

## When Experts Become Novices: A Mixed-Methods Exploration of International Scholars' Experiences at a US University

Masha Krsmanovic, Ph.D.

*The University of Southern Mississippi*

Corresponding author: Email: [Masha.Krsmanovic@usm.edu](mailto:Masha.Krsmanovic@usm.edu)  
The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Dr, Hattiesburg, MS 39402, USA

### ABSTRACT

*The experiences of international scholars in the United States who are part of short-term or exchange programs remain vastly under-investigated compared to their full-time, tenure-track, and tenured peers. Guided by Blau's (1964) social exchange theory, this study investigated professional and social experiences of exchange scholars at a large public research university in the southeast United States. A mixed-method exploration was conducted through surveys and interviews with international scholars who participated in an exchange program in the spring of 2020. The results revealed that exchange scholars were most satisfied with work conditions and their research experience, but least satisfied with professional development opportunities and cultural exchange. Further, participants' research experience was significantly correlated with their cultural exchange, while their professional development was significantly correlated with work conditions and support. Additional implications were drawn from the results revealing the unmet needs of program participants regarding the different areas of their exchange experiences.*

**Keywords:** international faculty, international scholars, internationalization, J-1 exchange programs

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### INTRODUCTION

For decades, international scholars have served as an important partner in globalizing United States (U.S.) higher education, advancing its research and teaching, and creating international collaborations. Over the past two decades, the number of international scholars in U.S. colleges and universities has almost doubled. As a comparison, between 1999 and 2000, the United States welcomed approximately 75,500 faculty and researchers from around the world, while between 2018 and 2019, that number reached 123,500. Unfortunately, the global pandemic interrupted the stable rate of annual

increase as worldwide travel and visa restrictions resulted in a 9.6% decrease in the number of international scholars in the United States between 2019 and 2020 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2021).

The term *international scholars* is inclusive of all international professionals in U.S. colleges and universities who engage in research, teaching, or clinical work and may include, but is not limited to, visiting faculty of different ranks, post-doctoral scholars, researchers, and specialists (IIE, 2020). These scholars predominantly support science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programs with more than 77% representation in these fields between 2018-2019. Others are engaged in the social sciences (8%), humanities (4%), business and management (3%), education (2%), and fine and applied arts (2%). Comparable to international students, global scholars are mainly represented by professionals from China (35%), India (10%), and South Korea (5%), followed by smaller representation from Germany, Canada, Brazil, France, Japan, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom (IIE, 2021).

Higher education research, both international and within the United States, has predominantly focused on exploring the experiences of international students while much less attention has been dedicated to internationally mobile faculty and scholars. Over the past decade, more than 300 peer-reviewed research articles were published on issues related to international students in the United States (Krsmanovic, 2021). However, much less research investigated the experiences of international scholars in the United States and, among those that did, the focus was mainly placed on the perceptions of domestic students about their international faculty. The few studies that involved international scholars mainly centered on immigrant or foreign-born faculty who made long-term commitments to their educational institutions in the United States (see Lawless & Chen, 2017; Mamiseishvili & Lee, 2018; Murad & Samples, 2015; Phillips et al., 2016).

Consequently, the experiences of international scholars in the United States who are part of short-term or exchange programs (J-1 visa programs) remain vastly under-investigated. Understanding the experiences of these scholars is of critical importance for higher education as upon the return of these scholars to their home countries, they not only apply the experience obtained during the exchange program, but also maintain international partnerships between the two countries and foster potential future exchanges and collaborations. To overcome this limitation, this study investigated the experiences of short-term exchange scholars (J-1 visa scholars) at a large public research university in the southeast United States. Through mixed-methods exploration, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do international exchange scholars describe their professional experience during their time at the U.S. university?
2. How do international exchange scholars describe their cultural exchange experience during their time at the U.S. university?
3. What are the unmet needs of international exchange scholars that can be better addressed during their time at the U.S. university?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Despite the importance of international scholars in U.S. higher education, there remains a paucity of evidence on their professional and other experiences as the overwhelming body of literature in this domain has focused on portraying international scholars through the perceptions of domestic students or colleagues. Among the studies that involved international scholars as participants, for the most part, researchers have focused only on full-time international faculty and investigated either their research productivity (Lawless & Chen, 2017; Webber, 2012) or workplace satisfaction (Lawrence et al., 2014; Mamiseishvili & Lee, 2018). Only a few studies attempted to explore the transition and professional development of international scholars (Murad & Samples, 2015; Phillips et al., 2016), but this research, as well, remains limited to full-time, tenure track, or tenured faculty. To date, the experiences of short-term exchange scholars on U.S. campuses have received scant attention in the research literature.

