UNDERSTANDING THE ADJUSTMENT NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS AT SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY CARBONDALE

by

Mehrete Girmay, M.P.H.


M.P.H., Southern Illinois University Carbondale

B.A., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill


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Approved by:

Dr. Sosanya Jones, Co-Chair

Dr. Juliane Wallace, Co-Chair

Dr. Peggy Wilken

Dr. Joseph Brown

Dr. Wendi Middleton

Graduate School


Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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In the recent decades, the United States has attracted the highest numbers of international students to attain an education with the majority of students sojourning from China, India, and South Korea (Valenzuela, Palacios, & Intindola, 2015). It is important that the particular needs of this population are understood and met by the universities that house them, primarily in regards to its effect on the student's health. Through the offering of both support and services, visiting students are more likely to feel welcomed and valued during their stay. Consequently, retention rates of this population have the potential to also be positively affected as fewer students will drop out of their program prematurely due to adjustment challenges.

The international graduate student population is a unique one that has specific needs that differ from domestic students and other acculturating groups. International graduate students face social, financial, and other stressors rooted in language proficiency while dealing with academic performance demands that accompany being a graduate student (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Furthermore, many international students studying at American universities tend to experience major adjustment challenges dealing with the unfamiliarity with American customs and traditions in addition to the lack of emotional and social support provided by individuals within the host culture (Chavajay, 2013; Valenzuela, Palacios & Intindola, 2015).

The goals of this qualitative, narrative case study were to first explore the needs of international graduate students in regards to their adjustment in obtaining their graduate degree at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) and how both their mental and physical health are affected. Currently, at SIUC, there are over 98 countries represented by both undergraduate and graduate students. More specifically, the number of international graduate students studying at SIUC continues to increase. In 2005, there were 882 international students and in 2015 that number grew to nearly 1000 (Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2016). As this number continues to rise in conjunction with shifting societal factors that have the potential to affect the international graduate students experience while at SIUC, it is important that University staff, which include but are not limited to full and part-time employees who work in (on and off) campus housing, student affairs, security, student rights and responsibilities, as well as Carbondale community members, are aware of the particular needs attached to this population and the ways in which they can play a role in fostering a welcoming environment.

Secondly, I explored what services SIUC offers to meet these needs. Whether the needs of this population are being met was significant for this particular study, specifically in regards to retention. After speaking with University staff in several departments in an effort to attain retention information on international graduate students, I learned that SIUC does not currently track retention statistics of their graduate student population. This directly speaks to the importance of this study as it can be used to shed light on potential links between retention and the lack of services offered by the University. Lastly, through both the review of literature and data collection process, I hoped to gain insight into the ways in which SIUC might be able to address the needs of their international graduate students. In hearing the participants' stories, I was enlightened on the varying

ways in which stressors have affected them and to what extent. This, in turn, allowed me to offer recommendations to the University regarding addressing these needs.

I used the narrative, case study approach to serve as a guide in the research process. After recruiting 15 international graduate students from the SIUC student body and narrowing down to 10, I held two focus group sessions followed by individual interviews with each participant. In order to get the richest data, I asked participants to share their experiences since arriving at SIUC. The primary factors that I focused on in my questioning process were centered on the student's health and included: 1) academic, social, and financial stressors; 2) social connectedness and support; 3) language proficiency; and 4) culture shock. This study is important for not only the international graduate student population but also for any university that houses or seeks to house international students at their institution. Furthermore, this study's significance rests in its ability to provide institutions and its select staff who work alongside this population with valuable inputs that they will be able to utilize as they welcome their visiting students. Overall, the goal of this study was to yield results that will open the door to dialogue regarding this population's needs, the impact that poor acculturation might have on the student's mental and physical health, and how bridges between the international and non-international communities can be built and more importantly, sustained.

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Finally, I want to close with scripture that has served as motivation to stay the course during this dissertation process and is a reminder for me to always ensure that my work is both passion-filled and of service to others.

 **"First thing in the morning, she dresses for work, rolls up her sleeves, eager to get started. She senses the worth of her work, is in no hurry to call it quits for the day. She's skilled in the crafts of home and hearth, diligent in homemaking. She's quick to assist anyone in need, reaches out to help the poor. (Proverbs 31:17-20)**

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction to the Problem

In 1950, the number of international students receiving their graduate education in the United States was 1.1%. Forty years later, that number grew to 2.9%. According to a report published in 2015 through the Institute of International Education, international students make up 4.8% of the student population in the US (Institute of International Education, 2015). This number is indicative of what the future looks like in terms of international students opting to attend U.S. universities for their graduate education. There are several ways in which the international graduate student provides benefits to the host university. International students provide opportunities for cultural diversity on university campuses, which in turn provides domestic students exposure to other cultures (Kwon & Yangyi, 2009). Furthermore, institutions of higher education are increasingly valuing diversity on their campus and are understanding that global outreach will also serve their academic reputation well (Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015).

At the graduate level, the focus shifts from coursework to research. As international graduate students serve in the role of research assistants they contribute to the universities various research efforts (Poyralzi & Kavanaugh, 2006). Furthermore, international graduate students are also able to help increase both the intellectual and cultural environment at the host university (Wagner, 2004). In addition to academic related benefits are financial ones. Unless international students have a graduate assistantship, they typically pay the full tuition amount of the host university, which helps to subsidize fees of their domestic student colleagues (Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015).

The graduate research process is a tedious one that is typically not solely performed but rather is done in conjunction with other academic requirements; therefore, it may be stressful for the researcher. As Hyun et al. (2007) and McClure (2007) explain, many international graduate students face stressors that are rooted in their research, their graduate assistantship positions, and post-graduation employment. Specifically, the 551 international graduate students surveyed, explained that the emotional stress that international graduate students faced no only affected their emotional stability but also their academic performance (Hyun et al., 2007; McClure, 2007). This supports the idea that the adjustment factors that the international graduate student faces have the potential to coincide with one another.

For the purposes of my research, I focused on the umbrella term of Acculturation. Broadly, acculturation can be understood as the cultural socialization process that an individual undergoes as they navigate their way through a new environment and society (Kim, 2006). For international graduate students, it is especially challenging to acculturate as their academic requirements and demands differ from that of a domestic or undergraduate student (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). In order to gain insight as to what is needed to provide the international graduate student with opportunities to successfully adjust to their host university's culture, it is important that we understand the topic as it relates to several key factors: stress and its management techniques/strategies, lack of social connectedness, financial stressors, language fluency/barriers, and academic challenges/difficulties. These obstacles in adjusting to a new culture, language, and academic environment, which stem from emotions of social isolation, being homesick, and culture shock, to name a few, all have the ability to affect how well the student adjusts (Baba & Hosoda, 2014).

As international graduate students sojourn from their home country to the U.S. to embark on their graduate career, there are many adjustment challenges that they encounter. These challenges are particular in nature as they differ from those of domestic graduate students. As researchers Sullivan and Kashubeck-West (2015) explain, the difficulties that international students experience are more extensive in nature. These challenges are potentially long lasting as international students face pressures in their adjustment process that have to do with cultural differences in the academic learning environment and style in addition to language barriers (Baba & Hosoda, 2014).

Over 121,637 international graduate students currently study at American universities. As an increase in mobility continues, there has also been an increase in international students attending universities in the United States (Cadd, 2012). Furthermore, as the trend in institutions of higher education promoting internationalization increases, the importance of understanding this population's needs gains importance. Subsequently, the strategizing efforts in recruiting international students in order to promote internationalization is also broadened (Hendrickson et al., 2013). A 2013 article in The Institute of International Education reports that the number of students electing to study abroad has tripled in the last two decades ("Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange," 2015). This speaks to the importance of institutions educating their students on ways in which to integrate with people from different cultures and environments so as to be able to properly exist in the increasingly globalized society (Hendrickson et al., 2013).

Southern Illinois University Carbondale had 1400 international students enrolled during the 2015-2016 academic year, with 2/3 being graduate students. It is evident that this is a

population that should have attention paid to their needs (Institute of International Education, 2015; Southern Illinois University, 2016). It is important to note that every university has their own culture that students must get accustomed to and this is more pronounced in the case of international students. An institution's culture is essentially the attributes that are particular to that university. These attributes include shared beliefs and values that are subsequently promoted on campus (Smirchich, 1985). The influences of the university's culture are far reaching as they have the ability to impact and shape the behaviors of staff and students alike (Billings & Terkla, 2014; Masland, 1985).

International graduate students often times arrive in the U.S. independent of family and friends, which affects them emotionally and triggers unhealthy levels of stress. During this process, the student typically experiences emotions of loss as they depart from loved ones in their country (Yeh & Inose, 2003). The arrival process, however, isn't the only part that poses an emotional challenge and, ultimately, stress for the student traveler. The preparation process, prior to leaving their home country, is also a difficult one. Szabo, Ward, and Jose (2015) explain that as the international student prepares to leave behind their family and friends and come to terms with the reality of being unable to communicate as frequently with them, they experience heightened levels of stress.

Though prior research has been performed on this topic in other regards, the more specified nature of this study will expose the experiences of international graduate students receiving an education at SIUC and more importantly what needs to be done to ensure that their experience is a successful one. Successful, in this regard, refers to the ease in which the student transitions into their new academic environment. The exploration and subsequent results of the

study are important not only for the institutions in which international students attend but also has the potential to have a more global impact.

One construct that I focused on throughout this research was Cultural Competence in regards to how SIUC staff understands the needs of their visiting students. Cultural Competence is an ongoing process defined as "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (Cross et al., 1989, p. 63). In using Cultural Competency as the guiding construct in this dissertation, I am able to contribute to literature by explaining the importance of cultural awareness on university campuses and, furthermore, methods for ensuring that potential needs of international graduate students are met. Essentially, the purpose for this qualitative narrative study can be understood in two parts: 1) to gain a full understanding of both international graduate student needs and SIUC's role in offering services and support in order to meet these needs; and 2) to understand these issues both independently and collectively in order to gain an understanding of where the potential disconnect might be.

There are, of course, a variety of factors that play a part in the adjustment needs that plague international graduate students and their adjustment to SIUC. In order to adequately meet the needs of this population, these factors should be understood both independently and collectively. For example, as I explored social support and how that plays a part in the adjustment of the international graduate student, I was able to understand how other factors might play a role in the socialization process. This was also true as I explored language barriers and social interactions. The language barriers often serve as a barrier for international students

interacting with American students (Yeh & Inose, 2003). This essentially means that as one factor was explored, such as the inability to communicate effectively, another factor, barriers in socialization, was also highlighted. As Yeh and Inose (2003) explain, in order for there to be a solid understanding of how international students relate to other students and staff while at the host university, it is equally important to understand the students' satisfaction with both their academic and social support systems at the host university. In exploring these factors and later making connections between them, I was able to understand the complexities involved in international graduate student adjustment needs from varying perspectives.

The maintenance of health, as it relates to the potential stressors that the international graduate students might face, is another important component in this study. Graduate students face many challenges, both academically and professionally, but these differ for the international student. For example, some of their more prevalent stressors might be rooted in being away from their support system, attempting to navigate the social scene that is particular to SIUC, which differs from their home country and university, all in addition to tackling the academic rigors of their respective academic programs. For the majority of international students, the most prevalent challenge is their mastering the host country's language (Mori, 2000). In addition to not being able to speak the host country's language serving as a barrier for socializing with other students, it also has the ability to affect the psychological adjustment of the student as well (Lin & Yi, 1997). This, again, speaks to the importance of understanding how the adjustment factors affect the international graduate student's experience in confounding ways.

The stressors rooted in the international graduate student's acculturation process have the potential to cause acute and chronic negative health effects. Acculturative stress, which can be

understood as the reaction to stressful life events that stems from the acculturation process, manifests itself both mentally and physically (Berry, 2005). Mental health, which is connected to emotions of isolation and depression and will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 2, is one area of the international student's adjustment needs that the university needs to be cognizant of as a potential concern. Mental health, primarily depression, is a major risk for the international student (Nilsson, Berkel, Flores, & Lucas, 2004; Yi, Lin, & Yuko, 2003). For this population, the vulnerability factors related to depression are rooted in the acculturative stress that is experienced as they adjust, particularly the psychological difficulties that they face as they seek to adapt to the new culture and the accompanying customs and social norms (Smart & Smart, 1995).

In understanding the strong association between acculturative stress and depression, it is easy to see how the international student might experience negative psychological health effects, especially as they attempt to compensate for their lack of social support. This loss of social support has a significant effect on how well the international student adjusts psychologically. Furthermore, isolation and depression stifle the student's ability to establish connections with other students (Hayes and Lin, 1994; Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992; Pedersen, 1991). These connections, which I will discuss within Chapter 2, are a vital component and have a buffering effect in the student's adjustment experience while at the host university. The lack of social connections not only prohibit the international student from being able to learn the language but also serves as a barrier in the student forming connections. Cultural differences also affect the international student's social interactions, their ability to establish relationships with American students, and ultimately contributes to their acculturative stress (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). The effects of acculturative stress are not limited to only the period of time in which the student

is at the host university but also have the potential to affect the international graduate student long after their time abroad, especially with the more challenging acculturative stressors (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998).

As researchers Kwon and Yangi (2009) explain, most international students experience various difficulties during their transitioning period. In the context of a non-international graduate student at SIUC, their challenges might be rooted in being homesick, if, for example, their family resides out of the state of Illinois. The international student, however, not only has to deal with being homesick but the added component of not being in their home country where people speak their language, engage in certain social or even academic related activities that are specific to their culture, etc. (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Pedersen, 1991).

It is imperative that we understand how the confounding challenges of adjustment affect the international student. Lee et al (2004) posit that international college students that have decreased social connections have negative views towards their host university, which also had an effect on their levels of perceived stress. Therefore, it can be assumed that international graduate students with high social connectedness are likely to adjust to the new social environment more easily and will experience less psychological stress than students with low social connectedness. The stressors of international graduate students are multifaceted and therefore have the potential to be remedied in various ways. As Yeh and Inose (2003) explain, both the social support and connectedness that the international student experiences will contribute to their overall level of acculturative stress. In revisiting the social connectedness factor, if SIUC offered free of cost, weekly English lessons in a group setting, it would allow international students to learn the language in a communal manner. This, in turn would aid in

their social needs being met. This service would address two major acculturative stressors that are particular to international graduate students, which are language barriers and lack of social connectedness as well as the accompanying emotions of inferiority, loneliness, and perceived alienation (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998).

## Research Design

The main purpose of this study was to gain an in depth understanding of the adjustment needs of international graduate students at SIUC. In order to do so, I employed a qualitative, narrative case study approach. Ultimately, the data gathered from the study, which was done through both focus groups and one-on-one interviews, was used to answer my four research questions: 1) What are the academic and social adjustment needs of first time U.S. entering international graduate students at Southern Illinois University Carbondale?; 2) In what ways do these needs affect the mental and physical health of international graduate students as they acculturate?; 3)What services does SIUC offer and/or need to expand upon in order to ensure that the needs of international graduate students are being met, primarily in regards to their mental health?; 4) What are the gaps in services to address the needs of international graduate students at SIUC?

In using the qualitative, narrative case study approach, I was essentially able to provide an account of the experiences of participants and explain why the international graduate students at SIUC have had the experiences that they had (Sandelowki, 1991). As narratives essentially tell how a person ascribes meaning to their experiences, I analyzed observations for patterns or themes in the stories that the participants share with me in the focus group sessions as well as the one-on-one interviews. I also looked at the way in which the stories were told. This means, that I not only explored the information that was shared but also how the participants shared the

information. I paid particular attention to the nonverbal communication given by the participants, such as eye or body movements, after being asked a specific question.

This approach also helped me in ascribing meaning to participant experiences as I explored discontinuities between what the participants shared with me and what their actual experiences were (Sandelowski, 1991). Since narrations refer to personal experience, the individual interviews provided an opportunity for me to hear the participant's stories regarding experiences that have taken place during their acculturation to SIUC. This technique allowed for an understanding of participant experiences and, furthermore, a reconstruction of events that have taken place from the perspective of the participants. More details on this can be found in Chapter 3.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

There are two main concepts that I focused on for this study: 1) Stress and its accompanying relief mechanisms and 2) University support and services. These two areas helped navigate my study as I delved deeper into the potential challenges that entering international graduate students at SIUC face. In regards to data collection, both of the concepts mentioned above were of benefit to me as I sought to understand the topic area more. I used Critical Social Theory as the theoretical framework and Critical Race theory as the conceptual framework, which will both be explained and applied in Chapter 2.

In focusing on the factor of stress, I was able to understand the underlying issues that not only cause stress for the students but also what needs to be done to remedy the situations that are responsible for doing so. Furthermore, understanding the stressors that international students deal with, allowed me to present this information to the University to provide them with insight on

what they may be potentially overlooking when dealing with this particular population. Another important reason as to why I believed that further studying stress will be beneficial for this study is because I am well aware of the demands placed on graduate students, irrespective of their status. As a Ph.D. candidate, I can both relate and empathize with the students.

The level of university support and services offered to the international graduate student community is truly the driving force behind this study; it is the all-encompassing focus in a sense. I sought to understand why the university has particular services offered meanwhile neglecting others. For example, there are graduate school orientations for international students. However, there may need to be one that specifically targets the important issues of navigating their way through academic and cultural differences (Olivas & Li, 2002). The researchers explain that stress relief may come through the international student understanding what the U.S. educational system actually looks like. I also believed that taking it a step further and explaining the culture that is particular to the host university, in this case SIUC and the surrounding community of Southern Illinois, would prove to be beneficial as well.

In exploring this topic, I wanted to learn what reason (s) are responsible for why SIUC has not implemented programs that target international graduate students. Are there financial and budgeting issues/restraints? Are there services offered for the international graduate community that simply aren't being properly promoted? These are a few of the very important questions that I needed answers to in order to gain a greater understanding of the viewpoint of the University as it relates to the needs of the international graduate students. Lacina (2002) explains the importance in having ongoing programs in place for international students. "The first way a university can help the student is by providing an international student center with advisers and

counselors who can help students with issues relating to adjustment to culture, university social scene, health care options, and financial needs (p.25).

## Operational and Conceptual Definitions

In order to properly embark on this study and attempt to explain information gathered in the process, I needed to provide clarity in defining terms used in the forthcoming chapters. These definitions are vital to comprehend prior to proceeding as it will allow the reader to be able to get a better understanding as they read through and process the presented material.

- **Acculturation**: is the cultural socialization process that an individual will experience when introduced to a new society (Kim, 2006)

- **Social Connectedness**: as Yeh & Inose (2003) explain, is essentially an aspect of the self and level of connectedness that one feels to their immediate social world

- **Cultural Competence:** According to the National Education Association (2015), cultural competence is the awareness one possesses regarding cultural identity and views about the differences inherent to each culture
  Researchers Cross et al (1989) explain Cultural Competence as a set of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that work in conjunction to enable a system or agency to work in an effective manner when dealing with cross cultural situations or events

- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Researcher Milton Bennett (1986) explains that cultural sensitivity is a process that individuals undergo as they progress from having a more ethnocentric orientation, which is the avoidance of cultural differences to a more ethno-relative worldview, which is the seeking and acceptance of cultural differences

- **Culture Shock:** can be understood as "the consequence of strain and anxiety resulting from contact with a new culture and the feelings of loss, confusion, and impotence resulting from loss of accustomed cultural cues and social rules" (Winkelman, 1994, p. 122)
- **Xenophobia:** according to Litvinova & Tarasov (2012) is a fear or dislike of people from other cultures and is considered an "intolerant relation to others"

**Summary**

This chapter served as both an overview of what the study entailed but also as preview of what subsequent chapters will expand upon. In the second chapter, I will provide an in depth review of literature on this topic. In Chapter 3, detailed descriptions of the methodology that I used in the study as well as the philosophy of both qualitative and narrative research will be provided. Chapter 4 is where I will describe the findings of the study in great detail. In the final chapter, I will discuss the results and implications of the study. This is also where I provide recommendations for future, related research being performed on the topic.

**CHAPTER 2**

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Introduction**

There are several extant studies that have explored the challenges that international students face while attending higher education institutions in the U.S. Most of these studies explored adjustment in regards to academic challenges, language difficulties, and social issues (McClure, 2007; Erichsen & Bollinger, 2010; Manathunga & Goozee, 2007). Additional research has been conducted on how factors such as gender, certain degree programs, and living conditions affect the international student's adjustment (Erichsen & Bollinger, 2010; Senyshyn et al. 2000; Tomich et al. 2000). Past studies have focused on the international students attempt to study in a foreign language and how the challenges of doing so involve more than just the mastering of language used for daily conversations with peers, but also of the academic terminology that is particular to that host culture (Erichsen & Bollinger, 2010).

Many of the acculturating factors have the ability to be confounding in nature. For example, language barriers have the potential to ultimately lead to confusion and anxiety for the international graduate student due to difficulty with course material and assignments (McClure, 2007). This, in turn, typically conjures up feelings of isolation and alienation (Erichsen & Bollinger, 2010). In addition to the aforementioned language barriers and feelings of anxiety and isolation is culture shock and its effect on the international graduate student's overall acculturation experience. Culture shock can be understood as the response that the student has to their new environment (Erichsen & Bollinger, 2010). In terms of the acculturation process, it can be understood as a type of learning shock that occurs as the international graduate student attempts to navigate their way through their new host environment (Okorocha, 1996). While it is

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widely known that graduate school can be a highly stressful experience for all students partially

due to the expectation that they should be independent workers and stronger writers by this point

in their academic journey, it is especially so for international students due to the added factors of

language barriers and struggles with academic work/demands (Erichsen & Bollinger, 2010;

Manathunga & Goozee, 2007). Due to this, international graduate students are typically more

reliant on their advisors than domestic graduate students (Ku et al, 2008; Schinke & da Costa

2001).

The heightened distress that international graduate students experience during their time

abroad is affected by multiple and confounding factors (Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015;

Erichsen & Bolinger, 2010). Cultural dissonance coupled with an inability to communicate with

other students and staff at the host university plays a role in the international student's

adjustment experience (Erichsen & Bollinger, 2010). This is precisely why it's especially vital

that advisors, faculty, and staff are all aware of their roles and responsibilities in ensuring that the

international student adjusts successfully to the university and, furthermore, that their

engagement with the local community is a positive one (Erichsen & Bollinger, 2010). Though

research has been performed on the differing factors related to the adjustment experience of

international graduate students, not much has been performed on how the adjustment experience

is affected by the services offered by the host university and, furthermore, the confounding ways

in which the acculturation process might affect retention at the host university.

Acculturating factors do not only affect the international student socio-culturally but also

health wise, with the potential for chronic illnesses to develop (Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung,

2015). Stress, anxiety, and other health related issues that are expected during any graduate

student experience have the potential to be exacerbated for international students as they deal with added stressors, such as language barriers (Schinke & da Costa, 2001). This, again, alluding to the confounding nature of acculturation factors. Wei et al (2007) explain that international students are at a higher risk of developing depressive symptoms due to varying acculturating factors such as lack of sleep due to stress, which often times leads to anxiety. Aside from the physical health issues are the emotional health issues that develop during the acculturation process. As Mori (2000) explains, international students that face difficulties with communication, social connectedness, and/or homesickness, will typically also encounter mental health issues.

There are several explanations as to what might be responsible for why the international graduate student might not seek professional help. Due to language and cultural barriers, it is often times difficult for an accurate diagnosis to be made and therefore effective methods for management to occur (Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015). This, referencing once more, the importance of university staff offering both support and services that would bypass any barriers in their international graduate students' decision to seek help. Additionally, there is the stigmatization factor that is attached to mental illness that often contributes to the international student's reluctance to seek professional help (Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015). This will be discussed in greater detail later within this chapter.

The literature review below will define acculturation and explore and discuss extant research on the differing acculturation factors of international graduate students. In doing this, I will be able to use this study to address current gaps in literature regarding the phenomenon.

## Acculturation

In the past 20 years, the number of international students at U.S. colleges and universities has doubled, as it has gone from 450,000 for the 1993-1994 academic year to over 886,000 during the 2013-2014 academic year (Chen et al., 2015). It is vital that host universities understand how and to what extent the acculturation process affects the international graduate student. For international graduate students, adjusting to a new academic environment can pose several challenges related to language barriers, academic rigor, living standards, finances, intrapersonal issues, etc. (Mori, 2000; Pan, Yue, & Chan, 2010). International students also face stress as they encounter challenges in dealing with social interactions, homesickness, and utilizing social support services offered on the host universities' campus (Bai, 2016; Liu, 2009).

Acculturation is the process involving both cultural and psychological changes that the international graduate student undergoes as they come into contact with a new culture (Berry, 2003) The acculturation process occurs when students from different cultural groups come in contact with one another thus resulting in a shift in the cultural patterns in which they are used to (Capielo, Delgado-Romero, & Stewart, 2015). As the international graduate student seeks to acculturate to their new academic environment, they undergo a process that involves both physical and mental adjustments. Essentially, acculturation can be understood as a dual adjustment process that presents both psychological and cultural change for the international graduate student (Suh et al., 2012).

The acculturation process is believed to exist across two dimensions, behavioral and cognitive (Berry, 1990; Kanters & Berry, 2003). The behavioral dimension involves the international graduate student becoming increasingly knowledgeable of the values, practices, and customs of the host university. The cognitive or psychological dimension allows for the

emotional attachment that the individual experiences within the host culture to be strengthened through these new cultural changes (Capielo, Delgado-Romero, & Stewart, 2015; Tropp et al, 1999). Acculturation should be understood as a process, while not attaching a positive or negative connotation to it. Acculturative stress, however, is the typically negative reactions that international graduate students experience in response to their new identity and as their behaviors and values change (Berry, 1974; Shiraev & Levy, 2010).

Principally, acculturation can be conceptualized through both unidimensional and bi-dimensional approaches. The unidimensional approach proposes that an inverse relationship is present between the individual and culture, while the bi-dimensional approach takes into account the identification that the individual attaches to their new environment (Shim, Freund, Stopsack, Ka̋mmerer, & Barnow, 2014). More recently, researchers have leaned towards the bi-dimensional approach in their research due to its ability to provide a more comprehensive understanding of acculturation (Ryder et al., 2000). In that same vein, I used the bi-directional approach for this literature review in order to get a fuller understanding of the needs of international graduate students at SIUC. More specifically, I used Berry's conceptualization of acculturation, which assumes that acculturating individuals are all confronted with the same two dilemmas (Berry, 1997, 2006; Shim et al., 2014).

The first dilemma involves the willingness of the individual to maintain bonds with their home culture. The second dilemma focuses on whether or not the individual deems it valuable to maintain relationships with those of other cultural groups (Shim et al., 2014). In order to best describe ways that the individual could deal with the acculturation process, Berry (1986) proposed four strategies, which are: 1) Integration- which encompasses the maintenance of the

individuals original culture in addition to the contact that they have with other cultural groups; 2) Assimilation- the maintenance of relationships that the individual has with other cultures while neglecting their connection to their home country; 3) Separation- is the maintenance of one's heritage while not being in contact with other groups; and 4) Marginalization- describes both a lack of maintenance with one's heritage culture and with other cultural groups (Shim et al, 2014).

Berry's strategies for conceptualizing acculturation on a deeper level can be applied to this study in three fundamental ways. First, in order to get a solid understanding of the international graduate student's needs, the extent to which each participant is connected to their home country must be understood. This information will provide insight into their personality and, furthermore, their ability to maintain a connection with their home country as well as with others at SIUC that are outside of their culture. Secondly, depending on the category in which the international graduate student falls into, I was able to understand how connection to home country might have an effect on their adjustment experience. Thirdly, in using Berry's strategies, I got a solid understanding of how this new culture at SIUC affects the perception that the international graduate student has of themselves (Shim et al., 2014). The international graduate students self-view is significant as it has the ability to affect them not only during their time abroad but when they return to their home country as well (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). Furthermore, for the international graduate students who do actually acculturate to American culture, they will still have to reenter their home country with altered self-concepts and world views, which again may be problematic (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004).

Acculturation and the international graduate student's self-view, in other words, self-construal, are related to each other. Therefore, acculturation can also be interpreted as the process in which the international graduate student adjusts their self-image in response to their new environment (Singelis, 1994). Consequently, this process of self- actualization can be conceptualized in two aspects: Independent and Interdependent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). Independent describes the international graduate student's uniqueness while Interdependent emphasizes the relationships that the international graduate student has with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). Understanding how the international graduate student's self-view might have been altered since arriving at SIUC will provide me with an understanding of the extent to which their adjustment experience has affected them overall.

## Acculturative Stress

Though all graduate students, irrespective of their status, experience adjustment challenges, there are academic and social adjustment issues that are particular to international graduate students (Mori, 2000; Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011). Additionally, international graduate students experience higher levels of stress overall and more psychological issues than domestic students (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011). The adjustment process involves feelings of discomfort as the individual feels pressured to adapt to their new environment (Baba & Hosoda, 2014). Acculturative stress is experienced as individuals attempt to adapt to their new culture (Berry et al., 1987). There are multiple sources of acculturative stress that stem from personal to social factors, such as geographic distance from loved ones (homesickness) and language barriers (Mori, 2000; Pedersen, 1991). Furthermore, the factors responsible for acculturative stress might be different depending on where the international graduate student is from, which is important to consider in this study (Capielo, Delgado-Romero, & Stewart, 2015).

