A Gateway to Integration: a Study of American Families and their International Visitors

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Abstract
Research shows that helping international students build support networks by forming new friendships is crucial to counteracting the feelings of isolation, loneliness, and frustration that may arise from studying abroad. Studies have shown that friendships between international students and host nationals benefit the local community rather than just the university by promoting intercultural communication and understanding. Most of these studies, however, have only focused on the friendships between international and domestic students and not between international students and local American or "friendship families." This study aims to make a contribution to the existing scholarship on intercultural friendship by looking at the expectations and obstacles that structure relationships between friendship families and international students at a research-one public land grant institution. By pinpointing these factors, we hope to take the first steps in developing a set of best practices for ensuring successful intercultural interactions between international students and their friendship families.

*Keywords***:** Integration, studying abroad, international students, intercultural friendship

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Introduction to Friendship Family Programs in the United States

By and large, international student populations at major universities can be very diverse with respect to racial identity, physical appearance, religious and political beliefs, and socioeconomic status. That is, "international sojourners" at U.S. universities are very different individuals, yet, as cross-cultural scholars assert, foreign students are often stereotyped by their American classmates, faculty, administrators, and even by community members (Spencer-Rodgers, 2001, p. 640). Some of the most pervasive stereotypes include viewing these students as "handicapped, deficient or bewildered" and "as lacking the English language ability, academic . . . preparation and familiarity of the U.S. educational system (Paige, 1990, p. 47). International students may experience adjustment difficulties and "language and cultural barriers between internationals . . . and host nationals can lead to interaction difficulties" and to the perception that international students can be withdrawn or socially isolated (Spence-Rodgers, 2001, p. 641).

Programs that connect international students at U.S. universities with local families or community members can alleviate some of these negative effects by offering "an important, informative experience that helps students adapt to unfamiliar U.S., local and academic cultures" (Andrade, 2009, p. 198). In addition, American families benefit from experiencing another culture often times without leaving the city limits. It is a widely held belief that the social and cultural integration of international students promotes persistence (Spence-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002). Given the revenue spent to attract international students to American universities, it is worth considering how to retain students. Integration through a friendship family program can be one component of that integration that may ultimately lead to greater return on investment. In the United States, it is common for universities and colleges to have a hospitality program, which may or may not include a host family or friendship family program (NAFSA, 2014).

One such program, The Missoula International Friendship Program, aims to help students to adjust to a new culture by providing "opportunities for social and cultural interaction among Missoula community members, international students and international scholars by sponsoring activities and gatherings throughout the year" (Fluck, 2009, p. 194). Like this and other friendship family programs, the program at the university where this research was conducted provides an alternative to traditional host family programs by creating opportunities for international students and scholars to develop relationships with local families and community members on a volunteer basis without living together. To help ensure successful intercultural interactions, these programs also strive to design and implement programming that encourages international students and community members to participate in activities specifically designed to expose both parties to different cultures, thus promoting discussion about cultural differences and similarities.

International students who have the opportunity to participate in a friendship family program may be better able to adjust to the sociocultural expectations and obstacles of life in America. Ultimately, connecting students to a community beyond the university may help institutions of higher education retain their international students and improve students' acculturation process.

Literature Review

Obstacles and Expectations

International college students that come to the U.S. to study may face various stressors in their daily lives (Chen, 1999; Hayes & Lin, 1994). Social isolation or loneliness may begin when international students start facing the challenges of living abroad, such as heavy academic workloads, English-language barriers, unfamiliar immigration procedures, adjustment issues, or prejudice and hostility to name a few (Chen, 1999; Gareis, Merkin, & Goldman, 2011; Zhai, 2002), When confronted with these challenges, many students retreat into their own language communities or decide to further isolate themselves (Chen, 1999). As studies have shown, students who take this path often find themselves experiencing even more language and interaction difficulties; they enter a "vicious circle" that can often lead them to perform poorly in school or abandon their studies altogether (Gareis, 1995, p. 48).

