UNDERSTANDING OF INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC ADAPTATION TO A U.S. GRADUATE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

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This study explored how academic relationships, acculturation strategies, and graduate experiences influence international graduate students’ academic adjustment to U.S. graduate life in a large Midwestern university in the United States. To understand international graduate students’ academic experiences, ten international graduate students from different countries were interviewed about their academic experiences and three research questions were examined, including:  a) what are international graduate students concerned about in their academic lives; b) how do the themes and subthemes influence their adaptation to a U.S. graduate school; and c) what are the major and the minor subthemes related to their academic adaptation?

Qualitative methodology was employed, including purposeful participant selection, observations, interviews, data coding, and data triangulation. In addition, mixed data analyses were used in this study to enlarge the effect sizes of the qualitative findings.

The findings show that international graduate students’ learning behaviors and attitudes are heavily influenced by the interactions with professors and fellow students, prejudice from school services, and family concerns. Unlike international undergraduate students, international graduate students are also affected by research concerns and graduate assistant work in U.S. graduate schools. Such working experiences have brought international graduate assistants both opportunities and difficulties in their transition to U.S. graduate education. Despite their
similarities in circumstance, these students’ adjustment processes may vary due to their language proficiency, cultural knowledge, learning attitudes, and the utilization of school services.

The above findings of this study will not only help international graduate become aware of their academic needs and expectations, but also help U.S. institutions understand their international graduate students’ academic adjustment processes, needs, and dissatisfaction. Moreover, giving the increasing trend of international education in the world, this study may also contribute to the scholarly inquiry of international students’ cross-cultural acculturation in the larger society.
Dedicated to the international graduate students at Bowling Green State University
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This study investigated international graduate students’ cross-cultural acculturation experiences in relation to their academic adaptation to U.S. graduate education. Research has found that when moving to a new environment, many international students faced a series of difficulties related to different foods, strange living circumstances, language barriers, and an unfamiliar education system. During the process, many international students also experienced psychological problems, including stress, depression, homesickness, and loneliness, all of which in return influenced their academic adaptation (Constantine, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Mori, 2000; Yoon & Portman, 2004). In other words, cross-cultural adaptation is a major issue of international students’ lives.

Therefore, it is critical for the host country to help international students in their transition to a new environment. In recent decades, the U.S. has been a major player in the education market with a large number of international students. According to Project Atlas 2007 and Open Doors, two projects of the Institute of International Education (IIE), the U.S. has been the top destination for international students since the late 1940s. With a general increase in international student enrollment, the U.S. has annually hosted over half a million international students since 1999/00, peaking at 623,805 in academic year 2007/08 (IIE, 2008). Therefore, helping
international students successfully adjust to U.S. universities can benefit a large number of participants, including both U.S. institutions and international students studying in the U.S.

This study explores international graduate students’ experiences of academic adaptation to a U.S. graduate school, and how the identified themes within such experiences have affected these students’ adjustment to U.S. graduate education both in behaviors and in their mental well-being. Such exploration may help not only international graduate students overcome difficulties in their adjustment, but also help U.S. institutions better understand these students’ academic needs.

**Background of the Study**

International graduate students are important to the United States culturally, politically, and economically. Firstly, international students enriched the cultural diversity of U.S. campuses and U.S. socio-cultural diversity as a result of increasing immigration and frequent workforce mobility (Kagan & Stewart, 2004; Stewart, 2006-2007). According to data from the Institute of International Education (IIE) - Open Doors, about 500,000 international students have enrolled in U.S. universities every year in the last decade. Additionally, many international students stay in the U.S. to work after graduation, composing a growing proportion of workers in knowledge economy occupations.

Secondly, international education and cross-cultural communication have played critical roles in political security for the United States since the beginning of the twentieth century. This
demand increased during the periods after WWII and the Cold War, when the U.S. recognized the importance of diversity in society and mutual understanding with other countries (de Wit, 2002).

Yet, since the 1980s, economic considerations have gradually outweighed the political need to develop international education in U.S. higher institutions (Horn, Hendel, & Frey, 2007). To keep up with the rapid pace of economic globalization during the 1980s, U.S. universities were actively engaged in international student enrollment, which served as “a way to stand out among the mass higher education market” (Chan, 2004, p. 35). For example, according to the 2005 Open Doors report, international students brought in net profits over $13,290,000 for U.S. businesses (IIE-Open Doors, 2006). Altbach and Knight (2007) also reported that international students spend an estimated $12 billion in the U.S. annually.

Among all international students, international graduate students have been crucial to higher education in the U.S. both financially and educationally (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Jacobs, 2005; Trice, 2003). Nearly half of the international students in the United States enroll in masters’ and doctoral programs (Institute of International Education, 2006). Furthermore, research has indicated that international graduate students have significantly enhanced the reputations of individual faculty, departments, and institutions (Jacobs, 2005; Trice, 2003). However, this group of students has often been neglected in terms of institutional support and care in the host
country. For instance, research has indicated that international graduate students have difficulty studying at U.S. graduate schools because they are faced with transitions both to a new educational system and to graduate study in general (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Schutz & Richards, 2003). Yet, their transitional difficulties and needs have not been sufficiently addressed by U.S. schools. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of international graduate students’ adaptation is in an urgent need.

