

# Taiwanese Students' Perspectives on Their Educational Experiences in the United States

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**Wen-Jiuan Yen**

School of Nursing, Chung Shan Medical University [wyen@csmu.edu.tw](mailto:wyen@csmu.edu.tw)

**Pat Stevens**

College of Nursing, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee [pstevens@uwm.edu](mailto:pstevens@uwm.edu)

*The United States welcomes a great many international students each year. Asian students make up the fastest growing segment of this international student body. Asian students have to deal with bicultural conflicts on many fronts in order to achieve a balance between participating in a new cultural environment and maintaining their own cultural identity. At the same time, they are likely to experience a great deal of homesickness. In this study, the investigators explored these issues with five Taiwanese students during their first academic year at a Midwestern university, hoping to gain insights about this uniquely situated group of Asian international students. In-depth interviews were conducted. An exploration of the pre-entry and early integration phases of study abroad was the focus of analysis. Thematic categories were identified.*

Cultural identity, adjustment, international students, Taiwan, stress,  
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## INTRODUCTION

The United States welcomes a great many international students each year. During the 1997-98 academic year, for instance, a total of 481,280 international students studied at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels at American colleges and universities; making up 3.4 per cent of the country's higher education population (Walker, 2000). Asian students represent the fastest growing segment of this international student body (Walker, 2000). In order to attract international students and meet the challenges of providing them with high quality education, adequate resources, and effective support, United States faculty members and university officials in the United States need to understand better the experiences these students have. They need to learn what happens to international students on their campuses and in their neighbourhoods. Many questions arise: (a) what does the chance to be educated in the United States mean to international students; (b) what do they have to cope with in order to make education abroad a reality; (c) what circumstances may compromise their efforts to get a good education in America; and (d) what kinds of classroom strategies and university infrastructure would assist them to achieve these ends?

In the study reported here we explored these issues with five Taiwanese students during their first academic year at a Midwestern university, hoping to gain insights about this uniquely situated group of Asian international students. Using in-depth interviews conducted in their first language we attempted to document their point of view about education and life in America.

## BACKGROUND

Lu (1991) described the major motivations that encouraged Taiwanese students to look to the United States for advanced education as: (a) the attraction of media discourse about the so-called 'American Dream;' (b) the Taiwanese respect for their country's citizens who hold United States degrees; (c) the admiration for the quality of education in the United States; and (d) the potential opportunities for work experience in the United States. While education abroad holds much promise, extant literature suggests that as international students are exposed to unfamiliar environments in the United States, they may experience anxiety, confusion, and depression (Lin and Yi, 1997). Difficulty mastering the use of the English language can be a major barrier in their adjustment to the American classroom and to the society in general. Interactions with American students can be problematic as well. From international students' perspective they are sometimes treated rudely, stereotypically, or insensitively (Senyshyn, Warford, and Zhan, 2000). Factors that have been found to predict how well individual students adjust in their first semesters abroad include: gender, age, family circumstances, emotional coping strategies, understanding about the United States, foresight about potential difficulties, and English language capability (Lu, 1991).

The preparation to come to the United States is important for international students; what happens then tends to influence their adjustment in the United States (Lu, 1991). Upon their arrival in the United States, Asian students have to deal with bicultural conflicts on many fronts in order to achieve a balance between participating in a new way of life and maintaining their own cultural identity. At the same time, they most likely experience a great deal of homesickness (Mori, 2000). Because studying abroad is a great honour for people in their home society, students also experience the pressure of parents', relatives', friends', and sponsoring organisations' expectations for high academic achievement and success (Mori, 2000; Pedersen, 1991). An exploration of the pre-entry and early integration phases of study abroad seems especially important in planning educational programs to meet the needs of international students. These phenomena were chosen as the foci of this study. Future investigations might be aimed at understanding the later phases of study abroad because even in contexts of successful adaptation to American education, international students face a further challenge at the culmination of their efforts when they must re-integrate in their home countries after spending years away.