### **Transition and Professional Development**

Evidence exists to show that an international faculty member's transition to a new professional and academic setting is not without challenges. In some cases, the transitional challenges stem from a continuous pressure encountered by faculty trying to secure permanent residence by proving they are more productive than their American peers, or from experiencing racism and xenophobia (Lawless & Chen, 2017). Other examples include difficulties in communication, establishing rapport with students, and pedagogical challenges (Murad & Samples, 2015). Consequently, international scholars often resorted to self-isolation partially due to their perceptions that professional accomplishments are the most important attribute for successful integration and partially because they lacked cultural and other resources to integrate within professional and social groups.

Several attempts have been made to understand the factors contributing to a successful transition of international faculty to U.S. higher education, their professional development, and retention at host institutions. In that regard, mentoring programs, whether individual or group, were found to lead to higher retention rates of tenure-earning international faculty (Phillips et al., 2016). Similarly, the alignment of international scholars' individual motivations with institutional interests led to implementing more successful exchange programs that resulted in multiple benefits for their participants in the areas of teaching and research (Patricio et al., 2018).

### **Productivity**

Central to understanding their transition and professional experience has been assessing international faculty research productivity, mainly in comparison to their domestic peers. The previously reported pressure of international faculty to outperform their American colleagues in order to secure permanent residency has been confirmed by several studies documenting that international scholars produce significantly more scholarly presentations, articles, patents, and other works than U.S. peers (Lawless & Chen, 2017; Webber, 2012).

Prior research further shows that non-domestic faculty are significantly more productive in research, but less productive in teaching and service than their domestic colleagues, thus corroborating the previously presented challenges related to international faculty teaching, socialization, and other non-research experiences. While U.S. faculty exceeded their international peers in undergraduate teaching and service contributions, they underperformed in research and other scholarly work (Mamiseishvili & Rosser, 2009). Documenting the experiences of female immigrant faculty, Lawless and Chen (2017) presented faculty perspectives such that, in order to stay in the country and achieve academic success, female immigrant faculty cannot only strive to meet standards set by American peers, but rather, must exceed such standards.

### **Work Satisfaction**

The third group of studies involving international faculty on U.S. campuses centered on their workplace satisfaction. There is a consensus among researchers that international faculty are, on average, less satisfied professionally than their domestic colleagues (Mamiseishvili & Lee, 2018). While international faculty report higher satisfaction with research equipment and facilities, U.S. faculty are more content overall and with respect to decision-making authority, salary and benefits (Webber, 2012). The significant differences in faculty members' satisfaction with autonomy were corroborated by Mamiseishvili and Lee (2018) who also noted that, compared to their international peers, U.S. faculty were more satisfied with independence and autonomy but significantly less satisfied with perceived recognition.

Several lines of evidence illustrated the importance of understanding and fostering international faculty work satisfaction by suggesting that their performance and retention are dependent on this variable. For instance, the intention of Asian international faculty members to stay in U.S. research

universities is conditional on their positive workplace perceptions, greater work satisfaction, and organizational commitment, as well as the time available for research, fairness of work evaluations, and merit-based tenure decisions (Lawrence et al., 2014). Data from other studies suggested that mentoring opportunities, both individual and for groups, can lead to self-validation among new international faculty and their higher retention rates (Phillips et al., 2016).

Overall, the literature on international faculty experiences has identified the most critical factors related to their transition, professional development, productivity, and work satisfaction. Much of the current literature in this domain paid particular attention to the relationship between scholars' professional satisfaction and productivity or their workplace satisfaction and retention. Such investigations, however, have failed to include short-term international scholars who have been increasingly present on U.S. campuses. In contrast to their full-time, tenure earning, or tenured peers, the experiences of exchange scholars have not received much research interest. Consequently, there is limited knowledge about possible factors that promote or hinder their transition, professional development, or workplace satisfaction in the host culture. This study sought to obtain the knowledge that can help address these research gaps and unveil the experiences of an under-investigated group of international scholars.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study was theoretically grounded in Blau's (1964) social exchange theory according to which "the character of the relationship between exchange partners" might "affect the process of social exchange" (p. 97). Advancing the premise that social relations unite not only individuals in groups but also groups in wider societies, Blau postulated that individual relationships ultimately influence the type of social exchange that will take place. Therefore, social exchange theory suggests that actions within social relations have the potential to create, nurture, and maintain long-term and far-ranging social relationships.