By investigating international students’ transition to a new educational environment through the field of cross-cultural psychology, the three challenges of cultural adaptation, mental health, and adjustment emerge. Berry’s (2006) model of acculturation and adaptation was used in this paper to assist in exploring international graduate students’ academic experiences. This model is appropriate to identify the influential themes related to international graduate students’ academic adjustment because it a) distinguishes group-level and individual-level acculturation, focusing on international graduate students’ adjustment at the individual level; b) considers the impacts of societal variables in the host countries on international graduate students’ acculturation; c) examines transitional difficulties resulting from life changes by investigating cultural contexts in the host country; and d) includes many moderating factors influencing international graduate students’ adaptation processes (Berry, 2006).
Research on international students’ transitional issues has demonstrated that these students generally experience difficulties in communicating with others in the host country due to language barriers, cultural differences, and discrimination. Such experiences have usually affected international students’ academic life and resulted in adjustment difficulties, including psychological stress, feelings of isolation, and other psycho-social problems (Constantine, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Mori, 2000; Yoon & Portman, 2004). In addition, in terms of academic life specifically, some researchers have found that international students experienced difficulty in communicating with their professors and peers, in working as graduate assistants, in writing academic texts, and in participating in class activities (Brown, 2008; Colombo, 2006; Paige, 1990).

In the past decades, only a few studies have identified the causes associated with international graduate students’ learning concerns and challenges. One of these studies demonstrated that international graduate students were an often-neglected segment of the student population in terms of institutional support (Vlisides & Eddy, 1993). Their difficulties in cross-cultural acculturation in relation to their academic life, distinguished from those of American graduate students, have remained largely unexplored.
Justification for the Study

This study focuses on a group of international graduate students, which has been an underrepresented group in the research of cross-cultural acculturation. Few articles studied this group’s acculturation needs. Moreover, this study specifically investigates these students’ academic adaptation rather than social or psychological acculturation. Since academic life is a major part of international graduate students’ lives, these students’ academic experiences should be highlighted in the study of their acculturation. Such a study will help U.S. institutions better understand these students’ academic needs, and better facilitate these students’ adaptation to U.S. campuses.

Furthermore, this study of international graduate students’ academic adaptation also contributes to original knowledge to the field of cross-cultural acculturation by describing international graduate students’ academic experiences at a large public Midwestern university in the United States. Ten international graduate students were purposefully selected for interviews as representatives of international graduate students in this university. Influential themes of these students’ academic adaptation experiences were generated through qualitative investigation. Findings regarding how these themes affect students’ behaviors and mental well-being in the adjustment process were represented, thus contributing to the academic study of international students’ transitional issues.
The Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to describe international graduate students’ academic adaptation experiences in a large public Midwestern university in the United States and to explore how the influential themes of such experiences affected these students’ academic adaptation. Research questions in this qualitative study are as follows:

a) What are international graduate students concerned about in their academic lives?

b) How do the themes and subthemes influence their adaptation to a U.S. graduate school?

c) What are the major and the minor subthemes related to their academic adaptation?

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the validity threat in the sampling phase, including whether the participants were representatives of all international graduate students in the university; whether they shared sufficient and honest accounts of their experiences; and whether their responses were reliable and valid to the topic of academic adjustment. These were unavoidable threats, which may limit the validity of the study.

Another validity threat is that the study largely relied on individual interviews. Participants’ responses may be heavily influenced by the interactions between the investigator and the interviewees and other issues such as timing of the semester. As a result, some participants may express their authentic experiences in adjustment, and some may exaggerate their experiences.
To diminish this threat, informal interviews with some instructors about international graduate students’ performance in class were conducted. In addition, site observations of selected campus services were recorded in the library, the writing center, and shuttle bus stops. These services were selected because they were mentioned by participants as being influential to their academic lives. Then, all the data were triangulated in the data analysis phase. With this strategy, this threat was decreased but not eliminated.

Last, other limitations are boundaries of a qualitative study, discussed in the methodology chapter, including a small number of participants, the focus on a single U.S. university, and the short time for data collection. These boundaries may diminish the validity and reliability of the study.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Key Concepts

This study uses key concepts from cross-cultural psychology and intercultural psychology to explore academic adaptation. Before proceeding, some key terms from those fields will be defined, including cross-cultural psychology, intercultural psychology, and psychological acculturation.

In this paper, adaptation and adjustment are used synonymously, which follows the usage of these terms in existing research on international students. Adaptation has been defined as both a continuing process and an outcome of intercultural contact in terms of psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002). Kim (2001) identified cross-cultural adaptation as the process to achieve social efficacy in a new environment by developing cultural communicative competence, functional fitness, psychological health, and cultural identity; this adaptation process continued for the duration of intercultural contact.

Adjustment was used to indicate the intercultural processes that individuals experience in order to manage and cope with their new environment. Adjustment also referred to the outcomes of those processes, including emotional and behavioral changes required for individuals to effectively interact with a new culture (Gallois, Giles, Jones, Cargile, & Ota, 1995). Aycan
(1997) defined psychological adjustment in terms of maintaining mental and physical well-being, and sociocultural adjustment in terms of becoming effective in the new society.