Researchers agree that one of the best ways to ensure international student retention is to encourage them to form intercultural friendships with host nationals. While interactions with other students from their home country remain an important source of support for international sojourners, studies show that international sojourners benefit most from intercultural rather than monocultural relationships (Gareis, 1995; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Prieto, 1995). Gareis et al. (2011) argue, in fact, that these types of friendships increase "students' general sojourn satisfaction, academic success, and intercultural as well as foreign-language growth" (p. 154). Establishing intercultural friendships is not, however, an easy process. International students' often find making American friends stressful and challenging (Williams & Johnson, 2011) or express disappointment with the quality of these relationships (Gareis, 1995). These findings indicate, then, that international students do not only face multiple obstacles when it comes to adjusting to their new environments, but also specific difficulties when attempting to create new friendships. In their study, Hayes & Lin (1994) identify language difficulties, cultural aspects, personal characteristics, academic concerns, and perceived discrimination as factors that might inhibit the formation of intercultural friendships. In her exhaustive analysis on how intercultural friendships are formed, Gareis (1995) identifies twelve key factors that influence friendship formation between international students and host nationals: "culture, personality, self-esteem, friendship elements, expectations, adjustment stage, cultural knowledge, communicative competence, external variables, proximity, U.S. elements, and what we may call chemistry" (pp. 48-49). While not all of these factors necessarily act as obstacles, they should be considered when trying to address the degree of success of intercultural friendship formation processes.

Out of all the factors listed above, international students' expectations when approaching international friendships is perhaps the least studied. To our knowledge, only Gareis' 1995 study has addressed this issue. She argues that students' expectations usually relate to their motivation, expected outcomes and developmental stages. Factors such as the reasons for studying abroad, the length of a student's journey and personal elements such as marital status and maturity level can impact not only students' success at developing intercultural friendships but also what they expect to gain from these interactions (p. 57).

Using Intercultural Friendship to Cope with Obstacles

Extensive research has also been conducted on the best practices to help international students navigate the challenges that they face when attempting to establish new friendships at an American university. For instance, having access to a student center that plans and hosts social events and designs programs to integrate international students with American students, the campus and the community has been shown to make a considerable impact in international student retention (Bista & Foster, 2011, pp. 6-7).

Although having access to programming and events helps students alleviate some of the stress that comes with adjusting to a new culture, research suggests that university-sponsored programming that puts students in touch with domestic students might not be enough. Williams & Johnson (2011) found low levels of interaction between international and domestic students at such events. They concluded that careful planning and encouraging faculty to make cross-cultural opportunities a requirement of their courses can help foster interactions (Williams & Johnson, 2011). Zhai (2002) states that universities should provide orientation programs for international students on academic and cultural differences as well as providing activities for international students to interact with domestic students. These activities could help to improve the international students' language as well as cultural adjustment. Even when events, programs and workshops are planned and facilitated by a university department, international students do not always take advantage of these opportunities. The question of how university staff can persist in their efforts to help international students adjust to their new environment remains unanswered.

It seems, then, that simply putting international students in touch with American students through events and programming is not enough to counteract international students' loss of social support and encourage them to build new social networks and develop a sense of belonging. Hendrickson et al.'s (2011) analysis has shown that building "more diverse friendship networks, particularly with host nationals" (p. 290) may have an overall positive effect on international students' satisfaction levels, academic performance and level of adjustment. The study conducted by Hendrickson et al. is part of an on-going effort to better understand the nature of intercultural friendships (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977; Gareis, 1995; Gareis, Merkin, & Goldman, 2011), how identity is negotiated in intercultural friendships (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Lee, 2006), and the benefits to be gained from these unique relationships (Gareis, 1995; Furnham & Erdmann, 1995; Redmond & Bunyi, 1993; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Most of these studies, however, focus on the friendships between international and domestic students or between international sojourners and host nationals rather than between international students and host community members specifically.