In the context of this study, social exchange theory served as the foundation for studying professional and cultural interactions that take place within exchange scholar programs and the resulting social structures that evolve from such interactions. Specifically, this framework allowed for exploring the ways in which international scholars perceived their professional, cultural, and overall development to have been nurtured by social relations in their new settings, as well as the resulting social (international) relationships that may be formed and maintained because of these relations. In line with the objectives of social relations investigation, this study sought to analyze whether and how social relationships can be formed from the exchange interactions, the forms such relationships may attain, and the barriers to their successful development (Blau, 1964).

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

Designing this study as mixed-method research (MMR) allowed to examine participants' experiences from multiple perspectives drawn from quantitative and qualitative sources of data. Specifically, this study utilized a two-stage explanatory sequential research design. In the first phase, quantitative data were collected using a survey instrument that explored participants' exchange experiences. In the second phase, qualitative data were gathered through individual interviews with participants. The ultimate objective in combining the two methods was to provide comprehensive and thorough responses to the main research questions stated for this study (Creswell & Clark, 2017). below.

#### **Setting and Population**

This research was conducted in the spring of 2020 at a large, public research university in the southeast United States. According to the institutional data, the faculty body is predominantly white (69%), followed by Asian (14%) Hispanic (7%), Black (4%), and international (4%). These demographic

data exclude short-term J-1 exchange scholars who, at the time of this research, counted 191. The university is classified as R1 doctoral institution with very high research activity.

Participants were recruited from the population of 191 exchange scholars hailing from 36 countries. Comparable to national trends, the greatest representation was from China, India, and Korea, but the institution also hosted representative numbers of scholars from Brazil, Turkey, Italy, and Canada. All scholars had the Exchange Visitor (J-1) non-immigrant visa that is awarded to individuals approved to participate in work-and study-based exchange visitor programs (U.S. Department of State, 2021). The length of their stay at the institution ranged from three months to one year.

### **Data Collection**

In the first phase of the research, a non-experimental survey research design was used to collect descriptive data about participants' attitudes about the exchange program in the areas of research and cultural experience, professional development, and program satisfaction. The demographic questions were designed to elicit descriptive information about participants' discipline, highest degree earned, exchange program concentration, and home country. The four sets of Likert-scale questions were composed to measure the respondents' level of agreement or disagreement with multiple items within each of the four categories – (a) research experience, (b) cultural exchange experience, (c) professional development, and (d) work conditions and support. The questions followed the traditional 5-point Likert scale with “strongly agree”/“strongly disagree” as endpoints and “neither agree nor disagree” as the midpoint. The free-response item asked participants to share any additional comments they may have about their exchange experience.

Upon securing the approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher contacted the Office of International Student and Scholar Services to obtain the list of all J-1 exchange scholars at the university. In January 2020, the link to the online questionnaire was emailed to all 191 exchange scholars. From this list, 54 scholars completed the questionnaire for a 28.3% response rate.

The second phase of the study involved identifying quantitative results that call for additional explanation and using these results to develop a qualitative data collection tool (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Interview questions were developed to focus on participants' professional, cultural, and overall exchange experience. Specifically, the questions asked international scholars to share rationales behind their survey responses, such as benefits of and barriers to successful professional development and cultural exchange. Due to the large size of the international scholars' program, interview participants were selected by purposeful sampling. They were recruited in collaboration with the university's faculty development center which, at the time of this study, led a professional development cohort for international exchange scholars. As these scholars independently sought and engaged in professional development opportunities, they were selected as potential participants who may offer rich insights into the research questions examined.

Before scheduling the interviews, the researcher confirmed with all interested scholars that they had completed the online questionnaire which was distributed in the first phase of this study. In early March 2020, individual, face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 exchange scholars. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative responses recorded for the free-response question in the survey were added to this data.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) software. Means and standard deviations were produced for participants' responses rating the four aspects of their J-1 exchange experience: research, cultural exchange, professional development, and work satisfaction and support. Pearson's correlation was used to test the correlation between participants' overall satisfaction with their research, cultural, professional development, and work conditions experience.

Among the 54 survey respondents, 35 had the doctorate as their highest degree, 13 had a master's degree, and six a bachelor's degree. For the discipline, 46 respondents were from STEM fields with electrical engineering, computer science, and physics accounting for the majority percentages. Non-STEM scholars represented the fields of education, speech pathology, hospitality, and health sciences. For the exchange program concentration, 51 scholars focused solely on research while the remaining three engaged in observation ( $n=2$ ) or teaching and research simultaneously ( $n=1$ ). China was the main country represented in the sample ( $n=13$ ), followed by Brazil ( $n=9$ ), Italy ( $n=6$ ), Pakistan ( $n=4$ ), India ( $n=4$ ), South Korea ( $n=2$ ), Mexico ( $n=2$ ), and nine more countries each represented by one scholar.