**Cross-cultural Psychology**

Cross-cultural psychology is the scientific study of similarities and differences in human behavior regarding the ways in which behavior was influenced by the cultural context (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002). Utilizing this definition, the study explores both how international graduate students adjust to the cultural context of U.S. graduate education, and these students’ learning behaviors and mental well being were influenced by the context.

More specific than the concept of cross-cultural psychology, intercultural psychology focuses on individuals’ changes in behavior and psychology when numerous cultural groups came together and interacted with each other in a host country (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002). Accordingly, intercultural psychology particularly focuses on the process of cultural contacts between foreign visitors and people from the host country, and generally assumes that they all interact with the host cultural context. For instance, international students’ adjustment process should be influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of professors and peers from the host country and these people are affected by social customs and beliefs of the host culture. In other words, personal changes in the adjustment process were mainly a result of a series of dynamic interactions between individuals as well as between individuals and the host
culture, rather than a result of a contact between different cultures (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002). In this paper, cross-cultural psychology and intercultural psychology are used synonymously because many studies on international students have used both cross-cultural adjustment and intercultural adjustment without particular clarification.

**Acculturation**

One major concept in relation to international students’ transitions in the fields of cross-cultural and intercultural psychology is psychological acculturation. Psychological acculturation has been defined as an adjustment process in behavior, identity, values, and attitudes that people undergo in response to a changing cultural context (Berry, 1990; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Psychological acculturation mainly examines the changes at an individual level, with necessary considerations on the group-level variations. In general, there were four groups of people as defined by their degrees of voluntariness to the host country, length of residence, and contact with the host culture, namely tourists, sojourners, immigrants, and refugees (Berry, 1990).

Categorized by the length of stay in the host country, the group with the shortest experience are tourists. Cross-cultural tourists are short term, voluntary holiday-makers, and their cultural contact with members of the host culture is limited. The second group was the sojourner, who mighter stay in the host country for several years. Sojourners voluntarily go abroad for a specific
purpose, such as international students, international business people, and diplomats. The third group is the immigrants, including a large portion of individuals who voluntarily relocate for long term resettlement and a small portion of individuals who involuntarily immigrate for political or religious reasons. The fourth group is refugees, who were involuntary settlers pushed into alien environments (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002).

International students are sojourners at the group level. They have distinguished characteristics in the acculturation process. They usually experienced fewer difficulties than refugees in psychological acculturation because they were voluntarily involved in the acculturation process with positive attitudes toward contact and change. Yet compared with immigrants, sojourners experienced more health problems without permanent social support (Berry, 1990). Hence, due to the group-level acculturation characteristics, international students have a distinct adjustment process to the host culture.

**Acculturation strategies.**

As a voluntary group to the host country, international students generally make use of a variety of strategies to acculturate into the host culture. The acculturation strategies were usually categorized by attitudes on cultural identity and the relationship with other cultures into the following four dimensions: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization (Berry, 1990). According to Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen (2002), an assimilation strategy was
used by individuals who wished to maintain their cultural identity as well as to seek daily interaction with other cultures; in contrast, a separation strategy was used by individuals who wished to maintain their cultural identity as well as to avoid interaction with others. Integration was used by individuals to both to maintain their original culture and to have daily interactions with other groups; in contrast, those who practiced the fourth strategy of marginalization indicated little interest in cultural maintenance, and little interest in interacting with others.

**Acculturative stress.**

When studying the above four types of acculturation strategies, researchers have found the greater the cultural distance between the host culture and sojourners’ home culture in terms of language and religion, the more behavioral changes and greater challenges sojourners are faced with. When these difficulties exceed the capacity of an individual’s well-being, acculturative stress appears (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002; Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Ward, 2004). The stress was often manifested by “lowered mental health status (confusion, anxiety, depression), feelings of marginality and alienation, heightened psychosomatic symptom level, and identity confusion” (Berry, 1990, p. 246). Moderating factors on the above stress included age, gender, education, religion, health, language, pre-acculturation motives, expectations, cultural distance, social support, societal attitudes, coping strategies, and acculturation strategies (Berry, 1997). In earlier research, acculturative stress was conflated with the concept of cultural
shock or transition shock, referring to the anxiety of effective interaction with the new environment in the cross-culture adaptation process (Oberg, 1960).

**Cultural distance and acculturation.**

An important value used to identify cultural distance and cultural variability in psychological phenomena has been individualism vs. collectivism (Matsumoto, Takeuchi, Andayani, Kouznetsova, and Krupp, 1998). It has been examined more thoroughly than any other values in contemporary cross-cultural psychology (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002).

Cultural distance in terms of individualism-collectivism (IC) and power distance was posed on the basis of Hofstede’s (1980) dimensions of culture. Hofstede has investigated in more than fifty countries the concepts of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and masculinity, which are defined next. Power distance referred to the psychological closeness between supervisors and subordinates, while uncertainty avoidance indicated the need for formal rules and regulations for decision-making. Individualism-collectivism was the degree of a concern for oneself or a concern for their collectivity, and masculinity referred to the emphasis on work goals or interpersonal goals.

Hofstede identified country clusters based on results from the indices of power distance and individualism. Hofstede found that most western industrial countries fall within a dimension
characterized by a lower power distance index and higher individualism index. Conversely, most developing (Third World) countries fell within a quaternary characterized by a higher power distance index and lower individualism index. In other words, cultural distance was considered as the function of the values of power distance and individualism.