As this literature review has revealed, international students face various obstacles and barriers when they study abroad. Out of all the possible stressors students can experience, the loss of social support systems seems to be one of the most crucial ones. While forming friendships with host nationals within the university system can contribute to easing international students' feelings of isolation, rejection and communicative inadequacy, this review has also suggested that expanding these friendships to include host community members can help to alleviate some of these stressors and improve student retention. Since studies on the topic of friendships between international student and host national families are almost non-existent, this analysis seeks to make a contribution to the growing field of intercultural friendship by attempting to pinpoint

some of the most important obstacles that international students and host families face when attempting to engage in meaningful cross-cultural interactions. It also aims to outline the steps both parties take to manage each other's expectations and overcome obstacles in an attempt to begin to formulate a theory of best practices when it comes to establishing and managing friendship family programs.

Methodology and Research Questions

Our research focused on the expectations that international students and American families have of each other and on the obstacles that both populations face when attempting to engage in successful intercultural interactions. Data was collected through a self-administered survey through Qualtrics in the fall of 2014 at a research-one public land grant institution in a rural setting. Two separate surveys structured around a five-point Likert scale and open-ended questions were sent to 167 students and 62 families. Twenty-five international students and 16 families who were enrolled in a university-sponsored, friendship-family program responded to the survey.

Our research seeks to consider answers to the following three questions:

1. What expectations do international students have of their American "families"?
2. What expectations do American "families" have of their international student friends?
3. What obstacles do international students and American families face when attempting to engage in meaningful intercultural interactions?

For the purposes of this study, we define intercultural interactions as those which encourage one's "ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247). Expectation with regard to communication is embedded within intercultural interactions. Expectation can be defined as one's degree of awareness to "cross-cultural and linguistic differences, world views, and beliefs and values" (Chamberlin, 2002, p. 1). At times, intercultural communication expectations can present obstacles or barriers to effective communication. It is important to understand that obstacles may arise from reluctance to communicate, distress or anxiety in the communicative situation and communication errors or misunderstandings (Tatsuki & Houck, 2010).

Results and Analysis

Population Profile

Students. Among the 25 students who responded to the survey, 52% of them are in the 18 to 27 age range. A majority of them are single, have no children and have been in the U.S. for one to three years, which may indicate that students are more likely to join a friendship family program once they feel more settled in the United States.

Less than half of all participants are graduate students. The rest of the studied student population included Intensive English Program students, undergraduate students and international scholars. The majority of respondents are engineering majors. The rest of the students are majoring in the social and natural sciences with a minority of respondents studying education, accounting and international business.

Families. Though previous international experience is not a requirement for family participants, the majority of respondents have had prior international experiences through travelling, living, working, or even volunteering abroad. The ages of respondents ranged from 25 to 75 years old. The majority are employed and three are retired. Nearly all respondents are married and over half reported that they have children. The countries they have traveled to spanned different regions, including Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia. Two family respondents reported hosting international students before. One respondent shared that they interacted with international students regularly through their job in the U.S.

Expectations

Students. An overwhelming majority of respondents, 23 out of 25, said the primary reason they joined the friendship family program was to interact with Americans. Improving their English was the second most common reason for joining the program, while teaching others about their own culture came in at a distant third. Once in the program, respondents expected to engage in activities or discussion that fostered cultural understanding and improved intercultural interaction. Students also listed improving their English language proficiency and engaging in friendly social interactions as expectations for the program, although these expectations seemed to be secondary to engaging in language and cultural sharing.

When asked about what potential friendship families might expect from them, students guessed that families might be interested in engaging in activities or discussions that fostered cultural understanding and asked the student to share details about their culture. Students also believed that families might expect them to engage in friendly social interactions and to participate in outdoor leisure activities.

Families. All family participants shared that they joined the program mainly to interact with international students. A minority of respondents also reported joining the program to either learn more about foreign cuisines or practice a foreign language. When asked about their expectations, families mentioned offering hospitality, mentoring, and cultural understanding to international students and scholars. One respondent shared that they wanted to introduce Mexican-American culture in addition to mainstream "American" culture. Like students, families also reported that they expected to partake in leisure activities with their students. Respondents felt that international students shared the same expectations as them, including an interest in improving cultural understanding and participating in leisure activities. Some families believed that students joined the program to improve their English communication skills and become further involved in the community.