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Latino international students, for example, have more pronounced acculturative stress in regards to bilingualism. For Arabic speaking international students, acculturative stressors due to discrimination and bullying are prominent (Romero & Roberts, 2003; Goforth, Pham, Chun, Castro-Olivo, & Yosia, 2016).

The relationship between acculturative stress and mental health is an important area to explore as the international graduate student's psychological maladjustment can affect their overall acculturation experience at SIUC (Berry, 2006). The effects of acculturative stress are not only long lasting but also typically get to a crisis level within the first six months of the student arriving at the host university (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011). Soon after the international graduate student arrives at SIUC, they may experience an imbalance between the new culture, its accompanying demands, and the resources that are available at the University to help them overcome acculturative stressors (Smart & Smart, 1995). Acculturative stress can even occur if the international student perceives that there is a lack of either cognitive or behavioral resources at the host institution; this, of course, can be quite challenging as they attempt to navigate the cultural norms of their new environment (Capielo et al., 2015). This speaks to the importance of host universities being prepared, prior to the arrival of the international graduate student, to remedy these potential acculturative stressors.

Currently, SIUC's Center for International Education offers services that intend to cater to the social, emotional, and transitional needs of visiting students. Some of these services include a coffee hour, which is a weekly social event that promotes social interaction and conversation. CIE also holds a weekly language exchange where international and domestic students are able to improve their second language proficiency. Half of the hour is dedicated to

speaking in English and the other half in the non-English language, which seeks to promote cross-culturalism. The CIE also seeks to engage the community in welcoming international students to the University and Carbondale. Through the program titled "Speakers Bureau," international students are able to visit various community sites and share information about their cultures and backgrounds. In turn, community members are able to not only learn about the visiting members in their community but also the ways in which they are able to potentially aid in their adjustment.  Although these services are offered through SIUC's Center for International Education, many of the visiting students may not know how to access the services or more importantly, are aware that they exist.

In a study that explored psychological acculturation, acculturative stress, and coping in Latino international students, it was explained that international students who are less likely to seek emotional support are at a higher risk of experiencing symptoms of depression (Capielo et al., 2015). Essentially, the international graduate student will experience acculturative stress as they attempt to maintain balance between their home country and its heritage with that of U.S. culture (Berry, 1997). Meeting the mental needs of international graduate students isn't always achievable as international students are less likely than domestic students to seek help (Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Yakushko et al., 2008). There are several reasons as to why, for example, the international graduate student, upon arriving at SIUC would be hesitant to seek professional help. First, many international students might be unaware of the severity of their symptoms and therefore not deem their psychological problems as detrimental enough to warrant outside help (Tracey, Leong, & Glidden, 1986; Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011). If international students do in fact seek mental health services, they typically wait until the symptoms are severe and they are unable to manage them on their own (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011). Secondly, a lack of

language proficiency can prohibit the international graduate student from seeking help. International students often claim that language difficulties are a major concern for them when going to their campus medical and mental health clinics (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011). So, even if the international graduate student believed his or her symptoms required professional intervening, they would still be hesitant to seek outside help due to their lack of English proficiency.

Thirdly, there is the financial aspect as international students might be unaware of what the costs of services are on campus (Blignault et al., 2008; Ho et al., 2008). For international students that are used to relying heavily on their families for financial support, they may not know how to handle this new fiscal responsibility (Ho et al., 2008). Lastly, there is the fear of stigma of being labeled as someone that has a mental health problem (Blignault et al., 2008; Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011; Ho et al., 2008). In order to remedy each of these potential barriers, it is critical that university staff maintain a level of cultural sensitivity when providing health services. This includes providing culturally appropriate services to help alleviate the possibility of the international graduate student not being intimidated if they do in fact seek professional help (Blignault et al., 2008; Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011; Ho et al., 2008). In order to help remedy any barriers rooted in intimidation, university staff will need to be aware of the cultural differences between domestic and international graduate students, and more importantly, the differences in their approach to seeking professional help. For example, it is typical for many international students to first approach their family/friends followed by university staff when experiencing a psychologically rooted issue, which differs for American students who typically opt to speak with a professional prior to family and/or friends (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011). This again speaks to the importance of university staff being

both culturally aware and sensitive to the different cultures and practices that are present on their campus in order to properly meet this population's needs (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011).

The existing literature regarding acculturation looks more closely at the factors in a more individualistic manner, as opposed to a collective one, and the ways in which these factors might affect the international graduate student. Additionally, much of the literature performed on the topic deals with the undergraduate population. This is important to note as there might be distinct differences between what an undergraduate and graduate international student faces during their acculturation process. There is even less research performed on the relationship between acculturation and university roles and responsibilities. In the study performed by Erichsen and Bollinger (2005), participants expressed how the lack of support offered by their host university brought forth heighted emotions of isolation. This study sheds light on the support and services methods offered by the university that would allow for a positive acculturation experience. Furthermore, this study explains how the graduate international student population's acculturation experience might be different from that of an undergraduate international student and, therefore, should be handled accordingly.

## Academic Stress

International graduate students face academic stressors that are similar in nature to those experienced by domestic students in addition to more particular stressors, such as challenges rooted in language barriers and social isolation (Chen, 1999). Academic stressors should be a central focus for the host institution in their addressing of potential needs (Ying, 2005). In a study that examined the adjustments that are necessary to foster the international student's ability to successfully integrate into the host university, international students rated their academic

adjustment as the most challenging part of their acculturation process (Ying & Liese, 1991).

Furthermore, in comparison to all of the other potential acculturative stressors, academic

adjustment has the strongest impact on the psychological adjustment and overall acculturation

experience of the international student (Frazier et al., 2011; Hyun et al., 2007). Graduate students

typically experience academic related stress due to high demands placed on schoolwork

expectations, deadlines, and examinations all in addition to adjusting to the American University

system (Abouserie, 1994; Hyun et al., 2007). The difference in academic structure and rigor

coupled with the demands of assignments force the international student to be under extremely

high levels of stress while studying abroad, therefore affecting them in other areas of their

acculturation (Hyun et al, 2007; Kinoshita & Bowman, 1998).

Researchers explain that academic distress presents itself in three primary ways for the

international graduate student (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Wei et al., 2007). First, international

students arrive to the United States with the expectation of excelling in their studies, thus

advancing their educational level (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Wei et al., 2007). For many

international students, especially those from Asian countries, they experience high levels of fear

dealing with the possibility that they won't be successful in achieving their academic goals (Wei

et al., 2007). As they deal with this pressure to succeed in addition to the fear of academic

failure, they ultimately become vulnerable to mental health issues (Bai, 2016). Secondly, many

international students face academic challenges due to incongruities in both the assigned work

and the accompanying expectations between their home institution and host university (Liao &

Wei, 2014). These differences further affect the international student as they attempt to keep up

with academic demands in their workload requirements (Liao & Wei, 2014; Misra et al., 2003).

Thirdly, language proficiency has the greatest impact on the academic stress that the

international student might experience while at the host university (Wan, Chapman, & Biggs, 1992). Limited language fluency affects the willingness or reluctance that the international student might experience as they attempt to participate in class discussions and/or meet with professors to explain any uncertainties they may have regarding assigned work (Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Liao & Wei, 2014; Ying, 2005). Language proficiency and its significance to the international graduate students' overall acculturation process is discussed in a subsequent section within this chapter.

The customs and traditions of U.S. education will undoubtedly be challenging for the international graduate student upon their arrival at SIUC (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). One of these challenges will have to do with understanding the differences in expectations for instructors and professors, as many cultures have different expectations of instructor/professor roles and responsibilities (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Zhou et al., 2008). For example, Chinese and British students tend to have differing assumptions about instructor involvement and support (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). In Chinese culture, a good teacher is typically someone that is knowledgeable about class material and instructs students with clear guidance; they even view their teachers as models of moral behavior, thus extending the instructors role beyond the classroom (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). Respectively, a good student in China is someone that not only shows reverence to their instructors but also learns by simply receiving the information provided and not critiquing what their teachers say (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). In British culture, however, a good teacher is someone that serves as more of a facilitator that helps students cultivate creativity and independence (Zhou et al., 2008). Even in understanding the stark differences in teacher expectations between just these two cultures, it is easy to see how this might affect the international student in their academic adjustment.

The adjustment process is not one that only the international graduate student will be expected to undergo. Professors and instructors must also adjust their teaching methods in order to accommodate for the needs of the international graduate student (Pedersen, 1991). Revisiting again the importance of cultural sensitivity, it is the responsibility of instructors to have an understanding of the different learning styles of international students and help decrease the potential for the student to experience confusion within the classroom (Pedersen, 1991; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004). The instructor being willing to make the necessary adjustments is an indicator to the international graduate student that their needs are a priority, thus providing them with a sense of belongingness (Rubin, 2014). I can attest to this as someone who has instructed both international graduate and undergraduate students at SIUC. Since I am primarily accustomed to American teaching methods and classroom dynamics, I had to take various steps to accommodate the international students. This included me talking slower so as to allow for the international student to be able to grasp material as English wasn't their first language. Additionally, there were fewer pop quizzes and limited required oral presentations. Instead, I assigned more group work, which researchers support as a method to help in the alleviation of academic stressors (Mori, 2000; Pan et al., 2010). I found that assigning group work was particularly beneficial for the international students as they were able to build connections with domestic students while also allowing them insight into a different learning style (Mori, 2000; Pan et al., 2010).

Academic adjustment issues affect the international student in other ways, primarily psychologically and socio-culturally (Poyrazli et al., 2002; Ying & Liese, 1991). The better the international student is able to manage their academic stress, the better they adjust psychologically (Ying & Liese, 1991). In regards to sociocultural adjustment, the greater the

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self-efficacy the international student has towards their academics, the better they adjusted socially (Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002). As differences in academic environment present themselves, which include the above mentioned teacher and student dynamic, the international graduate student will begin to experience stress (Lewthwaite, 1997). An example, as explained in Chen's research, is the difference between Asian and U.S. Universities. Asian universities tend to be more regulated as professors are regarded as authority figures while there is fewer student led discussions and presentations. Conversely, at American universities students are encouraged to engage one another in class and often times lead discussions (Chen, 1999).

Even in the cases where international students weren't intimidated by their new academic environment, challenges still presented themselves as the international student experienced confusion when assignments were assigned and, furthermore, the appropriate ways in which to communicate with their instructors regarding their confusion. For international graduate students, this can be especially stressful as they experience uncertainties regarding what the most appropriate methods for discussing issues in navigating their research might be (Lewthwaite, 1997). To this end, as they seek to participate in research, present language barriers might prohibit them from doing so; therefore, directly speaking to the confounding effects of acculturative stressors and, furthermore the importance of exploring factors both independently and collectively in order to get a fuller picture of its effects (Ying & Liese, 1991).

**Culture Shock**

One of the primary hardships and challenges encountered by international graduate students while studying in the U.S., is the culture shock that they experience (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). Culture shock involves both the adjustment and

adaptation processes that the international student experiences as they deal with behavioral, cognitive, and demographic factors (Erickson & Bollinger, 2011). It has been suggested by researchers that the length of stay at the host institution has an effect on the student's acculturation as they have more opportunities to assimilate into the host culture; the longer the international student stays in the host country, the more acculturated they will be (Wilton & Constantine, 2003). This is an issue for graduate students in particular as their academic programs are typically for only two to five years (Ward & Kennedy, 1992).

Social support also helps in the alleviation of feelings of homesickness, which is a result of culture shock (Hannigan, 1997). Furthermore, as Kwon (2009) explains, homesickness is an inevitable part of the acculturation process and, therefore, experienced by the international student regardless of their prior knowledge and exposure to U.S. culture. In order to counter other acculturation related emotions, such as depression, which Kwon posits is a result of culture shock, the University should promote social activities that provide opportunities for cross-cultural interaction (Kwon, 2009). Culture shock can also have detrimental effects on the academic success of the international graduate student (Kingston & Forland, 2008). For many international students, they are accustomed to being high achievers in their home country and experience shock as they encounter challenges in understanding assignments and subsequently not performing as well as they expected (Kingston & Forland, 2008). This idea is supported in a study that explored the learning difficulties that international students face. Researchers explain that most international students encounter culture shock during their acculturation process as they deal with issues not only rooted in communication but also navigating their course content (Yang, Salzman, & Yang, 2015). In addition to language diversity issues, culture shock affects the international student socially as they acculturate (Lacina, 2002). In order to remedy socio-

cultural issues and ultimately provide the international graduate student with a more positive experience while at SIUC, the University needs to offer services that cater to these specific needs (Lacina, 2002).

Cross-cultural adjustment is essentially the response that the international graduate student has to their new environment as they attempt to adapt and function within it (Kim, 2001). As we relate this process to acculturation, we can understand that it is essentially an intercultural adaptation that occurs for the international student upon their arrival to the new environment (Zhou et al., 2008). To this end, upon the international graduate student's arrival at SIUC, they will face intercultural challenges as they acculturate that either prove to be positive or negative experiences. In order to understand intercultural adaptation and its relationship to acculturation, I explain what Ward and his colleagues propose are the two distinct ways in which it can be defined: 1) Psychological- has to do with the stress that the international graduate students deal with as well as the coping mechanisms they employ to remedy their stress; 2) Sociocultural-deals with the cultural learning process or the behavioral competence that the international graduate student has as they adapt to this new academic environment (Searle & Ward 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992; Zhou et al., 2008).

The Acculturation Model shows the interactive nature of the psychological and sociocultural factors involved in the cross-cultural process (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). The most prominent factor in the cross-cultural transition is what stress-coping strategies and social skills the international graduate student develops (Zhou et al., 2008). This involves both cognitive and behavioral responses to acculturative stressors. The model further posits that as the international graduate student manages their stress and acquires relevant social skills, they will

adjust psychologically while simultaneously adapting socio-culturally (Zhou et al., 2008). As student sojourners travel to the host country, the impact of the unfamiliar environment and its accompanying values, which is essentially the "shock" that they experience, has the potential to affect them in a myriad of ways (Ward & Seale, 1991; Zhou et al., 2008). There are three models that explain the relationship between culture shock and acculturation, which are: 1) Uni-dimensional, 2) Bi-dimensional, and 3) Categorical (Zhou et al, 2008).

The Uni-dimensional Model implies that as the international student seeks to assimilate to their host culture, they will eventually become so immersed in that new culture that it will take precedence over the identification that they previously had with their home culture (Olmedo, 1979; Zhou et al., 2008). So, within this model the international graduate student views their home and host culture through a lens of opposition instead of one that has the potential to be counterbalanced (Zhou et al., 2008). In contrast to this model is the Bi-dimensional approach, which explains the balance between acculturation and identity that occurs as the international graduate student develops their bicultural identity (Ramirez, 1984; Zhou et al., 2008). This model is similar to Cultural mediation, proposed by Bochner (1982), which suggests that student sojourners are able to balance both their home and host cultures and subsequently develop bicultural or multicultural personalities.

Within the Categorical model, which is the most complex, researchers suggest there are four ways in which the international graduate student conceptualizes both their home and host identities (Berry, 1994; Berry, 1997; Zhou et al., 2008). First, there is Integration, which suggests that the student sojourner has a high awareness of both their home and host culture. So, as the international graduate student arrives at SIUC, they will identify with their home country and

American culture, which in turn will allow them to have a positive regard towards both. Secondly, there is Assimilation, which is when the international graduate student views themselves highly only in the host culture meanwhile having a low view of themselves in terms of their host culture identification. Next, is Marginalization, which occurs when the international graduate student has a low perception of themselves in both their home and host culture identifications. International graduate students that fall into this category face the most challenges in their acculturation process as they don't feel connected to either co-nationals or domestic students.

Lastly, there is Identity, which is affected by varying factors such as age, gender, educational level, reasons for migration, etc. These factors are all linked to the different experiences that the international graduate student encounters in the acculturation process (Berry 1994; Berry, 1997; Zhou et al., 2008). Though this model sheds light on the varying ways in which the international graduate student might experience SIUC, it neglects to address the importance of emotional, social, and academic needs being met. Rather, it places emphasis on the international student and less on that of university staff. As we understand the differences between the three models and the complexities involved within each one, we are able to gain insight into how acculturative factors ultimately affect the international graduate student's identity. (Berry 1994; Berry, 1997; Zhou et al., 2008)

## Language Related Factors

Of all of the acculturative stressors, language barriers are one of the most prevalent for international students and has the most far reaching effects; it has the potential to affect the international graduate student socially while also compromising their academic success (Lin &

Yi, 1997; Mori, 2000; Xu & Montgomery, 2008). Additionally, a lack of proficiency in the host countries' language might obstruct social interactions between international graduate students and native speakers (Mori, 2000; Xu & Montgomery, 2008). Conversely, proficiency in the language of the host country has the ability to aid in countering academic and social acculturative stressors (Church, 1982; Oberg, 1960). The higher the international student perceives their English proficiency to be, the better they will be able to manage other acculturative stressors as they will be more comfortable speaking about their needs with university professionals and native students alike (Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Contrariwise, international graduate students that are unfamiliar with communication patterns at the host institution, specifically in terms of how information is shared and the emotion expressed while doing so, face more challenges in acculturation (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Essentially, language proficiency provides the confidence the international graduate student needs to be able to interact with native students and staff (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). More importantly, it allows for more opportunities for the international student to cultivate relationships that provide social support for dealing with acculturative stressors (Church, 1982; Oberg, 1960; Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Ying & Han, 2008). These social support systems are vital in allowing for a better overall psychological acculturative adjustment for the international graduate student (Church, 1982; Oberg, 1960; Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Ying & Han, 2008).

Language or communicative competency not only plays a vital role in the acculturation process of international graduate students but also provides insight to cultural cues (Gallagher, 1993; McCabe & Meller, 2004). Furthermore, as researchers Bachman and Lantolf (2000)

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explain, sociolinguistic abilities allow the international graduate student to attach meaning to these cultural cues. Learning the host cultures language allows the international graduate student to also simultaneously learn the specific cultural characteristics that are attached to that language (Yang, Salzman & Yang, 2015). Language proficiency provides insight into how the host society functions and the norms within that culture. (Church, 1982; Oberg, 1960). In regards to the social factor, the better able the international graduate student is to communicate with native students, the stronger their social bond will be (Swagler & Ellis, 2003). Establishing social ties is equally as important as academic adjustment; therefore, language proficiency should be considered a vital component in understanding the acculturation needs of international graduate students (Yue & Le, 2013).

The role that language proficiency plays in the academic acculturative process of the international graduate student is particularly important to address. On a fundamental level, language barriers make it difficult for the international graduate student to be able to understand what is being taught in the classroom, and therefore, unable to engage in discussions (Frey & Roysircar, 2006). Language barriers negatively impact the international graduate student's ability to interact with faculty regarding issues they may be having as they may be reluctant to speak to professors and other university staff when they encounter challenges (Frey & Roysircar, 2006). Lack of language proficiency coupled with the pressures to assimilate have the potential to work in conjunction to elicit emotions of depression within the international graduate student (Baba & Hosoda, 2014).

The ability of the international graduate student to master the host countries language does not mean that their acculturation process will be any easier than those that do not (Kwon,

2009). Furthermore, irrespective of the level of the international graduate student's English proficiency, they will still experience emotions of loneliness, stress, and homesickness (Kwon, 2009). Researchers explain that there are six factors relating to communication competency, which are: 1) language competency, 2) social decentering, 3) knowledge of the host culture, 4) adaptation, 5) communication effectiveness, and 6) social integration (Arthur, Redmond, & Bunyi, 1993). These factors provide insight into primary challenges that the international graduate student will encounter in their acculturation to the host institution.

Past research on language barriers does not explain how to target the issue. Several studies go in depth regarding how language barriers contribute to acculturation but do not provide insight into the ways in which the acculturation experience might be affected by the services offered through the university (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Mori, 2000). Furthermore, only a few studies highlighted how language barriers might play a role in impacting the health of the international student (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998; Babiker, Cox, & Miller, 1980). This study fills that gap in literature by providing insight into not only how language barriers might play a role in negatively impacting the acculturation experience but also what might be done on behalf of the university to overcome that barrier, therefore allowing for a successful transition for the student. In addition, this study explores how language barriers might affect the health of the international graduate student, speaking to the importance of understanding the phenomenon in a more comprehensive way.

### Socio-Cultural Factors

Social support is an important factor in the coping and management of acculturative stress. This is especially true for the psychological stressors that the international graduate

student might experience upon arriving at SIUC (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Crocket and his colleagues (2007) explain that social support is essentially the availability of both psychological and social resources that the host institution provides to help students manage stressors (Crockett et al., 2007). The social support that the international graduate student receives from university staff, domestic students, and co-nationals contributes to the student's overall psychological well-being while abroad (Zhou et al., 2008). This is important to note as student sojourners don't typically have social networks in place within the host institution prior to their arrival (Berry, 1987). Therefore, the social networks that the international graduate student establishes with domestic students is vital and typically has a positive effect on their acculturation, especially as they deal with acculturative stressors (Poyrazli et al., 2004)

Unfortunately, the majority of international graduate students face difficulties in establishing social connections with American students (Frey & Roysircar, 2006). These difficulties, researchers explain, are due to one of two reasons. The first has to do with the international student's preference to not associate with domestic students (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). One factor as to why this might be the case is because many international students believe that American students have superficial friendships that focus more on academics and less on personal matters (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Furthermore, international students tend to report that their closest friends are those that share the same culture as them due to similarities in preferences of friendship depth (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977). Since every culture defines "friendship" differently, the international graduate student might decide that the challenges of forming friendships with domestic students outweigh the potential benefits (Fahrlander, 1980). Furthermore, friendships and their importance in one's life differ at varying stages in the life cycle (Korn & Nicotera, 1993). Most graduate students fall into the

categories of both young adult (late teens to early thirties) and adult (ages thirty to forty). As these are both important periods in the life cycle, highlighted by educational achievements, marriage/family life, and demands of work, the benefits of friendships are often seen in that they provide the critical input and support needed during this period (Jerrome, 1994).

A second reason or contributing factor for why the international graduate student might find it difficult to form connections with domestic students is due to a perceived lack of opportunities on campus (Mori, 2000). Many international students find it challenging to establish genuine friendships with Americans due to lifestyle and cultural differences. This, ultimately, prevents the international graduate student from being able to integrate fully into the culture of the host institution (Spencer-Oatey & Xion, 2006). It is important for international graduate students to develop relationships with American students (Church, 1982; Li & Gasser, 2005; Zhou et al., 2008). These relationships have social, psychological, and academic benefits for the international graduate student as they enable them to develop the necessary cultural skills to be able to assimilate into the host culture (Li & Gasser, 2005; Zhou et al., 2008). The greater the amount of interaction that the international graduate student has with domestic students at SIUC, the less academic and social challenges they will encounter (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Additionally, the social support that is attached to cross-cultural interactions will aid the international student in their English proficiency, which leads to better psychological adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990; Zimmerman, 1995). This is especially important in times of distress, as the international student deals with certain acculturation challenges that American students will be able to aid them with (Church, 1982).

This idea is supported by several researchers who posit that international students belong to three different social networks, with each network serving a particular psychological function (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin 1977; Furnham, 2004; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). If the international graduate student fails to incorporate themselves into one of these networks, they won't be able to adapt, and subsequently, integrate into the host culture (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin 1977; Spencer-Oatey & Xion, 2006). The three networks, which include the Mono-Cultural Network or Primary Network, the Bi-Cultural Network, and the Friendship Network, all describe the ties the international graduate student has with both the host culture and their home culture. The Mono-Cultural Network is when the international student maintains both the behaviors and values of their home culture, which are done through both connections with other students from the same culture that are also at the host institution and through communications with friends from their home country (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin 1977; Furnham, 2004; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham 2001; Zhou et al., 2008).

The Bi-Cultural Network is one in which the international student has interactions with domestic students and staff that aid them in their acculturation process; this process includes the teaching of cultural skills that will support their academic success (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977; Furnham, 2004; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Zhou et al., 2008). The Friendship Network, on the other hand, is when the international student establishes connections with domestic students in which both parties provide social support to one another and enjoy engaging in social activities together (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977; Furnham, 2004; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Zhou et al., 2008). However, as Lin and Yi (1997) explain, there are the cases of international students who don't feel they belong to either the international or American communities. For example, Asian international students tend to feel discomfort when interacting

with domestic students due to cultural differences, such as the assertive nature of American students. Yet, these same Asian international students also face difficulties establishing connections with Asian American students as their personalities are not compatible with other aspects of Asian culture, such as deference (Lin & Yi, 1997).

Social support, though an independently significant factor in the cross-cultural adjustment of the international graduate student, should be considered in conjunction with other acculturative stressors in order to get the full scope of its effects on acculturation. As Poyrazli and his colleagues explain, international students that have higher levels of social support in addition to possessing better language proficiency, experience less acculturative stress overall (Poyrazli et al., 2004). The idea of the confounding effect of acculturative stressors is supported in Sumer and his colleagues (2008) research that reports that the international students' level of social support coupled with the satisfaction in their social network will have a positive effect on their overall adjustment to both the host institution and culture.

Social support is particularly important for addressing the mental health needs of international students (Han, Kim, Lee, Pistulka, & Kim, 2007). International graduate students with greater social support tend to have decreased levels of acculturative stress, more specifically, depression, than students with lower social support (Heehanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Hom, 2002). Satisfying social connections, especially with those from the host country, provide international students with opportunities for better overall psychological adjustment (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Previous studies performed by various researchers support this thought as they explain that having friends in which the international student can confide in is especially helpful when they experience feelings of isolation (Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Yeh

& Inose, 2003; Olaniran, 1993; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002-2003; Li & Gasser, 2005).

In order to provide better insight into how sociocultural factors are related to social support, acculturative stress, and psychological distress, I will explain and apply Barrera's (1988) three models of social support. The three models include the: 1) Direct Effects Model, 2) Stress-Buffering Model, and 3) Social Support Deterioration Model. The Direct Effects Model suggests that the international student's social support networks have a direct effect on their psychological health. This model also posits that all human beings have needs that are rooted in attachment and connections with others. Social support, therefore, helps the international graduate student meet these needs by allowing for human contact, which, in turn, has a positive effect on their psychological well-being. It should be noted that these needs are not contingent upon the presence nor absence of acculturative stressors (Barrera, 1988).

The Stress Buffering Model, also known as the Moderating Effect, suggests that social support serves as a buffer for the stress that the international student experiences, thus preventing them from experiencing even more detrimental and extensive effects. Furthermore, this model posits that social support serves as a moderator between acculturative stressors and the psychological well-being of the international student (Barrera, 1988). To this end, as the international graduate student builds social support systems at SIUC, not only will they experience a decreased level of acculturative stress but they will also be protected from experiencing acculturative stressors that could be more damaging to their mental health and remain with them upon completion of their academic program. Lastly, there is the Social Deterioration Model, or the Mediating Effect. This model posits that various acculturative

stressors, typically those that the international student deems traumatic, will lead to the reduction of social support. This reduction will then lead to higher levels of psychological distress for the student. So, this model predicts that the level of social support that the international graduate student has, will serve as a mediator between acculturative stressors experienced and potential psychological distress (Barrera, 1988). Essentially, this model explains that with the diminution of social support there will also be negative effects on the psychological health of the international graduate student during their adjustment process at SIUC (Barrera, 1988).

Researchers Lee and Robbins (1998) posit that the social connections that international students establish at the host institution are an aspect of the self and, furthermore, a reflection of the international students' perceived sense of both closeness and togetherness within their social environment. In order for student sojourners to establish relationships and engage in social activities with others while at the host university, they will need to have higher perceived levels of social connectedness (Lee & Robbins, 1998). Therefore, the international graduate student's adjustment to SIUC is ultimately dependent on their perceived level of social connectedness (Duru, 2008). Higher social connectedness coupled with greater amounts of social support allows the international student to have an easier adjustment to their new environment (Duru, 2008). Similarly, student sojourners with lower perceived levels of social connectedness will struggle in their adjustment process (Lee & Robbins, 1998). Within this struggle is the potential for the international graduate student to grow to feel distant from other students, thus leading them into feelings of isolation (Lee & Robbins, 1995).

As research has established, the acculturation experience of the international graduate student is dependent on many factors, one of which is the student's personality (Shirav & Levy, 2010). According to researchers, there are two personality types that are typical of international

students. The first personality type is the Integrationist, who they classify as the student that values their own culture while still interacting with other students from other cultures (Shirav & Levy, 2010). The second type of international student is the Separatist, who is identified as the student who values their own culture but is less interested in interacting with others that are from different groups (Shiraev & Levy, 2010). So, we can assume that personality is an important piece to understanding the acculturation needs of international graduate students as it will affect the manner in which they handle acculturative stressors while at SIUC, especially psychological ones (Bochner, 1982).