Cultural distance was generally regarded as an influential factor on international students’ transitions to host countries. When international students interacted across cultural boundaries, clashes were more likely to occur if their values and behaviors differed significantly from the host culture (Brislin, 1990). For our purposes, culture is defined as the knowledge, beliefs, values, skills, and behaviors shared by a social group (Pai, Adler, and Shadiow, 2006). Accordingly, the greater the cultural differences between the host culture and the international student’s home culture are, the more challenges this student is likely to face, and the greater chance of the student will experience acculturative stress. Therefore, cultural distance is an important in investigating international students’ acculturation and adjustment to a foreign country.

**Berry’s Model of Acculturative Stress and Adaptation**

Berry’s (2006) model of acculturative stress and adaptation is utilized in this study to assist in exploring international graduate students’ academic adjustment (see Figure 1). This model is appropriate to identify some influential causes of international graduate students’ academic
adjustment because it a) distinguishes group-level and individual-level acculturation, focusing on international graduate students’ adjustment at the individual level; b) considers the impacts of societal variables in individual’s acculturation by examining institutional impacts; c) highlights the stress resulting from life changes by investigating cultural contexts; and d) includes many moderating factors during the whole acculturation process. In other words, this model clearly demonstrates international students’ acculturation process, as well as the issues influencing such a process. In addition, the model employs many key concepts mentioned in this study, such as acculturation, coping strategies, and stress.
Figure 1. Acculturative Stress and Adaptation, Berry (2006), p. 45

Group Level

Society of origin
- Political

Acculturation
- Experience
  - Contact

Society of settlement
- Social support

Individual Level Variables

Moderating factors prior to acculturation
- Age, gender, education, religion
- Health, language, status, pre-acculturation

Stressors
- Cognitive control
- Problem

Stress
- Psychosomatic
- Psychological

Adaptation
- Psychological
- Cultural

Moderating factors during acculturation
- Contact discrepancy
- Social support: appraisal & use
- Social attitudes: appraisal & reaction
According to Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen (2002), the model (see Figure 1) examined acculturation in a holistic way by investigating the interactions between individuals’ origin cultures and host cultures. An individual’s home culture should be an important consideration in the study of cross-cultural acculturation because the cultural characteristics of the original culture always accompany individuals to the culture of settlement.

As shown in Figure 1, at the individual level, this model starts with acculturation experience in the left middle box, which shows the beginning of an individual’s contact with a new culture. Then, during the intercultural contact, an individual experiences greater or lesser difficulties or stressors, which is represented in the second box in the middle line of the model. Due to the impact of the moderating factors, shown in the upper line and the lower line of the model, some difficulties decrease effectively; some may not and result in psychological stress such as anxiety and depression at the end. For example, the moderating factors such as coping strategies or outside support can help an individual deal with difficulties. Generally speaking, only when certain difficulties are out of an individual’s cognitive control do they cause stress. Finally, in the middle line of the model is the long-term outcome of acculturation, cultural, social, physical, and psychological adaptation outcomes. The following sections explain in detail how Berry’s model is used in this study.
First of all, in this model, the moderating factors were divided into those occurring prior to acculturation and during acculturation; all of them “can be seen as risk factors and protective factors, depending on their degree or level” (Berry, 2006, p.46). For instance, the model shows that age is a factor influencing international students’ acculturation. The impacts can be positive or negative on individuals’ adjustment to the host country. Therefore, this paper not only identifies influential themes on international graduate students’ academic adjustment to U.S. graduate schools, but also explores how these themes impact students’ adjustment.

Second, the model suggests that acculturation does not necessarily result in stress. As Berry (2006) stated, only when greater levels of conflict were experienced are these adjustments judged to be problematic. In this sense, acculturation experiences include both smooth adjustment at a lower level, and stress at a higher level of intercultural adaptation. For instance, international students whose home culture is similar to the host country may experience less stress and smoother changes than those whose home culture is very different from the host culture. In order to understand international students’ adjustment in a complete way, this study investigates the themes influencing all kinds of acculturation experience, including both smooth and stressful adjustments. Thus, this study purposefully selected participants with cultures both similar and different from American culture based on Hofstede’s cultural distance indices.
Third, this model indicates that although sojourners could use coping strategies to help with their adaptation process, these strategies were effective only if the dominant society had positive attitudes towards these people (Berry, 2006). In other words, individuals’ acculturation is not only impacted by their own strategies and attitudes, but is also inevitably affected by the context of the host country. In this study, themes of international graduate students’ academic adaptation are examined from various sides, including individuals’ skills, interactions with others in the host country, and impacts of environments outside of classroom.

Fourth, in this model, the level of stress resulted from the interaction between acculturative problems (stressors) and individuals’ coping strategies (Berry, 2006). Coping strategies may decrease acculturative stress. For instance, international students who have had previous experiences in a foreign culture may experience less stress than others who have not, even if both students are from the same country. In other words, acculturative stress is not solely determined by cultural distance; coping strategies are important moderating factors in an individual’s acculturation process. Therefore, this study employed qualitative methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of participants’ adjustment.