## METHOD

### Sample

For this in-depth qualitative investigation of Taiwanese students' learning experiences in the United States, five participants were recruited through snowball sampling. The first author, a member of the Taiwanese Student Association at the university where the study was being conducted, brought information about the research to friends and associates. The study became known by word of mouth in the small community of Taiwanese students on campus and five students eventually volunteered. All of them were born in Taiwan, held F-1 student visas, and were in the middle of their first year of study in the United States. They were pursuing a variety of majors. Three were women; two were men. One was an undergraduate student and four were postgraduate students. Their ages ranged from 23 to 27 years. All students were financially sponsored by their families in Taiwan.

### Data Collection

Each participant provided informed consent and then engaged in a semi-structured, audio-taped interview of two hours duration. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions posed in Chinese using Chinese concepts about (a) what inspired participants to study in the United States; (b) how they had prepared to come to America; (c) what they had expected college life to be like

in the United States; and (d) how their goals for the future had influenced their choice of the United States as a place to study. They were asked to describe what it was like when they first arrived and how they had adjusted over the first few months. Questions also prompted them to talk about any difficulties they had encountered, who might have helped them along the way, and what they enjoyed about being in the United States. Finally they were asked to discuss what faculty members and other university personnel in the United States could do better to assist international students like themselves.

Interviews were conducted in Chinese by the first author as a means to ease disclosure and make the interviews resemble natural conversations. A private setting was chosen for each interview; two were interviewed in the students' homes, and three in the home of the first author. Participants were promised confidentiality. Details of their narratives have been changed as necessary to protect their anonymity. All procedures were approved by the University Institutional Review Board.

### **Analysis**

The first author listened to the Chinese language interview tapes, translated them, and typed them in English. The English language texts then served as the data for analysis by both authors. Throughout the analyses the first author went back to the Chinese language tapes to verify meanings of the stories before translation. She consulted with bilingual colleagues as well to assure the adequacy of her translations of participants' stories into English words and concepts.

Narrative strategies were used to examine the data. In an initial iteration, events recounted in each interview were arranged in chronological order and a flow chart was constructed to examine developmental patterns and staging for each participant. Then the flow charts of chronological events of all five participants were compared and contrasted to identify similar and differing experiences across the sample. In the next step, verbatim English translations of the interviews were coded thematically using content analysis. Quotes from participants illustrate each theme in the report of findings.

As part of the analysis, a close look was undertaken into insider-outsider issues. Because the first author was herself an international graduate student from Taiwan, she shared many elements of their histories, culture, and circumstances with the other participants. She was able to identify and follow up cultural and experiential content in the interview setting that an outsider may have missed. She was a trusted member of the group to whom they could explain positive as well as negative experiences without fear of causing insult or incurring reprisal. Such openness was not likely to have been possible with an American interviewer or with an interviewer who was a faculty member (a position held by the second author) because of possible constraints of respect and deference. The ability to converse in the students' first language no doubt increased the spontaneity and comfort of both the participants and the interviewer, thereby increasing authenticity and candour.

In order to balance this insider perspective, the authors discussed the stories participants told and the meanings this information might have for international students as well as for United States educators. Such dialogue worked to tighten the conceptual translations of the verbatim Chinese as each tried to clarify the subtleties of the story in Chinese and how this might best be conveyed in English. This collaboration also helped the authors reflect on the importance of the subjective experiences of the Taiwanese author during her first year studying in the United States, and how those experiences motivated the study. This made the authors particularly sensitive to the issues at hand. The second author, too, was forced to look at assumptions that might have guided her educational practice that were at odds with what these particular international students found to be

helpful. Such reflexivity was considered a necessary ingredient to assure the scientific adequacy of qualitative research (Hall and Stevens, 1991).

## FINDINGS

An exploration of the pre-entry and early integration phases of studying abroad was the focus of the analysis. Within each of these phases the following thematic categories were identified: (a) inspiration for studying abroad, (b) things at stake in initiating international study, (c) preparations for becoming a student in the United States, (d) initial responses to an unfamiliar environment, (e) early experiences in American society, and (f) the impact of stress on their lives. In addition to these findings, participants offered suggestions concerning what faculty members and other university personnel might do to ease the difficulties international students faced.