Bochner (1982) proposes four types of ways that individuals respond to acculturation, which are: 1) Passing, 2) Chauvinist, 3) Marginal, and 4) Mediating (Bochner, 1982). He posits that the international graduate student with a Passing response to acculturative stressors has a more embracing approach to the host environment while lacking cultural identity to their home country. So, upon the international graduate student's arrival to SIUC, they will be more open to the University and the Southern Illinois community but will have a sense of detachment with their native cultural identity. Conversely, the Chauvinist international graduate student rejects the host culture altogether while inflating their native cultural identity and its values. Bochner claims that individuals with Marginal responses are not connected to either their native or host culture (Bochner, 1982). Lastly, the international graduate student with a Mediating response takes the acculturation process a step further and integrates both cultures and ultimately develops their own cultural system (Bochner, 1982). To this end, host institutions should be aware of not only the needs of international students but more importantly the differences in ways that these students might respond to acculturative stressors.

In attempting to further the understanding of how personality might affect the international graduate student, it is fitting to apply the Theory of Contingency of Self-Worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). This theory suggests that individuals base their self-worth on the perceptions that others have regarding their appearance and academic abilities (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). This is especially important in terms of the socialization factor as the international graduate student will be more or less inclined to interact with others depending on how they believe they are perceived (Ho, 1991). An example can be found in the goals of Chinese international students. As their culture places a high value on educational achievements, their self-concept, in regards to their academic competence, rests heavily on outside perceptions (Ho, 1991). The interrelatedness of academic and socio-cultural related acculturative stressors can be clearly understood in the challenges that international graduate students face as they attempt to understand differences in collectivist versus cooperative academic cultures (Constantine et al., 2005). African international students, for example, are taught in a communal setting and, therefore, struggle in adjusting to the more individualistic American learning style (Constantine et al., 2005).

The challenges in adjustment that international graduate students face should not only be attributed to factors rooted in the aforementioned emotional, social, and academic stressors. There are indeed external factors, such as societally based ones, that have the potential to affect the international students experience while at SIUC. In the next section, I explore and discuss literature on the role of social media in the adjustment of international graduate students and whether it serves as either a hindrance, asset, or both.

## Social Media

The international student experience is much different than it used to be years ago, primarily due to technology (Sandel, 2014). Prior to the usage of social media, the mass media outlet relied upon was television (Sandler, 2014). Today, however, there is a wide range of options such as email, instant messenger, Skype, Facebook, Twitter, Viber, etc. that allows the international graduate student to be able to remain connected to family and friends in their home country (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Sandel, 2014; Sheer, 2011). These connections allow for the perception of the distance between home and host culture to appear lessened for the international graduate student, which, in turn, helps alleviate certain emotions attached to homesickness (Sandel, 2014). In order to better understand how the acculturation process is affected by the use of social media, especially in regards to ways in which social media is related to acculturative stress, I will be applying the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory. Through this theory, Kim and colleagues (2009) claim that pushing the international student to adapt to their new environment, their individual experiences in acculturation, which they refer to as "stress-adaptation growth," coupled with practices involving communicating with domestic students, will accelerate the adaptation process. The theory also proposes that the adaptation process might be delayed if the international student has greater communication with co-nationals, as it limits their potential for interactions with domestic students (Kim, 2006**;** Kim, Izumi, & McKay-Semmler, 2009; Kim, Lujan, & Dixon, 1998).

One major weakness in the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory is that it does not take into account the fact that acculturation is dependent on both the international student's willingness and effort to adapt to the host culture; thus, again, alluding to the previously mentioned factor of international graduate student personality and its effect on their acculturation (Sandel, 2014). In

order to understand the international graduate student's role in their acculturation, I will be applying a portion of the above-mentioned Model of Acculturation by Berry and colleagues. Through this model, they explain the dynamic between the international student and their new society (Berry, 2005; Berry, 2009; Ward, 2008, 2013). The researchers propose that the adjustment process involves two distinct components: 1) Psychological and 2) Sociocultural (Berry, 2009; Ward, 2013; Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). This differs from Kim's (2006) claim that the adjustment process that the international student experiences is due to the discomfort that accompanies the process of experiencing a new environment and culture. Furthermore, the former has to do with the desire and intrinsic motivation of the international student to assimilate. The latter, however, is related to the culture shock that the international graduate student might experience as they acculturate (Sandel, 2014).

Though both theoretical and conceptual perspectives offered by Kim (2006) and Berry (2005) are insightful, I sought to understand how technology, more specifically social media, impacts the cross-cultural acculturation process of the international graduate student at SIUC. As I was also interested in exploring how the health of the international graduate student is affected by their acculturation process, I focused on two studies that offer insight and potential answers to both. The first study performed by Kim and colleagues (2008, 2009) explored both the interpersonal and mediated communication styles of international students. The results of this study were that the greater the amount of communication the international student has with domestic students, the healthier they will be, both psychologically and physically. Researchers also found that there weren't any effects on the psychological or physical health of the international student if they used mediated forms of communication with other international students at the host institution (Kim, Izumi, & McKay-Semmler, 2009). These conclusions are

consistent with the Cross-Cultural Theory, which claims that there is a positive relationship between psychological/ physical well-being and greater communication between international and domestic students (Kim, Izumi, & McKay-Semmler, 2009; Sadler, 2014).

The second study performed by Ye (2006), in which she explored international student adjustment and social media usage, showed results that social media usage by international students is dependent on two things: 1) the age of the international student and 2) the length of time that they are in the U.S. Younger international students and those that study in the U.S. for a shorter amount of time engage in more online activities. Similarly, older international students that study in the U.S. for longer periods of time use social media much less (Ye, 2006). They also explained that the former group of international students had overall lower levels of difficulty in adjusting to their host institution (Sadler, 2014; Ye, 2006). This study supports Kim's claim that greater amounts of communication with domestic students will lead to a higher level of adaptation (Sadler, 2006). Ye's (2006) study also presents a contrast to Kim and colleagues' (2009) study where she concluded that the more ties that the international student has with their long-distance networks the more they will experience positive emotions as cited in Sadler's 2014 article.

Social networks, be it face-to-face or online, work in complement to help the international graduate student's overall adjustment process (Ye, 2006). As Kim and colleagues (2009) explain, communication with domestic students will meet the more informational based needs of the international student. However, communication with other international students, through social media, will meet their emotional needs (Sadler, 2014) Kim and colleagues (2012) performed another study where they explored how international students coped with

acculturative stressors. They found that social media sites such as Facebook served as a coping

mechanism for stressors. Furthermore, this study concluded that some international students used

Facebook as a means to help them identify more strongly with the host culture. The majority of

the international students, however, used the social media site to remain connected to their

culture and maintain their native identities (Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2012). Similarly, in a study

performed by Hjorth & Arnold (2011) exploring social media and the role it plays in the lives of

international students, it was concluded that the improvements in access to social media sites has

enabled international students to remain connected to their loved ones and culture. The

personality differences of international students and their purposes in utilizing social media

speaks directly to the aforementioned claim by Ye (2006) that international students' adjustment

to their new environment rests heavily on their personal motivation.

Social media hasn't always been a productive avenue for obtaining information regarding

other cultures and has the potential to negatively affect the acculturation process for the

international student (Sandel, 2014). Media outlets, as Keshishian (2000) explained in her

autobiographical study, which examined the vital roles that media communication has on the

acculturation process, has the potential to both support or hinder the international graduate

student's acculturation (Sadler, 2014). The varying social and political events that have taken

place both domestically and internationally have an influence on how the international graduate

student is perceived by both native students and university staff (Sadler, 2014). If the perceptions

are negative, this can lead the international graduate student to experiencing feelings of

discrimination and isolation (Goforth, Pham, Chun, Castro-Olivo, & Yosia, 2016). For example,

Keshishian (2000) explained that during her stay in the U.S., the media's coverage regarding the

1979 Iranian hostage crisis situation ultimately slowed down her adaptation process (Sandel, 2014).

The exposure to and use of media can promote cultural segregation or encourage assimilation into the host culture. (Elias, 2008) To support this idea is the theoretical model developed by researchers Adoni, Cohen, and Caspi (2008), to explain four types of media users that are typical of immigrants, which are: 1) Adapters- individuals who primarily use the host cultures media language; 2) Dualists: are individuals who are consumers of both the host cultures media language and their home culture social media language; 3) Separatists- individuals who consume high amounts of the host cultures social media language and low amounts of their home country language; 4) Detached- are individuals who are not consumers of either the host cultures social media language nor their home countries' (Elias, 2008). Researchers also posit that immigrants that fall into the Adapter and Dualist categories are more likely to identify with the host culture. However, those that fall into the Separatist and Detached categories will identify more with their home country and are, therefore, inclined to associate with those from the same culture (Adoni, Cohen, & Caspi, 2002; Elias, 2008). To this end, we can assume that the acculturation experience of the international graduate student will be largely dependent on the group that they fall into (Elias, 2008).

A review of the literature proved that there isn't a clear picture of how migrant groups will benefit from utilizing social media to aid them in the preparation process. In fact, one particular study actually excluded participants that were preparing to study abroad (Sadler, 2014). The acculturation process is largely affected by the amount of prior knowledge the international student has regarding the host culture (Zhou et al., 2008). So, the lack of preparedness and awareness of the host culture has the potential to make the international

graduate student's acculturation process more difficult (Zhou et al., 2008). This is an important piece to this study as I sought to understand what services SIUC offers to this population in order to meet their various needs and, furthermore, how University staff prepare prior to students arrival. However, regardless of the extent to which the host university prepares for the arrival of the students and the services offered while at the host university, there is still the potential for the international graduate student to face adjustment challenges due to discrimination rooted in ethnicity and religion. In the subsequent section, I will dissect literature that explores this very important factor as it relates to the adjustment process of international graduate students.

**Perceived Discrimination**

Since a positive acculturation process can be classified as one that is associated with fewer acculturative issues and a higher level of ethnic maintenance, it is important that the host institution provide opportunities for international graduate students to be able to engage in the cultural activities, which they are used to (Ward, 2013)**.** This balance isn't always easy to achieve for the international graduate student as they not only experience high levels of stress in attempting to maintain their ethnicity but often times lose parts of their identity and even religion in the process (Berry, 2006; Edmondson & Park, 2009). As Ward (2013) explains, the more the international student is able to maintain their ethnic and religious identity, the fewer behavioral problems they will experience as they acculturate. In other words, when international graduate students feel supported to act out their religion, they will be better able to adapt to the new environment (Ward, 2013). These findings are in direct contrast to Kim's (2006) suggestion of the adaptation process, which she posits is a process of reorganization that the international student undergoes when exposed to their new environment.

Acculturation is particularly challenging for international students that are a part of

marginalized groups or those that typically experience discrimination due to their ethnicity

(Goforth, Pham, Chun, Castro-Olivo, & Yosia, 2016). Researchers Ying, Lee, and Tsai's

explored the perceived discrimination of Chinese international students versus that of Chinese

American students (as cited in the 2007 article by Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). They found that

Chinese international students had more experiences of feelings of isolation from the host culture

than Chinese American students (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Another study exploring

discrimination amongst international students showed that African international students

experience discrimination from both co-nationals and native students while Asian international

students experience prejudice and discrimination mostly from native students (Constantine,

Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005). The significance of these studies is that they

explain that irrespective of the region in which the international graduate student is from, there is

a good possibility that they will experience what they perceive to be discrimination from

domestic students and/or staff.

　　Religion has the ability to play a significant role in the acculturation experience of the

international graduate student, both in a positive and negative way. As the international graduate

student attempts to cope with varying acculturative stressors, primarily those that impact their

physical and psychological health, they often rely on their religion and its accompanying

practices (Hsu et al., 2009). Many international students find comfort in the support that they

receive from the networks that they build within their religious activities. These networks, in

turn, help to meet their social related needs (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Hsu et al.,

2009). Relating religion to social media, it is easy to understand its role in both the creation and

perpetuation of stereotypes (Aroian, 2012; Keshishian, 2000). A prime example of how the

media's portrayal of cultures and religions can bring forth negative attention and perceptions, is the War on Terror (Aroian, 2012). This has certainly highlighted Muslims, particularly those from the Middle East, in a negative light; thus, directly affecting international students from Arab speaking countries as they feel judged and often times isolated (Goforth, Pham, Chun, Castro-Olivo, & Yosia, 2016).

The mental health of the international graduate student is greatly affected by their perceived discrimination (Goforth, Pham, Chun, Castro-Olivo, & Yosia, 2016). This is precisely why it is important for host universities to be aware of the specific needs of differing religious groups as it will direct them in the process of implementing appropriate services (Bernal, Bonilla, & Bellido, 1995). One of the primary goals of the host institution should be to promote an environment that is culturally inclusive. One way to do this through providing a safe environment where all religious practices are respected (Bernal, Bonilla, & Bellido, 1995). In order for this to be accomplished, the host institution must remain cognizant of the importance of not only cultural awareness but of religious support and the need for accommodations for religious practices to be made available on campus. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the host university to understand just how closely linked acculturative stress is to religion and in doing so, will be better able to remedy potential stressors before they lead to more detrimental health effects (Bernal, Bonilla, & Bellido, 1995).

## Health & Acculturation

I've explained the ways in which all of the aforementioned stressors affect the international graduate student in terms of their acculturation to SIUC. Yet, it is equally important to consider how the international graduate student's health is affected by this process. Research has established that international graduate students are an extremely vulnerable population to

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acculturative stress and its accompanying health problems, particularly psychological health, as they typically experience symptoms of distress and depressive symptoms (Blignault, Ponzio, Rong, & Eisenbruch, 2008; Chen et al., 2015; Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Liu, 2009). As international graduate students sojourn to the U.S. and face individuation from their families and the customs in which they are used to, they will be vulnerable to various psychiatric disorders (Chen et al., 2015). This is related to the acculturation process as it has the ability to produce poor academic performance, absenteeism, and self-harm for the international graduate student (Chen et al, 2015). Psychological distress is more prevalent in international graduate students compared to that of domestic graduate students, therefore, it is important that I considered the ways in which mental health issues have the ability to affect other areas of the student's life (Lu et al., 2014).

The Journal of American College Health (2007) published an article in which the prevalence of mental health needs in international graduate students was examined. The results showed that 44% of international graduate students had at least one emotional or stress related issue that had a significant impact on not only their well-being but their academic performance as well. Though physical health is a very important component in outcome variables regarding acculturation, there have been far fewer studies that explore this topic in comparison to mental health (Shim, Freund, Stopsack, Ka᷈mmerer, & Barnow, 2014). This is surprising because physical health symptoms are linked to mental health, especially as it relates to the distress that is associated with acculturation (Chan & Parker, 2004; Kirmayer & Young, 1998; Lee, Kleinman, & Kleinman, 2007; Shim, Freund, Stopsack, Ka᷈mmerer, & Barnow, 2014). For the international graduate student at SIUC, they will need to also adjust to the differing way in which this new culture seeks to address health issues of the students on campus. For example, for international

graduate students that come from cultures that promote holistic practices, which is foundationally built on Eastern medicine, they will encounter challenges as they receive health care services in American culture (Pang, 1998).

As we consider the fact that suicide is presently the second leading cause of death in the young adult population (ages 25-34), it is vital that the adjustment outcome of self-harm be given special attention by universities as they prepare to welcome international graduate students (CDC, 2015). In a study that looked at the mental health issues experienced by Chinese international students studying in the U.S., researchers found that the Asian international students were more likely to not only experience suicidal thoughts but also attempt suicide than domestic students (Chen et al., 2015). Various research suggests that health issues present themselves as the international student transitions to study in the United States, difficulties can present themselves as they deal with language barriers, social isolation, academic difficulties, and financial hardships (Aubrey, 1991; Hyun et al. 2007; Tseng & Newton 2002; Wei et al., 2008). Other researchers claim that changes in the international student's mental health might be a direct consequence of their migration experience (Zhou et al., 2008). The emotional strain that the international graduate student experiences as they attempt to navigate their new academic environment at SIUC, can cause their health to be compromised (Yeh, 2003).

In a study performed by Sawir (2007), which focused on the importance of social networks for international students, he found that nearly two-thirds of the 200 international students in his study experienced problems of loneliness and/or isolation, especially within the first few months after their arrival to their host university (Sawir et al., 2007). He further suggests that there are three types of loneliness that typically present themselves in international

students: 1) Personal loneliness- this is due to loss of contact with family and friends; 2) Social loneliness – due to loss of social networks; and 3) Cultural loneliness- is triggered by the absence of the culture and language that the international graduate student is accustomed to (Sawir et al., 2007). This is important information for host universities to be aware of in order for them to be able to understand the differences and causes in the loneliness that the international graduate student might experience. Consequently, in doing so, university staff will also be well versed in the factors that might serve as barriers for the international graduate student seeking help and therefore better prepared to counter them.

## Barriers to Seeking Professional Help

There are several personal and institutional barriers to the international graduate student seeking professional help (Blignault, Ponzio, Rong, & Eisenbruch, 2008; Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Liu, 2009). The emotional barriers have to do with the international student experiencing feelings of shame, fear of stigma, lack of awareness of what services the host institution offers, and cost of services (Liu, 2009). The institutional barriers, simply put, have to do with the availability of mental health services for ethnic minorities (Blignault, Ponzio, Rong, & Eisenbruch, 2008; Frey & Roysircar, 2006). Many international students are mistrustful of the mental health professionals on their campus as they expect cultural differences to play a significant role in the services that they receive (Mori, 2000). Furthermore, the fear that the international graduate student might have regarding seeking professional help for mental health issues has much to do with their home countries view on mental health and counseling (Blignault, Ponzio, Rong, & Eisenbruch, 2008; Frey & Roysircar, 2006). In many developing countries, both mental health and counseling services are new and still considered a taboo topic (Blignault, Ponzio, Rong, & Eisenbruch, 2008; Frey & Roysircar, 2006). Consequently,

international graduate students from these countries will have a difficult time understanding not only the concept of mental health but more importantly the benefits of being treated by professionals (Blignault, Ponzio, Rong, & Eisenbruch, 2008; Frey & Roysircar, 2006).

Though international students might view counseling services as beneficial and, furthermore, necessary in order to have a successful academic and social experience while at the host university, counselors and other appropriate staff are often times unable to address mental health needs due to language barriers and cultural differences that prohibit the international student from seeking help (Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015; Nilsson & Anderson, 2004; Nilsson, Berkel, Flores & Lucas, 2008). According to a 2004 *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy* article where researchers sought to understand outreach-programming effects on international students, only 2% of international students sought counseling services (Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 2004). Furthermore, one-third of international students that did in fact seek counseling for issues related to depression, assertiveness, academic major, and anxiety, eventually quit attending sessions after the initial intake (Nilsson, Berkel, Flores & Lucas, 2008).

Researchers propose that as individuals experience acculturative stress they use two coping mechanisms, self-blame and denial (Crockett et al., 2007; Wei et al, 2008). Consequently, both coping mechanisms typically result in experiences with clinical levels of depression (Capielo, Delgado-Romero, & Stewart, 2015; Crockett et al., 2007; Wei et al., 2008). This concept of denial was supported in a study performed by Mitchell, Greenwood, and Guglielmi in which they explain that Asian students that sought therapy to address their mental health challenges attended fewer therapy sessions than non-international students at the host university due to their belief that their symptoms weren't severe enough (Mitchell, Greenwood, &

Guglielmi, 2007). Similarly, research by Ying, Lee, & Tsai (2007) in which they explain that for Chinese international students attending universities in America, their facing adjustment challenges and being unable to address them will place them at a greater risk for developing psychological distress. Regardless of the international graduate student's potential fears and inhibitions in seeking professional mental health services, it is the role of the university to promote an environment that seeks to eliminate stigma that is attached to mental health (Yoon & Jepsen, 2008). The most important component to consider in the addressing of mental health needs is its ability to turn into chronic stress and more detrimental, long term health effects for the international graduate student (Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015).

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

For the purposes of the literature review, I used Critical Social Theory (CST) as the theoretical framework in order to serve as a tool to both guide me in the review process as well as in the synthesizing of the literature previously performed on the topic. CST can be understood as a multidisciplinary knowledge base having the goal of critiquing the way in which society functions and subsequently making changes based off of that acquired knowledge (Leonardo, 2015). Therefore, I used this method to help me in not only understanding the experiences of the participants but also critiquing and ultimately providing insight into what should be done to meet the adjustment needs of the international graduate student population at SIUC.

To help direct the exploration of the research, I used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the conceptual framework. Critical Race Theory is typically used as a framework to explore and expose the ways in which the present social structures are affected by both race and racism (Yosso, 2005). In this study, however, I utilized CRT as a guide to understand how perceived discrimination on behalf of the international graduate student plays a part in their acculturation.

As I used CRT in this study, I needed to remain attentive to potential issues of equity and how educational disparities based on student status, international or domestic, might have an effect on the academic and social experiences of international graduate students at SIUC (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). To this end, I was also able to use this framework to understand how differences in ethnicity might play a role in the acculturation experience of the international graduate student (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). Furthermore, this framework allowed me to explore how the services offered at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale affect the international graduate student in various ways (Yosso, 2005). Since narrative research essentially works on the principle that individuals make sense of their environment by the construction and narration of stories, I was able to use both CST and CRT as a way to capture the experiences of international graduate students at SIUC (Merriam, 2009).

An additional benefit of using both CST and CRT was the ability to explore and dissect social and equity factors attached to the international graduate student population, such as feelings of being an overlooked and/or undervalued population at SIUC. I used both approaches to critique how ethnic segregation, lack of awareness, and potentially oppression relate to promoting disadvantages in the adjustment process for international graduate students (Leonardo, 2015). I also incorporated the Critical Race Theory in Education (CRTE), which was developed by researchers Edward Taylor, Adrienne Dixson, and Cilia Rousseau after they examined CRT and found that it lacked the addressing of many important disparities present within the U.S. educational system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Therefore, CRTE can be understood as a theoretical perspective that aims to explore and address the ongoing gaps that are present within the educational system (Dixson & Rosseau, 2006; Taylor, 2009). In applying the CRTE framework to this study, I was able to explore ethnicity as a social construct and how it

may hinder the international graduate student in their adjustment to SIUC. Furthermore, since storytelling is a central component of both CRT and CRTE, I used the narrative approach as a means to explore how factors such as language barriers, cultural differences, discrimination, and religion affect the adjustment experiences of international graduate students at SIUC (Barger, 2015). Ultimately, as I explored and revealed how institutional inequities might play a role in this population's adjustment, I was able to provide information that will help in the establishment of a bridge between international graduate students and SIUC staff (Gay, 2010).

In order to conceptualize experiences shared by international graduate students at SIUC, the differing factors that play a part in this relationship between student and University must first be understood. The literature and subsequent discussion sheds light on international graduate student needs and university obligations in regards to meeting those needs. Furthermore, it leads the reader to understand what either promotes or prohibits the international graduate student's utilization of student services at SIUC. Lastly, as I worked through the information, I was enlightened on factors and perspectives that I hadn't initially thought of prior to embarking on the study. My attempt is to fill gaps in literature regarding how the potential lack of emotional, social, and/or academic support affect their adjustment process at SIUC.

## Conclusion

The literature that exists on international graduate students provides great insight into the potential needs of this population. Extant literature, however, is limited in regards to the cross-cultural adjustment process that the international graduate student undergoes as they arrive to their new academic environment and, furthermore, the ways in which the host institution can meet the needs of this population (Kim, 2001). Aside from the obvious uniqueness of this study

due to its focus on SIUC international graduate students, there are three main gaps in the literature that this study sought to address.

First, in regards to the very important factor of culture shock, literature only provides one model of cross-cultural adjustment, which is the Recuperation Model. This single model cannot adequately address the psychological recovery that follows the initial shock that international graduate students encounter upon their arrival at SIUC. This is an important factor to consider as the coping mechanisms employed by the international graduate student have the ability to affect the student's overall acculturation. Although the relationship between acculturative stressors and their adjustment to the host institution is examined in several past studies, there is a scarcity of research regarding how that relationship might be influenced by the presence or absence of social support. As this literature review has exemplified, the emotional and social support that the international graduate student receives is instrumental in dealing with acculturative stress. Revisiting Barrera's (1988) three models of social support (Direct Effects, Stress Buffering, and Social Support Deterioration) it is easy to see that there are several approaches to the ways in which international graduate students utilize social support systems to combat acculturative stressors. Further research needs to be performed to explore the management techniques that have proved beneficial for the international graduate student.

Secondly, since international graduate students who have high levels of social support from American students and staff have a better overall socio-cultural adjustment outcome, it is critical that host institutions provide an environment that supports cross-culturalism (Poyralzi et al., 2004). This speaks to the importance of universities being prepared to meet the needs of this population, prior to the students' arrival. Lastly, a major limitation in past research performed on this topic is that researchers have only explored and assessed certain populations within the

international graduate student community. These students are mostly Asian and European, with very limited information on African international graduate students provided. In researchers neglecting to include certain international student populations in their studies, we are unable to get a clear understanding of how the acculturation process might affect international students differently due to where they are from.

This study fills these gaps, thus providing a more comprehensive picture of the needs of the international graduate student population at SIUC. Furthermore, though past research has been performed on the topic, there isn't one that seeks to explore all of factors contributing to the international graduate student's acculturation experience at SIUC. The literature review proved that though past studies have used both qualitative and quantitative methods, there has been more of a usage of quantitative and mixed methods. Furthermore, these studies have been more specific in their focus on the phenomenon, focusing solely on targeted and predetermined factors. Even fewer studies have explored factors but rather have embarked on the study with predetermined ones. These same studies have utilized the mixed methods and quantitative approaches more heavily. In using the qualitative approach, I was able to use the information garnered from both focus groups and interviews to understand the factors in a more detailed and first hand witness way. In delving deeper into the intricacies involved in understanding the acculturation needs of international graduate students, I was able to provide information that will bridge the necessary gap between the international graduate student population and the appropriate SIUC staff.

# CHAPTER 3

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Approach

There were many objectives for this qualitative, narrative case study. The primary purpose, however, was to understand the challenges that international graduate students face in regards to academic, emotional and physical aspects, as they attempt to get adjusted both academically and socially while at SIUC. In discussing these challenges, I collected data that allowed me to gain a deeper sense of their needs and what is or isn't being met on behalf of the University. Their stories shed light on this important issue that affects both SIUC staff and students alike as they seek to maintain an inclusive environment for all students.

### Qualitative Research

In order to accomplish the goals of this study, I employed a qualitative approach. Qualitative research aims to understand the world through the eyes of the participants whose world it is. Qualitative research does not begin with a hypothesis that is proved or disproved but instead with a plan of simply exploring the phenomenon at hand (Wilson, 1998). There are several key reasons as to why I chose this approach. First, for this particular study where I sought to identify the details in the experiences of the participants, the qualitative approach allowed me to understand how the experiences affected the participant's social world (Lerner & Tolan, 2016). Secondly, the qualitative approach allowed me, as the researcher, to focus on the process that deals with the how's and why's of the phenomenon and, furthermore, the meaning attached to that (Wilson, 1998). Therefore, I was able to not only understand how and why international

graduate students at SIUC experienced what they did in their adjustment process but also how they've personally interpreted these experiences (Butina, 2015).

Researchers Marshall and Rossman (1995) explain that qualitative research has four main purposes, which are to: 1) explore or investigate the phenomenon, 2) explain the factors as to what is responsible for the phenomenon, 3) describe the phenomenon in a way that the reader will be able to understand the participants' experiences, and 4) predict or forecast behaviors, events, etc. attached to the phenomenon. Proponents of qualitative research explain that the equivalent theoretical platforms to the statistical data that quantitative research yields, are rooted in both the sample size and its ability to get to the participant's subconscious level of thinking. This, they explain, can only be accomplished through qualitative methods that allow for prolonged discussions and the subsequent analysis of information (Barnham, 2015). This certainly speaks to the appropriateness of this method for this study, since my goals were not only to understand what the participant's experiences have been but also how they truly think and feel about their experiences. This method, therefore, revealed a much deeper contextual layer which, allowed me to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants experiences.

**Narrative**

The Narrative approach, typically interchangeably referred to as storytelling, serves as a tool for the researcher to both tell stories as well as ascribe meaning to subjective experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005). This, in turn, allows for the exploration of those meanings in order to gain a better understanding of the phenomena of interest, in this case the adjustment needs of the international student (Rejno, Berg, & Danielson, 2014). In using narrative analysis, I was able to simultaneously explore the stories that the participants shared while also making sense of their

experiences (Riessman, 1993). Within the process of narrating experiences, which includes a co-authorship with both the narrator and the participants, we ultimately change, or refigure, our initial understanding of not only ourselves but the world in which we live (Riessman, 2014; Rejno, Berg, & Danielson, 2014; Wiklund-Gustin, 2010). To this end, narratives can be understood as a means for attempting to reshape the way in which we understand life while also respecting individuality within the human experience (Brown et al., 2008). Furthermore, in performing narrative interviewing, I was able to acquire information regarding first hand experiences from participants (Mikkonen, 2012).