Fifth, in the acculturation model, adaptation is a neutral word, varying from well-adapted to poorly adapted statuses. It does not necessarily mean acculturated or assimilated. Because of the
neutral meaning of acculturation and adaptation, this study explores participants’ adaptation experiences, both with positive and negative outcomes.

Studies on International Students’ Acculturation

Much research on international students’ acculturation has indicated that international students generally experience difficulty in their cross-cultural adjustment process. Challenges and difficulties included feelings of isolation, loneliness, homesickness, and insecurity (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). Paige (1990) argued that one of the biggest difficulties for international students’ acculturation was the dilemma between integrating to the new academic community and maintaining their cultural self-esteem. The other major challenges included difficulties in communication and discrimination.

Difficulties in Communication with Others

For many international students, language was a major acculturation challenge (Wilton & Constantine, 2003). Hernandez Castaneda’s (2008) case study at a U.S. university found that international students had difficulties in communicating in English, seeking academic advisement, integrating into their academic programs, and learning cultural differences. Li (2007) also identified language issues as one of the key causes influencing students’ academic adjustment.
Furthermore, language challenges often cause academic problems for international students. Constantine, Okazaki, Gainor, and Baden (2005) found that international students generally expressed difficulties in communicating with professors and peers; thus, they tended to choose courses that required limited English ability. Poyrazli & Grahame (2007) discovered that due to language inefficiencies, many international students usually had difficulty in interacting with professors, getting used to teaching differences, and participating in class discussion with their American peers. Moreover, McClure (2007) stated that ineffective interactions with professors easily caused international students’ mental problems such as anxiety of adapting to the new teaching style, stress of undertaking research work independently, and depression of seeking learning support from professors.

**Prejudice and Discrimination**

Many studies have indicated that international students occasionally encountered prejudice and discrimination, which affected their mental health (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Mori, 2000; Yoon & Portman, 2004). Language ability could be one of the reasons why international students occasionally faced prejudice and discrimination; other reasons included color, gender, and race.

Constantine et al. (2005) examined the cultural adjustment experiences of 12 African students in the U.S. in a qualitative study. They found that African international students generally experienced prejudicial or discriminatory treatments by others, which resulted in
serious acculturative stress, including anger, frustration, feelings of isolation and loneliness. Bonazzo and Wong’s (2007) study on Japanese international female students also indicated that their participants experienced discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypes when interacting with professors and peers. Simpson’s (2008) study on international graduate students of color stated that these students were confronted with nonacademic challenges which impacted their transition to the graduate education, causing feelings of marginalization and isolation as well as cultural stereotyping and discrimination. Wadsworth, Hecht, and Jung (2008) further explained that discrimination was an important predictor to international students’ educational acculturation because perceptions of discrimination from American peers created stress for international student to adapt to the classroom environment.

**Moderating Factors Influencing International Students’ Acculturation**

In Berry’s (2006) model, moderating factors of acculturation and adaptation are classified into two categories: those prior to culture-contact and those after arriving in the host country. Moderating factors prior to acculturation are more related to people’s original cultural background and characteristics, such as age and gender. Moderating factors during acculturation are more concerned about the impacts of host culture and people’s interactions with the host country, such as social support and acculturation strategies.
Moderating Factors Prior to Acculturation

Cultural distance.

Cultural distance was identified as a factor impacting individuals’ adjustments to a new culture in Berry’s (2006) model of acculturation. Research on intercultural training has found that cross-cultural transitions are less difficult for those international students whose home cultures are similar to the host culture; as a result, these students experience less psychological stress (Ward, 2004; Redmond, 2000). Furnham and Bochner (1982) also indicated that international students’ adaptations varied as a function of the cultural distance between their home cultures and the host culture. Galchenko and Vijver (2007) confirmed such statements when they examined the cultural distance in international exchange students’ acculturation processes and outcomes in Russia. They found that the Asian group, who had larger cultural distance from Russia, showed more stress, fewer coping strategies, and poorer adjustment than students from African countries with a smaller cultural distance.

In addition, some other moderating factors in Berry’s (2006) model, such as language and religion, are closely associated with the factor of cultural distance, influencing international students’ acculturation. In a qualitative investigation of Asian students’ learning experiences in New Zealand, Campbell and Li (2008) discovered Asian students’ challenges included language difficulties in communication, lack of the knowledge of academic conventions, difficulties in
group cooperation, lack of sense of belonging, inadequate learning support, difficulties in making friends with domestic students, and cultural differences in terms of communication barriers and unfamiliar patterns of academic norms. Most of these challenges derived from cultural differences of pedagogical implementations in these students’ home countries.

In a qualitative study conducted by Constantine, Okazaki, Gainor, and Baden (2005), researchers found that Asian students clearly felt the differences of educational system in the U.S. and they generally experienced cultural value conflicts. Yeh and Inose’s (2003) study discussed the impacts of cultural distance on international students’ adaptation by indicating that European students experienced less acculturative stress and cultural conflicts in the United States than their Asian, African, and Latin American counterparts. By contrast, Wilton and Constantine (2003) found that Latin American students had higher levels of psychological distress than their Asian peers because of greater cultural value conflicts and lower enrollment resulting in fewer peer support resources.