Qualitative data were analyzed using *NVivo* software combined with thematic data analysis. Specifically, participant narratives were examined through Saldana's (2012) values coding which reflects on participant values, attitudes, and beliefs that lie behind their perspectives. Given that interviews served as a tool for explaining participant attitudes reported in the survey, values coding allowed the researcher to uncover the importance that international scholars attributed to different aspects of their exchange experience. Additionally, values coding is particularly recommended for studies that explore cultural values, identity, and interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences in a particular case or setting (Saldana, 2012).

Interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and coded by distinguishing all responses that reveal participant values, attitudes, and beliefs about different aspects of their exchange program experience (e.g., statements such as "It is important for me", "I need to", "I feel that", "I liked that", etc.). In the next step, these responses were categorized based on the constructs investigated in the research questions (professional experience, cultural experience, and overall experience). Then, a collective meaning was derived for each set of responses under the premise that they are all part of an interconnected experience revealed in the survey responses.

The 10 interview participants were representative of the J-1 population at the university in terms of home countries – Brazil ( $n=4$ ), China ( $n=4$ ), the Czech Republic ( $n=1$ ), and Pakistan ( $n=1$ ) and academic fields – computer science ( $n=3$ ), engineering ( $n=3$ ), physics ( $n=1$ ), optics ( $n=1$ ), hospitality ( $n=1$ ), and education ( $n=1$ ). The sample included seven female participants and three males. The duration of their exchange programs at the institution ranged from four months to one year.

## RESULTS

The results obtained from the questionnaire are reported in the quantitative results section and the data collected from the interview instrument are reported in the qualitative data findings section. Following Creswell and Clark's (2017) recommendation, study findings are reported for quantitative and qualitative results respectively and distinguished from inferences and interpretations reported in the discussion section.

### Quantitative Results

Overall, international scholars were most satisfied with their work conditions and support at host institutions ( $M=4.42$ ,  $SD=.59$ ), followed by satisfaction with their research experience ( $M=4.39$ ,  $SD=.47$ ). On average, scholars were less satisfied with their cultural exchange experience ( $M=4.06$ ,  $SD=.79$ ) and least satisfied with professional development experience ( $M=4.04$ ,  $SD=.69$ ). Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for four different aspects of participants' exchange experience – research, cultural exchange, professional development, and work conditions.

**Table 1:***Descriptive Statistics for Participants' Exchange Experience (N=54)*

<b>Survey Item</b>	<b><i>M</i></b>	<b><i>SD</i></b>
Overall research experience	4.39	.47
I understand U.S. scholarship and research culture	4.37	.78
I feel confident to conduct or present my research in the U.S.	4.46	.74
I establish relationships with my U.S. colleagues through research	4.54	.63
My exchange department and/or institution support my research	4.59	.71
My exchange department and/or institution support me to produce innovative and high-impact research	4.50	.77
I have had to adjust my approach to research because of cultural or academic expectations in the exchange program	3.96	1.22
I am overall confident in my research skills while in the exchange program	4.37	.68
Overall cultural experience	4.06	.79
I understand U.S. culture	3.93	1.00
I feel welcomed by my exchange department and/or institution	4.41	1.05
I feel connected with people from my exchange department and/or institution	4.22	1.04
My exchange department and/or institution are genuinely interested in learning about my culture	3.44	1.09
My exchange department and/or institution have a genuine commitment to cultural diversity	4.22	.81
My exchange department and/or institution make genuine efforts to recruit international scholars	4.17	1.06
Overall professional development	4.04	.69
I actively seek out professional development opportunities	4.31	.86
I am aware of professional development opportunities available to me	3.76	1.11
I am provided with resources and support I need to grow professionally	4.06	.87
I am provided with resources and support to advance my research	4.39	.78
I am provided with resources and support to aid my cultural exchange	3.70	1.05
Overall satisfaction with work conditions	4.42	.59
I am satisfied with my office space	4.26	.99
I am satisfied with my lab or other research space	4.54	.81
I am satisfied with technology and computer resources	4.37	.85
I am satisfied with clerical and administrative support	4.43	.81
I am satisfied with my J-1 status-related support	4.56	.83

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between the four aspects of participants' exchange experience – research, cultural exchange, professional development, and work conditions. As presented in Table 2, participants' cultural exchange experience was significantly correlated with their research experience ( $r=.36$ ,  $p<.01$ ), suggesting that satisfaction with research experience improves participants' overall cultural exchange. Additionally, professional development was significantly correlated with work conditions and support ( $r=.41$ ,  $p<.01$ ), implying that satisfactory work conditions and increased support can aid participants' professional development.