Family and Student Interactions

For both students and families, sharing a meal was the most common way to spend time together. As students remarked,

> The experience I like the most was the first dinner that I had in the family's house. It was very fun, I learned a lot and could show my culture.

> I enjoyed going out on coffee with my American mom and her son. That was awesome, and a great bonding exercise. After that, we went to her brother's house for lunch, and that was fantastic.

One family noted that,

> One of my best memories of our student from Germany was making pretzels together in the kitchen. I learned so much and it was so fun for my husband and me!

Leisure activities in addition to local outdoor activities were popular as well. Students preferred to engage in informal conversation with their families on a variety of topics including asking for advice. Families, on the other hand, listed social or community-based events such as taking their students to a 4th of July celebration, concerts, county fairs, and horse shows, as successful platforms to interact with students. Many families invited their students to experience holidays with them as well. In sum, students were primarily focused on communication and experiencing family life whereas families wanted to showcase local culture.

Obstacles and Responses to Obstacles

Both sets of respondents listed communication and scheduling as their main challenges in interacting. Sixty percent of families, for instance, shared that they met with their host student three to five times throughout the semester. These numbers tended to go down when students were asked to report how many times per semester they met with their families. In fact, roughly half of the students reported having met with their families zero to two times during the semester they began the program. Although the office of international programs at the studied university sponsors various events throughout the year to try to make it easier for families and students to get together, 40% of families and 55% of students said that they never attended any of these events.

While scheduling conflicts are the primary obstacle faced by both families and students, cultural differences and language barriers also created some challenges. At least five family respondents reported having some sort of cultural "misunderstanding" with their student friends, while only two listed miscommunication because of English language proficiency. Students, on the other hand, viewed language barriers as a significant obstacle, with at least five respondents citing communication or the need to improve their English as obstacles in their interaction with their family friends. Only one student cited cultural differences regarding politeness and humor as an obstacle.

Finally, issues also presented themselves before families even met with their students. For instance, some reported matching difficulties such as being matched too late or with too many students. Unlike families, a majority of students think that the family and student matching process occurred in a timely and appropriate manner.

When families and students encountered intercultural interaction difficulties, they deployed a range of interpersonal strategies to deal with these obstacles. Families, on the one hand, used communication, patience and understanding. One respondent reported using humor as their tool for resolving issues. A majority of students, on the other hand, simply listed "perseverance" as the best way to improve communication and language proficiency when interacting with their families.

Satisfaction with the Program and Outcomes

The university-sponsored friendship family program hopes to foster cultural understand and intercultural communication among its participants. Both students and families seem to perceive the outcomes of the program as achievable. A majority of students think that they learned valuable information about American culture from their family. This knowledge, in turn, seems to translate to an improved sense of belonging and a newfound confidence when interacting with people in their new country. Seventy percent of students, for instance, believe that their interactions with their family have helped them to feel comfortable interacting with American community members off-campus, and seventy-five percent of them feel even more comfortable with American community members on-campus. A majority of students also claim to interact at least once a week with Americans outside of the classroom and half of the students attend events and programming organized by the office of international programs at the studied university on a regular basis.

From a management and customer service standpoint, both groups of respondents reported their satisfaction with the program outcomes. Ninety-five percent of students, for example, think that communication with program staff was effectively and timely, while 76% of the students agree that events organized by the office of international programs at the university were well-organized, fun and scheduled at times when families and students were available. What's more, 89% of students plan to participate in the program again in the future. In addition, 69% of families recommended the program to other families, which indicates that they believe that their experience with their international friends has been meaningful enough to merit sharing.