### Inspiration for studying abroad

Participants described multiple sources of inspiration for studying in American universities: growing up idealising America, wanting a competitive edge in the Taiwanese job market, wishing to avoid the competition they faced in the Taiwanese university system, desiring greater choice about the major course they studied, and wishing to broaden their life experiences.

#### *Idealised America*

Participants talked about when and how they first imagined coming to the United States to study and it usually involved believing in some rendition of the 'American Dream'. They grew up learning about America from television, movies, and books. America was the land of plenty, the incubator of the world's most innovative new knowledge, the place where a poor man could become rich. America had the best universities and the best jobs. Particularly when participants found themselves dissatisfied with the rigidity of the education system in Taiwan, they assumed everything in the United States must be better. One respondent said:

*Studying in America has been my dream since I was a child. Teachers kept telling us that studying abroad is better than studying in Taiwan.*

#### *Competitive edge*

Getting a United States degree promised a competitive edge among their Taiwanese peers. Students believed that if they studied in the United States they would learn to speak English better than those students who remained in Taiwan; and that capability would win them a better job. Finding a better job, in turn, would honour their families. They also spoke of a common attitude in Taiwan – that employers regard degrees from abroad more highly than domestic degrees. One respondent stated:

*In Taiwan, people still believe that the person who gets a degree from outside of Taiwan is better than the one who gets a degree from Taiwan. People respect the person who has the background of studying abroad. I don't know whether the situation indicates that Taiwanese have blind admiration of things foreign, but I think to study abroad can put me in a better position to compete with other people. If I can get the degree from the United States, that means my English is better than the person who has a Taiwanese Master's degree. Then I can get more opportunities to find a good job.*

#### *Avoiding competition*

Studying in the United States can also help students avoid competition. Attending a prestigious school is greatly valued in Taiwan, but the competition for admission to the top-ranked Taiwanese

universities is quite stiff. Only a small proportion of applicants get accepted into postgraduate study there. According to official statistics, 1.2 per cent of the total applicant pool was admitted to Taiwanese postgraduate programs (Tseng, 2000). The responses of two of the students interviewed were:

*I decided to study for my Master's degree after I graduated from university, but the competition for enrolling in Taiwanese graduate schools is very serious.*

*The reason I decided to study abroad is that it is so difficult to compete with people who take entrance examinations for graduate school in Taiwan.*

### **Choice of field of study**

Taiwanese students take national examinations to enter high school, university, and graduate school. Their examination scores correlate directly with the major courses that they pursue, and thus can limit their choice of field of study. Because of the more flexible application systems in the United States, Taiwanese students who wish to pursue a major course from which they would be exempted by their examination score, find applying to schools in America an attractive option. One student said:

*I found there are problems in the educational system in Taiwan. For example, my major was decided by the score of my national entrance examination. I didn't even know what my interest was, but my score decided everything for me. I had to major in Finance. When I studied it in school, I found I did not like it. I wanted to transfer to another department, but my department didn't allow me to. In other words, I couldn't take classes that I was interested in.*

### **Broader life experiences**

Studying abroad was also a wonderful chance to experience new and different things. The participants strongly believed that schooling in the United States could open their minds and enrich their lives and one commented:

*One who goes to graduate school must not only have profound knowledge, but also have an open-mind, and understand that there are many differences between Western and Eastern cultures. Studying abroad is a good chance for me to experience all of these things.*

### **Things at stake in initiating international study**

Studying abroad is considered a risk-taking venture for these students. Taiwanese families traditionally expect that upon completing higher education their children would get good jobs and attain independence and success. Two respondents said:

*To be honest, I had not dared think of graduate study abroad because in Taiwan we are expected to work as soon as possible after we graduate from the university. I didn't want my family to take care of me. I hoped I could be an independent person as soon as possible.*