**Table 2***Pearson Correlation for Participants' Exchange Experience (N=54)*

Variables	1	2	3	4
1 – Culture	1	.358**	.337*	.329*
2 – Research		1	.338*	.182
3 – Professional Development			1	.414**
4 – Work Conditions and Support				1

\*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level

\* Correlation is significant at the .05 level

### **Qualitative Findings**

The analysis of interview transcripts and responses to the open survey question revealed three themes. In line with the study research questions and interview questions, the themes portrayed scholars' reflections and insights about their professional, cultural, and overall exchange experience. These narratives led to a deeper understanding of participants' quantitative responses and helped interpret the benefits of and barriers to their successful professional and cultural exchange.

#### ***Professional Experience***

Three sub-themes emerged from the scholars' narratives about their professional experience – program benefits to participants, program benefits to the host departments, and university-wide professional development opportunities. A common view amongst interviewees was that the biggest benefit from the exchange program was enjoying the availability of a wide range of professional resources, mainly free access to online databases and published scholarship. As one scholar shared:

In Brazil, I wrote my dissertation searching the papers, and then I had to go to Research Gate and ask the authors to give me the paper because we don't have access to good journals. Here, I always tell my research friends from Brazil that this is my Disney [laughs] because I can find everything I need.

Another positive experience expressed was the freedom and autonomy in conducting research and seeking external funding. Scholars voiced their admiration with the grant funding systems in the United States which they perceived as having very few or no restrictions compared to those in their home countries. Other professional benefits reported included strengthening critical thinking skills, learning new ways to analyze and synthesize knowledge, and engaging in higher-order thinking.

Participants also agreed that their presence was beneficial for their domestic colleagues who had the opportunity to obtain varied professional and cultural insights. Most commonly, international scholars familiarized their colleagues with different teaching and research approaches in their countries and shared cultural customs. Several participants had the opportunity to share these insights not only with their colleagues, but also with students. A scholar from China used his work in the lab to teach undergraduate and graduate students about research, teaching, and other professional development structures in her country, while a hospitality scholar from Brazil served as a guest lecturer in one undergraduate class:

I talked to them [students] about my work experience and about my research in Brazil and asked them if they had any questions. And they had many questions, so we spent the entire class answering them. And in the end, I was like - Oh my gosh, it was the worst class in my whole life. And I was ashamed. And my English was getting worse because I was nervous. But then the professor told me that students loved it because I talked about my work, and I gave them a lot of new information. And they said they loved it!



When discussing professional development experiences outside of their host departments, participants were unanimous in the view that it was quite challenging to discover such opportunities. As a scholar from Brazil explained: “There is a lot of communication I don’t receive. I’m not a staff here. I’m not a faculty here. I’m not a student here. So, I’m not in the communication [loop]”. Her colleague from China elaborated on this sentiment by saying:

We [J-1 scholars] are different from graduate students or postdocs. Graduate students have many chances to know everything about the campus. But we don’t. I think if there’s an opportunity, maybe someone can organize our departments to introduce something about the campus, like how to use the library. Unfortunately, we don’t know very much about it.

Among the opportunities that international scholars independently sought, the faculty development center was the most utilized resource as, each semester, the center engages in international scholar outreach. Therefore, most participants reported attending workshops and programs offered by the center, mainly focused on teaching and learning. These venues allowed them to interact with other faculty at the institution, including other international scholars, and to learn different pedagogies, active learning approaches, and student engagement techniques – all of which they reported as experiences they did not have at their home institutions.

### ***Cultural Experience***

Two recurrent sub-themes related to cultural exchange experiences were perceptions amongst interviewees about establishing short-term and long-term relationships with the members of their host culture. Building social relationships with their colleagues or other members of their academic communities proved to be particularly hard for exchange scholars. The majority expressed that their programs focused solely on research with little opportunity for cultural enhancement. A scholar from Pakistan described this experience by saying:

Here everyone is busy with their own job, with technology. When you meet with them, they will say “Hey, how are you” in a good manner, but not so much with feelings for one another. In Pakistan, you will sit with people, and you will share every difficulty with them. But here it’s not like that. I think people are very busy. One recommendation for the university would be to gather American people and international people for a gathering or an event where they would interact.