When families recommended the program to others, they shared that the best takeaways from this program are the friendships they were able to build and the cultural understanding they gained. As one respondent explained, "it's worth the risk and can be very enjoyable and enlightening." They viewed it as a readily available opportunity to learn about other cultures. Families expressed that, in addition to providing international students with a means to practice English, avoid loneliness and integrate into the community, the program was rewarding by sparking new friendships and providing cultural insight. While both families and students were able to appreciate the value of forming intercultural friendships and were generally satisfied with the program, they also felt that there was room for the program to improve.

Recommendations for Program Improvement

Students suggested having more purposeful activities, a larger pool of families as potential matches and activities that encourage community involvement. Please recall that families often socialized with their students through participation in various community events. This discrepancy may indicate that students don't perceive attending local celebrations as a way of engaging with the community.

Families suggested using targeted outreach for recruiting more families for this program. Proposed advertising methods included email, newspaper, internet, and radio, as well as publicity through presentations at university departmental meetings. One respondent advocated for providing an incentive for families to recruit new families. Program improvement in terms of having more facilitated or shared activities and inviting prospective families to meet current family participants and their students was also mentioned.

Research Questions 1 and 2

Let's begin with research questions one and two which ask us to consider the expectations international students have of their American families and vice versa. The most prominent expectation we found is that families and international students tend to believe that both parties have the same expectations for the program and interacting with one another. Intercultural understanding was a huge motivating factor for families and students to participate in the program.

As the results of the surveys show, families expected to share their own culture. They prioritized taking students to community events and teaching them about American culture and holidays. In contrast, students' primary expectation was to communicate with families and experience family life. This emphasis on communication for students and cultural sharing on the part of families signals the importance of forming strong relationships. This family interest in sharing culture suggests that, the program may be helping to create more "interculturally literate" families and students (Heyward, 2002) while, at the same time, putting support systems in place to help students adjust and communicate effectively (Lacina, 2002).

International students also have the expectation that their families will help them with their English and communication skills. As previous research on the perceived importance of English and academic study has shown, international students feel that improving their language proficiency is key to achieving academic success (Zhai, 2002). Therefore, it is not surprising that students listed practicing English as one of their main reasons for joining the program. The fact that, students reported that their interactions with their host family improved their sense of comfort in interacting with Americans suggests that friendship family programs may help alleviate second language anxiety international students have by providing them with a casual off-campus environment with which to practice their English and learn about American culture (Zhai, 2002). As one student testified, "the communication between me and my family was pretty awesome and it really help me think more confident about English and America."

Students' increased confidence in their English proficiency may also have to do with the fact that families share the expectation that students will want to practice their English and they

were open to helping students achieve this goal. Furthermore, the high number of students who decided to join the program while also enrolled in Intensive English classes may indicate that, from a student's perspective, taking English classes may not be enough to attain a high enough proficiency of English.

To better understand the pressure to learn English and why internationals join a friendship family program, we should consider the value of code-switching. Opportunities for practicing code switching outside of the academic setting on a small scale through informal meetings with a host family provides international students with more assurance in their ability to interact with American community members on a larger scale (Molinsky, 2007). For example, international students may have learned through their interactions with their American host to put less emphasis on the value of "saving face" from their home cultures which may have initially caused them to be anxious of interacting with Americans due to fear of embarrassment and shame through committing cultural faux pas and making English language mistakes. In addition, American hosts may mimic international students' family support systems back home which, as research shows, is a major source of security and identity for those from collective cultures (Lacina, 2002).

While students reported leaving the program having had their expectations regarding English proficiency and acculturation met, family participants also stated that the greatest program outcomes were their increased cultural understanding and viewed this as a convenient opportunity to increase their cross-cultural and intercultural knowledge. As our research shows, friendship family programs benefit both parties involved and results in "cultural synergy" (Kingston & Forland, 2008, p. 211). In other words, the intercultural communication and the literal and figural give and take occurring between families and international students in a friendship family program may be the perfect receipt to integrate and value all cultures. That is,

> For international students, increased friendship with host nationals means more opportunities to learn about host culture and language, better social integration, greater sojourn satisfaction, and more positive views of the host country. For the host community, the benefits include exposure to other cultures, networking and travel opportunities for local students, and an enhanced international image abroad (Gareis et al., 2011, p. 168).