**Age and gender.**

Berry’s (2006) model posits that age is an influential pre-arrival factor, which has been confirmed by other studies (Msengi, 2003; Seo & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). For instance, Seo and Koro-Ljungberg (2005) reported in their hermeneutical qualitative study of older Korean students in the U.S., that these Korean students experienced communication difficulties in class
participation because of language barriers and age-related concerns such as taking care of parents and finding a spouse. Moreover, Seo and Koro-Ljungberg’s (2005) indicated that older Korean students preferred to preserve their own cultural values, which resulted in serious value conflicts while adjusting to the U.S. However, other studies did not find a significant relationship between age, gender and acculturation (Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timini, 2004; Yeh and Inose, 2003).

**Moderating Factors During Acculturation**

**Social support.**

Social support and societal attitudes are shown as one of the moderating factors during acculturation in Berry’s (2006) model. Many articles have represented the positive impacts of social support in international students’ psychological well-being (Duru and Poyrazli, 2007; Lakey & Dickinson, 1994; Lakey, McCabe, Fisicaro & Drew, 1996; Ye, 2006). For instance, Yeh and Inose’s (2003) quantitative study of international students’ acculturation stress at a U.S. university found that social connectedness and social support network satisfaction were significant factors predicting students’ acculturative stress. Ying and Liese (1994) also found friendship with Americans usually led to improved psychological preparation and a successful adjustment in the United States.
Besides societal characteristics, social support from family, friends and community has also
been identified as contributing positively to adjustment. Schuh and Laana (2006) concluded
several salient issues related to first-year students’ adjustment processes, and one of which was
communication with family members. Constantine, Okazaki, Gainor, and Baden (2005) also
reported that international students generally described their family and peer networks as being
useful in helping them with cultural adjustments to their new environments. In a quantitative
study, Kagan and Cohen (1990) identified social support as a significant factor predicting
international students’ cultural adjustment. Their study found that social support from a spouse,
American friends, and friends from the same country as the student significantly and positively
influenced international students’ cultural adaptation. This broad range of social support
encouraged sojourners to immerse themselves in the host culture while still preserving their ties
with friends from their home culture.

**Coping strategies.**

Coping is a concept that has been frequently mentioned in studies of adjustment. Coping
refers to the use of strategies such as learning culture-specific knowledge and skills to effectively
interact with the new environment, and such knowledge and skills were found useful to facilitate
categorized coping into four styles: approach, avoidance, acceptance, and social support.
Individuals may have more than one coping style when they interact with the host culture, which greatly influences their cross-cultural adjustment.

Among these four styles of coping, approach indicates active coping, planning, and suppression of competing activities. Avoidance was defined as behavioral disengagement, denial, venting, and the absence of positive reinterpretation. Acceptance referred to restraint coping, and lastly, social support indicated seeking emotional and instrumental support. Among them, the coping style of avoidance had stronger negative consequences for cross-cultural adaptation than the others. By contrast, social support positively connected individuals with a variety of sources in a cultural context, such as family members, co-national or host national friends, and institutional services (Ward and Kennedy, 2001).

Individuals’ coping strategies were identified as being important to their acculturation process, because these strategies improved interaction with the new environment (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). In a cross-cultural study, Britain, Ward and Kennedy (2001) found that two coping strategies, approach and avoidance, were significantly associated with British international students’ cross-cultural adjustment in Singapore; whereas the other two, acceptance and social support, were not found to significantly relate to these students’ adjustive outcome.
Contact discrepancy related to time.

Sojourners usually did not transit to a new environment in a smooth way, because of disorientation, anxiety, confusion, and culture shock resulting from unfamiliar cultural environments (Bochner, 2006). Lysgaard (1955) as well as Klineberg and Hull IV (1979) have posed the U-curve hypothesis of the fluctuant adjustment process with typical periods of euphoria in the first six months after the initial arrival, depression after the first six months, and recovery after 18 months in the host culture. Yet, the U-curve hypothesis has been challenged by many researchers. Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen (2002) found that psychological adaptation often increased soon after the initial intercultural contact, then followed by a variable decrease over time. In contrast, sociocultural adaptation showed linear improvement over time. Some longitudinal investigations of sojourner adaptation also found that international students usually experienced the most acculturative stress soon after they arrived at the host country (Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima, 1998). Moreover, Kim (1995) identified the process of cross-cultural adaptation as “a cyclic and continual draw-back-to-leap pattern similar to the movement of a wheel” rather than a U-curve shaped pattern (p. 178). However, all the above researchers agreed that an individual’s cross-cultural adjustment varied over time in a fluctuating process.
In recent years, many researchers have compared the changes in individuals’ acculturation processes over time. Firstly, a number of researchers have found that length of residence in the host country is one important moderating influence in individuals’ adaptation. For example, in a quantitative study, Wilton and Constantine (2003) examined the relationship between length of residence, acculturative stress, and psychological problems in Asian and Latin American international students’ adaptation. They found that a longer length of residence in the U.S. predicted a lower level of psychological problems. However, the impact of residence length on individuals’ acculturative stress was not found significant. In Wei, et al.’s (2007) quantitative study of international students’ depression, researchers reported that the length of time in the U.S. did not show a significant prediction to international students’ depression.