Among those who were successful in building cross-cultural relationships, such experiences occurred outside of academic settings, mainly by going to local churches or, for those who came with children, through schools. As one scholar explained: “Through the PTA in my son’s school, I met many people and had the opportunity for social engagement and volunteering.”

Despite these obstacles in establishing short-term relationships, a common view amongst interviewees was that they will continue collaborations and partnerships with their colleagues upon returning to their home countries. Several revealed that they already planned collaborative research projects between the two countries, while others intended to develop intercultural programs – “After my return to the Czech Republic, I’ll meet with the vice-dean for internationalization at my university. I am convinced that having a similar program for international faculty at our university could be extremely beneficial. Thank you for the inspiration!” Some scholars explained that lasting effects of the exchange program will primarily be maintained through deconstructing cross-cultural biases and bringing nations together:

People of Pakistan and the media have a negative image of America, that they are anti-Muslim. But no such type of situation occurred to me. I have not seen that from anybody. When I go back, I will spread that in Pakistan. If I had the ability, I would send my whole university here for one month so that they can see with their own eyes and experience how good the people here are. Every day I am talking to my family. And initially, they were concerned that I was coming to America. And now I tell them – they [Americans] are kindhearted, they are educated, they are professional, and they are really helpful.

All scholars approaching the end of their exchange programs expressed desire to participate in the program again and regret for not having enough time to experience as many cultural and other events as they would like to. These long-term collaborations, they hope, would allow them to make up for those missed opportunities.

### ***Overall Experience and Unmet Needs***

Even though international scholars shared that they benefited from the exchange program professionally and personally, they disclosed its limitations and offered recommendations for improvement. The three main development areas included increasing mentorship and peer support, offering a short orientation, and providing social engagement opportunities. The most widespread concern among the participants was that their exchange mainly involved isolated lab work with little to no training, mentorship, or teamwork. Even though scholars enjoyed advancing their research through state-of-the-art facilities and resources, their work was the only exposure to their host institutions and societies. As one scholar described “I expected more of a supervisor–supervisee kind of exchange and collaboration between research groups, not to be alone all the time”. In that regard, participants suggested offering either more frequent meetings and ongoing collaborations with mentors and colleagues or providing opportunities for social and professional connections outside of academic departments. As a researcher from China explained:

Our experience here is very lonely. I only communicate with my PI, my lab mates, and my roommates. But the social aspect is very limited for exchange scholars. This doesn’t have to be an entire course or a program, even small gathering events would be great.

Some participants disclosed that they attempted to initiate connections with other faculty in the program, but such attempts turned to be unsuccessful as, they shared, “everyone is locked in their office, and we can’t find anyone to talk to.” A recommendation presented by several scholars was to enhance the exchange program by offering guest lecture or class audit opportunities. These venues, they argued, would allow for much-needed social connections and would introduce participants to different pedagogical and student engagement techniques and help them learn more about the students in the United States. As one participant reflected: “One thing I missed is to attend one class before I left so that I can see faculty lecture style, how they teach, how they react to students, how students ask questions, and how faculty are answering.” Their colleague elaborated on this sentiment by saying: “Maybe you can find a class and a professor, maybe someone who is very popular with students, and invite J-1 scholars to visit that class and to listen. After that, we can discuss that class and what we learned.”

Closely related to the perceived lack of social engagement and to excessive work autonomy was the realization that, upon their arrival to the host institutions, exchange scholars get lost in the system. As many of them shared, the unique classification of exchange visitors excludes them from orientation programs offered to faculty or teaching assistants. Still, no such alternatives are offered to them, and they are placed in their departments without being oriented to the academic system, professional or other customs, available resources, or any other aspects of their exchange programs. As one scholar described:

For a while, I felt a bit lost. Usually, when you start with a new company, HR would send you some papers, documents, or some guides about the company or your role. And I had to discover everything about the university as I worked here. I didn’t know that I could have an ID. I didn’t know that I could use the library. It’s things like this. I thought maybe there would be more procedures when someone is joining the university.

The exchange scholars’ needs in this regard varied from learning HR and administrative procedures to being familiarized with available resources, to understanding the academic system and their role in the host culture. As a participant from Czech Republic noted:

Being an international scholar at the US campus, it is not easy to understand the American university life on your own. It took me some time to learn more about the American educational system and what are all the challenges that students here face. My major is Education so, thanks to my background, I met great teachers and talked with students, which helped me to gain some understanding. Nevertheless, it was not enough to answer all my questions.