Family approval was crucial for these participants, therefore:

*When the idea of studying abroad came up, I doubted whether my family could support me. My family's attitude was positive. Because they thought as long as it is good for me, they would support me forever. Their attitude really impelled me to make the decision.*

## Preparations for becoming a student in the United States

Once these students had been inspired to study abroad and had the encouragement of their families, there were a number of concrete preparations they had to make. They had to study for and score well on the English language exam (TOEFL) and the appropriate United States standardised test (for example, the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) for graduate admission), make application to American schools, and then choose which university to attend. Getting an adequate score on the TOEFL was a challenge. Because they wanted to do well, they attended intense, short-term courses at English training centres in Taiwan specially designed to prepare students who wish to study abroad. Advisers at the English training centers provided information on the ranking and prestige of universities in the United States and the examination scores required for admission to each college or university. They also helped translate application documents.

In choosing between schools, they prioritised rank, which reflected the Taiwanese emphasis on the honour of attending a famous school. One respondent stated:

*I applied to schools based on their rank, tuition, and TOEFL score requirements. The rank of the university was my first priority, but which schools would consider me was decided by my TOEFL score. The last concern was whether the city was interesting or not. For example, if the city had played an important role in America's history, my impression was that it would have special characteristics.*

In order to provide the greatest possible opportunity and choice, students submitted applications to several schools. An indication of a positive admission decision came in the form of an I-20, which is an approval document from a university that allows an individual to get a student visa to enter the United States. The receipt of an I-20 was a landmark event, which brought with it excitement as well as anxiety. One respondent said:

*When the university sent the I-20 to me, I felt so odd. One part of me was excited because now I could study abroad. It was real, not a dream. That first feeling was happy, but it was followed by hesitation. Is my English good enough to study abroad? Fear and worry filled my mind. I even doubted if I could get to the airport. My family was my first concern. Two years...I don't know...maybe in two years being away their health will fail. How will they do?*

## Initial responses to an unfamiliar environment

With all their expectations and conflicting feelings participants packed their belongings to face the future in the United States. When they arrived, their emotions became even more complex as they were disillusioned, felt terribly homesick, and became overwhelmed by their worry about the burden their families were enduring.

### *Disillusionment*

The first and hardest thing students faced was that America was **not** completely good. Their images of America did not fit the reality, and they began to doubt whether their decision to study in the United States had been a wise one. Two comments demonstrate their feelings:

*I found I didn't understand America at all. It is not what I imagined. I thought America was an advanced country and everything was clear and brilliant. The first impression I had was that it was grey. And I got lost all the time. Everything was so complicated. I felt upset. I thought, why did I come here?*

*My teacher in Taiwan used to tell us of situations in America., but maybe it was a long time ago. Something changed. He said Americans are so polite. But I came here and found everything is different from what my teacher said. My neighbour always dumps trash in the hall, and doesn't care how other people feel. Wine bottles and cigarette butts can be seen everywhere, and nobody cares how other people feel.*

### **Homesickness**

Living in this unfamiliar environment, missing their families, having to speak a foreign language, and eating food very different from what they were used to, made participants feel homesick. Two of them said:

*I missed my family very much. During the first month, whenever I saw anything that reminded me of Taiwan, I cried. I wanted to go home, but I couldn't.*

*In the first semester I had a strong motive to give up everything. I was sad. I wanted to go home. I asked myself, "Why did I want to come here?"*

### **Family concerns**

Once they arrived and realised how much everything cost, participants began to understand how expensive their stay in the United States was going to be for their families. They were shocked by the amount of money necessary to pay for tuition, room and board, books and school supplies, and daily incidentals. They felt guilty about placing such a heavy burden on their families and were embarrassed to have to keep asking for money from their parents. Paradoxically, the more family support and willingness to pay the students experienced, the more stress they felt. Some of the comments made by the students were:

*My parents have many children, and everybody is studying. It's a heavy burden for them. I can't imagine how much money I will have them spend before I am through. My family's support makes me feel more stressful.*