In using the narrative approach, I was able to co-construct meaning of the phenomena along with the participants. Furthermore, in hearing the stories shared by the participants, we were able to help make meaning of their experiences. Together, we explored and explained what essentially are retroactive constructions of the experiences of the participants (Rejno, Berg, & Danielson, 2014; Sandelowski, 1991). This means that in order to address the adjustment factors I mentioned above, I needed to make connections between the factors and then interpret them. This approach also allowed me, as the researcher, to understand how the participants, themselves ascribe meaning to those events (Wiklund, 2010). This, again, speaking to the appropriateness of applying CRT as the conceptual framework to help in understanding participant experiences, both on independent and collective levels. Riessman (2014) explains that narratives differ from other methods in that they have the added benefit of being able to not only answer the questions regarding the phenomenon but also explain what actually happened. So, during the data collection process, I explored the experiences that international graduate students have had while at SIUC in addition to understanding the perceptions that they've personally attached to their experiences and how that plays a part in their adjustment process (Riessman, 1993).

Narration has the ability to contribute to an understanding of ourselves and in a larger context, the world in which we live (Rejno, Berg, & Danielson, 2014). In using this approach, I was able to identify sources of adjustment issues for the international graduate student while also exploring how the student identifies themselves in terms of their adjustment (Riessman, 1993). In other words, the narrative method contributed to the understanding of how the student has been affected, both personally and academically as they've transitioned. Furthermore, I was able to explore if and how they've had to reshape their lives as they've adjusted to the new environment (Rejno, Berg, & Danielson, 2014). Narrative approaches enabled me, as the researcher, to co-construct the stories with the participants while maintaining respect to both the individualities and similarities in each participant's experience as an international graduate student at SIUC (Gregory, 2010; Wiklund, 2011).

In addition to the reasons listed above, I chose the narrative approach in order to help me contribute to literature. In doing this I was first able to explore the adjustment needs of international graduate students at SIUC. Next, I was able to understand in what ways these needs are or aren't being met. Lastly, I was able to offer suggestions as to methods for ensuring that needs were or were not met. This approach allowed me to understand each individual's story independently and then examine feedback collectively so as to be able to make connections with the information shared between each participant, again adding to literature on the needs of international graduate students. Prior to the start of the study, I planned for any overlap in responses. Each participant will surely have different experiences or different interpretations of their experiences as it relates to this topic. Essentially, in using the narrative approach, I served as the co-constructor and co-author along with the participants as we worked together to express, in as accurately as possible, their experiences (Rejno, Berg, & Danielson, 2014; Riessman, 1993)

As previously mentioned, I wanted for the international student's voice to be heard and understood by the reader. This topic is not only sensitive in that it has the ability to conjure up emotions within the participant as they speak about experiences but it might also present information to the University that might prompt them to be introspective in understanding how their services or lack thereof have affected their international student population. Qualitative research allowed me to extract rich data that ultimately provided a more in depth and comprehensive understanding of the topic. Therefore, narrative approaches should be understood as a method used to tell stories as well as create meaning so as to be able to understand the experiences in a much deeper way.

## Research Approach

My literature review served as a confirmation that this topic still had plenty of room for exploration. Additionally, I gained insight into other methods for data collection used by other qualitative researchers. In the study performed by Lee et al. (2004), the intersectionality of differing factors, such as acculturative stress, perceived social support, and acculturation level on psychological distress were explored and then findings allowed me to think about the options I have for which I was able to explore the topic further. Much of the research explained how stress plays a major role in the adjustment process of the international graduate student and how it has the potential to affect the overall psychological balance of the student. However, there has been a limited amount of research performed on how confounding factors of stress, the nature of the international student's preparation to sojourn, and the host university's strategic planning efforts to meet this population's needs, play a role in the adjustment of the international student upon their arrival.

Szabo, Ward and Jose (2015) take this idea a step further in explaining that in order for stressors of international graduate students to be addressed, they must first be understood by the host university. Therefore, in order for international graduate students to have their needs met, SIUC staff must first educate themselves on the potential needs and how they differ from that of domestic student needs. Researchers Hirai, Frazier, and Syed (2015) performed a study in which multiple trajectories and predictors were explored in regards to first year international student adjustment to American universities. Based on their finds, they determined that in order for the host university's staff to be able to offer early interventions for students that may be at risk for facing adjustment challenges, they need to first be aware of the predictors. Universities that welcome international students, must be well versed in not only potential triggers for stress but also effective methods for overcoming them. It is crucial that the university be able to identify the factors that contribute to the experience of the international graduate students in order for them to be able to address their needs (Meghani & Harvey, 2015).

Another important component that I had not considered prior to performing the literature review that revealed itself during the process was the importance in understanding how the international student views themselves in relation to domestic students and its ability to affect their overall adjustment experience. In a study conductedd by Suspitsyna (2013), it was explained that attempts to make sense of their time at the host university affects the international student's identity and their adjustment process. This idea is supported in the longitudinal study performed by Meghani and Harvey (2015) where they explain that the international student's perceptions of their experiences affects their adjustment to their new environment. So, how well the international graduate student perceives their adjustment process ultimately affects the

information they shared with me during the focus group discussions and the individual interviews.

In this research process, I took into account how the personality and opinions of the international graduate student essentially work in conjunction to affect their experience at SIUC (Rahman & Rollock, 2004). In using CRT as the conceptual framework, I was able to analyze data gathered regarding participant feelings of discrimination and equity and how that plays a part in their overall acculturation experience. In order to get a greater understanding of the issue, I explored the congruence between the characteristics of the international graduate student in terms of their perceptions of their experiences and the characteristics of the host university, SIUC, in regards to the services that they are offering this population (Nolan & Morley, 2014). In doing this, I was able to understand the intricacies involved in the cultural assumptions that the international student has about SIUC both prior to and following their arrival at SIUC as well as their adapting psychologically and physically to their new environment (Parker & McEvoy, 1993).

My ultimate goal in performing this research was to serve as the vessel for which the international graduate student's lived experiences had the opportunity to be heard. To this end, as the researcher, I made sure to design questions with the goal of eliciting information from the participants that allows the reader to comprehend the importance of both cultural sensitivity and awareness as it specifically relates to this population.

## Limitations

As I embarked on this study, I was aware of several limitations that would present themselves throughout the process. The main limitation that came to mind had to do with what information I was able to garner during both focus groups and interviews. Depending on the

cultural and/or religious background of the student, they may not be willing to share information that they feel might be damaging to SIUC's reputation as well as due to their belief in the potential of it being traced back to them. This fear might have been something that held them back from sharing vital information during our meetings. In order to mitigate this limitation, I assured the participants both prior to the start of the focus group and interviews that all information shared will be handled confidentially and solely used for the purposes of this study. It was important to remember that the benefits of the data gathered through this study outweighed any potential limitations.

## Population

I was interested in a target population that had diverse backgrounds. I created a flyer and sample email, both explaining the purpose of my study. I first utilized the connection that I have within the International Students Office at SIUC to help advertise and distribute the flyer. The initial selection criteria were:

1) The international graduate student had not been to the U.S. prior to the start of their time at SIUC;

2) The international student was currently enrolled in either a Master's or Ph.D. program.
As I began to receive information from and briefly spoke with interested participants, I knew that it would serve me well to be more flexible in my selection criteria. Therefore, I selected one participant that came to the U.S. and received a Master's degree from an outside institution and came directly to SIUC afterwards to pursue their doctorate. I also selected a participant that came to SIUC as an exchange student for four months during their undergraduate years; this participant ended up coming back as a full-time student to pursue their Master's degree two years later. I quickly learned that in opening up the selection criteria, I was better able to recruit a

diverse population of international students, which in turn allowed for opportunities for the data

to be much richer, adding to the value of the study. From those 15 responses, I narrowed the list

down to 8 for several reasons. Two of the students were unable to make the focus group sessions,

four did not respond to the informational emails and subsequently sign the consent forms in time

to participate, and one was actually a senior in their undergraduate program.

Though this method of accessing participants proved to be satisfactory count wise, I

wasn't quite satisfied with the amount of diversity. I wanted to ensure that the population was

representative of as much diversity as possible. Therefore, after the all-female focus group, I

used the snowball sampling method and requested that several of the participants contact other

international graduate students that they know who might want to participate in this study. After

five more potentials reached out, I selected two final participants for the study. I selected one

male and one female international graduate student that had not been to the U.S prior to coming

to SIUC to pursue their graduate degree.

### Selection of Participants

As previously stated, I focused on international graduate students only at SIUC. I

specifically solicited international graduate students from all continents and regions. The

majority of the participants had not entered the U.S. prior to their arrival at SIUC, which

provided a better understanding of how sojourning to the U.S. for the first time affects the

student's adjustment. This also served as a comparison base against the two participants that had

either received a graduate degree at another university prior to attending SIUC for their doctoral

studies and for the participant who had traveled to SIUC during their undergraduate years prior

to returning for their graduate studies. Essentially, it allowed me to understand the students

experience from differing angles yet still with a focus on certain criteria. My main purpose with

the sampling criteria that I had created was to help avoid spending unnecessary time and resources. The information and responses that I garnered through my research, however, is applicable to any university that deals with international students. In recruiting 10 final participants that shared both similar and slightly differing criteria, I was able to examine those shared experiences in several ways.

Once I had the participants that I believed would provide pertinent information and were willing to candidly share their experiences, I discussed the study in great detail with each of them so that they possessed a full understanding of the study. Once in mutual agreement, I set up the focus group, which I initially planned to hold in person. Due to extensive challenges in scheduling the meeting for many of the participants, I sent an email out to the group asking them to respond with whether they preferred a virtual or in person focus group. It was unanimously decided upon that the virtual focus group would work best. I then sent out a Doodle poll requesting that each participant fill out the poll with their available dates and corresponding times.

In the end, the data collection process ran smoothly as I set up and used the forum of Google Hangouts and telephone. I had one all-female focus group and one all-male focus group. Each participant had an individual interview following the focus group sessions, which provided for opportunities of expansion on the information shared during the focus group and also as a follow up to ensure that I've indeed captured the stories that the participants intended to share. The newly added female participant missed the all-female focus group session that was held earlier that week and therefore only participated in an individual interview.

## Data Collection

The data collection and subsequent analyses of the data for this study procedurally consisted of two stages. I began the data collection process by holding two focus group sessions, where between 4 and 5 participants in each session were prompted with questions designed to elicit dialogue regarding their experiences while at SIUC. The first focus group session consisted of only female international graduate students; the second session consisted of only male international graduate students. I had previously conducted a mock focus group, therefore, the process was familiar to me. During focus group sessions, I recorded the conversations so as to replay it while simultaneously referring to my handwritten notes of the information shared during the session. Since focus groups are essentially performed to gain knowledge regarding participant attitudes, opinions, and beliefs, I was able to extract rich data regarding each participant's adjustment experience since arriving at SIUC as a graduate student (Then, Rankin, & Ali, 2014).

I used the focus groups as a guide to understand the general thought processes and views of the participants. The focus groups were beneficial as they allowed me to create constructs that helped guide the research (Dilorio et al., 1994; Kingry, Tiedje & Friedman, 1990). The focus group creates a space for the participants to share information in a more transparent manner and also help decrease bias in terms of participants opting to share only the information that they believe to be appropriate or socially acceptable (Then, Rankin, & Ali 2014). Following each focus group session, I had semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. I did this with the hope that the participants would be eased into the question and answer process and also so that I was able to use the experience of the focus groups as a guide for the one on one interviews. I was sensitive to the fact that my role as the researcher would be especially pronounced during this

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time and therefore have a greater chance of affecting the participant's willingness to share information with me. It is fundamental that the researcher be cognizant of their position at all times as there is always the risk of overstepping boundaries with the participant (Haahr, Norlyk, & Hall, 2014).

My goal for conducting the individual interviews was to provide an opportunity for participants to expand on topics touched on during the focus group. This was also a way to help alleviate any discomfort they might have experienced in sharing their responses in the more communal atmosphere. The qualitative researcher is tasked with attempting to garner as much knowledge from the participant while maintaining compassion and respect for their experiences (Haahr, Norlyk, & Hall, 2014). In beginning the data collection process with the focus groups and culminating with the one-on-one interviews, I was able to build rapport with the participants. By the time we had the interview, I had already explained the purpose of the study several times so that the participants had a solid understanding. This observation also involved me paying attention to nonverbal actions as they might be telling of emotions that resurface due to certain questions or the recalling of experiences. This, too, was expanded upon during the interviews. In cases where questions raise anxiety or any other psychological distress, I was prepared to provide information on resources and support available on campus.

After the focus groups as well as after each interview, I replayed the tapes used to record the conversations. I used my hand written notes that were taken during both data collection processes as a supplementary tool. These notes included details of nonverbal actions such as sudden movements during their communication that took place. Additionally, directly after the focus group and each interview, I took detailed notes. This was not necessarily done for the

purposes of the actual data collection process, but more as a reflective mechanism for myself as I sought to understand the expressed stories.

## Human Subjects

Prior to beginning the actual data collection process, I requested and obtained IRB approval from the Human Services Committee at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. This process involved me submitting detailed information to the Committee that included but wasn't limited to the background of the study (purpose), the methods that I employed in the study regarding the processes I used for the recruitment of participants, data collection, analyzation, and interpretation. Additionally, I explained my plan for ensuring and maintaining confidentiality and ethics. Upon receiving approval, I began the recruitment process. As I previously mentioned, I recruited participants through connections that I already had within SIUC's international office as well as through snowball sampling.

The focus group sessions began with me providing an introduction of myself and recapping the purpose of the study. I then posed initial questions that lead into a discussion about their experiences. As the researcher, I served as a guide of sorts if conversations repeatedly went off track and needed to be redirected to remain on topic. In doing this, I had to remain open to receiving unexpected information as it might have later been of benefit to the study. After the focus group, I held the one-on-one interviews, which lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. During this time, I took handwritten notes in order to supplement the audio recordings.

## Ethical Considerations

In order to protect the identities of each participant and promote confidentiality, pseudonyms were ascribed to each participant. Prior to the focus group, I discussed with each participant the purpose of the study and the role requirements of both me as the researcher and

them as the participants. I made sure that participants knew that their participation in this study was purely voluntary. I provided each participant with informed consent forms that they were asked to fill out prior to the start of the focus group. I began both the focus group session and the one on one interviews by reviewing the form aloud. The focus groups, as explained above, were separated by gender to accommodate for any potential factors that might contribute to participants not feeling comfortable in sharing information during the session. I allotted time for questions and anything that remained unclear for the participants. During the one-on-one interviews, I made sure to state that depending on what I found in both the focus group sessions and interviews, there might be a need for me to have follow up interviews to allow for expansion and/or clarification, if necessary. I explained, the interviews would not require more than an hour and could also be done virtually.

During both the focus groups and interviews, I used the aforementioned audio recordings to document this sharing of information and kept the files locked in my home. This was done to ensure organization in both the data gathering, documentation, analysis, and transcription. This was also done to ensure that I kept a documentation trail that was easy to follow. This helped in the process of the gathering of information and the paper trail in which I plan to leave behind for other researchers.

## Rigor and Trustworthiness

It is important that I discuss the issues of rigor and trustworthiness as it relates to this study. In regards to Credibility (or internal validity), I made sure that the data was in alignment with what the international graduate students were actually trying to say in the focus group and interviews. In order to ensure that this was the case, I performed member checking post interviews with every participant. This was done to ensure that what they shared during the

interview was documented in the right context. I wanted to make sure that I was eliminating as much bias as possible and instead allowing their true voices to be heard.

I was as descriptive as possible regarding how I derived at my conclusions so that all of the gathered information made sense, was clear, and properly documented. This was a continual process, repeated throughout the study. This was precisely why I built a strong rapport with the participants prior to the start of the interview so that they were comfortable enough with me to express anything that posed discomfort as we reviewed what they shared. This, in turn, allowed me to ensure that I was not allowing my own personal bias to influence the participants' answers or the conclusions in any way.

Transferability is a very important aspect to consider when working on a qualitative study. In my research, I strived to make sure that the results, if the study were conducted in a similar manner, would be able to be applied to other international graduate student populations and not just SIUC students. On my end, I made sure to be thorough in my descriptions of the actual context of the research. I also tried to ensure that the results were properly documented and that the entire process, from start to finish, was easy to follow. I did this so that those who wish to generalize (or transfer) the work to another setting or context would be able to do so without confusion. It was vital that I remembered that there is no surefire way to be totally sure that my work would be transferable as that also depends on the judgment call of the person wishing to transfer the results of the work.

The issue of Dependability was one that I needed to pay close attention to in this study. I employed my voice recorder as a supplement to my hand-written notes that I took during the interview. This was done to let me know that I had arrived at the most unbiased and replicable conclusion possible. As I explained above, the goal of this study was to shed light on a very

important and yet overlooked issue that all universities, irrespective of differences, need to be made aware of. In order to do this, I needed to provide a clearly outlined method for how I coded the responses of the answers from the participants. In doing this, other studies that might be performed on this topic or ones similar in nature to it will be able to know that I relied as much as possible on data void of personal bias and anything undocumented during and post interviews. I kept a detailed paper trail for both personal and public purposes that other, future researchers, would be able to utilize. This journal of sorts was able to provide insight into the whys and what's of my study so as to again, confirm dependability.

Last, but not least, there is the concept of Confirmability that must be considered in this study. In doing this, I wanted to show that the study would be able to be confirmed by other researchers. To meet this standard, I made sure that I accurately documented all of the procedures that were involved in the study. Additionally, I was responsible for making sure that I properly documented the procedures for how I continuously checked the data throughout the research process. I anticipated that this would be a tedious process in getting many international students to open up and share their experiences. There were also obstacles that presented themselves that are rooted in my obtaining information from the University such as lack of documentation of statistics related to international graduate students. However, this study is one that is necessary for not only the international student population but also the University.

There was always the potential for biases to present themselves in this study. In remaining cognizant of both the emotional and subjective bias that is often times more prevalent with qualitative research, there were certain steps that I took (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). To this end, in order to help account for and potentially limit personal biases that would affect this study, I began the focus groups and the one-on-one interviews by explaining my background and

experiences to the participants so that they fully understood my position. I explained that although I was aware of some of the potential areas that SIUC might be able to aid international students in this process, I was unsure of all of the needs, which was precisely why I needed their help in sharing their personal experiences. My hope was that this transparency on my behalf would be felt and more importantly reciprocated by the participants.

In regards to using the narrative approach, I also needed to be aware of the potential for refiguration, which might occur as I narrated the stories. Therefore, it was vital that I performed certain actions to ensure that I did not allow my personal beliefs or opinions to influence the participants or the direction of the study. This tied in with the previously explained positionality issues that might present themselves and what I would do to counter them. As the co-constructor of these stories, my role was to be both extensive and limited. It was extensive in that I was required to be the person responsible for making sure that their stories were told as accurately as possible. This, of course, required that I remained detail oriented throughout the study. My role was limited as I was required to simply relay the participant's story to the reader in its truest form. This aided in the process of ensuring that bias is limited. It was my hope that my experience as a researcher allowed me to stay aware of potential biases that might present themselves. Similar to my strategy for countering potential positionality issues, I simply remained aware but did not allow it to direct or limit the study. Again, as the participants were the co-constructors of their story, I reminded them that I needed them just as much as they needed me in order for their story to be told. I wanted them to understand that I was here to support them. The more information I received from them, the better I was able to tell their truth.

## Data Analysis

In sequential order, I used Open, Pattern, Values-based, and Emotional coding. All four coding methods served as tools to gain a deeper understanding of not only what the participants were saying but also how they said it. I was proactive in transcribing information gathered post focus group sessions. The coding process was tedious as I collected more data than I had anticipated I would. Both focus group sessions went well over the one-hour time frame. The participants were so interested in continuing the discussion they actually requested that we not end at the hour mark. Open coding served as the initial coding method and organizer of key concepts, categories, and sub-categories, which in turn helped in the subsequent analysis of data. I used the field notes and memos that I took during the focus group sessions and interviews that highlighted both similarities and differences of consistent key themes, categories, and sub-categories. Following this, I used Pattern coding in order to explore the themes and patterns and the explanations. Pattern coding accomplishes this by breaking down the themes, causes and explanations. (Wallman, 2005)

I also used two other coding methods, values-based and emotional coding, as both the focus group sessions and interviews proved to be very personal and emotionally driven. Both coding methods were beneficial as I sought to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and how they affected their health and overall adjustment as graduate students at SIUC. Values-based coding was particularly appropriate and useful for this study as themes involving participants' personal morals, values, and host culture, religion, affected their experiences adjusting to SIUC.  Many of the participants shared that they felt that the morals that were instilled in them prior to coming to the U.S. were very different than what they saw and experienced while at SIUC. They expressed that often times they felt "different" and "confused"

because they did not know how to reconcile the lessons that they learned during their upbringing with their new American culture.

Additionally, during the focus group sessions, I paid attention to new themes that I had not considered prior to the sessions or wanted to expand on during the interviews. As previously explained, I was interested in exploring what, if any, differences in language presented themselves during focus groups and individual interviews. Therefore, I used structural coding to understand more deeply and consequently make connections between potential themes. The interpretation of the data is an important facet of the process especially as it relates to ethical processes. As I navigated my way through this study, I referred to past literature for support. However, I did not seek to necessarily interpret data but instead review the information while not making the information meet the needs of this study. Again, the focus always remains on telling the story of the participant, which in turn deals with adhering to ethical guidelines. As themes presented themselves, I began to create connections and fill in the gaps in literature or areas that had not been expanded on.

The interpretation of the data gathered is a process that must be carefully done as it involves ethics. My role as the researcher was to simply explain the data that was shared by the participants while remaining cautious so as to know alter any information shared. As previously explained, my intention was to relay the information exactly as the participants shared it with me in order that their experiences could be felt.

## Researcher Positionality

The motivation behind my pursuit to explore this topic for my dissertation was twofold in nature, both rooted in personal reasons. First, my lineage leads to Ethiopia, where my parents, upon graduating from high school, migrated to the U.S. on college scholarships making me a

first generation born U.S. child. After a successful and rewarding undergraduate experience, they both went on to attain graduate degrees in their respective fields. During this time, they were burdened with the accompanying stressors of managing family life such as raising kids while maintaining a new marriage. Throughout my developmental years, I was privy to conversations regarding the challenges that they were facing in their graduate programs and more importantly how dissimilar it was to their experiences as a first-time international undergraduate student. I recall them explaining how supported they felt while at their undergraduate institutions and, furthermore, within their academic departments. By the time they entered graduate school they had already experienced four years of American education and were working in fields where they were able to utilize their degrees. Having formed strong academic related connections during their undergraduate years that they were able to draw upon as they navigated their new careers and graduate studies, they were able to tackle potential issues with ease and support from one another. This support allowed them both to flourish in their academics as well as professions.

Aside from this initial familial-based sparked interest, upon entering SIUC as a graduate student, I was fortunate to be able to meet and form strong connections with many international students. During our conversations regarding their adjustment to SIUC and their academic programs, I gained an understanding of their needs as a visiting student and what they believe the University is and/or isn't doing to meet these needs. Their candid responses to my questions, in which at the time were solely rooted in general interest, opened my eyes to the possibilities of research. I was extremely passionate about this topic because not only do I identify with the population but also as a strong supporter of inclusion efforts in any regard, I wanted to serve as a

liaison of sorts on behalf of both the international graduate student population and the University.

My personal connection to the topic as someone with an international background and a strong connection with many of the international graduate students at SIUC, being an advanced Ph.D. student, female, and younger in age all had the potential to affect the study, positively and negatively. Due to my ties to the international graduate community at SIUC and my familial background, I was privy to many of the adjustment issues that this population deals with. This had the potential to serve me well but also had the potential to be problematic. First, I don't have an accent, which was one of the first comments that many of the international students made to me during our casual conversations. This, I thought, might add to the list of differences that the participant believed we had, therefore limiting the information that they decided to share. Secondly, though I have an international background, I might seem more relatable to one population versus another. For example, African students might be more inclined to discuss certain facets of their experience, while international students from other regions might be less inclined to do so. Furthermore, I am passionate about the topic and the needs of these students. It was important that I kept this in mind or I would run the risk of allowing emotions to take precedence over what the participants were stating in their responses. Conversely, my dedication to the topic in terms of the population being studied, had the potential to be internalized by the participants and in turn facilitate a comfort level that allowed them to be transparent with me.

As a Ph.D. candidate, participants might have not felt as comfortable discussing issues with me that they believed I would not be able to understand. I anticipated that if this occurred, it would most likely be with master's level or first year doctoral students. This actually turned out to be of benefit to the study in that the participants viewed me as less of a threat and more as

someone that has gone through and overcome the academic obstacles that they are in the midst of. They see me as more of a peer and someone that is more relatable to them than different. I understand the stresses that accompany that of being a graduate student, regardless of level acquisition. This is something that I explained and exemplified through my nonverbal communication with the participants.

I also anticipated that more demographic related positionality issues, such as gender and age, might come into play as the participants might question my qualifications. This also had the potential to be affected by religion. For more male dominated religions, males and females do not interact beyond a certain point which again, confirms the need for gender specific focus group sessions prior to a combined one. This was important as it had the potential to affect the level of comfort and subsequently their willingness to share information with me. While keeping all of this in mind, there was always the possibility that there would not be any positionality issues. Experience with research taught me to anticipate potential positionality issues and to simply deal with them as they present themselves. I pride myself on being an open-minded person and respecting all cultures and religions and their accompanying practices. This is something that I knew would allow me to relate to the participants. Though there were inevitable differences between me and most of the participants, my willingness to be empathetic and understanding of their experiences and the differences that each participant shared was essential. My goal was to create a space where the participant felt welcomed, valued, and most of all heard.

Overall, I think that my positionality as a graduate student, a woman that has direct lineage that leads to a foreign country, and my experiences with international family and friends that have navigated their way through graduate school, were all of benefit to the study primarily in regards to the rapport building process with participants. My familiarity coupled with my

passion about this topic motivated me to work tirelessly to ensure that I did their stories justice. Therefore, I anticipated the data collection process being an easier one to navigate due to my positionality. To counter these potential positionality issues, I maintained a level of empathy and authenticity for the participants as they shared their experiences with me.

Additionally, I utilized triangulation, particularly Methodological Triangulation, in order to limit personal bias in both the data collection and analyses portions of this study. This form of triangulation involved the usage of several options to gather data, such as focus groups, interviews, and observations. This, in turn, helped in the mitigating of bias, particularly Measurement Bias. (Kennedy, 2009) For example, participants might have experienced peer pressure during the focus groups and therefore not shared important information regarding their acculturation process. Triangulation allowed me to get a more comprehensive picture of the phenomena through data gathered from not only the focus groups but also the individual interviews. To help minimize bias in my coding, I used Interrater Reliability, which helped me assess my interpretation of information and potential themes along with that of a fellow Ph.D. student who assisted me with the coding process. This was especially useful for data that was considered subjective (Hartling, 2012).

## Conclusion

My main purpose for performing this study was to allow the lived experiences of the participants to be told in an honest manner. My wish was that universities that house or seek to house international graduate students gain deeper insight into what it is that this population requires in order to have a positive adjustment process.  As I discuss later in Chapter 5, I hope that the information gathered through the study will help to potentially aid in the cultivation and subsequent implementation of programs geared towards meeting the needs of these students. I

maintained integrity throughout the research process as I only shared information that was

directly from the participants and not my own interpretation of their experiences.

# CHAPTER 4

## FINDINGS

The findings of this qualitative narrative study are from a data collection process that included two focus group sessions (one male and one female) and a total of ten individual interviews. As the primary purpose of this study was to understand and subsequently explain how the adjustment experiences affected the health of the participants in the study, I explored the themes that emerged throughout both processes. The participants shared their experiences and how they were affected emotionally while at SIUC. From the shared stories of the participants, there were six patterns and emerging themes.

## Categorizing and Codifying

The six themes that emerged during both focus group sessions and the individual interviews involved five rounds of coding, each serving a specific purpose to understand the data on differing levels. The themes that emerged from the participant's stories are a direct reflection of what these international graduate students at SIUC experienced as they adjusted to the University and also the Carbondale community. These themes also include the emotions that are attached to participant experiences, which incorporate their upbringing, morals, and beliefs. I used Critical Social Theory to understand how social issues affected feelings of inequity on behalf of the participants. I also used the Critical Race Theory in Education to both explore and address how the ethnicity of the participants related to their academic experiences and, furthermore, how institutional inequities contributed to their acculturation experiences. In order to contextualize and further analyze the presented themes, I employed the framework, Critical Race Theory. I did this to help explain the participants' perception of discrimination and how that affected their adjustment to SIUC.

The first round of coding, which was Open coding, involved the reviewing of the tapes of the focus groups and interviews to define prominent concepts and categories shared through words of the participants. For example, participants repeatedly shared thoughts on language barriers and how it affected their adjustment to SIUC. In order to maintain organization and distinguish between categories and concepts, I used different colored highlighters. Every time a participant mentioned language barriers as a challenge, I used the same colored highlighter. The language barrier would be labeled as "Concept" while other thoughts that were related such as English not being the participant's first language, I labeled as "Categories" within the chart. I then created a chart with labels for themes that repeatedly emerged. This not only allowed me to have a clearer understanding of themes but also the properties associated with the themes. Within the chart were examples of words shared by participants to correspond with the properties and themes. Essentially, I was able to create a chart that showed what themes were both similar and different between the stories that the participants shared. In doing this, I was able to understand just how common certain experiences were among this population, which helped later as I made recommendations.