Secondly, much research found that acculturation varies over time, with the most stress during the initial contact with the new culture, in contrast with previous findings in terms of U-curve hypothesis. For example, Ward, Okura, Kennedy, and Kojima (1998) investigated Japanese international students’ adjustment in a longitudinal study of psychological and sociocultural adaptation to New Zealand. They found that international students’ psychological and sociocultural adjustment problems were greatest at the entry point and decreased over time, which did not follow a U-curve fluctuation. Their study also indicated that the correlation between psychological adjustment and sociocultural adjustment usually increased over time, which
reinforced the close relationship of sojourners’ psychological adaptation and behavioral adaptation. For another example, Brown and Holloway (2008) conducted an ethnographic study of international students’ adjustment at a university in England over a 12-month academic year, and their findings challenged the U-curve model of international students’ acculturation.

**Acculturation strategies related to attitudes.**

Acculturation strategies as a moderating factor in Berry’s (2006) model referred to individual attitudes and behaviors towards the host country. For example, personality was found to influence an individual’s acculturation attitudes and adjustment to a new culture. Duru and Poyrazli (2007) investigated the acculturative stress of 229 Turkish international students at 17 U.S. universities, and discovered that the impacts of students’ personalities, in terms of neuroticism and openness to experience, was a significant predictor in these students’ cross-cultural adaptation. Ward, Leong, and Low (2004) also found that personality in terms of neuroticism and extraversion were closely related to international students’ acculturative stress.

Besides personality, media was also reported to be influential to international students’ acculturation attitudes. Reece and Palmgren’s (2000) study indicated that Indian international students’ acculturation motivation was significantly and positively correlated with four television viewing motives in terms of acculturation, reflection on values, surveillance, and learning. Tobolowsky (2006) also discovered that media such as television shows about international
students’ college life abroad affected first-year college students’ expectations and behaviors of academic life.

**Studies on International Graduate Students’ Academic Adjustment**

Research has indicated that international graduate students often have difficulty studying at U.S. graduate schools, because they faced both a transition to a new educational system and adjustment to a new level of graduate study (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Schutz & Richards, 2003). These difficulties have generally been identified into two categories regarding academic life and graduate life.

**Difficulties Related to Academic Life**

International graduate students faced linguistic and cultural challenges in terms of becoming accustomed to an unfamiliar culture and to a new education system, as well as navigating these differences in a foreign language (Andrade, 2008). Moreover, most international graduate students reported feeling some level of frustration at meeting the high level of academic English requirements, in particular, academic jargon and scholarly writing.

Additionally, language can impact and strengthen many other barriers related to international graduate students’ academic adjustment. For instance, international graduate students’ English proficiency was closely associated with their confidence to handle with heavy academic workloads and to participate in class discussion (Swagler and Ellis, 2003).
Swagler and Ellis (2003) conducted a mixed methods study on cross-cultural adjustment of Taiwanese graduate students in the United States. Through interviewing 24 Taiwanese graduate students, the researchers found three major themes throughout these students’ adjustment experiences: confidence in English fluency, social contact with both Americans and Taiwanese, and being independent in the U.S. A follow-up quantitative study showed that the combination of confidence of speaking English and social contact was a significant predictor of international students’ cultural adaptation.

**Challenges Related to Graduate Life**

Graduate education can be difficult for international students to adjust to because of the heavy workload, unfamiliar academic cultures, and challenging assistant work. Brown (2008) investigated international graduate students’ acculturation and found that one-year master’s students typically experienced academic stress owing to the intensity of coursework. Brown’s study showed that students’ stress was most intense at the beginning of their academic programs, and declined gradually as a function of reduction in the academic workload. In addition, Brown (2008) reported that international graduate students’ acculturative stress mainly resulted from academic cultural differences between their original countries and the host country. These cultural differences included learning resources, academic writing, critical thinking, participation in discussion, and intensive technology use. As Colombo (2006) stated, international students’
difficulties in adjusting to academic writing was not only due to language barriers in terms of vocabulary and grammar but also because of the inadequate understanding of academic writing standards and expectations in U.S. universities.

Besides coursework, assistantships have been identified as another challenge for international graduate students in their adjustment to U.S. graduate schools. Paige (1990) found in the late 1980s that a majority of international graduate students work as teaching assistants (TAs) or research assistants (RAs) in the United States. TA or RA experiences usually added to international graduate students’ acculturative stress because of both the difficulties in completing their tasks and having to deal with the complaints from American students and faculty. For instance, American undergraduate students complained that their foreign TAs lacked the adequate English language skills and effective teaching skills. American graduate students who did not receive financial aid complained that international graduate students took their jobs away. American faculty complained their RAs were unfamiliar with academic research norms and the American educational system (Paige, 1990).

Summary

This chapter demonstrated the importance of international graduate students to U.S. schools and to the large society. It then described the conceptual framework of acculturation and adaptation in the field of cross-cultural psychology. Firstly, relevant concepts in terms of
interculture psychology, acculturation, adaptation, adjustment, cultural shock, and cultural distance were explained. Then, Berry’s (2006) model of acculturation was introduced as the conceptual framework of this study. In addition, the author discussed how this mode is applied in this study to explore international graduate students’ academic adaptation experiences. Next, to get a contemporary view of international students’ acculturation, this chapter reviewed recent articles and published books about international students’ acculturation. The review was demonstrated on the basis of Berry’s (2006) model of acculturation in terms of stressors and moderating factors in the acculturation process. Finally, studies in the last two decades about international graduate students’ acculturation were examined and a more comprehensive understanding of these students’ experiences was found necessary.