Research Question 3

Still, even with all of the positives of intercultural friendships, challenges may arise. Research question three allows us to consider what obstacles international students and their American families face when attempting to engage in meaningful intercultural interactions. With regard to this question, the primary challenge both families and students reported is scheduling. Scheduling presents a challenge for several reasons. Families and students may have different communication styles or prefer to communicate in different registers. Families may use e-mail to connect with students, but students do not always check e-mail. Punctuality may be another challenge as perceptions of time may differ as well.

Students reported overextending themselves and are very concerned about their academic performance and specifically their grades. Although international students see the value of experiencing American family life, they also clearly feel the pressure to succeed at the university

and this may be the top priority for many students leading them to push social integration or interaction with Americans to the bottom of their list of priorities. This may be due to pressure from home to perform or a window into implicit social and cultural differences that impact adjustment. Still, American families also face constraints when it comes to scheduling because of work schedules, children and other commitments. Given the scheduling and time constraints, it can be challenging for international students and American families to develop a strong bond.

In sum, relationship building in the U.S. could be considered fast-paced compared to that in other parts of the world. American communication builds upon this, as asking someone how they are or suggesting that they have dinner in the future is not always meant to be taken literally. This has led to the misconception by international students that Americans are friendly yet superficial and by Americans that international students are introverted and only want to socialize with students from their home country. As Williams and Johnson (2011) and Gareis et al. (2011) have shown, misconceptions such as the ones mentioned above constitute one of the most important obstacles to forming intercultural friendships.

Suggestions for Further Research

This research was limited by the context in which it was conducted and by the demographics of the respondents who participated in the program and thus the study. For instance, the majority of student respondents were undergraduate students, yet the total international enrollment at the studied university is nearly equal with regard to graduate and undergraduate international students. This offers an opportunity for future researchers to investigate international students who participate in a friendship family program to better understand their social and cultural experiences in the United States.

More specifically, it may be worth employing a mixed-methods or qualitative methodology to better understand how international students' interactions with friendship or host families in particular benefitted them and how those interactions impact their interactions with American students, staff and faculty. A qualitative methodology may enable a deeper understanding of the experiences of social integration or isolation that international students are having.

Finally, how can a university assist international students and their American families to overcome challenges with regard to interacting? Since families' and students' inability to attend university-sponsored events seems to suggest that more programming will not really make a difference in terms of helping families and students find the time to meet, more training to make students and families aware of the cultural differences regarding scheduling and punctuality might be what is needed to encourage students and families to communicate more openly and honestly about scheduling difficulties. In addition, reminding students of the importance of maintaining work-life balance through counseling outreaches may encourage graduate students, in particular, to find the time to meet with their family friends.

When dealing with language barriers and cultural misunderstandings, the university should follow the advice of respondents and provide orientations for students and events, programs and workshops that deal with social and cultural norms in a fun way or through medium such as cooking that all cultures can appreciate and enjoy. As families reported, humor,

patience and understanding go a long way in negotiating misunderstanding along the path to "cultural synergy" (Kingston & Forland, 2008).

Conclusion

In summary, we know that friendship family programs have tremendous potential to bring American families and students together. These university-sponsored programs are a testament to the importance of connecting students to the wider community. Still, friendship family programs at institutions of higher education in the United States are unusual. As Gareis, Merkin and Goldman (2011) conclude,

> On an institutional level, more universities should offer events and programs to foster interaction, including socializing opportunities, buddy systems, and residential programs. (p. 167).

We also know that institutions of higher education typically aim to integrate international students into the university environment and the community so as to promote retention or a return on the investment for international student recruitment efforts. As such, it is worth exploring how effectively friendship family programs not only socially and culturally integrate students, but more specifically how they retain students.

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