For the second round of coding, I used the more direct approach of examining the data, which was Axial Coding. With Axial coding, I used the concepts and categories to serve as a confirmation that they both accurately represent interview responses. I then explored the relationships between the concepts and categories. The third round of coding I used was Structural coding. I did this in order to be able to organize and label the data gathered through the participant's stories. This was an especially beneficial coding process, as I explored similarities and differences between the male and female participants and their adjustment experiences. I started to introduce codes that were specific to the males separately from that of

the female participants. It also helped in distinguishing between some of the similarities and differences of what was shared in the focus group sessions versus during that of individual interviews. For example, many of the participants were more candid in their responses to questions during their one-on-one interviews especially in regards to the more sensitive topics, such as loneliness and isolation.

In the fourth round of coding, I used Interaction coding in order to essentially do two things: 1) identify the ways in which the ten participants and I co-constructed the stories that they shared; 2) examine the differences in the ways in which the stories were shared by the participants. This, again, involved examining the differences in both delivery of information and the level of transparency during both focus group sessions and individual interviews. The fifth and final round of coding involved using Emotion coding. This coding served as a means for me to be able to understand the participant's experiences and stories by applying labels to their feelings.

## Background of Participants

There were ten (five females and five males) international graduate students that participated in this study. Fortunately, I was able to garner interest from participants from varying backgrounds and majors. In having variation, I was able to get different perspectives regarding their adjustment experiences as it related to their upbringing, cultures, and their respective departmental academic demands. As previously mentioned, in order to protect the participant's identity, pseudonyms were immediately ascribed to each of them. To clearly layout participant information and to serve as a reference point, when necessary, I have created a table below.

**Table 1:** *Participant Information*

| Name | Country of Origin | Degree to be Awarded |
|------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Liana | Bangladesh | Masters |
| Jill | Nigeria | Ph.D. |
| Patricia | Mongolia | Masters |
| Myra | India | Ph.D. |
| Jenn | Zambia | Ph.D. |
| Michael | Nigeria | Ph.D. |
| Ryan | India | Ph.D. |
| John | Japan | Masters/ Ph.D. |
| Stephen | Columbia | Ph.D. |
| Kyle | Nepal | Masters |

<center>**Themes**</center>

**Theme # 1: Feelings of Loneliness and Isolation**

The most poignant emotions that were expressed during both the focus group sessions and interviews, were loneliness and isolation. There was a consensus in both the male and female focus groups in that as the participants began their adjustment process at SIUC they experienced various types of loneliness and isolation. For the majority of the participants, the isolation that they experienced was preceded and caused by their feelings of loneliness. As I will explain later within this chapter, the participants shared stories of triumph as they were able to overcome these emotions and subsequently adjust to their new academic environment. There were four types of isolation that repeatedly presented themselves by participants, which I will explain individually as sub-themes.

*Sub-theme 1: Social Isolation.* All ten of the participants shared that they have experienced some form of social isolation since entering graduate school at SIUC, especially during the period of their initial arrival. The social isolation that they experienced is multi-factorial and is confounded, at times, by other adjustment stressors. Many of the participants expressed that the social isolation they experienced was so extreme that they felt more comfortable staying home than going out. During her interview, Jill *Again, pseudonyms are ascribed to participants* (Nigeria, Ph.D.) explained that she had felt lonely and isolated from other students and the University as a whole. She shared that since being in her academic program for over 10 weeks, she had only spoken to two other non-international students. Her experience in dealing with domestic students had been that if she is not the person to initially reach out, then they would not. Jill further shared thoughts regarding how this might be due to inherent cultural differences. She explained that in Nigeria, people are more communal while American culture promotes

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independence. Jill said, "African people are social and everyone wants to be family." For Jill this difference had been so overwhelming that she decided very early on in her arrival at SIUC, that though she would still be open to building connections with domestic students, she would mostly invest in forging friendships with other international students. This decision, she explained, had served her well as her connections with other African international graduate students, specifically, helped her adjust more quickly to SIUC and to living in Carbondale.

Another female participant, Liana (Bangladesh, Master's) explained that she too had experienced social isolation that stemmed from loneliness. Coming from a tightknit family base in Bangladesh, she found it quite difficult to navigate her way in a culture that was so different from what she was used to. She shared that due to her not having any family or many friends to go out with, her routine had become straightforward in that her schedule typically consisted of going to class and back home to study. During the focus group, she shared "There has been no formal conversations with classmates, so I began to concentrate on my studies and research." The lack of social interaction was a very challenging adjustment for Liana to make. She said, "We are all social beings that need to be around others in order to survive." Though admittedly an introvert, the distance from her loved ones made her appreciate being in the presence of others more.

Similar to both Jill and Liana, Myra (India, Ph.D.) also shared her experiences of loneliness and social isolation while at SIUC. During the focus group, Myra expressed that the independent nature that she believes Americans ascribe to, has served as a barrier in allowing relationships to be formed and, furthermore, the ability to learn about other cultures. For Myra, eating alone was something that posed a major adjustment challenge for her. She explained that in India, meal times are considered opportunities for laughter and sharing updates with one another. She was

shocked to see American students eat their lunch separately and even if they were meeting for lunch to not wait on others to begin their meal. She said, "I have learned that food is such an important part of our society. Eating food without socializing, is new for me. It was very disconcerting to come here and notice that people don't share foods or lunches, like a peace offering." She also expressed how culturally beneficial it would be for domestic and international graduate students, alike, to share their meals with one another. She said that there is much to learn from not only the act of eating with people from different backgrounds but also from trying their native foods.

Myra attributes her feelings of isolation from non-international students to differing cultural practices. According to her, in Indian culture, people desire to help one another, even strangers. She explained, "Everyone has their own life in America and if you need help, you have to ask for it." She also explained that she noticed that there were cultural differences in the willingness of Americans to help others. She said, in coming from a culture "Where people help their neighbors if they are struggling to now living in America, where people don't necessarily go out of their way to help someone" was a culture shock for her. Myra, who has been at SIUC for eight years, shared that she has witnessed a shift from an accepting Southern Illinois community to a much more conservative, less accepting one. This shift, she explained, is another source of perpetuation of international student's feelings of isolation and loneliness, due to not feeling welcomed in the community.

During the all-male focus group session, the sentiments regarding social isolation were similar to the ones shared during the all-female focus group. Michael (Nigeria, Ph.D.) explained that he had experiences where American students were hesitant to respond to his initiation of conversation and when they did it was only to appear friendly, but not necessarily interested.

During his one-one-one interview, Michael elaborated on his experience with social isolation. He shared an example of a time when he ran into a classmate outside of the academic setting and when he greeted him, the person responded with a cold-natured "hello." This experience shaped Michael's view on domestic students and American culture. He explained that this encounter and others similar to it, deterred him from ever initiating conversation with domestic students again. He said, "I am very picky with whom I call my friends" and therefore he was not eager to seek out what he deemed "forced friendships" with domestic students.

Another male participant, Ryan (India, Ph.D.) shared similar thoughts to Michael during the focus group. He explained that he has often felt that if he was not the one to initiate conversation with domestic students, then there would not be a conversation. He explained that there is a genuine disinterest on the behalf of American students in desiring to get to know international students, "Especially the students from rural areas like Carbondale." He has had more positive experiences with domestic students that were originally from larger cities like Chicago than Carbondale, as he said "They were more accepting and open minded." From his experiences, students from rural areas are not friendly and look at you as though you are something different. Ryan also said that "Some students from Carbondale become nervous and I don't know if that is because of how they're raised. It seems like they don't want to be involved with international students."

***Sub-Theme #2: Social Isolation and University Support.*** Through the stories shared by participants, it was evident that social isolation is something that might be able to be addressed by the implementation of services and the support of University staff. Many of the participants expressed that they believe that it is the responsibility of University staff to help alleviate feelings of social isolation that international graduate students experience, primarily through the

advertising of events being held both on and off campus. Though participants shared that they mostly rely on their own social connections to remain in the loop regarding upcoming events, the majority of the participants expressed that they wished that University staff did a better job of outreach to the international graduate student population. As Stephen (Columbia, Ph.D.) shared during the focus group, "We need to know what is going on and what services the University has."

In talking with the participants, I learned that the amount of events being held both on and off campus was not the primary issue. Rather, it seemed to be the efforts employed that have served as the barrier for international graduate students attending social events. During the focus group, female participant Jenn (Zambia, Ph.D.) shared that "The University should enlighten domestic students on that international students are different and ways to be respectful of one another." Jenn shared that she had experiences where she was initially met with kindness until she spoke and an accent was heard. She said "People look at me and think I'm African American, but when I talk, they say she's different. People should be treated safely and sometimes you feel unsafe because you're different." Jenn went on to explain how it is the University's responsibility to ensure that all students feel safe and supported, regardless of their classification. She said, SIUC staff "need to bridge the gap between domestic students and international graduate students and that the staff must be properly trained to do that."

Another factor for international graduate students and their lack of attendance at social events are the methods employed in reaching out to this population. As female participant, Myra shared the University should try a different approach than using email as their primary method for advertising events. As an advanced Ph.D. student, Myra explained that she and her colleagues are often bombarded with emails daily, which makes it easy to overlook the messages that

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contain information regarding upcoming social events. During both focus group sessions, I posed the question, "Do you feel that you have had enough social support from University staff?" Male participant, Ryan, responded by explaining that his friends, who are also international students are the ones to keep each other abreast of what is happening both on campus and in the Carbondale community. He went on to say that University staff "Acts like they are doing a lot to support international students when they are not." Three of the other participants chimed in and shared that they too feel that the University does not do enough to reach international graduate students about events. Kyle made a key point when speaking to the connection between inclusion efforts and ability to adjust. He explained, that similar to other types of support, international graduate students have to put forth the effort to be included and aware of what is going on both on campus and in the community. He explained that SIUC "does not have that many programs planned to make sure that international graduate students feel included."

This was a sentiment that was shared by many of the participants. Similar to Ryan, male participant John (Japan, Master's/Ph.D.) shared that University staff should deem it a priority to include minority populations such as international graduate students in advertising efforts that are varied so as to get a diverse turnout at events. During the focus group, John said that it is "the responsibly of the university to prepare staff to help the international graduate students adjust to the University." He shared a personal experience of when he first arrived at SIUC. He said, domestic students tried to talk to me but I couldn't understand them." He shared that he was treated differently by his American peers but if University staff and students had the proper training on cultural diversity, this might not have been the case. He said, if the University staff told people that international students are not fluent in English, speak slowly or use certain words, and to be kind" then the treatment towards international graduate students would be a

much more pleasant one. Furthermore, he stated "This is not the responsibility of the domestic students but should be the role of the University to let the students know" how to treat international students on campus. John also shared that a key component to ensuring that happens is that the University offer trainings for its staff to be well versed on ways to be of support to international graduate students and outreach efforts that will help facilitate inclusiveness on campus.

When prompted with the same question during the female focus group, Patricia (Mongolia, Master's) shared that though she relies on her friends who are all also international, to be kept in the loop regarding activities on campus she does think that it should be the University's job to inform international students of what is happening. She said, "My friends let me know what is happening at the University but I think they should do more to include us too." The majority of the participant's attributed many of the positive aspects of their adjustment at SIUC to the connections that they have made with other international graduate students. As Patricia shared about her reliance on other international graduate students at SIUC, she spoke about how they have also helped her with the transition. She explained, "I like to socialize and I talk about my academic and personal life with my friends, so it helps me get through the struggles."

Other participants shared that in relying on other international graduate students for support, they were able to navigate their way through their new academic culture easier. According to female participant, Jill, her friendship with other African graduate students allowed her to be involved in both social and community events. One of these friendships, which was established within weeks of Jill's arrival to SIUC, has helped her step out of her comfort zone and attend events within the community, of which she explained are not what she is typically accustomed to. She said, "I am not this kind of person to go out and meet people but this Kenyan girl wanted

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to meet me and we met in the mall and had coffee. Meeting her has made my adjustment easier."

She further shared that her connections with other African students seem more like family than

friendships, which again she added, helped her during her initial adjustment process.

Conversely, there were two participants (both male) that shared that whether they were

informed about social had not affected them enough to experience loneliness or isolation.

Furthermore, they both expressed that SIUC staff does a satisfactory job of informing the

international students about University events. Kyle (Nepal, Ph.D.) and John both expressed that

it is the responsibility of the international graduate student to learn about ways in which they can

be involved. During the focus group, Kyle said "If you're not outgoing, the services will not be

effective; if you're forward and outgoing then there's opportunity. It depends on the student."

During the same focus group John shared that he felt that he was very much aware of campus

events. He also shared that he was very comfortable asking University staff questions, if they

arose, regarding information on upcoming events. During his interview, Kyle shared that he is

primarily made aware of social events through hearing about them through his friends, which

happen to be both American and Nepalese, which allows him to attend many domestic and

international events. It is important to note that both Kyle and John still shared similar feelings to

the remaining eight participants that the University can and should do more to ensure that

international graduate students receive information regarding both University and community

events. As John said during the focus group, "SIU should do more for their international students

to feel welcome but I have been okay with this."

There are many contributing factors as to why international graduate students might feel

socially isolated. During this data collection process, two reasons presented themselves. One

reason that was repeatedly mentioned by participants during the focus groups and interviews was

the pending academic requirements impeding their abilities to take part in events. For male participants, Ryan and Kyle, their assignments and research were both sources of stress and reasons as to why they were unable to attend many social events. They both shared stories of how they have spent many holiday breaks working on upcoming assignments. A few weeks before the focus group, Ryan shared that he traveled to Atlanta with a friend. As soon as he arrived, his graduate advisor asked that he return the same day to help him with a research project back at SIUC. Ryan shared that though he was frustrated he felt obligated to do so as he knows how difficult it is to get an assistantship position as an international student, which will be discussed later within this chapter. He said, "As soon as I got to Atlanta, I had to turn around to do research for my professor." He went on to say, "I don't have off as a student but as a Ph.D. student you are bound to take challenges." Kyle had a similar situation where he had plans to spend his spring break with his friends but was unable to due to having to complete his work. They explained that their academic requirements are demanding and require so much attention that they often opt to not attend social events during the week or go out on weekends in order to remain on top of their work. During the female focus group, Myra and Liana both shared that they are so immersed in their studies and research, that they are unable to attend many of the social events being held. As Myra said during the focus group, "I don't really have time to be social right now because I am about to graduate and I am looking for jobs."

The second contributing factor mentioned was only shared in the female focus group. Food and the accompanying cultural practices that differ between American and international students, affected their feelings of inclusiveness. Every culture has customary practices that are attached to it, especially as it relates to the eating of meals. For example, in Bangladesh as Liana shared, she eats her meals with her family every day. Similarly, for Myra, as I previously

explained, in India, eating a meal is a communal time when family and friends congregate to share laughs and life updates with one another. This is something that I can personally relate to being raised in an Ethiopian household. It is actually customary to offer a full meal, dessert, and coffee/tea to visiting guests and deemed taboo to leave someone's home without indulging in some capacity. It is considered an offense to both go to someone's home and not partake in a meal or have coffee/tea and also to not offer that to guests.

For participant Myra, the individualistic nature that she attributes to Americans, where it is the norm for people to eat alone, in her opinion promotes isolation. She said that though she has since adjusted to the American style of eating her meals alone, she still maintains that there is much to gain in eating with others. Patricia, in agreement with Myra, said "One of the largest things that affected me was getting used to eating alone. Food is being social and food is about people; for you to be healthy you need to have someone you can share the food with." Female participant, Liana, who is from Bangladesh, shared similar thoughts to both Patricia and Myra in that Americans seems to be less communal, and furthermore, that both the preparation and eating of meals has been a major factor in her experiencing emotions of social isolation. During the focus group, she said, "If you live alone you don't have anybody to share that food with and talk with someone. That made an emotional impact on me. I don't want to eat food or take care of myself because nobody is watching me." She further shared that the lack of accountability led to her being less inclined to cook and instead grab a quick meal and eat alone at home. This, in turn, started a cycle of eating unhealthy and the neglect of her own personal health.

*Sub-theme #3: Interpersonal Loneliness.* Social loneliness can also be viewed as a cyclical term as it has the ability to affect and be affected by other types of loneliness, such as Interpersonal Loneliness. For many of the participants, the shift or loss of relationships that they experienced

as they entered SIUC was significant. All ten participants shared that family and friends were significant sources of both happiness and sadness. They expressed that they relied on their families for emotional support during times of distress in their adjustment process but were also sad that they were physically so far from their loved ones. Similar to the theme of Social Isolation, there were differences between genders regarding the extent to which distance from families affected the adjustment of the participants.

For the male participants, the shared sentiment was that the distance was a necessary part of the process in order to accomplish the end goal of obtaining their graduate degree. As Ryan shared during the focus group, "I call my parents on average one to three months. But, I keep a group message with other international students. My parents don't use social media or text. So I will need to call and I am busy with work so I can't call." During the focus group, Bal shared that when he first arrived at SIUC, he would talk to his family every day. He explained that after several months being at SIUC, the frequency of calls changed. He said, "Now I'm used to it and talk to my family once a month." He also shared that due to time differences and his family not using social media, he does not "Have too much time or money to talk on the phone with them." Only one male participant, Michael, called home on a weekly basis, consistently. During the focus group, he said "I talk to my family every day. I'm one of four kids, so we talk every day." For Michael, speaking with his family daily allowed him to continue to feel connected to them. He further explained that though he had adjusted well to being away from his family, it was not until he faced a mild breakdown during his first few months at SIUC, that he began to seek strength outside of his family. He said, "I was stressed out and overwhelmed during spring break; I just stopped and stepped away from everything and went to church to remember why I am here." Michael further shared that through attending church, prayer, and building connections

with other Christians, he was able to reaffirm his decision to attend SIUC and solidify his

purpose as to why he chose to be" away from his family. Again, this thought process that the

male participants shared of distance from loved ones being par for the course, was evident.

For three of the five female participants, distance from loved ones was a major challenge

in their adjustment to SIUC. During her interview, Jill laughed aloud as she shared several

accounts of when she would call her husband and complain to him about how sad and unhappy

she was being in Carbondale. "I call him and tell him how lonely I am and he tells me how I

wanted to do this." She shared how fortunate she is that her husband is a strong communicator,

as she relies on for daily motivation. She said, "I had to be independent when I first moved here

and I am stronger now." Another female participant, Liana, shared that her experience of not

living near her family had been extremely difficult. When she first arrived at SIUC, she would

talk to her family daily, which served as a source of comfort. The frequency in which she calls

home, had also decreased over several months due to academic demands. She explained that

though being away from her immediate family and husband was still overwhelming at times, her

focus had shifted towards her academics. Unbeknownst to me at the time, academic demands and

its bearing on participant adjustment, both for the male and female participants, was an emerging

theme. Therefore, this will be discussed in the next section.

Several of the participants spoke about how the holidays were an especially difficult time

for them. During her interview, Jill shared that when she arrived at SIUC, she felt extremely

lonely as it was during the holiday season. She said, "I expected there to be fireworks and

cheering in the streets but it was quiet and boring." Prior to her arrival to the U.S., Jill had heard

stories about how big of a deal holidays are in America, especially Christmas and New Year's.

To her surprise, it was the exact opposite. She explained that though she wanted to be near her

family during that time she had to come to Carbondale early to get ready for the start of the spring semester. Male participant Ryan, had similar experiences as Jill. After sharing his stories, he mentioned that the University needs to do more to ensure that there are activities for international students to be able to engage in during holiday breaks since for many international students, going home to their country is not an option. He said, "International students need to be treated equally and the reducing of bus and rec center hours needs to be addressed."

However, for three of the participants, their experience with Interpersonal Loneliness was slightly different as they had lived away from family prior to arriving at SIUC. During the focus group, Ryan shared that since he had studied abroad in the United Kingdom while obtaining his Master's degree, dealing with being away from his family while at SIUC, did not have much of an effect on his overall adjustment experience. He said, "I lived in the U.K. for my Master's, so I was away from home. I was kind of used to it." This was also the case for Myra and Jenn, who both had been in boarding school leading up to college. During the focus group, Myra shared that when she first arrived to SIUC, though she missed her family, her adjustment being apart from her loved ones was not as difficult as her academic adjustment was. Similarly, Jenn also explained that she had been away from her family for so many years during high school, college, and again while pursuing her Master's degree. She said, "I was immune to the distance part of the adjusting." Instead, getting used to what she believed was the lack of cultural diversity in Carbondale was more of an issue.

*Sub-theme #4: Academic Loneliness.* All of the participants shared that academics had been a major challenge in their adjustment to SIUC. The participants shared that stress related to academic achievement played a role in perpetuating another type of loneliness, Academic loneliness. With the exception of one participant, Patricia, who shared that even amidst her

highly demanding academic schedule she was still able to attend many social events, all of the participants shared numerous stories about how academic and research demands served as barriers to their adjustment to SIUC. The majority of these participant stories included memories of spring breaks missed and Friday nights having to stay in and complete assignments that their non-international counterparts did not have to work as hard to complete due to language barriers not being an issue.

During the focus group, Myra, who is an advanced Ph.D. student shared that her research and dissertation writing have taken precedence over socializing. For Myra, the most challenging aspect of her adjustment was getting used to the difference in academic structure and overall academic environment at SIUC. Though she grew to appreciate the American educational system, she explained that her first few months at the University were intimidating. She explained that she was so overwhelmed with her academics and the loneliness that it perpetuated, that she relied heavily on her mom, who lived in India, to give her moral support. She said, "I called my mom every day saying 'I'm so dumb' because all of the American kids would talk so smart and intelligent in class." This intimidation, she explained, forced her to experience levels of isolation as she dedicated more time to her studies. Similar to Myra, male participant, Michael, shared that the differences in the academic structures between Nigeria and the U.S. was a challenge that he struggled to overcome. He said, "The work here is much harder," which forced him to dedicate more hours to his studies and consequently attend fewer social events. Male participant, Ryan shared that since he arrived at SIUC seven years ago his schedule had only gotten busier. In order to socialize, he said that he has to carve out small amounts to do so while also ensuring that he is meeting all of his academic deadlines. During the focus group,

Ryan said "I want to take the challenges as a Ph.D. student but I carry a lot every day. You are always occupied and have no time to relax."

The information shared during both the focus groups and interviews, I learned that for the majority of the participants, their academic stressors can be attributed to two factors; the first factor was language barriers. Many participants shared that difficulties understanding course assignments caused challenges adjusting to SIUC. During her interview, female participant, Patricia explained that she often experienced challenges understanding assignment instructions and felt lost in class due to this. In order to ensure that she is able to accurately complete assignments, she used a tape recorder in class to record lectures. This, she explained, has caused embarrassment for her. She said, "I asked my professor to record lectures, but I wonder what the other American students think about this." Male participants John, Ryan, and Kyle all shared similar thoughts regarding academic stress and its effect on their emotions of loneliness. During the focus group, they explained that there are many times in which they want to go out on the weekends or travel with friends during holiday breaks but are unable to due to their academic demands. As Ryan explained, as a Graduate Assistant, he is tasked with completing research assignments on behalf of his professors in addition to meeting deadlines for his own assignments and research leaving him little to no time for extracurricular activities.

Academic differences seemed to be a major obstacle for the participants but also a motivator to succeed. During the focus group, Michael explained that due to educational differences between the American and Nigerian system, he initially felt that he was at a disadvantage compared to his American colleagues. He said, "In America, the students are being prepared for graduate school and to do well." This, he explained, is not the case in Nigeria. He said that upon his noticing of differences, he began to push himself to work harder in order to be

on the same academic level as the domestic students in his academic program. Similarly, Myra shared that though her biggest challenge was adjusting to the American educational system, which she claimed is also much different than India's system, she very quickly learned to appreciate this new approach to education. During the focus group, she said "I like this way of education more now but at first I was confused." So, a challenging new approach to education, which started off as something negative turned out be a motivator to adjust and ultimately assimilate into. She shared that she began to mimic the studying tactics employed by American students, which served her well. "She said, "My classmates taught me tricks on how to skim through my chapter readings for class. I never knew how to do this before."

The second factor that participants attributed their academic stress to was the unspoken comparison between them and their domestic counterparts, which they believe is perpetuated in U.S. academic settings. As female participant, Jill, shared during her interview, she initially had a tough time navigating her way through her program due to the competitiveness between students. She explained that in Nigeria, it is customary for students to help one another. She shared, "We all help one another, and all students are willing to do that." This, she explained, was not easy to adjust to as she did not initially feel supported by her colleagues. "The other students walk in to class and do not talk to me or to each other." This individualist approach, she believed was an example of the individualist culture that is customary to America.

*Sub-theme #5: New Environment Loneliness.* In examining the root of the feelings of isolation and loneliness that participants experienced, it is easy to see that it can be explained by them simply being in a new environment. As several participants explained during the focus group sessions, being in a new place, immersing themselves in a new culture, and simply having to adjust to being away from loved ones, all at the same time, had been overwhelming. Female

participants, Jenn, Patricia, Jill, and Myra had a difficult time transitioning from living in major cities to living in rural Southern Illinois. Jenn shared that being in the new environment, she learned to quickly rely on herself to meet likeminded people. She said, "I created my own tribe of people that I can talk to. Some are American and some are African."

During the focus group, she explained that this tribe is what has gotten her through the moments where she has felt lonely. Similarly, female participant Myra, found it especially difficult to navigate this new culture and more specifically, the community of Southern Illinois. Coming from the booming capital of New Delhi, which Myra explained is both extremely busy and loud, she found it challenging to be in quiet, rural Southern Illinois. She said, "I need to hear street noises and people outside of my apartment, especially when it is time to sleep." For male participant, Ryan, who is also from India, living in the mostly quiet Southern Illinois community also posed an adjustment challenge for him. During the focus group, he said "In the rec center they have flags put up to make it seem like this is a cultural place, but not really." To this end, Ryan explained that getting accustomed to what he labeled as a town with a lack of cultural awareness and diversity had been the most challenging aspect of his adjustment experience.

One of the questions that I posed during the focus groups was centered on gauging to what extent participants felt that the University and community members welcomed their presence. The overall consensus for both the female and male focus groups was that although the community members might seem welcoming and accepting of other cultures, it was actually conditional. Many of the participants shared stories in which they felt that University staff, students, and community members were accepting of their presence as long as they fit the mold of how international students should behave. The story shared by female participant, Myra, spoke to this conditional nature of acceptance. Myra shared that prior to the recent 2017

presidential election, she never felt unwelcomed nor undervalued in Carbondale. "I was okay as long as I acted Indian." She explained, it was not until she began to share thoughts on candidates and other election related matters, that she realized that not only were her thoughts not welcomed but in fact negated and dismissed by Americans. She said "as soon as I started talking about my issues with what the country is doing that's when they acted like I had no right to do so."

Myra further explained that she had noticed a shift in the welcoming nature of community members over the eight years that she had been residing in Carbondale. When I explored this further and asked if she believed the current political climate had some bearing on the shift in acceptability of international students, she agreed. Myra believed that the due to the current political situation, "people don't want to open their minds to other cultures and people." However, she explained that SIUC students and community members enjoy other cultures only when it is pleasing to their needs. For example, there is a yearly cultural show that is held on campus. During this week of events, which is referred to as the International Festival, daily events are held with the purpose of exposing students, staff, and community members to a variety of cultures. Myra explained that this is one of the times in which she feels that international students are appreciated. She, however, attributes this limited time of appreciation to the idea that international students are being viewed "as puppets putting on a show." Myra shared that during the international festival week, different cultures are put on display and appreciated for the "pretty dresses and foods." She explained, that once the week of events are over and the international student returns to the classroom setting they "have to act American again." She went on to say that domestic students, SIUC staff, and community members should learn to appreciate international students beyond the International Festival events and,

furthermore, as "cultural beings, that are also living and breathing beings, that take their cultures with them in everything that they do."

Positionality also played a role in the level of support the participants believed they received. As Ryan and Myra shifted from doctoral students to Ph.D. candidates, so did the treatment they believed they received from University staff. Myra explained that professors within her department are more respectful since they know that she will soon be their academic equal. However, she shared that this shift in positionality had also brought with it negatives. She said, "Whenever I look for jobs after graduation, I am not given the same treatment as the male, white students. They get the first options." She further shared that as she began to search for jobs, she noticed that there were some staff that had attempted to hold her back from applying to certain positions while encouraging other, non-international students to apply. Discrimination was also something that male participants, Stephen and Ryan, had experienced. During the focus group, Stephen spoke about how he had been discriminated against by University staff and students, which in turn has affected his adjustment to SIUC. He said, "I am always asked about my connection with drugs since I am from Columbia." He expressed the way in which he is viewed is also represented in how he is treated. Like Stephen, Kyle believes that he and his international graduate student colleagues have faced more job search challenges than non-international graduate students that were at the same point in their academic program. He shared a story of when a fellow international doctoral student went to a job fair held on SIUC's campus. He said, "There was a job fair on campus and one of the companies was only looking for domestic students but did not say it. One brown colored person walked in and before he could say his name they told him he could not apply." Kyle explained that his friend was in fact a citizen but was not given a fair shot due to him being an international student.