*I am shocked to need so much money. Actually, I make a plan how to spend my money carefully every month, but 'you cannot make bricks without straw'. So when I find my money is going to be used up, I have to call my family, even though I don't want to.*

*I cried for my family. They are fine, but ...for example, I called my parents for tuition. My mother said OK, but she kept asking, "When do you need money? Because the exchange rate is so high now. Can I wire money after it goes down?" When I hung up the telephone, I stayed in the bathroom and cried and cried. Every time I call my parents for money, they never reject me; instead they comfort me. That makes me feel so sad.*

Participants also felt overwhelmed by the academic success they believed they owed their families. Studying abroad was not just fulfilment of a personal desire, but encompassed a responsibility to family. Some observations made were:

*I must get the result. I mean the grade. My parents invest money on me, and the only thing that they can get is my grade. So I have to study hard for them. I have spent much money so far, and I have to get the result.*

*I know my mother put all of her expectations on me; I can't disappoint her. In the first semester, I had a strong desire to give up everything. But I can't do that. My uncle told me that I needed to hold on for my mother because she sponsored me to study abroad with great difficulty. No matter how stressful, I couldn't give up. He said "What you do is not only for yourself, but also for your mother".*

## Early experiences in American society

Many social situations in the early integration phase of their studies in the United States were difficult because of racial discrimination and language barriers.

### *Racial discrimination*

An early experience each of these students described was feeling discriminated against. Two examples were:

*There is serious racial discrimination here. For example, in the supermarket, cashiers are polite to white people. But to us, yellow race, they treat us like we can't afford to purchase their products.*

*I remember one day soon after I got here; it was a sunny day. I went to a Vietnamese restaurant, and I was waiting for the red light to change into green. Suddenly, one car drove by mine, rolled down the window, and yelled at me. He spat at me, and then drove away.*

Participants reported that they observed white people treating African American people differently, not being as friendly and helpful as they were toward other white people. This, in turn, made them uneasy and fearful of being mistreated themselves. The students indicated, however, that they were more frightened of African Americans than they were of white Americans because of the stereotypes they had read about when they were growing up. Other researchers have also found that Asian international students have lower perceived comfort levels with African Americans due to negative portrayals of African Americans on television, in the movies, and in news reports (Talbot, Geelhoed and Ninggal, 1999).

On campus, participants perceived they were treated differently as well. They believed it was because American students saw them as outsiders. Some of the respondents commented:

*I find students here are so conservative. They do not believe the experiences of other countries. They criticise the accents, religions, and diets from other countries.*

*My classmates insist on their thoughts being right. They cannot accept something new from another country. They regard people who are not from here as foreigners.*

*I am the only international student in my department, so all of the people surrounding me are American. Because of my special appearance, skin color, and language, it feels to me that everybody is watching my performance. I think they feel I am weird. So I have to protect myself.*

*Maybe the difference is hospitality. Taiwanese never discriminate against foreigners in our country. When we find a foreigner looking lost on the street, we always help them automatically. That does not happen here. Although people always say that the United States is a cultural melting pot, they don't like to learn other cultures.*

Participants said that American students tended not to look at them when they spoke and offered little verbal response. Each described instances in which American students avoided them when they were instructed to break up into groups to do group projects. They were commonly left with nobody to partner them. It then became embarrassing because faculty members had to assign students to work with them. One participant reported that classmates treated an Asian Teaching Assistant impolitely, blaming the Teaching Assistant for the difficulty in comprehending the material being taught. One participant reported that a few of her American classmates were "very nice." She said, "They understand my English is not good. They wait and listen to me patiently or



speak slower.” Overall, however, participants felt it was difficult to make friends with American students.