Many scholars felt like they “did not belong anywhere” as the International Student and Scholars’ Office is only in charge of their immigration and onboarding status and does not include them in international student programming. But at the same time, no other campus unit includes them in their programming either as they do not have the status of faculty, staff, teaching assistants, or graduate students. Overall, participants concluded that a short orientation, whether by their departments or other campus units, along with promoting opportunities for social engagement and collaborations, would have greatly enhanced their exchange experience.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While this study provided valuable insights into the experiences of exchange scholars, an under-researched group of international faculty in the United States, it is not without its limitations. On one hand, combining quantitative and qualitative research designs helped alleviate the shortcomings of utilizing a single research design. On the other hand, the quantitative portion of this study remains limited by self-reported data which cannot be used as an objective measure of the program’s effects on the participants’ ability to apply the skills, competencies, and experiences obtained in the program in their home settings. To fully evaluate the quality of the exchange program, future studies need to investigate professional, cultural, and other contributions that exchange faculty make upon their return to home counties and academic institutions.

While the sample from this study was highly diverse in terms of participants’ academic fields, nine out of ten interview participants were from China, Brazil, and Pakistan – the three countries that were overwhelmingly represented in the institutional population of exchange scholars. Therefore, gathering qualitative data that would portray the experiences of exchange scholars from other countries, especially those from developed and English-speaking countries, warrants further investigation. This research is also limited by a single setting, so the experiences of international scholars were limited to only one region of the United States and one institutional culture. International faculty whose exchange programs were based in other regions and institutional settings may yield different notions and insights, particularly regarding their cultural experiences. Therefore, future research should not only include exchange scholars from other regions of the United States but also employ multi-setting research and compare potential moderating effects of participants’ location or institution on their exchange experience.

Lastly, this study gave voice to international scholars and, consequently, recommendations and implications presented were drawn from their perspectives and insights. To achieve balanced and objective recommendations it is critical to engage other stakeholders involved in these programs, mainly International Student and Scholar Services, faculty development offices, and the representatives from academic departments hosting international scholars. Hearing from multiple parties involved in constructing these exchange experiences can lead to more feasible and sustainable program improvements.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study set out with the aim of understanding the experiences of short-term exchange scholars in a new academic, professional, and cultural setting. With respect to the first research question and participants’ professional experience, it was found that international scholars were, on average, most satisfied with work conditions and research experience, but least satisfied with professional development opportunities. Further, participants’ research experience was significantly correlated with their cultural exchange, while their professional development was significantly correlated with work conditions and

support. Interview data provided additional insights by revealing specific benefits of the program to international scholars and their host departments, as well as hurdles in seeking professional development opportunities.

The exploration of the second research question demonstrated that scholars were less satisfied with their cultural enhancement than work conditions and research experience, but more satisfied than with professional development opportunities. Additionally, their cultural exchange experience was significantly correlated with their research experience. Qualitative findings helped explain these attitudes by identifying specific barriers that participants experienced in attempting to establish social relationships in their host communities, as well as their desire for maintaining professional and long-term collaborations.

Lastly, the results for the third research question identified unmet needs of program participants concerning different areas of their exchange experiences. On that question, scholars suggested three main development areas for the J-1 scholar program – increasing mentorship and peer support, offering a short orientation, and providing social engagement opportunities.

Overall, the unique contribution of this study is that it explored the experiences of short-term exchange scholars, thus addressing the critical limitation of contemporary research which has overwhelmingly focused on full-time, tenure-track, or tenured international faculty. Consequently, the results of this research can only be interpreted in relation to the dominant literature on the experiences of full-time faculty who made long-term commitments to their higher education institutions.

Regarding participants' professional experience, the comparison of the findings with those of other studies confirms that international scholars often feel excluded from their host settings or unsupported in their efforts to achieve integration and sense of belonging. While prior research attributed this phenomenon to experiencing racism, sexism, xenophobia, or disdain for foreign accents (Lawless & Chen, 2017), this study revealed a different set of challenges that led to the feelings of isolation among short-term exchange scholars. In accordance with the present results, past studies have also demonstrated that mentoring programs for international scholars can improve their satisfaction and retention at host institutions (Phillips et al., 2016). Consistent with the literature, the participants in this study suggested that increased mentorship and peer support could help reduce feelings of isolation and establish social relationships.