Nearly all of the participants expressed that SIUC staff, specifically, can help ensure that international graduate students feel not only welcomed but are better able to adjust to their new environment through spending time in arming the staff with the appropriate skills that will allow them to prosper beyond their time at SIUC. As Patricia said, "Helping us get internships is important." Myra also shared that "There needs to be help with resumes and applications. We cannot compete if we do not have the guidance." To this end, in helping international graduate students with the application process, such as resume building and subsequently how to enter the job market, many of the international graduate students will not lack the confidence needed to seek employment as they near the end of their program.

***Sub-theme #6: Cultural Loneliness.*** The most popular theme that emerged during both focus group sessions was Cultural Loneliness as it tied in some other themes that were both expected and unexpected. As male participant, Michael explained, being away from a family that is as close as his was not easy to adjust to. He said, "It was not too hard to make friends and I have adjusted but it was not easy to be away from my family." But, what was much more challenging for him and other participants was adjusting to the differences in culture and hospitality.

During both focus groups, I asked participants what the most stressful part of their adjustment to SIUC had been. The participants responded with varying accounts about how their experiences dealt with the cultural differences between them and non-international students and, furthermore, how it had affected their overall adjustment to SIUC. During the male focus group, Michael shared that he struggled acclimating to American culture as he was shocked to see just how much of a difference there was between the ways in which he was raised and what he witnessed upon arriving to SIUC. He said "I was raised very differently and religious. I see people here that dress and act any way that they want. It is very shocking." As Michael and I

spoke privately during his interview, he explained that he "is a Christian by faith" and his

devotion to the Christian religion had shaped his life and also helped him during his more trying

times in his cultural adjustment process. He explained, "When I was lost and didn't know if

SIUC was the right place for me to be, I went to church. And now, I am back on track and

focused."

Though Michael and Jill, both from Nigeria, were the only two participants to share how

religion had played a role in their adjustment at SIUC, I believe that it is significant in that it

exemplifies how one's faith, particularly for this population, has the ability to not only bring

forth stability but also promote social interactions. During her interview, Jill said "I have met a

lot of other Christians through my church that are also African. We support each other and get

together weekly to talk and eat together." During the interview, Michael explained that attending

church had provided him with not only opportunities to cultivate friendships but also serve as a

safe space where he could share his feelings. He said, "I feel at home when I am at church and I

feel welcomed. My faith in God keeps me centered."

**Theme #2: Social Media**

The second most prominent theme that emerged was the usage of social media. For all

ten of the participants, social media not only served as an outlet but was also their primary forum

for maintaining contact with loved ones and friends in their home countries. This was the only

theme where there was not any variance between male and female frequency of usage of social

media. There was, however, a difference in their purposes for using the social media sites.

During the female focus group, Jenn shared that she uses "social media for a lot of reasons but

mostly to keep in touch with family and update them with pictures and to see family pictures."

She said that in being able to see pictures of family and friends and know what's going on with

them, she is able to maintain a feeling of connectedness with them. Female participants, Myra and Liana both shared that they also use social media, particularly Facebook and Viber, to stay connected. Myra said, "I now mostly use 'WhatsApp' to chat with my mom and my friends." Viber was also an especially popular social media forum used by participants as it is free to use for calling, texting, and photo sharing, which as Jill explained is a benefit. "I like using Viber because it's free and I can keep in touch with everyone."

During the male focus group, male participant, Ryan, shared that in addition to utilizing all of the available social media sites to chat with his family, he is also a part of a group chat with friends that reside all over the world. Due to his prior experience living abroad while pursuing his Master's degree, he was able to build connections with students from many different backgrounds. He said, in this group chat "We all write about our lives and help each other with job search stuff and availabilities." He explained that this is an especially valuable tool as it is especially difficult for international students to gain employment post-graduation. This will be discussed in greater detail in a subsequent section.

During her interview, female participant, Liana, expanded on the importance of social media on her adjustment experience. For Liana, who is away from not only her parents and sister but her husband as well, social media allows her to feel connected. She said, "I get on Facebook to talk with my family. I enjoy doing this a lot." Similarly, female participant, Jill, who is away from her immediate family and husband, explained that her reliance on social media heightened since her arrival at SIUC because it became too costly to call out of the country daily. "I can talk to my family with a better connection on social media because sometimes my phone does not work due to bad connections." Overall, the participants shared that during the times that they felt lonely, especially when they first arrived at SIUC, social media also served as a source of

comfort. As one of the primary purposes of this study was to understand the adjustment stressors that this population deals with, it was evident that social media helped in addressing some of the stressors, especially Social Isolation.

**Theme # 3: Mental Health and Support**

One of the primary purposes of this study was to explore the ways in which the health of international graduate students at SIUC is affected by their adjustment. Of the two potential health threats, mental health emerged as a theme and proved to be a true concern for many international graduate students. Their adjustment needs coupled with all of the differing types of emotions that they experience as they adjust, must be appreciated by University staff. In order for the students to feel comfortable in seeking professional help for mental health concerns, they need to feel confident that the services needed will be adequately delivered. During both focus group sessions and interviews, the participants spoke candidly about how their adjustment experience had been stressful and difficult to overcome.

Female participant, Jenn, shared an experience of when she arrived in America for the first time to pursue her Master's degree at an outside University. Though she shared that this University did have a large international community, she still experienced what she labeled an emotional breakdown. She said, "I was consuming food that wasn't good for me and I ended up with hormonal imbalances, which brought me to a depressed state." She explained that she went to the campus health center in order to receive support, her experience was a positive one in which she felt supported by staff and health professionals alike. She attributed her positive experience and the beneficial support that she received to the idea that Ohio State University is a culturally diverse setting, dissimilar to SIUC.

Male participant, Ryan, had a similar and yet different experience during what he labeled was a traumatic experience during his initial arrival at SIUC. During the focus group he shared that his workload was extremely overwhelming and subsequently his stress levels began to rise. He, too, went to the campus health center, where he explained that not only was his visit one that he claims was useless but also where he felt discriminated against. He said, "I had an experience, I approached the University for emotional support but I did not receive any emotional support. The psychologist was not qualified to deal with my problems. The psychologist was talking but did not solve anything." Ryan attributed the lack of care to the staff not being properly trained and too young in their professions to be able to adequately meet his emotional needs. Ryan also shared that since that negative experience at the Health Center, he has felt less inclined to seek support from the University during times of distress furthering his feelings of isolation. He said, "I did not return to the health center and will not go back if I ever have the same problem."

Though other participants shared stories that were both different and similar to both Jenn and Ryan's, this population's resiliency was evident throughout the data collection process. The strength that they each possessed emanated through as they shared their stories. One of the most powerful statements shared during the focus group was by female participant, Myra. Speaking to how difficult her emotional adjustment process was, she said "I know that I can get through anything. I am stronger because of all of what I've been through. I can move anywhere in the world and build a life for myself." In agreement to Myra's comment, female participant, Liana explained that though her transition to SIUC and adjusting to American culture were difficult, she felt a sense of empowerment in that she was able to press through and make a life for herself in Southern Illinois. She said, "During orientation, the group mentioned that there will be meetings for emotional journey sharing, through the CIE, but I have never been. Whenever you

have an emotional breakdown then you can talk with my family and friends." She further shared that what she deemed important regarding her adjustment process was "how you move out of the negative situation to a better one."

The male participants shared similar emotions related to their ability to overcome adjustment challenges, especially as it relates to their emotional issues. During the male focus group, Michael explained how his emotional challenges in getting acclimated to SIUC and American culture made him stronger. Though he explained that he had not utilized on campus mental health services, he would not do so even if he felt he needed it. Instead, he would speak to his family about his issues. He said, "If I have an issue, I can call and speak with my family." He also shared that in Nigeria, schools are not concerned with nor expected to meet the emotional needs of students. Rather, they are only responsible for educating the students. So, for Michael there were not any expectations for SIUC to meet any of his emotional or mental health related needs.

During the individual interviews, I asked each participant what they do in their spare time to unwind and destress. Participants Patricia, Jill, Jenn, and John all had similar answers in that they hang out with friends that are mostly from their home countries, with only a few associates that are non-international. As Patricia shared, "I don't see why I need to associate with American students because we have nothing to talk about. We always help each other." John also shared that though he does have American friends, most of them are due to having classes together. During the focus group, he said "In my department, we take same classes so it's easy to be friends with both types of students. Outside of school, I found it hard to make friends with domestic students like at bars." Emotional stress has far reaching effects and has the ability to handicap growth and ultimately the adjustment for international graduate students.

**Theme #4: Professor and Student Dynamic**

For many of the participants, acclimating to a new academic culture was one of the most challenging parts of their adjustment at SIUC. During both the focus groups and interviews, participants shared examples about the ways in which their home culture and U.S. culture differ in terms of academic environment, specifically professor and student dynamic. During the focus group, female participant, Patricia explained that it was difficult for her to adjust to teaching styles of her professors and the student/professor dynamic. She said, "I think every professor has their own style of teaching. So I have to modify myself and I have to do my part to get help." She explained that part of her adjustment to this has been to "figure out the professor's style and go with that." Similarly, female participant Liana, shared "When I started doing my classes here, it was difficult for me to understand how the professors talk with the students but I have learned that it is acceptable."

Myra, shared that her biggest challenge was in fact navigating her way through a classroom environment that was so different from the one that she was accustomed to in India. She said, "When I think back, the biggest challenge for me was getting used to the classroom setting and how students contradict their instructors." She explained that in India students are very respectful of their professors and rarely question or challenge them. Essentially, the student only speaks when spoken to by the instructor. Myra explained that this difference in academic culture is one that she has grown to appreciate as she now speaks up when presented material is not clear. However, Myra still maintains a balance between her home and U.S. culture in how she approaches instructor and student dynamic. She said "I do contradict the professors sometimes, but I do it respectfully."

Similarly, female participant, Patricia agreed with Myra's statement and shared that in Mongolia, similar to India, the instructor is revered by the students. Adjusting to SIUC, where the students are actually advised to speak up in class, was something that she found challenging. During her interview, Jill also shared that in Nigeria it is customary for students to not speak back to their teachers whether they understand the material or not. "I was shocked to see that American students are not afraid to question their professors about assignments." Patricia explained that when she initially began her studies at SIUC, she did not feel comfortable meeting with her professor to discuss any questions she had regarding assignments. She said, "In Mongolia, students to do not challenge their professor. They are highly respected." Overtime, however, her comfort level grew as she understood that her professors were willing to help. She said, "My professors are very nice in my department and have been helpful." Patricia explained that once she began to understand this, she began to feel more comfortable. Similarly, Liana said that it took her a while to get accustomed to the concept of office hours. Initially, she shared, she was afraid to approach her professors and ask for more personalized help with assignments. During the focus group she said, "All of my professors were welcoming to me and understanding." This, she said, made her feel inclined to reach out in the future.

The challenge adjusting to professor and student dynamic was also something that the male participants shared was challenging to get used to. As Michael explained during the focus group, "In my country, students don't really question the teacher; there is respect." He said "American students talk back to the professor and if they do not agree with something, they will say it." This, he went on to explain, was something that he found to be "very weird." John followed Michael's words by sharing that he also had to adjust to the more casual manner in which the students speak to professors at SIUC. During both focus group sessions, the

participants shared countless stories about how this instructor to student relationship has in turn had bearing on their feelings of academic isolation. This theme in particular, I believe, provides great insight into cultural differences and how it has the ability to affect the international graduate student's adjustment to SIUC. As we discussed this topic, I recall realizing how cultural differences have the ability to not only affect the student's comfortability in speaking to their instructors when there is a concern but also their ability to do well academically. Basically, if the student does not feel comfortable asking their instructor for help that could be detrimental to their mastering of material and subsequently the grade that they receive in the class. Therefore, it is vital that the international graduate student feels that they are able to openly speak to their professors, if and when questions regarding assignments arise.

As more of a summative and follow-up question, I asked participants whether they felt supported by their professors, especially as it relates to explaining unclear information regarding assignments. The participants explained that though the differences in instructor to student dynamic was challenging, they did have the support of professors. As John explained, "I feel that in my department, my professors are helpful with international students." He explained that there are many international students within his department and that "the department and professors are understanding." During his interview, male participant Michael explained that though he still does not feel comfortable questioning a professor about an assignment or research work, he does think that the professors want him to fully understand the material and be able to showcase that in his work. He said, "The way that students speak here is not like back home. But, I like this way here because I have learned a lot of material in a very short time."

What surprised me most was that nine out of the ten participants claimed that though their academic related stressors started off as something negative as time went on it actually

turned out to be a positive, strengthening experience. Myra said, "You can put me in the middle of nowhere and I can make a life for myself." Patricia and Liana both agreed with Myra's comment and explained that they too had been strengthened by their adjustment experience, especially the academic related ones. Patricia said, "I am a lot stronger and able to do everything on my own." This had also been the experience for male participant, Michael as this was his first time living away from home. During the focus group, he shared that the adjustment to SIUC and the American educational system was an experience that he was thankful for. He said, "If I am stressed, I just choose to stop and get refocused." The majority of the participants explained that though their professors were helpful, this was not necessarily the case for staff outside of their department. This is discussed in a later section.

**Theme #5: Financial Stability**

One theme that I had not considered would present itself prior to the start of the data collection process was how the lack of financial stability, specifically the lack of funding, might have an effect on the adjustment experience of international graduate students. For several of the participants, much of their stress was rooted in a lack of financial security. At some point in their graduate career any graduate student, irrespective of their status, might experience a sense of fear due to changes in graduate assistant position availability. However, for international graduate students it seems to be a heightened and much more real fear as there are limited employment opportunities due to F-1 Visa and I-20 limitations. Many international students are unable to work off campus and are therefore, restricted to only working as a graduate assistant through the University. Conversely, domestic students do not face the same limitations and are able to work in both on and off campus positions.

For many of the participants, the majority of their adjustment stress has come from the changes in graduate assistantship contracts. During the focus groups, they shared how they were initially promised that they would receive funding from the University that would cover their entire graduate process. However, for Ph.D. students, which have more extensive requirements than that of a Master's student, funding had become an issue. This change in funding forced Ph.D. students John and Ryan to debate whether they should transfer to another program. As John shared during the focus group, transferring to another university was something that he was considering due to both funding and overall departmental changes. "I'm doing my Ph.D. program for at least three or four more years but I'm not sure how the program is going. My program may shut down and something severe might happen. I'm thinking a lot about if I should move to another school."

Like John, Raj shared that he is debating if he should "finish and try to graduate early or just transfer. I am worried about job opportunities after graduation and visa changes too." Female participants, Jenn and Myra, shared that they too have experienced stress related to the shift in graduate assistantship position availability within their respective departments. During the focus group, Jenn shared that since priority is typically given to domestic students, she has had to be extremely proactive in her search for GA positions. She said, "I wondered why I wasn't getting the same opportunities as domestic students; I wondered is it because of the color of my skin or because I'm an international student." Like Jenn, Myra explained that she experiences anxiety at the end of each semester as she awaits the decision as to whether she will be provided with a graduate assistant position for the following semester. "I am nervous waiting to see if I will get an assistantship position." These are emotions that she shared her American colleagues could not relate to. She said, "It is not easy to do this and watch your American colleagues not be worried."

According to three of the doctoral participants, Ryan, John, and Myra, the employment stress extends beyond graduate assistantship positions. As they grew closer to graduation and began to seek employment, they realized how disadvantaged they are. Myra shared that employment for international students should be a top concern for University staff. She further explained that a priority of University staff should be what they are doing to help prepare international graduate students to be able to compete with domestic students in the employment seeking process. Male participant, John agreed and shared that "There needs to be more hand holding for international students." Overall, the consensus was that there needs to be there needs to be more opportunities for job preparation and information on jobs that specifically offer sponsorship for international students to remain in the U.S. after graduation.

During their interviews, Master's students Patricia and Liana shared that they have also experienced financial stress, but mostly due to currency differences. Patricia said, "I am not used to things being too expensive. I also have my parents to help me pay for all of my stuff." Though, she says, she still receives some financial support, she said that she considers herself financially independent. Liana also had trouble adjusting to the differences in cost. During her interview, she said "I was surprised with how expensive living in Carbondale is when I first came." She said that though she quickly adjusted, she "was experiencing stress learning how to pay for things and how much transportation costs." She explained, "The University should do better with giving information regarding banking options and the process for opening accounts."

As I analyzed the data regarding financial stress and its effect on adjustment, I realized that more of the male participants experienced or were still experiencing stress related to financial instability. Only two of the five female participants shared that financial stability was a challenge in their adjustment to SIUC. As I considered the reasons as to why this might be the

case, I recalled the differences between genders as it related to familial ties. Most of the female participants said that they speak to their families at least 3-5 times a week, with two of them saying that they speak to their immediate family members once a day. The male participants, however, are much less in contact with their family. Most of them with the exception of Michael, speak to their families on average twice a month. To this end, a plausible reason for the difference in stress would be that the male participants are less dependent on their family members for not only emotional but financial support as well.

### Theme #6: Overall University Support

All ten of the participants shared that they believe that SIUC staff can and should do more to meet their adjustment needs. All of the aforementioned stressors worked simultaneously to have an effect on the participant's adjustment experience. The data collection process proved to me that this is a population of students that require more detailed attention, primarily from University staff. Without this support, there is no way that international graduate students will be able to prosper during their time at SIUC. In every story shared by participants, it was evident that the challenges that they faced could have easily been remedied by the support of staff.

Many of the participant's hail from heavily populated, metropolitan cities, which Carbondale is a far departure from. As was shared in their stories, a major challenge in adjustment and quite frankly, a source of discomfort for the participants was getting used to the lack of available public transportation options in Carbondale. Speaking to the uniqueness of this study, international graduate students that reside in Carbondale might have a different adjustment experience from those that live in larger cities, where transportation is not limited. The basic, daily activities that domestic students might take for granted such as having a car to make a grocery store run, is something that requires much preparation for international graduate

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students. As male participant, Stephen shared during the focus group, the University should provide information on available options for transportation to international graduate students. He said, "When I first arrived here, I took a taxi to get groceries but I did not know how much it would cost. I had to share the taxi with so many other people too. I wish the University would tell us what I can take to get my groceries." In using the taxi service to run his errands, he explained that it was not only expensive but extremely time consuming. Female participant, Liana, shared similar thoughts during her interview. She said, "I did not have a car when I first got to SIU and I did not know how to get to the stores. I didn't know the University had a shuttle service; it's a good thing, but I didn't know it exists." SIUC offers shuttle services, with the hours of operation listed on the website. But, as Liana explained, this is something that should have been told to her and other international students very early on. She explained that she found out about the bus service and that the hours of operation are listed on the website after months of being at SIUC.

While discussing this topic, I realized the importance in publicizing information for this population. If they are not made aware of their options, they won't be able to utilize them. As Liana shared, the University staff does not "actually tell you how to settle down in this city or this culture; they don't direct you with where you should go." Like Liana, female participant, Jill mentioned that she too found out about the shuttle service weeks into her arrival at SIUC. She also shared that if it were not for her African friends at SIUC, she might have never learned about the shuttle system because of her limited interaction with domestic students and University staff not notifying her about it. This, she explained, should be one of the most important pieces of information provided to international graduate students upon their arrival to SIUC.

## Summary of Findings

The data collection process proved to be an enlightening experience in which I learned much about a population that has faced many challenges in their adjustment to SIUC and to the Southern Illinois community but have also overcome many obstacles. The stories and information shared above include quotes from the participants during focus groups and one-on-one interviews. There were several other findings that are certainly worthy of further exploration. However, the themes in this particular study were most prominent for the majority of the participants. The five themes include: 1) Loneliness and Isolation, 2) Social Media 3) Mental Health & Support, 4) Professor and Student Dynamic 5) Financial Stability 6) Overall University Support were explored in great detail to provide great insight into the needs of this population.

There were two participants, Patricia and Kyle, which seemed to have similar adjustment experiences to one another and also quite different ones from that of the other eight participants. Both Patricia and Kyle expressed that their adjustment was not an easy one that required many lifestyle alterations to be made on their behalf. Yet, they both also shared that since their arrival at SIUC, they had not faced any adjustment issues related to social isolation, mental health, professor and student dynamic, or financial instability. After speaking with them over the course of several days, their similarities in personality might be one of the factors as to why their adjustment was so similar to each other. Both Patricia and Kyle are outgoing and very social people. Furthermore, they both primarily associate with people from their respective countries of Mongolia and Nepal.

The participants shared their experiences, which involved emotions such as fear, anxiety, stress, frustration, loneliness, lack of support, and stereotypes. In order to understand the first theme, Loneliness and Isolation, I needed to explore the multiple layers attached to it. There

were three sub-themes that emerged, which were: 1) Social Isolation 2) Interpersonal Isolation 3) Academic Isolation 4) New Environment Loneliness 5) Cultural Loneliness. Each sub-theme provided a more in depth look into the differing ways in which loneliness and isolation affected the participants. Similar to the process in which I explored each theme, I also explored the sub-themes individually and then collectively.  This way, I was able to give the attention deserved to each theme and make connections between what it means for this population to experience various types of loneliness and isolation. Specifically, in regards to loneliness, the participants expressed an interest in fitting in and being included in both school and community events.

**CHAPTER 5**

**DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this study was to understand the stressors associated with the adjustment experience of the ten participants and, furthermore, explore how these experiences affected other areas of their lives. This study also focused on understanding where potential gaps might be between the experiences of the international graduate student population and the services that the University currently offers in order to meet the specific needs of this population. Though many unexpected themes presented themselves throughout the data collection process, there were initially four primary research questions: 1) What are the academic and social adjustment needs of first time U.S. entering international graduate students at Southern Illinois University Carbondale?; 2) In what ways do these needs affect the mental and physical health of international graduate students as they acculturate?; 3)What services does SIUC offer and/or need to expand upon in order to ensure that the needs of international graduate students are being met, primarily in regards to their mental health?; 4) What are the gaps in services to address the needs of international graduate students at SIUC? Within this final chapter, I will provide a discussion of the findings from the data collection process while recapping the themes that emerged from the ten participant's stories. In doing this, my goal is to understand how the themes help to answer the four research questions. I will close the chapter out by discussing the significance of the findings, the implications of the findings, implications of the results, recommendations for further research, and a conclusion.

The goal of this study was twofold in nature in that it sought to not only explore the stories of the adjustment experiences of participants but also be able to see what services may need to expanded upon or may need to be implemented in order to ensure that the needs of this

population are met. The study also sought to be able to contribute to current literature by allowing the experiences of the participants to shed light on how the adjustment experiences of international graduate students is a unique one and, furthermore, one that differs from that of domestic graduate students. The six themes that emerged were first explored independently. Then, in order to contextualize and further analyze the presented themes, I employed three different frameworks: 1) Critical Race Theory; 2) Critical Social Theory; 3) Critical Race Theory in Education.

In using Critical Race Theory, I was able to understand how the participants perceived and experienced discrimination and how it might have affected their adjustment to SIUC. Next, I used Critical Social Theory to explore how social issues have the potential to create feelings of inequity. Lastly, I used the Critical Race Theory in Education to both explore and address how the participants related their ethnicity to their academic experiences. I also used CRTE as a way to explore how potential institutional inequities contributed to their acculturation experiences. In the next section, I will discuss the themes that emerged during the data collection process while drawing on current literature. I will make connections between the findings and literature to see what similarities and differences exist, which will primarily be done to understand what contributions can be made to literature from the themes that emerged from this study.

**Theme #1: Feelings of Loneliness and Isolation**

During both the focus group sessions and individual interviews, all ten of the participants shared that they have experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation. This is in support of current literature that explains that the challenges that international graduate students face in their adjustment have the potential to lead to feelings of isolation and ultimately affect how well the student adjusts to their new environment (Baba & Hosoda, 2014). The participants shared

that they experienced emotions that included sadness, rejection, anger, and resentment. Under what turned into this umbrella term of "Loneliness and Isolation" were six sub-themes. These sub-themes included: 1) Social Isolation; 2) Social Isolation & University Support; 3) Interpersonal Loneliness; 4) Academic Loneliness; 5) New Environment Loneliness; and 6) Cultural Loneliness. Both the male and female participants shared personal experiences that touched on feelings of being overlooked, desiring to be included, a lack of social support, not being valued nor appreciated, etc. I will now discuss the sub-themes as they each provide a different perspective to the overall theme.

*Sub-theme 1: Social Isolation.* For all of the participants, social isolation was something they experienced at some point of their adjustment to SIUC. Though these emotions were more pronounced during their initial arrival at SIUC, for many of the participants, the social isolation that they experienced had more to do with inequities between them and domestic students. In support of what researchers posit in current literature, as the international graduate student senses a loss of social support, they will also begin to experience emotions related to social isolation. In turn, as the feelings of isolation continue, they will consequently feel less inclined to establish connections with other students, especially domestic ones, or attend social events (Hayes and Lin, 1994; Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992; Pedersen, 1991). For the majority of the participants, however, their feelings of social isolation were rooted in how they were mistreated by domestic students and University staff. Participants shared experiences of being ignored and overlooked for job related opportunities, while priority seemed to be given to domestic students. For many of these participants, these experiences were so damaging, that it deterred them from wanting to be social in the future.

Several of the participants expressed that the confounding effect of being away from family in their home country and receiving the cold shoulder from students and selective staff, forced them in the direction of only wanting to associate with other international students. For others, their comfortability in associating with other international students was their driving force in doing so. During the focus group, female participant, Patricia, shared that she sees no benefit in associating with domestic students. She explained that her international friends understand her adjustment challenges, especially as it relates to academics. Similarly, male participants Ryan and Kyle shared that they mostly associate with other students from their respective countries of India and Nepal. Though they both have created friendships with domestic students, they shared that their closest bonds consist of international students.

The difference in cultural norms between participant's home countries and American culture, was a major reason as to why the participants also experienced emotions related to isolation. For example, three of the African participants, shared that a major challenge for them was getting adjusted to the individualistic culture that is promoted in America. As Jill explained during her interview, she struggled getting adjusted to the competitive academic environment at SIUC, where people did not seem eager to help one another. This was also the case for female participant, Jenn, who shared that she found it difficult to get acclimated to the lack of friendliness and supportiveness that she felt from her colleagues.

*Sub-theme #2: Social Isolation and University Support.* As the participants shared their experiences and thoughts regarding isolation, University support was a topic that repeatedly presented itself. With the exception of one participant, all of the participants expressed that the University can do more to ensure that their social needs are met. As John shared during the focus group, the University should adequately train their staff to be able to accommodate the

international student population. John believes that many of the adjustment issues that plague international graduate students, could easily be remedied if the staff were well informed about the possible adjustment challenges that international graduate students might encounter when they arrive. The participant's stories and experiences directly support what researchers Erichsen and Bollinger (2005) wrote regarding how lack of host university results in heighted emotions of isolation.

In addition to staff training, participants shared how the University should employ various methods for advertising social events for international graduate students. Graduate students are typically more removed from campus events due to living off campus and having more challenging academic demands. Therefore, international graduate students are a population that might require more than a single approach to advertising events. All of the participants shared that they rely on their friends to inform them of campus events. As Myra shared during the focus group, email is not the most effective tool to reach this population as graduate students are often bombarded with daily emails. Myra shared that she missed many social events due to overlooking emails containing information.

Though the one participant, Kyle, shared that he did not believe that the University had lacked in promoting social events, he did share that SIUC staff can still do more in their promotional efforts.  To this end, it was evident that though the participants were more reliant on their friends to be updated on campus and community events, they still desired to have University support. As male participant, Ryan shared, the University should make it their priority to have international graduate students feel welcomed and more importantly, supported. This will be discussed more in depth in its own section.

***Sub-theme #3: Interpersonal Loneliness.*** The stories that the participants shared were filled with emotions involving sadness. They shared how being physically distant from their loved ones caused distress and were daily sources of emotional stress. For seven out of the ten participants, their departure to SIUC was their first experience being away from their family and friends. For these participants it was especially difficult to adjust to living abroad. In addition to the typical adjustment experiences that international graduate students might face, they also dealt with other challenges such as having to prepare their own meals. In turn, as explained by the participants, these challenges affected them in other ways, such as their emotional health.

For the majority of the participants, keeping in contact with their families and friends who remained in their home countries was a priority. During the focus group sessions, participants shared that speaking with their families was a part of their daily routine. For female participants Liana and Jill, calling and speaking with their parents and husbands allows them to still feel connected to them. For example, during her interview Jenn shared that when she questions her move to the U.S., her husband reminds her of her purpose for being at SIUC. Similarly, during the focus group session, Liana shared that talking to her family especially during stressful moments helps her refocus.