### ***Language barrier***

Language posed many problems socially as well as academically at the beginning of their time in the United States. Some issues that drew comments were:

*Some ideas are easy to describe in Chinese, but are hard to say in English.*

*In the beginning, since English is not my native language, when I wanted to describe something, I didn't know which word or grammar was appropriate. The more I worried about my grammar, the more nervous I got. So finally, I kept silent.*

*It is hard to be involved socially with American students because I can't understand their slang.*

*Sometimes, my classmates speak so fast that I can't catch what they are talking about. If I ask them 'pardon,' they stop talking with me.*

One participant described a situation in which she talked with the professor on the first day of class and explained that she might need some extra help because of her language difficulties. The professor replied, “That is your problem, not mine.” From that time on, the student kept silent in class, but the professor posed questions to her at every meeting. Sometimes when the student could not answer the questions, the professor said something she could not understand and the other students laughed. She felt she was being ‘scoffed at.’

### **Impact of stress on international students**

What was the impact of such stress on these Taiwanese students? In the integration phase of their stay in America, they felt bereft of language and friends.

### ***Losing the ability to communicate***

Because of the fundamental differences between Eastern and Western languages, most Asia students have to think in their own language first, and then speak in English. This laborious process of translation was frustrating for participants and they felt robbed of conversational spontaneity. They spoke of it as losing the tool of communication, as if they were suddenly dumb. The more care they took with their English, the more stress they felt. They were hesitant to speak because frustration sapped their confidence. Some students commented:

*I remember that first semester; I felt that I was locked in a tower. It is the feeling you have when you have lost your language. I was not a novice in my field of study, but I felt so stupid.*

*Speaking...I felt I was an orphan because of my English problem, without support from anyone. I was like a bird without wings.*

*It was so painful to me. I wanted to express my thoughts, but I could not express them. So I thought I was an idiot in class.*

*My problem is not whether I can talk with people or not, but rather whether my English can attract people's attention, because in a group, people keep talking and it is impossible for me to get into the conversation or interrupt them and get them to listen to me. What I hope is that my English will improve so that my talk can attract people's attention.*

Because of their fears about understanding and expressing themselves in English, these students were hesitant to interact with American students. Several of them said:

*I felt pressure to talk with the American students, but I didn't know what they were talking about. I remember one experience when I asked one of my classmates what the teacher had said. He said lots of words; I didn't understand anything. My response was "Thank you." I seldom talked after that.*

*I was so frightened to try to establish relationships with my classmates at the beginning. I would always choose the seat in the back corner of the classroom. Nobody sat by the break, nobody sat beside me. I isolated myself this way.*

*I always used the bathroom one floor down from my classroom. I didn't want to meet any students from the class at the bathroom because I didn't know what I was supposed to talk to them about.*

The Taiwanese students did not always retreat from American students. They made efforts to interact, but met with lots of challenges. Several studies have shown that American students interact with international students only superficially, and as a result many international students give up trying to establish deep cross-cultural relationships (Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992). Some comments made were:

*Initially, my classmates like to talk with me. But after they found I have an English problem, they don't want to talk with me. Especially, if my classmates whisper to me during class. I don't understand. Even though they might be telling me a joke, I have no response because I don't understand. After a couple times, they don't like to talk with me.*

*Once I was talking to a classmate and another American student I knew walked up. They had never met each other before, but immediately they started to talk to each other and ignore me. I hate this feeling. I admit I am not a person good at social communication, but in Chinese society I have never been ignored. This feeling forces me to arm myself. There are many ways to arm myself; one is to pretend I understand Americans' talking when I really don't understand. This is a painful experience. I don't like the hypocritical feeling, but I don't like people feeling bored talking with me either.*

### **Loneliness**

Language difficulties contributed to participants' loneliness. In addition, there were tremendous cultural differences to contend with in order to meet and be with local people. One participant brought up this example: physical touch and walking hand in hand are the signs of close friendship between women in Taiwan. She came to understand that such behaviour in America is seen to be strange. The loss of this display of tenderness made the student feel particularly lonely. Other routines of camaraderie that participants were used to in Taiwan did not occur on their United States campus. Some examples from students' comments were:

*American people emphasise the individual, but Taiwanese care about the group. I mean Taiwanese students like to work together. We chat, go shopping, do homework together after class, but American students like their own individual life after class. I feel lonely.*

*Sometimes I am like an abandoned puppy; nobody cares about me. I feel a sense of emptiness. It is most serious in the evening. I am afraid of the feeling of emptiness.*

*When the feeling comes, I absolutely can't stay at home alone. It is like people abandon you in America.*

These students coped with their loneliness by seeking out the company of other Taiwanese students on campus. While this group was relatively small and dispersed throughout the various academic majors, in time they became acquainted with one another. Participants recalled that by the second semester they had started to feel a sense of belonging, most strongly through their association with other Taiwanese students. Some comments noted were:

*When I became acquainted with my friend (another Taiwanese student), it made me feel that somebody was standing by me.*

*When you have unhappy things happen and you lose self-confidence in the initial phase you need some people to listen to your complaints. It is impossible to complain in English. Chinese is the major instrument for complaining. So Taiwanese students were my major listeners. Taiwanese students all have similar situations so we can support each other.*

They also dealt with their loneliness by praying, using the internet to keep in touch with people and events in Taiwan, and rational thinking. A few students said:

*When I felt sad I prayed to Buddha to help me.*

*When people talked in class and I couldn't, I felt nervous and lonely, but I pretended that I was practising my listening comprehension. I comforted myself by means of this thought so that I could change my emotion.*

*I remember last semester I cried almost everyday, but at the beginning of the second semester, I told myself that I don't want the sad life again. Besides, I could handle the classes better, so I wanted my life to be better.*

### **International students' suggestions for what might help**

From their perspective as international students who had been studying in the United States for less than a year, participants offered some suggestions. They believed strongly in the rewards of international study for themselves as well as for the universities they attended. Some of their thoughts and ideas were:

*I think that a school that has many international students will become more diversified and energetic. A school's ability to attract international students means that it can go to the world, and so is an excellent school. I think every school should look forward and be open-minded to accept different cultures.*

*I don't think international students need special counselling services, but we need the feeling of being home. If a school really concerns itself about students, students will feel the school is their home in some way and not only a place to study.*

*I don't know if the university needs to provide more services to international students, but I feel that the staff of the departments who deal with international students should be nice. When someone treats you nicely, you feel you are valuable.*

*This is an example of how to make things go better for international students that I heard from a friend at another university. In his experience, after he registered, the Dean of his school met him first. The Dean made a special welcome to him and gave him some suggestions about his study plans. He felt he got respect.*

*One of the other universities that decided to accept me as a student started sending me information about their city and state. They sent me a letter and asked me if I needed*

*someone to pick me up at the airport or if I needed a temporary house to stay in. Their literature said that many American students at their campus volunteered to be of service to help international students. The university I chose to come to didn't offer these things, so I worry that it doesn't care about international students.*

*I don't regret my decision to come here. One thing for sure is that studying abroad can help me have an open mind. After I experience a worldwide viewpoint, I am a totally different person. In other words, disillusionment is the beginning of growing because America is not my paradise any more, but I know I can learn from my experience being here. Studying abroad also makes me see my own country differently. International students are so lucky because not everybody has the chance to live in a completely different place.*

## DISCUSSION

The small size of the sample and the cultural homogeneity of the participants limit the study's findings. They cannot be taken to represent the general population of international students studying in the United States. It is possible, however, in studies like this one, that the knowledge gained may be transferable to other contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The rich experiential descriptions offered by these Taiwanese students may serve to inform educational practice and enhance program planning. Larger studies are needed that involve more international students, from more widely dispersed areas of the globe, who might be studying in a number of American universities.

Another limitation of the findings involves language. Because the interviews were conducted in the first language of the Taiwanese participants and first author, the opportunity to engage in unconstrained dialogue during data collection was enhanced, a dynamic that increases validity in qualitative research (Hall and Stevens, 1991). To collaborate with the second author, however, and to make results meaningful to an English-speaking audience of educators in the United States, translation of interview data from Chinese to English was required for analysis. Some loss of concepts and cultural metaphors may have occurred in the translation process.