This research broadly supports the work of other studies in this field by linking the existing evidence on international scholars' workplace productivity with possible reasons behind such a phenomenon. Namely, it is already well-known that international faculty outperform their US peers in research and scholarship productivity, but lag in teaching and service accomplishments (Webber, 2012). The existing knowledge, however, failed to explain the rationale behind such trends. The participants in this study made the first step in that direction by sharing that their undivided focus on research felt imposed as they were provided with little to no opportunities for cultural enhancement. Unsurprisingly, this study identified research experience as one of the highest-ranked aspects of participants' exchange and revealed its significant correlation with cultural experience, thus showing a unique relationship between the two constructs that has not yet been reported in prior studies. Moreover, the qualitative data of this research presented unique factors behind scholars' satisfaction with their research experience, mainly the availability of open access resources and grant-seeking opportunities.

While prior research examined international faculty workplace satisfaction only in comparison to their domestic colleagues (Mamiseishvili & Lee, 2018), this research helped explain the factors influencing exchange scholar workplace satisfaction. For instance, prior findings demonstrated that international faculty reported high satisfaction with research conditions at U.S. institutions (Webber, 2012). This study advanced such knowledge by comparing participants' workplace satisfaction with other aspects of their exchange experience and noting a significant correlation between satisfaction with work conditions and professional development. Given the dependent nature between these two aspects of

scholars' experiences, more efforts need to be invested in developing professional development opportunities for international scholars or introducing them to those that are already in place.

With respect to participants' cultural exchange, this research corroborated prior knowledge in some respects while offering novel insights in others. Namely, in accord with recent studies, communication, socialization, establishing rapport with the members of the host culture, and other non-research experiences emerged as the main transitional challenges for participants in this study (Murad & Samples, 2015). The unique contribution of this research, however, was that it identified the root causes of such challenges for exchange scholars and noted that their unique J-1 classification excluded them from social, cultural, and other programs in the host institution, thus leaving them siloed throughout their time in the program.

These findings become particularly critical when examined through the lenses of Blau's (1964) social exchange theory, the theoretical framework guiding this research. Overall, this study supported Blau's postulation that individual relationships ultimately influence the type of social exchange that will take place. As many participants shared, building social relationships with the members of their academic communities proved to be particularly hard for exchange scholars. Consequently, they were less satisfied with their social exchange compared to their professional or research experience.

Of particular interest for future studies would be to revisit exchange scholars' expectations for maintaining long-term professional collaborations with their host institutions upon return to their home countries. Even though this goal emerged as an overarching theme from participants' narratives, it is contrary to the social exchange theory which postulates that social relations between individuals in groups serve as a prerequisite for creating and maintaining long-term exchanges between groups in wider societies. Given the volume of obstacles that prevented participants from building within-group (short-term) relationships, their intended between-group (long-term) collaborations should be approached with reservation.

As most universities around the world are working hard to strengthen their internationalization strategies, and as international faculty mobility continues to increase, it is critical for U.S. institutions to engage in deliberate efforts to continue attracting and retaining international scholars. The importance of international faculty on U.S. campuses must not be overlooked and institutions must engage in ongoing efforts to understand the experiences of their exchange scholars and the ways in which these experiences may impact future international partnerships and collaborations. In that regard, the main implication of this research is that academic departments hosting international scholars and the administrative offices behind these exchange programs must not work in isolation. Instead, they must combine efforts and initiatives to ensure that exchange faculty have a meaningful experience from start to finish. This approach includes ensuring that international faculty are oriented to their host institutions and that their time in the program meaningfully connects academic/research experience and social/cultural exchange.

Knowing that international scholars in this study were most satisfied with work conditions and research experience, but least satisfied with professional development and cultural exchange provides support for the conceptual premise that their professional and cultural experiences must be perceived as inseparable. Thus, for academic departments to be able to truly benefit from international scholars' presence, they first must provide opportunities for scholars' professional growth to take place in unison with their cultural development. Strategically focusing on the unmet needs of program participants, such as mentorship and peer support, orientation programs, and social engagement opportunities, can help all stakeholders streamline their efforts to ensure that program benefits are maximized for all parties involved – international scholars, academic departments, and host institutions.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of research raising an intriguing question regarding the extent to which the United States can maintain its leading position in international student and scholar mobility in the time when other countries are engaging in an accelerated, if not aggressive, battle for global supremacy. As this research concludes, being a "magnet" for international students and scholars is no longer sufficient if such phenomenon are not accompanied by deliberate and evidence-

based strategies for ensuring the professional and cultural growth, development, and satisfaction of international students and scholars.

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**MASHA KRSMANOVIC**, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the School of Education, University of Southern Mississippi. Her areas of research include international students, internationalization of higher education, first-year students, and student success. [Masha.Krsmanovic@usm.edu](mailto:Masha.Krsmanovic@usm.edu)