What was interesting about this theme was that similar to the aforementioned theme of Social Isolation, differences between genders regarding the extent to which distance from families affected the adjustment of the participants was present. Many of the male participants, regardless of whether they had prior experiences living away from their homes and families, they seemed to be less affected by this type of isolation than the female participants. Both male participants, Michael and Kyle expressed that they understood that the distance from their families in their home country was a necessary part of the process in order to attain their degree.

Additionally, a source of comfort for many of the participants was that they understood that their time apart from their families was temporary. Furthermore, many of them shared that they planned to travel back to their home country after graduation.

*Sub-theme #4: Academic Loneliness***.** As I discussed experiences with the ten participants, I learned just how challenging adjusting to the academic environment at SIUC had been for them. Nine out of ten of the participants had experienced stress related to their academics, which had in turn had an effect on their feelings of isolation. This is in support of existing literature, where researchers claim that compared to all of the other potential acculturative stressors that the visiting student might encounter, the academic adjustment related challenges have the strongest ability to impact their psychological adjustment and overall adjustment experience (Frazier et al., 2011; Hyun et al., 2007). These nine participants had experienced such high levels of academic related stress that it would prohibit them from being able to attend social events held on campus. For many of them, their difficulty in adjusting academically was due to the differences that were present between the academic structure in which they were used to in their home country and the American academic system. Academic stress is a unique challenge in that it incorporates several acculturative stressors such as language barriers and classroom environment. Also, in support of current research, this study's findings show that academic structure along with assignment difficulty and deadlines, place the visiting student under extreme levels of stress and consequently affects other areas of their adjustment at the university (Hyun et al, 2007; Kinoshita & Bowman, 1998). In attempting to get adjusted to their new academic environment at SIUC, the participants shared that they dedicated more hours to their studies than what they believed their domestic colleagues had to due to language barriers and not grasping all of the material due to the speed in which the instructors spoke.

Another academic related adjustment challenge was the workload. For male participant, Michael, adjusting to the amount of daily assigned work in his classes was a major source of stress. He explained that in Nigeria, the workload is much lighter than that of the one at SIUC. Like Michael, Ryan shared that there were times that he wanted to be social and attend events but decided not to due to academic related stress. Female participants, Liana and Myra also shared that they both have experienced high levels of stress related to adjusting to the American educational system. During the focus group, they spoke about how the differences in classroom environment was very challenging to adjust to, especially how students and professors interact with one another. In their home countries, the instructor is revered and rarely spoken to, even if an assignment is unclear. Liana and Myra were shocked to witness how open the students were with their professors and would even challenge them at times.

Though language barriers and comparisons made between international and domestic students were two of the primary factors contributing to the participants experiencing academic stress, language barriers did not serve as significant of a barrier as I had anticipated it would. In fact, professor and student dynamic proved to be a more stressful adjustment to make for the participants and one that even at the time of data collection was still something that they were not used to. For some participants, the academic stress that they had experienced also seemed to have affected them emotionally and socially. As female participant Myra shared during the focus group, she often times questioned her abilities when she compared herself to the non-international students in her classes. She recalled how she would call her mom in tears daily about how she felt as though her academic abilities were not on the same level as the American students. Similarly, during the focus group, Michael shared that he struggled with initial feelings of a lack of ability as he compared himself to his American colleagues. During the focus group,

he shared that he believed that American students are reared in the direction of being prepared for rigorous studies from an early age. He shared that in Nigeria, academics is less rigorous and therefore does not prepare the student for strenuous study schedules.

*Sub-theme #5: New Environment Loneliness.* The stress that participants experienced can be understood as their seeking to adjust to the larger culture of the United States and the sub-culture that is Carbondale, Illinois. Through listening to the stories that the participants shared, I learned that their being in a new environment, being away from loved ones, all while adjusting to new foods and ways of life were extremely overwhelming. For many of the participants, adjusting to living in rural Southern Illinois was also a major challenge in their adjustment. For example, for participants Jenn, Myra, Ryan, and Stephen getting used to the quiet in Carbondale was not easy to do. They shared stories about how they even found it difficult to sleep at times due to the lack of street noise. As they hail from larger, metropolitan cities, it was shocking to them how quiet the suburban town of Carbondale was. The participants also shared that the lack of cultural awareness that some staff, students, and community members have towards international students was also another challenge that they had to overcome.

Current literature supports the idea of programs being developed to increase an intercultural classroom and community environment (Leask, 2009). I could sense the pain as the participants shared that they had experiences where they felt that they were viewed as second class citizens, treated as showcases, or overlooked for academic related opportunities. As female participant, Myra shared during the focus group, if it were not for the annual International Festival held on SIUC's campus, the many cultures that are present at the University, would never be appreciated. Speaking to the feeling of being overlooked that many of the participants shared they had experienced, was Jenn's story of not being made aware of graduate assistantship

opportunities that she was qualified for. Subsequently, she began to seek out opportunities on her own.

Participants also shared stories regarding how they felt that their opinions, especially as it related to U.S. matters, such as politics were not welcomed. As the media coverage regarding the most recent presidential election heightened, several participants shared that the treatment towards them changed. They explained that while they might have felt comfortable speaking on foreign matters with their colleagues and instructors, it seemed that their views on candidates, world issues, and the direction of the country, were not something that they had the right to speak on. In essence, they felt as though they were being compartmentalized in which they were able to only speak on certain matters and not others.

For some participants, such as Stephen, stereotyping has been a major barrier in his adjustment. During the focus group, he spoke about how he had many students and staff alike make comments regarding him being from Columbia and their long history with drugs. He expressed how this stereotyping and generalizations had affected his ability to assimilate, as people seemed fearful of him. Male participant, Ryan also shared how he and other international graduate students had been victims of prejudice. He shared a more recent story of how another Indian graduate student, who was actually a U.S. citizen, attended a job fair on SIUC's campus. He explained that his colleague was immediately turned away from certain jobs because the employer assumed that he was not a citizen simply based off of his skin color.

***Sub-theme #6: Cultural Loneliness.*** As I spoke with each of the participants, it was evident that a prominent challenge they faced was adjusting to their new culture, as it was so different from their home one. Cultural loneliness, as was explained in Chapter 4, is different from other forms of loneliness. For many of the participants, the inherent differences in cultural practices and

hospitality was not an easy hurdle to get over. Participants shared stories about how the competitive nature amongst students and the lack of assistance that they provide to one another was a cultural shock for them. For female participants Jenn and Patricia, who both explained that they come from cultures where people are eager to help one another, they had a difficult time realizing just how individualistic U.S. culture is.

Many of the participants shared that their experiences with cultural loneliness led to feelings of isolation. To this end, the more participants felt that they were "different" from their non-international colleagues, the less inclined they were to socialize or make an effort to create friendships that extended beyond other international graduate students. In order to counter these feelings of cultural loneliness, many of the participants looked for outlets. For some, like Michael and Jill, religion served as their primary sources of comfort. For others, simply sticking to creating bonds within the international community helped in the adjustment to cultural differences as they presented.

**Theme #2: Social Media**

For many of the participants, social media proved to be a major source of comfort as they were able to feel connected to their loved ones who lived abroad. Furthermore, social media forums such as Facebook and Instagram, which are able to be accessed from computer or phone, allowed the participants flexibility in how much they remain connected. The female participants did have more of a reliance on social media. During the focus group, many of the female participants shared how they would use their social media accounts to both see and share photos with their family and friends in their home countries. These findings support current literature in that social media serves as a way for the international graduate student to not feel as distant from their loved ones. Essentially, their connections and personal bonds are able to be maintained,

thus lessening emotions related to homesickness (Sandel, 2014). The male participants seemed much more involved in the cultivation of on campus relations as opposed to keeping in touch with their family and friends back home.

For all ten of the participants, however, the usage of social media was something that they appreciated. Both male and female participants shared how social media also served as an outlet of sorts, where they were able to step away from their academic demands. Viber, a free texting, picture sharing, and chatting feature, was another popular option used by participants. As graduate students, the participants shared that they appreciate free services where they don't have to rely on calling cards and paying to keep in touch with their loved ones. Social media was also something that the participants expressed helped them in their adjustment process. For female participant Liana and male participant Michael, it was especially useful during their initial arrival at SIUC. During times of extreme stress, they would call home and speak with their loved ones to receive moral support.

According to the stories shared by participants, social media served as a tool to aid in overcoming social isolation. As female participant Patricia shared during the focus group, when she was unable to go out or simply did not have the desire, she would get on social media and talk with her family back home. This was also the case for male participants Kyle and John. During the times where they felt stressed academically and unable to attend social events, they explained that logging on to social media allowed them to still feel engaged. To this end, social media outlets helped in the adjustment for many of the participants; it seemed that social media served as a buffer in helping the participants get over their initial hurdles of adjustment at SIUC.

**Theme # 3: Mental Health and Support**

A significant purpose for exploring this topic was to understand the ways that the health of this population might be affected by their adjustment to SIUC. The health related questions that I designed involved understanding how the mental health of the participants were affected by their adjustment process. The transition from living with loved ones in an environment where one is comfortable to being thrust into a new culture is not an easy one to make. For many of the participants, emotional stress was something that accompanied their adjustment process. Therefore, the participant's experiences support current research that the emotional wellness of the international graduate student is likely to be strained as they attempt to navigate their new academic environment and surrounding community (Yeh, 2003). As we spoke about their mental health status after arriving at SIUC, some participants spoke about unfavorable experiences where they did not feel supported. In hearing their stories, I was able to feel their pain. Once again, they shared experiences where some felt overlooked while others felt that the University does not do enough on their end to help ensure that the emotional needs, especially as it relates to the specific challenges in adjustment are met.

Several participants spoke about their experiences and reactions to mental health related issues. For some, their initial response was to speak with their loved ones. For others, their immediate action included going to the health center located on campus. However, when they did utilize health services, the experience was an unpleasant one. As Ryan shared during the focus group, he was treated differently from the moment the nurse read and mispronounced his name aloud. He further shared that when he raised his hand to confirm his presence, he was met with a grimacing face and unkind welcome. When probing the issue of mental health further, I learned that the participants do see the benefit in seeking help on campus. What served as a

barrier in doing so is their trust that first they will be treated kindly and secondly that the staff will have the knowledge in order to meet their specific emotional needs, as theirs has the potential to be different from that of domestic students at SIUC.

Differences between cultures played a part in the participants seeking mental health support on campus as well. As Michael explained during the focus group, in Nigeria there is not an expectation that the University staff should help them with their mental health needs. So, with this mindset, Michael shared that during the times where he felt overwhelmed or as though he needed mental health support, he would reach out to his family. Female participant, Liana, shared that she too relies solely on her family for her stress management and mental health support. She shared that though the University might have the resources available, her comfortability in speaking with her family trumped that. For two of the participants, religion played a significant role in their overcoming emotional/mental health related issues. Both from Africa, Michael and Jenn spoke about how their prayer life and church attendance helped them during the more stressful times in their adjustment at SIUC.

During the discussion about mental health and support, I learned that meeting the emotional needs of the participants is something that should be a primary focus for the University. Additionally, the extensive training of staff to be armed with the appropriate tools to be prepared to offer valuable services to international graduate students should be deemed a priority. Mental health is still a taboo topic but I was pleasantly surprised that the participants were so transparent in their responses to my emotional/mental health related questions. What was most obvious from my discussions with the participants was their resilience. The participants spoke about their feelings of empowerment after enduring and overcoming their adjustment challenges and stressors. One statement by female participant, summed up the strength that emanated from the

participants as they shared their experiences. She explained that in finally adjusting to being away from home and her loved ones while adjusting to her new environment, provided her with a confidence that she can now survive in any environment.

### Theme #4: Professor and Student Dynamic

Different from academic related stress, was the adjustment that the participants explained they made in adapting to the professor/student dynamic. All ten of the participants agreed that in their home countries, the instructor is respected and so is their time. Therefore, students do not typically speak to professors regarding any questions that they may have regarding assignments, especially after the class session is done. Instead, participants explained, they would rely on their friends for academic concerns and not on their instructors. These findings serve to support current literature where researchers explain that a source of adjustment stress for the visiting student will be rooted in their attempt to adjust to cultural differences in expectations of instructor roles and responsibilities (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Zhou et al., 2008). As the participants shared, their culture and the accompanying morals and practices are acted out in every aspect of their lives. So, the reverence they have for instructors is something that many of the participants shared will never change. However, did learn to incorporate this new, American approach.

Several of the participants shared that their initial transition into the new academic culture was intimidating and had an effect on their ability to complete their assignments. During the focus groups, there were discussions regarding how uncomfortableness in requesting further assistance with assignments led them to not only submit their work on time but also experience feelings of isolation. According to the participants, this lack of comfortability forced them to want to dedicate more hours to assignments. Four of the five female participants shared that a primary source of their discomfort in their adjustment was getting used to being vocal in the

classroom regarding subjects that might have been unclear. In turn, as they did not feel comfortable seeking help from their instructor, they felt that they had not mastered the material and therefore were unable to submit their work on time.

As the participants and I discussed their instructor's willingness to help them during moments where they faced academic challenges, all ten shared they had either had positive experiences or believed that their instructors would provide assistance if needed. As female participants, Patricia and Liana shared during the focus group, they were shocked at how understanding their professors were with their academic challenges. Their offering of their time outside of their office hours and responding to the emails that they sent, assured them that their instructors were non-judgmental and, furthermore, supportive. This, Liana shared allowed her to overcome any potential fears she had regarding reaching out to her instructors. Essentially, it opened the door for communication and for a rapport to be built. As we closed the discussion on support from instructors, John made a comment regarding outside staff not being as supportive as instructors have been. As he shared his thoughts with the rest of the group, the remaining four male participants all agreed with the idea that University staff should be provided with more in depth training regarding the issues that might plague international graduate students. These findings add to current literature, in which researchers explain the importance in cultural sensitivity on behalf of the instructors. Furthermore, it also supports current literature that in order for the international graduate student to not feel emotions such as confusion while in the classroom, they need support from not only their instructors but other University staff (Pedersen, 1991; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004).

During both focus group sessions, the participants shared countless stories about how this instructor to student relationship has in turn had bearing on their feelings of academic isolation.

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This theme in particular, I believe, provides great insight into cultural differences and how its far reaching effect on the international graduate student's adjustment to SIUC. As we discussed this topic, I recall realizing how cultural differences have the ability to not only affect the student's comfortability in speaking to their instructors when there is a concern but also their ability to do well academically. Basically, if the student does not feel comfortable asking their instructor for help that has the potential to be detrimental to their mastering of material, subsequently the grade that they receive in the class, and their overall GPA. Therefore, it is critical that the international graduate student feels that they are able to openly speak to their professors, if and when questions regarding assignments arise.

**Theme #5: Financial Stability**

For many of the participants, having a lack of financial stability and not knowing whether they will be given an assistantship position for the upcoming semester is stressful. International graduate students have the additional challenge of not being able to work outside of the University due to Visa work restrictions. As participants Ryan and Myra explained, upon their arrival at SIUC, they were promised to receive full financial coverage for the duration of their respective academic programs. Over the past several years, however, they have been informed that due to funding issues they may not receive funding nor a monthly stipend to cover their studies. This is a stressor that is unique to this population as domestic students are able to seek employment beyond the campus should they ever want to. Furthermore, international graduate students are not eligible to receive financial aid or student loans to help them with their financial needs.

As many of the participants shared, the financial burdens coupled with not knowing if they are going to receive funding or not for the upcoming semester had been so stressful that it

forced them to contemplate whether they want to transfer to a different academic institution in order that they can start a new graduate assistant contract as they complete the remainder of their program. As Jill shared, it is not only difficult to receive the graduate assistantship but also to find out what options exist. During the focus group, she shared how domestic graduate students seem to receive the information regarding graduate assistantship opportunities before international graduate students do. Due to this, she explained, she began to seek out opportunities independently as opposed to waiting to be told by her instructors or advisor. This too, has been Myra's experience as she has witnessed domestic students receive assistantship opportunities and be provided with post graduate employment information that she too was qualified for. She further explained that she had noticed that not only did racism exist on campus but so did sexism. She was extremely hesitant to delve deeper into this topic. In respect of her hesitance, I did not inquire further.

Employment issues were more of a concern for the doctoral students, primarily those nearing the end of their academic program. For the Master's level participants, their stress was rooted more in having to adjust to the currency differences between their home countries and the U.S. In support of current literature, the costs of campus services such as food and transportation added to the adjustment challenges that the international graduate student faced while at SIUC (Blignault et al., 2008; Ho et al., 2008). As both Patricia and Liana explained, much of their financial stress had to do with affording things such as food and personal items that were much more expensive in the U.S. than they were accustomed to in Mongolia and Singapore. The findings regarding financial burdens, also directly supports current literature that for the international graduate student that is used to receiving monetary support from their family will

face challenges adapting to their new financial responsibility of living alone in the U.S. (Ho et al., 2008).

As participants shared, their financial challenges also had to do with not having a vehicle when they first arrived at SIUC. In having to rely solely on public transportation, which is limited in Carbondale, they were spending significant amounts of money on taxi service. Many of the participants shared how little they knew about alternative transportation options, such as the University shuttle service. Jenn, Myra, and Liana all spoke about how if it were not for their international friends, they would not know that the shuttle service existed. This was similar to what the participants had periodically alluded to as they explained how the University as a whole and primarily the International Office did not prepare them as well as they should have to properly navigate their way around the campus and community. As Liana spoke about during the focus group, she never received proper guidance as to how to open a bank account in Carbondale. Other participants chimed in and shared that the though the International Office did explain and provide pamphlets with information on options for banking, their guidance should have been more in depth.

**Theme #6: Overall University Support**

The overall consensus amongst the participants was that University staff should be doing more to ensure that the needs of international graduate students are met. Furthermore, the participants shared that the University should deem it a priority to properly train their staff to be well equipped to able to combat any potential challenges that international graduate students experience, primarily during their initial arrival at SIUC. As I spoke with the participants, I learned just how unique their needs are and how dissimilar they are to domestic graduate students. I also learned how little they believe University staff is working on their behalf to aid in

their adjustment process. Male participant, John made a substantial point during the focus group when he shared that University staff should not only train their staff more properly but also assess the needs of international graduate students so that as new, incoming cohorts enter they will not have to experience the same challenges as the previous one. The orientations that the participants attended, they explained, were informative but not as in depth as they would have wanted. This supports current literature, where researchers suggest that orientations need to be more in depth and highlight key areas where past international graduate students might have faced adjustment challenges, so as to help the current cohort not experience the same ones (Olivas & Li, 2002).

The participants in this study shared stories and experiences that showed their resiliency and ability to overcome what many others are unable to. Those same stories however, were also filled with emotions of sadness and loneliness. In addition to having to deal with the emotions of being physically distant from their loved ones, the participants also had to deal with the loneliness that came from not feeling as though they were receiving adequate support from University staff. Though these participants were able to get through challenging times, it was evident that they were still dependent in the sense that they wanted to know that if needed, University staff would be both present and willing to help them. For many of the participants, their reliance on University staff was needed more during their initial arrival at SIUC. Furthermore, for the majority of the participants, being provided with information regarding transportation options and opportunities for both assistantship opportunities and social activities was of primary concern.

During the focus group sessions, I shifted my inquiry to learning about the level of support the participants received from the International Office staff. The consensus this time was

that the International Office does offer support, but only when sought. Additionally, many of them explained that as graduate students with large amounts of assignments and research obligations, they are unable to visit the office as often as they want. All ten participants only visited the International Office regarding visa issues. They did share that International Office staff members, such as Mrs. Elaine Conrad, had always been welcoming and interested in helping them overcome any adjustment challenges. Several participants also agreed that the International Office should create a more detailed and comprehensive orientation that is tailored specifically to the graduate student population. Additionally, they should ensure that their orientation does not coincide with that of any of the departmental ones. As female participant Myra shared, she missed one full day of orientation week at the International Office due to its being held on the same day as the graduate student orientation in her department.

Overall, the participants felt that University support can be improved upon in several ways, which in turn would help eliminate many of the adjustment challenges that international graduate students face as they first arrive at SIUC. When the participants were asked whether they utilized the services offered through the Center for International Education, the consensus was that they either do not have enough time to attend the few events that are held or that they are not made aware of them in time. In hearing their responses, it was clear to me that it was not that the participants were not interested in attending events. Instead, it was that they did not feel supported by select University staff, such as health center workers and administrators.

### Significance of the Findings

The findings from this study are significant in several ways as there is limited research on the adjustment needs of this unique population of students. First, in order to help ensure that international graduate students at SIUC not only overcome their adjustment challenges, but that

they prosper during their time at the University, it is important the appropriate staff are well versed on both the potential challenges and needs of this population prior to attempting to be of service. In addition to holding mandated trainings, it would be beneficial for these select SIUC staff to employ strategies used by other universities both domestically and internationally that are working well. For example, the University of Alberta is working towards ensuring that they are available to provide specialized trainings for staff and support for their visiting students that begins prior to the international student's arrival to the University. In understanding the unique needs of this population, they will be able to meet those needs while also continuing to attract international graduate students to their university, even in light of recent policy changes.

Another university that continues to strive to make their academic environment a more welcoming and inclusive one for their international graduate student population is The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The "Global Grads" program, which is a collaborative effort between various campus partners, seeks to aid the international graduate student adjust to their new academic environment and community. Some of the planned programs for the 2017-2018 academic year are the "Finding Funds Workshop," "Preparing International Teaching Assistants Program (PITAP)", and "Fostering Resilience through Community." These workshops and seminars are centered on creating a space where the visiting student has an overall positive acculturation experience. Secondly, on a larger scale, the findings can help other universities understand the needs of their international graduate student population. Thirdly, regarding potential implications for health educators and practitioners, specifically, this study's findings have the ability to broaden their perspectives to include an understanding of just how interconnected stress and mental health are as it relates to this

population and, furthermore, what their role can be in prevention of health relates effects of adjustment stressors.

Speaking to the uniqueness of this study is that though these findings are based off of the narratives of ten international graduate student participants at SIUC, the data gathered has the potential to be applicable and implemented at other academic settings that house international graduate students. Furthermore, the findings are significant for non-international students to be aware of how they might be able to help in the adjustment of international graduate students by being empathetic to their needs. The six themes that emerged from the stories and experiences shared by the ten participants, have the ability to, at the very least, start the discussion about ways in which University staff will be able to implement services that will hopefully bridge the gap between what is already being offered and what these participants shared that they believe is lacking. SIUC staff should seek to make it a priority that all of their students, including international graduate students, are both welcomed properly and treated fairly during their stay. Similarly, it is also the responsibility of the Carbondale community members to not only be tolerant of other cultures but accepting and kind in their treatment towards this population of students.

## Contributions to Current Research

This study's primary contribution to research is that it allows for a further, more in depth understanding of the interconnectedness of the adjustment needs of international graduate students at SIUC. As I delved deeper into the findings of this study, I used Critical Social Theory to help me in understanding the ways in which the social issues affected participant's feelings of unequal treatment. In doing so, I was able to make the connection between how the participants shared that they are an overlooked population and how that impacted their ability to

properly adjust to their new setting at SIUC. In essence, I used participant stories to understand how social related issues also played a role in hindering their adjustment process. I then used the Critical Race Theory in Education to help me examine, explore, and address how the differences in ethnicity between the participants and domestic graduate students played a role in their acculturation experience at SIUC and within the Carbondale community.

In using CRTE, I was able to understand how culture is an all-encompassing term that includes language, food, and social skills that are not always easy to adapt to. Lastly, I applied Critical Race Theory to help me explain how the experiences of discrimination affected the participant's adjustment and to what extent. I was able to understand first just how far reaching the effects had on the participants and their adjustment. I was also able to understand how language barriers and norms that are inherent to every culture, played a role in the participant's adjustment at SIUC and their ability to make connections with non-international students.

In summation, this study allows for the topic of inclusiveness to be explored from different angles, while also examining the relationship between the themes that emerged and their overall effect on the adjustment challenges of the participants. The personal stories and experiences of the participants provides opportunity for further understanding of how socio-cultural factors affect the adjustment of visiting international graduate students and have the potential to have long lasting effects, beyond their time at SIUC.

**Implications for the Practice**

The results of this study are based off of the unfiltered stories and experiences shared by the ten participants that provides insight into the adjustment challenges that they experienced. The findings of this study also shed light on what the participants believe the University is doing to meet the needs of the international graduate student population and more importantly what is

lacking in regards to services offered. The six themes that emerged can serve as a guide for University staff as well as for health educators and practitioners to work in conjunction to help meet the needs of incoming international graduate students at SIUC.

## Health Educators and University staff

Health educators and practitioners alike possess the knowledge to help in the alleviation of certain stressors that contribute to the adjustment challenges that they experience. It would be of benefit to the incoming cohorts of international graduate students if health educators and practitioners worked alongside the appropriate SIUC staff to create a sustainable plan for their transition to the University and community. After hearing the stories and experiences shared by the participants, I felt compelled to investigate what services are currently being offered to this population of students. Through this investigation, I learned that there are initial services such as the orientation that is held when the international graduate students arrive prior to the start of the semester. However, there are not many other services that are offered once the semester has officially started. As some of the participants mentioned, they are aware of the weekly coffee hour that is held at the International Office. As many of them explained, this is more of a social event and a way to meet other international students. What the participants explained is lacking is more informational sessions on varying topics held not only in the beginning but throughout the semester.

In University staff providing the training to all personnel who will deal with this population of students, in any capacity, they will be working towards creating an environment that is both comfortable and easier to adapt to. For example, there could be a monthly check in where international graduate students are able to come to the International Office and speak with a health professional regarding any stressors that may be impacting their adjustment. If the

stressor is beyond the scope of the health educators training, they can then elicit help from the more appropriate University staff member(s) to help the student.

Finally, the findings of this study reflect what the actual experiences have been for ten members of the international graduate community at SIUC. The participants in this study exemplified what it looks like for someone to enter a new environment and culture and begin the assimilation process; All the while, attempting to overcome the many obstacles that might come their way during said process. This study offers University staff and health practitioners the unique ability to experience the transitional issues and challenges that many of them experienced and, furthermore, the ways in which many of those issues can be remedied or avoided in the future. Therefore, the responsibility of helping ease international graduate students into University life rests on the shoulders of University staff, students, and Southern Illinois community members.

This study's findings also shed light on keys ways in which SIUC is able to make institution wide changes that would be of benefit to visiting international graduate students. Exploring current institutional policies are critical to understanding what programs need to be implemented. For example, in listening to the participant's stories, I was able to understand the importance in having a mandated informational training for all parties that will be working in any capacity with the international graduate students. On a much larger scale, the current political climate has the potential to impact not only the experience of international graduate students at SIUC but also their willingness to study abroad. As previously mentioned, international students are a huge revenue source for the universities that house them and the surrounding towns, such as Carbondale (Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015). However, the current administrations recent anti-immigration sentiments have the potential to deter these students

from desiring to come to the U.S. for their academic needs. This is supported in the findings of this study as the participants shared their beliefs regarding how the current political situation has had a bearing on how welcomed they felt and more importantly how they believed they had not been treated as equals at the university and within the community. Therefore, tolerance and acceptance as it relates to the international graduate experience has have both fiscal and political implications.

At a time where nearly all states have faced significant financial cuts for higher education, anti-immigration laws seem to be affecting graduate programs more than ever. According to a 2017 New York Times report, "graduate schools appear to be feeling the worst pinch, with nearly half reporting drops" in international student applications. Universities have come to financially depend on international students as they typically pay double or triple in tuition compared to that of their non-international counterparts. For many years, Illinois has been one of the leading states to house international students, primarily due to their leading engineering programs. For many of these international students, they are mainly attracted to the idea of being able to receive a better education and remain in the U.S. post completing their degree. However, for students that come from Muslim based countries, such as Iran, which is one that the current administration has placed on the no-entry list, this might be a strong deterrent. This supports current literature by the New York Times (2017), which claims that students from the Middle East have recently reported having the most anxiety related to studying at a U.S. institution. Due to the ban, many of the international graduate students might fear returning home to their home countries during academic breaks, as they may not be able to return. This means that international graduate students might not be able to see their loved ones for many years, some up to eight years long, depending on the degree that they are seeking.

In light of the recent shift in policy, many international graduate students might begin to look elsewhere for their academic needs; they may look to the UK or Canada, for example, who might be more welcoming than America. According to a Washington Post article (2017), in February of 2017, University leaders, presidents, and chancellors collaborated in signing a letter to President Trump asking him to repeal his executive order on anti-immigration policy. This policy change presented by the president, forced many university officials fear that their typically high number of enrollment of international students would substantially decrease. As the participants shared, the lack of friendliness they have received from American students and some staff at SIUC negatively affected their adjustment to the University and to the city of Carbondale. Looking forward, institutional and state policy changes can have a direct impact on how many international graduate students will decide to attend SIUC in the upcoming years. To this end, even though international graduate students might have previously overlooked their difference in tuition due to their eagerness to receive what they believed would be a superior education, there is a strong possibility that they would decide to either stay in their home country or choose alternative countries to further their education. As the U.S. is currently undergoing both political and economic changes, University staff must be cognizant of the real effects of xenophobia on the international graduate student's adjustment experience. For example, as participants mentioned, the 9/11 attacks shifted how Muslim students were both viewed and treated. This national policy shift has the potential to affect the currently enrolled international graduate students as they have already begun their program of study and may not want to leave prior to completing it. Racism and stereotypes that international graduate students might have previously encountered will only be heightened since there are actual policies in place that specifically target this population. Their basic human rights now come into play, which is why this

population should be given higher levels of emotional and academic support while abroad. This, once more, speaks to the aforementioned double sided importance of exploring this topic on several conceptual levels, as it will be of benefit to the Universities and international graduate students.