What we can say from the findings of this study is that studying abroad was an exciting experience for these international students, a dream they made come true, but not without heartaches. An idealised vision of America and the belief that a United States degree would help them to brighter futures in the careers they chose motivated their efforts to gain admission to universities in the United States. A great deal was at stake for them in asking their families to support such an endeavour that raised many questions. Would they succeed in America? Could they be sure of securing a good job upon their return to Taiwan? How could they dare to be independent of their families? Would they be able to live up to their responsibilities? However, because their families encouraged them, they did proceed to the tasks required to gain the all-important I-20 that made their entrance into the United States possible. Intense English language training followed by rigorous testing of their English language capabilities and their potential for academic achievement in the United States finally led them to make application to American colleges and universities. They hoped to attend a university of some prestige and academic standing, both to honour their families and to give them a competitive edge in Taiwan.

Anticipating great things, these Taiwanese young people arrived in a United States that did not match their pre-departure images. They began to very terribly homesick and were overwhelmed by guilt by the burden they had asked their families to bear in financing such expensive schooling. Their early social experiences were frightening as they faced what they perceived to be discriminatory behaviour on and off campus. The racism they observed in their daily activities was very discomfoting as was the apparent lack of openness Americans had toward people from

other countries. Their fledgling fluency in English was a barrier, more socially than academically. These students did not emphasise the anxiety they may have experienced learning in English and getting good grades. Rather, they emphasised the anxiety they had in social situations. They interpreted their inability to articulate in English as a fundamental loss of communication with the Americans who surrounded them. They were hesitant to interact with American students because when they did, they were often impatiently brushed off or ignored.

Thus, the Taiwanese students were very lonely during their first months in the United States. Social customs were different from those at home, and it was so difficult to make friends with American classmates. They thought many times of giving up and returning home. The responsibility they felt to their families and their continuing belief that studying abroad was an unparalleled opportunity to broaden their experiences and enrich their future work lives kept them in the United States. By the second semester they generally did not feel so sad. A developing sense of belonging came particularly with the friendships they cultivated with other international students on campus.

The depth of isolation and loneliness these Taiwanese students described could have led to adjustment problems other researchers have found in populations and samples of international students, including any number of physiological and psychological symptoms, and cognitive fatigue (Mori, 2000). Educational researchers have suggested that those international students who hold the highest expectations about the quality of their lives in the United States may face the most bitter disappointments, resentment, and sadness (Mori, 2000). It may be that the very brightest and most enthusiastic international students are therefore at greatest risk from health problems early in their residence at United States universities.

### CONCLUSION

Individual educators can make a difference in the experiences of international students by insisting collectively on services that involve the active participation of American students, are respectfully delivered, and make international students feel like they belong to the university community (Senyshyn, Warford and Zhan, 2000). These services can also make a difference by not assuming academic deficiency from limited English skills or passivity in the classroom (Ladd and Ruby, 1999; Shigaki and Smith 1997).

English language facility can be a significant problem for many international students. For Asian international students in the United States, poor English has been found to be a major stressor (Lin and Yi, 1997). The findings of this study suggest that when international students' difficulties communicating in English are coupled with an atmosphere of racially motivated hostility or indifference toward people from other nations, the situation may become exceedingly painful for them. While most United States universities have language programs to assist students for whom English is a second language (ESL), how many United States universities have in place anti-racist programs to assist the major ethnic group in the student body to eliminate prevailing xenophobic attitudes and behaviours? Are United States university programs sufficiently committed to eradicating all forms of social oppression and racial disadvantage on their campuses to become what a participant in this study called 'schools that can go to the world?'

The economic benefits of attracting international students to academic programs in the United States are well known (Nimmer, 1994). Global politics in the twenty-first century demands that attention be given to international education. In light of the personal struggles international student participants in this study described, excellence in international education can only be achieved when contexts in which racism occurs are changed and parochial worldviews are eliminated.

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