## Limitations

The primary goal for this study was to explore the adjustment experiences of international graduate students attending SIUC. Additionally, the objective was to understand how these experiences affected their stress levels and mental health. In order to gather the data that was needed, I employed the qualitative approach, which included two focus group sessions (separated by gender) and individual interviews. During the focus groups and interviews, I asked open-ended questions that I designed, which led to in depth discussions regarding the participant's experiences at SIUC.

The focus group sessions, which included ten total participants, were deliberately separated by gender in order to provide an environment that was comfortable for all of the participants. My objective in doing this was to help ensure that discussions would not be altered due to discomfort or fear of judgement. The individual interviews allowed the participants to expand on any area that they might have not felt comfortable doing so during the focus group sessions. It was also a time for me to gain clarification on any topic discussed during the focus group to ensure that I had captured what the participant intended to say. In having a small sample size of ten participants, I was able to extract data that truly captured each of their experiences. Though the sample size is small and therefore unable to make generalizations based off of the findings, it allowed me to focus on getting at the heart of the matter, which was gaining a true understanding of the participant's experiences.

Similarly, this study was performed with participants from a single, rurally located university. Therefore, another limitation is that the findings may not be a reflection of international graduate students housed at other universities, particularly those in more metropolitan areas. This being a qualitative study, the goal was not to garner data that would be generalizable. However, the aforementioned sample size and location would be limitations in that regard. The last limitation was my positionality as it related to the participants and potential bias on the research. As an advanced Ph.D. student that was born in the states, I prepared myself for the probability of some of the participants being hesitant to share some of some of their adjustment challenges that they experienced out of fear that I would not be able to relate. In order to help alleviate the possibility of this happening, I made sure to begin both focus group sessions by explaining that I, too come from an international background. I was also fearful that the male participants would not feel comfortable sharing information with me, as I am a woman. The candid nature of the male participant responses, led me to believe that this was not the case. However, I am unable to conclusively say that my positionality did not have any effect on the answers that the participants provided to my questions.

## Remaining Gaps in Literature and Recommendations for Further Research

Though this study is unique in nature and is able to provide deeper insight into the adjustment experiences of international graduate students at SIUC, there are still areas that are not tapped into. Furthermore, the six themes that emerged in this study have the ability to take the findings even further. Based off of the remaining gaps in literature, there are four recommendations that I would make for additional research being performed on the topic. First, future researchers should further explore the impact that location has on the international graduate student's adjustment experience. As I spoke with the participants, I learned that a major

adjustment challenge for them was transitioning from a more populated and urban city to the rural and slow paced, Southern Illinois community. It is my belief that researchers will be able to notice differences between participant experiences based off of placement. These findings have the potential to create a discussion regarding the importance of university and community relations in order that international graduate students feel welcomed and included in the community. There are several ways in which community members are able to help the visiting students adjust to living in Carbondale. For example, creating a program that pairs senior community members with international graduate students would allow the visiting students to learn about their new community while the senior community member learns about different cultures, exposing both parties to their similarities and differences.

The ten participants in this study shared personal stories and provided insight into how stressors have the ability to affect their mental and emotional wellbeing. However, there are still unchartered areas that were not discussed regarding mental health as the topic, at times, seemed to be too sensitive to delve deeper into. Therefore, my second recommendation for additional research would be for researchers to more deeply explore the relationship between adjustment stressors and mental health effects in addition to the various barriers between their seeking of mental health services. Furthermore, research should focus on the lasting effects of the adjustment stressors. Emotional wellness is an important piece to the international graduate student's experience. In exploring this, more information can be garnered regarding the ways in which health educators and practitioners might be able to work alongside the appropriate university staff. These staff members should work together to ensure that international graduate students have an easier transition into their new academic environment and more importantly, be able to overcome their emotional stressors.

Though this study discusses how stereotypes and generalizations based off of culture, religion, etc. play a role in the adjustment experience for international graduate students, there should be more exploration done on the cyclical nature of xenophobia and how it is both affected by and affects the visiting student's experience. Several participants shared how they felt that they were an overlooked population that were only valued as members of the SIUC community during specific times. In looking at stereotypes and its effects through the lens of the participants, it would provide another dimension to emotions related to isolation and loneliness as well.

Another remaining gap in literature is the exploration of current institutional and state policy changes effective since January 2017 that might have affected the international graduate student experience at SIUC. Since massive political changes are currently being undergone, it will be interesting to see what the number of incoming international graduate student attendance will be in upcoming academic years. To this end, my third recommendation for researchers is the exploration of the guidelines and standards that are place, both on the institutional and state levels. This would hopefully highlight areas for University officials to both assess and evaluate the extent to which the needs of international graduate students are actually being met. Some areas of exploration might include understanding how closely the International Office staff works with other on-campus staff members, such as the instructors of international graduate students to help in alleviating their academic related issues. Also, what mechanisms are used to ensure the effectiveness of the currently offered programs and services and, furthermore, by whom? In regards to state policy, however, researchers could investigate what programs might be implemented to serve as a bridge between the international and domestic population in Carbondale. These programs should be offered with the goal of promoting inclusiveness and peace building efforts.

Additionally, many of the participants shared that a major stressor for them was their finances and not being able to work off campus due to Visa restrictions. As policy changes occur, there is also the potential for more limitations regarding Visa's and employment to subsequently be affected. In exploring this topic further, researchers could expand on the relationship between the current national policy's heavy restrictions on Visa's as it relates to international graduate student employment and its effect on the experience for the visiting students. For example, a policy change affording international graduate students similar employment opportunities as domestic graduate students, would mean them facing less financial stressors during their time abroad while gaining valuable learning experiences outside of the University setting, which they could apply to their future roles of employment.

Taking a different approach to the effects of policy, my fourth and final recommendation for future research is the exploration of the interconnectedness of institutional and state policy and its effects on the adjustment experience of the international graduate student. More specifically, institutional practices should be investigated to shed light on what practices, in terms of services offered by SIUC, have worked in the past and what needs to be implemented in the future to ensure that the adjustment needs of current and future cohorts of international graduate students are met. As I listened to the ten participant's share how they felt SIUC staff are not well trained to meet many of their adjustment needs, I began to think about what could be done to remedy this.

In focusing on SIUC, a primary and more immediate recommendation that I have is that all staff and students, not just those in the International Office, who will be working with international graduate students during their stay at the University, attend a weeklong training prior to the arrival of the students. This training would include but not be limited to, topics

ranging from: transportation/shuttle services offered on campus and ways to access information regarding hours and availability; meal planning and healthy food options; housing accommodations and actual help with the move-in process; emotional and mental health services for the more specific needs of this population; and an organized list of activities and events held on campus and in the Carbondale community, which would be disseminated through several mediums. As many of the participants shared, they desire to have a more hands on approach by SIUC staff and students, particularly during their initial arrival at the University. Planning this training will take time and a merging of minds between all staff previously stated. The resources that are required and the time that the select staff will be away from their work, will need to be carefully coordinated so as to be both efficient and efficacious for all attendees.

To this end, an additional and feasible recommendation would be for the University to implement a pairing system, one domestic student to one international graduate student. This way, as adjustment issues arise for the international graduate student, the student representative assigned to them would be able to assist them. The benefits of such program is supported in literature where researchers explained that students paired with host nationals have higher grades (Trice, 2007). This could potentially also be beneficial in addressing the more sensitive and personal needs that international graduate students face, as they might feel more comfortable speaking to a fellow student as opposed to a University staff member. In thinking beyond SIUC, this pairing program would be a beneficial service for other universities that house international graduate students and desire to ensure that they are working towards making the experience of their visiting students a positive one.

**Conclusion**

This qualitative study was driven by the desire to explore the experiences of international graduate students at SIUC. The six themes that emerged speak to many areas of adjustment and the findings shed light on new issues of acculturation such as stereotypes and its relationship and effect(s) on mental health. Yet, the findings also support current literature. For many of the participants, a prominent adjustment challenge was overcoming language barriers (McClure et al., 2007). Furthermore, many of the participants shared how language barriers worked in conjunction with other adjustment stressors, such as new classroom environment to elicit emotions related to loneliness and isolation. This supports researchers Erichsen & Bollinger's (2010) article where they wrote on the interconnected nature of adjustment stressors and their resulting effects of loneliness and emotions related to isolation. This is also in alignment with Mori's (2000) article, where she touched on the relationship between adjustment stressors and how they essentially build off of one another to eventually affect the international graduate student's mental and emotional health.

For many of the participants, academic stressors were a one of the major adjustment challenges (Ying & Liese, 1991). It is critical that SIUC staff work towards ensuring that the international graduate student has acculturated into their new educational setting (Ying, 2005). Speaking once more to the interconnectedness of the adjustment stressors, is how many of the participants shared that their issues with academic adjustment had the strongest impact on their psychological adjustment at SIUC (Frazier et al., 2011; Hyun et al., 2007). This leads me to a central component of this manuscript, understanding how the adjustment stressors affect the emotional health of the international graduate student at SIUC. As I listened to the participants share how their adjustment to both SIUC, Carbondale, and the U.S. as a whole affected their

mental health, I understood how different their mental health needs are from that of domestic graduate students. Even in regards to sleeping patters, several participants spoke about how they faced difficulty getting rest at night due to feelings of loneliness and also the lack of noise in which they were used to. This lack of sleep affected not only their ability to properly function but also contributed to the development of emotional issues. This supports current literature, where Wei and his colleagues (2007) discuss how the lack of sleep coupled with adjustment stress, have the potential to directly result in feelings of anxiety for the international graduate student. Emotional wellness is something that SIUC staff must view as a primary concern for this population and work to ensure that there are proper staff in place to meet their emotional and mental health needs.

Mental health continues to be a taboo topic and is especially so for this population. As male participant, Ryan, shared his experience of visiting an on campus professional for his mental health needs and how he was met with what he deemed a lack of experience in addition to a lack of tolerance for other cultures, I realized the importance of having staff that are well versed in the needs of this particular population. The majority of the participants shared that they rely on their families, though thousands of miles away, to provide them with support when needed. Also, many of them did not view their mental health needs as priority enough to seek help (Tracey, Leong, & Glidden, 1986; Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011). This supports current research in that the participants that did opt to use on campus health mental health services only did so after their symptoms had become too severe and as they labeled it, having a mental breakdown. (Tracey, Leong, & Glidden, 1986; Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011)

The stigma that surrounds receiving mental health support is a major barrier in international graduate students deciding to seek help (Chen, Liu, Zhao & Yang, 2015). As female

participant, Jill shared, it is the responsibility of the University to help de-stigmatize students

seeking mental health support. Though the resiliency that these participants have as a result of

their adjustment experience was evident in their stories, it was also clear how their adjustment

struggles had affected them emotionally. This made me recall Berry's (2006) article where he

explained the effects of stress on the psychological maladjustment of the participants and their

overall adjustment experience. Additionally, the necessity to meet the emotional needs early on

in the international graduate student's arrival at SIUC is also critical (Chalungsooth & Schneller

2011; Capielo et al., 2015). The participants spoke about how they wished that they were met

with a more hands on approach by staff to help them adjust to campus life. This is key to

ensuring that the visiting students have a positive adjustment experience (Hirai, Frazier, and

Syed, 2015). This is especially true as it is typically the case that within the first six months of

the international graduate student's arrival, they experience the highest levels of acculturation

related stress (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011). To this end, the aforementioned program of

pairing domestic and international graduate students would serve as a beneficial initial step in

moving in the right direction.

The study supports current literature in regards to how the adjustment stressors that the

participants experienced affected their overall acculturation process, which essentially occurred

the moment they came into contact with domestic students and resulted in a shift in cultural

patterns (Capielo, Delgado-Romero, & Stewart, 2015). Many of the participants shared how their

attempts to have dialogue with non-international students were unsuccessful and led them to only

want to associate with others from the international community (Frey & Roysircar, 2006). They

also spoke of their level of comfortability and not feeling as though it is a forced or surface level

friendship (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). These friendships, as participants shared, are

what kept them aware of on campus social activities while also serving as an emotional outlet during stressful times in their adjustment process (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977).

This study's findings also support current literature in regards to social media and its role in having a positive effect on the adjustment experience of international graduate students (Ye, 2006). As nearly all of the participants shared, being able to communicate with their loved ones through social media has been both a source of strength and comfort (Sadler, 2014). Participants shared how social media sites such as Facebook and Viber served as outlets and ways for them to cope with their adjustment stressors (Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2012). Furthermore, as participants explained, social media sites also helped them to feel connected to their families and friends who still lived in their home countries (Hjorth & Arnold, 2011). Though current literature does not provide great insight into how migrant groups might benefit from the utilization of social media, this study does indicate that there are indeed benefits to the usage of social media as the visiting student seeks to acculturate at the University (Sadler, 2014).

Prior to the start of this study, I had not anticipated just how interconnected the adjustment challenges would be. The findings from this study support researchers Poyrazli and colleagues' claims that international students that have receive higher social support experience less acculturative stress overall (Poyrazli et al., 2004). Furthermore, this study's findings also add to current literature regarding the interconnectedness and confounding effects of acculturative stressors such as social support and level of satisfaction with social networks and overall adjustment to both the host institution and culture (Sümer et al., 2008). The confounding effects seemed to have worked to make the ability for the participants to overcome their adjustment challenges much more difficult. For example, the theme of isolation and loneliness

highlighted how critical inclusion efforts are, especially as it relates to international graduate student's comfortability in attending on campus and community based activities. Similarly, the intersection of academic stress with social isolation was evident as the participants shared stories about their being unable to attend social events and ultimately build connections outside of the international community due to their struggle adjusting to the different academic culture at SIUC and having to dedicate more time to their studies and subsequently attend fewer social events.

The findings from this study also spoke to the implicit need for University support efforts to be expanded. Many of the participants shared how they felt more supported during their initial arrival at SIUC and that the support faded as the semester went on. Therefore, all efforts in the form of programs and services for this population should be sustainable throughout the year. In order to ensure that this happens, there should be a merging of select University staff, instructors and educators to work to make the experiences of these visiting students a much more positive and fulfilling one (Szabo, Ward and Jose, 2015). In fact, as proposed by several of the participants, University and community support strategies should be outlined and ready to be implemented prior to the international graduate student's arrival at SIUC. Furthermore, it is critical that select staff and students assigned to work with this population be creative and think of strategies that may be outside of the box in order to meet the particular needs of the population.

The primary objective of this study was for the voices of the participants to be heard and more importantly, to be felt. The findings from this study clearly provide insight into the experiences of ten international graduate students and how these experiences played a role in their overall adjustment while at SIUC. This study should not be perceived as having covered all of the adjustment challenges and needs of international graduate students or that of the ten

participants for that matter. However, it should serve as the bridge between what is being done to support the acculturation experience for international graduate students and more importantly, what needs to be expanded upon or implemented. Therefore, this study provides insight for University staff, health educators/practitioners, and domestic students alike on ways in which they can be a part of alleviating the adjustment issues that international graduate students encounter during their time at SIUC.

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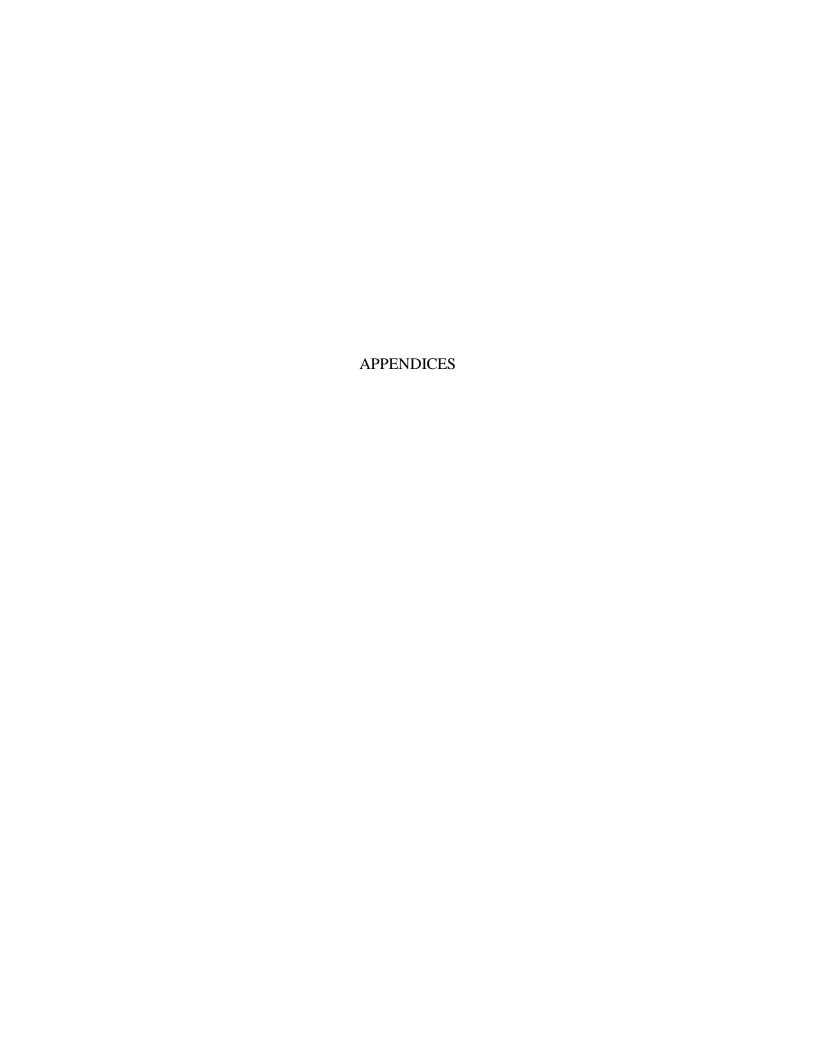used? *Canadian Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing, 22(14).*

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APPENDICES

# Appendix A
Interview Protocols

Cover Sheet

Interviewer Name _____

Date of Interview _____

Time of Interview _____

E-mail _____    Telephone _____

**Notes**

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## Project Overview for Participants

## Project Overview

Greetings All,

Thank you for volunteering to take part in this study.

I will begin by explaining the purpose of this study. After concluding, I will provide a time for you to ask any questions or share any comments that you may have. The primary purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the acculturation needs of international graduate students at SIUC. Furthermore, I am interested in understanding how these needs have the potential to affect the student's emotional and physical health. In order to do this, I will be performing a qualitative narrative, case study. My goals for conducting this study are: 1) explore the needs of international graduate students in regards to their adjustment in obtaining their graduate degree at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) and if their mental and physical health are affected; 2) to explore what services SIUC offers to meet these needs; 3) to gain insight into the ways in which SIUC might be able to address the needs of their international graduate students.

The primary factors that I will focus on in my questioning process will be centered around the student's health and will include: 1) academic, social, and financial stressors; 2) social connectedness and support; 3) language proficiency; and 4) culture shock.

Now that you have received an overview of the purpose of the study, I will provide you with the data collection process and how confidentiality and risk reduction will remain at the forefront throughout this research study.

I will be conducting three focus group sessions. The first session will be an all-male session. The second session will be an all-female session. The last focus group session will be a mixture of both male and female. Each session is estimated to last one hour. After concluding all of the focus group sessions, I will be having individual interviews, which are also estimated to last one hour. The interviews will be used as a time for further expansion and clarification on topics discussed during the focus group.

In order to main confidentiality, I will employ several tactics throughout the study. First, a pseudonym will be attached to each participant. Secondly, I will be the sole person with access to all of the responses to questions as well all other information shared during focus group sessions and interviews. (To assist in the coding process, I will use another Ph.D. student, but again names and all other identifying information will be withheld.)

I do want to reiterate that your participation in this study is completely voluntary. This means that at any time you may withdraw from the study or refuse to answer any questions, particularly those that might elicit emotions of distress. I truly thank you for your time and willingness to be as transparent as possible in order to help shed light on a very important topic.

I will now leave time for any questions or comments you may have.

## Focus Group Interview Protocol Questions

**RQ#1: What are the academic and social adjustment needs of first time U.S. entering international graduate students at Southern Illinois University Carbondale?**

1. When did you arrive to SIUC?

2. Which graduate program are you in?

3. Please explain what your overall experience has been in adjusting to SIUC?

4. Please describe your experience adjusting to your academic program at SIUC?

5. How easy has it been for you to make friends at SIUC?

6. How often do you speak with your family/friends in your home country?

**RQ #2: In what ways do these needs affect the mental and physical health of international graduate students as they acculturate?**

1. Has the adjustment process affected you emotionally? If so, how?

2. Has the adjustment process affected you physically? If so, how?

3. Please share your most stressful experiences in adjusting to SIUC?

4. Have these experiences affected your overall adjustment to SIUC?

**RQ #3: What services does SIUC offer and/or need to expand upon in order to ensure that the needs of international graduate students are being met, primarily in regards to their mental health?**

1. Do you feel that you have enough support within your academic program?

2. Do you feel that if you required emotional support that there are adequate services in place on campus to do so?

3. Do you feel that the current services offered on campus are adequate enough to meet your social needs?

**RQ #4: What are the gaps in services to address the needs of international graduate students at SIUC?**

1. Do you think that SIUC has the proper services in place to help you adjust to the

   University? If not, please explain what services you think need to be implemented?

2. Do you feel that the current support and services offered on campus are promoted well enough?

## Individual Interview Protocol Questions

**Q#1:** Tell me about your background (What country you are originally from?; What year did you enter into United States?; What program are you in?)

**Q#2:** Tell me about your family dynamics? What do you miss most about your family and the country itself?

**Q#3:** What has been your experience as an entering international graduate student at SIUC?

**Q#4:** What has been your biggest cultural shock?

**Q#5**: How do you spend your free times or weekends (activities that you do, with whom)? Who do you mostly hang out with?

**Q#6:** What is the most stressful part about being an international graduate student?

**Q#7:** What do you do to relieve your stress?

**Q#8:** How supportive has your department been in helping with your adjustment to SIUC?

**Q#9:** Have you utilized the International Office on campus and their services?

**Q#10:** Do you believe SIU does a good job of welcoming and making international graduate students feel a part of the SIUC community?

**Q#11:** What are some programs or events that SIU has offered that have made you feel a part of the SIUC community?

**Q#12:** What do you do to balance your daily stressors such as missing family and friends back home?

**Appendix B**

**Southern Illinois University – Carbondale**
**Health Education – Pulliam Hall**
**Carbondale, Illinois 62901**

**Recruitment E-mail Letter (to be attached to flyer)**

Greetings,

My name is Mehrete Girmay (Mimi) and I am currently a Ph.D. student in the Health Education Department at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. I am reaching out to you to provide you with information regarding the study and hopefully gain your interest and participation.

I am conducting a study regarding the adjustment needs of international graduate students at SIUC. This study will contribute to existing literature by exploring the needs of this population and gaining an understanding of how these needs might affect the health of the students. The primary objective for this study is to allow the voices of international students to be heard and for their experiences to be shared in the hopes of addressing any gaps in services that might be present.

My request is that you take some time to speak with me regarding your adjustment experience at SIUC. All information shared will be appreciated and used solely for the purposes of furthering the investigation into this population's needs. I am interested in setting up a date and time that would work best for you to discuss what your experience has been as an international graduate student adjusting to SIUC.

I will be holding three focus group sessions. The first one will consist of all males, the second all female, and the third will be a mixture of both male and female. In order to get the most comprehensive picture of the experiences of all participants, I will be holding individual interviews with each participant. This will be done after the final focus group session.

I hope that I have provided you with adequate insight into what this research study process will entail and furthermore how important of a role you will have in the process, should you choose to partake in it. If you would like to participate in this study, please send me an email at your earliest convenience that includes your contact information. I can be reached by phone at 202-573-4198 or by email at mehreteg@gmail.com. Should you at any time feel the need to contact the individual supervising this research study, please email Dr. Sosanya Jones at smjones@siu.edu.

Lastly, if you decide that this study is not something you feel you would like to partake in but know someone that might be interested, I request that you forward them this email.

I sincerely thank you for your time and consideration,
Mehrete

**Appendix C**

**Southern Illinois University – Carbondale**
**Health Education – Pulliam Hall**
**Carbondale, Illinois 62901**

**Informed Consent Form for Participants**

Greetings:

My name is Mehrete Girmay and I am currently in my final year as a Ph.D. student in the Health Education and Recreation Department at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. For my dissertation, I will be performing a study regarding international graduate students and their adjustment to SIUC.  The primary purpose of this study is to shed light on this very important topic and gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of this population. If you decide to participate in this study, you will be provided with more detailed information regarding your role as the participant. Furthermore, this study is completely voluntary, which means that at any time you may decide to discontinue your participation.

Sharing your personal thoughts and experiences as an international graduate student at SIUC will allow me, as the researcher, to delve deeper into this phenomenon and help piece together the needs of this population. In order to get the richest information, I will be having three focus group sessions with at least 12 other participants. The first two sessions will be separated by gender, while the last session will be a gender mixed one. Following the focus group sessions, there will be individual interviews. If you do decide to participate in this study, I am requesting that you plan to at least dedicate 60 minutes for each focus group session (a total of 120 minutes) and another 60 minutes for the individual interviews. During both the focus group sessions and the individual interviews, I will be asking questions that will hopefully allow you to recall and share personal experiences as an international graduate student at SIUC.

Regarding the focus group sessions, all reports based on this research and written by the researcher will maintain the confidentiality of individuals in the group. Only group data will be reported and no names will be used. Since a focus group involves a group process, all members of the group will be privy to the discussions that occur during the session; therefore, absolute confidentiality on the part of the participants, themselves, may be difficult to ensure.

In order to help ensure that I have captured what you intended to say and also for transcription purposes, I will be using a tape recorder. After each focus group session, I will replay the tapes and compare them with the handwritten notes that I took during the sessions. Additionally, quotes shared during the sessions and/or interviews will be used, again, only for the purposes of providing a clearer picture of participant experiences. Furthermore, in using quotes I will be able to provide a more detailed explanation to the reader about what you, as the participant, are attempting to explain through your own words. I will do my best to promote confidentiality by ascribing pseudonyms to each participant, which will be done prior to the start of the first focus group session. All of the information gathered will be kept confidential and the audio recordings will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, along with all other research materials. All tapes will not

be kept past three years after the conclusion of the study. Throughout the study, I will strive to maintain an environment that is safe for welcoming for all participants.

If at any time you have questions, please feel free to reach me at: 475 Clocktower Drive, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Illinois 62901, by phone at: 202-573-4198 or via email at: mehreteg@gmail.com . You can also reach my research advisor, Dr. Sosanya Jones at smjones@siu.edu.

*I sincerely thank you for taking the time to understand the purpose of this study and what your role might be in helping me complete it. If you feel that you have received sufficient information and would like to participate in this study, please read and sign below.*

*I have read the material above, and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me for the relevant information and phone numbers. I realize that I may withdraw without prejudice at any time.*

**<u>Voluntary Consent for Participants to Read & Sign:</u>**

1) I understand that my participation in this research study is voluntary, which means that at any time I may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study. Additionally, the researcher has the authority to decide to withdraw me from the research at his/her discretion.
2) I understand that audio taping is part of this research and that by signing below I am giving consent to be audio taped.
3) I also give permission for the researcher (Mehrete Girmay) to quote me within this paper.

4) I () **AGREE** for the researcher to use audio recordings solely for research purposes. I () **DO NOT** agree for the researcher to use audio recordings solely for research purposes.
5) I () **AGREE** for the researcher to quote statements made by me in their work and understand that identifying information will not be attached to quotes. I () **DISAGREE** for the researcher to quote statements made by me in their work and understand that identifying information will not be attached to the quotes.
6) I () **AGREE** to do my best to help promote and maintain an environment that is safe by not repeating any information that was shared during focus group sessions. I () **DO NOT AGREE** to do my best to help promote and maintain an environment that is safe by not repeating any information that was shared during focus group sessions.

**By signing below, I am agreeing to all of the above and have decided to participate in this study.**

Your Name: _____

Your Signature: _____

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be

addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709.  Phone (618) 453-4533.   E-mail  siuhsc@siu.edu.

VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Mehrete Girmay

mehreteg@gmail.com

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale
Master of Public Health

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Bachelor of Arts, Sociology

Dissertation Paper Title:
"UNDERSTANDING THE ADJUSTMENT NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL
GRADUATE STUDENTS at SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY CARBONDALE"

Major Professors: Drs. Sosanya Jones and Juliane Wallace