This literature review not only discussed the importance of international students to U.S. universities, but also represented the need to better understand international graduate students’ academic adjustment. In order to investigate these students’ adjustment, concepts in the field of cross-cultural psychology as well as acculturation were examined and presented. Berry’s (2006) mode of acculturation and adaptation was employed in this study. The review of research and publications in the recent two decades in this chapter indicated that international graduate students’ academic experiences at U.S. graduate schools have still remained largely unexplored. Therefore, this study is designed to bridge this gap through qualitatively investigating
international graduate students’ academic adjustment experiences in a U.S. university. Methods used in this study and the research process are demonstrated in the following chapter.
CHAPTER III: METHOD

Research Purpose and Qualitative Method

Because of the exploration research purpose, qualitative research methodology was employed in this study. Three boundaries were identified, including research subjects of only international graduate students, a focus on these students’ academic experiences instead of psychological and social acculturation in a general sense, and a single U.S. university as site.

This research was conducted at a large, public university located in the Midwestern United States. This university is home to over 18,000 students who live on the main campus and offers more than 200 student organizations and clubs, including 38 fraternities and sororities. It offers over 200 major programs through its seven colleges. Altogether, there are approximately 927 full-time faculty members, 80% of who hold the highest degree in their field. This university has over 20,000 students, comprised of over 17,000 undergraduates and 3,000 graduate students. Among the 20,000 students, there are approximately 800 international students from over 80 countries. In the academic year of 2008-2009, 407 international graduate students enrolled in the university. Among them, more international graduate students were from collectivist cultures than those from individualist cultures. Participants were chosen from both types of cultures.

Qualitative research was used in this study because the purpose of research was to explore international graduate students’ adjustment experiences. The exploration of such experiences
“can only be established by talking directly with people, allowing them to tell stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). Compared with quantitative research, qualitative research usually requires an inductive paradigm to guide the research project and an interpretive lens to analyze the data. In this study, the paradigm was social constructivism, which relied on participants’ views of an issue, considered the interactions between settings and the participants, and developed an understanding of an issue in an inductive way (Creswell, 2007). In addition, several characteristics of qualitative research were emphasized in this study based on the above paradigm, including natural settings where participants experienced the issue, multiple sources of data, participants’ perspectives, and inductive data analysis.

In this study, the bounded systems included the setting of a medium-sized public Midwestern university in the U.S., the population of international graduate students, and research conducted over three semesters. First, the study was conducted at a Midwestern U.S. university to explore international graduate students’ cross-cultural acculturation. Second, the study was limited to international graduate students’ academic adjustment, and did not include undergraduate international students. Third, this study was conducted in a limited time period, from the summer semester of 2009 through the spring semester of 2010.
Moreover, from the major methods used in this study, this study could be defined as a qualitative interview study, in which interviewing is the primary data collection strategy to understand an issue (Hatch, 2002). This study aimed to explore international graduate students’ cross-cultural acculturation in academic life. Interviewing was an appropriate strategy because it gave participants an opportunity to tell their own stories. That said, the interpretations of data focused on the descriptions of participants’ experiences to explore the common themes influencing their academic life. Additionally, through member checking with participants and peer debriefing with some professors in her department, the investigator attempted to bracket her background and experiences as an international graduate student from the data interpretation in order to get a fair understanding of the participants’ experiences.

In all, on the basis of the constructivist paradigm, the interpretative stance of this study should be both describing the context and bracketing the investigator’s background. More information related to permission, participant selection, and sources of data are discussed in the following sections.

Data Collection

Permission from HSRB Office

Since this research study involves human subjects, approval was needed from the Human Subject Review Board (HSRB) at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) before data
collection began. To obtain the approval of research, informed consent and interview
questionnaire of this study were submitted together with the HSRB application form. The
informed consent briefly introduced the purpose of the study, the procedure, any benefit and
harm to participants, and the procedures for people to participate in and withdraw from the study.

The study was approved by the HSRB office on August, 14, 2009 before the participant
enrollment started (see Appendix A).

**Participant Selection**

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P</th>
<th>I-C Culture</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>GA</th>
<th>Status</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>RA</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Germany</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>RA</td>
<td>Single</td>
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<td>Math</td>
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<td>Second</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>TA</td>
<td>Single</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>American Studies</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>RA</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Geology</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>TA</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
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<td>German</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>H</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Second</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* P: participants; I-C: Individualism vs. Collectivism culture; GA: graduate assistant; RA: research assistant; TA: teaching assistant

Purposeful sampling was used in this study. To represent international graduate students
from diverse cultures, ten participants were purposely selected from culturally representative
groups of international graduate students at a large Midwestern university in the United States (see Table 1).

The important value dimensions used to identify cultural distance and cultural variability in psychological phenomena are known as Individualism vs. Collectivism (Hofstede, 1980; Matsumoto, Takeuchi, Andayani, Kouznetsova, and Krupp, 1998). Country clusters have been established based on the index of power distance and the index of individualism (Hofstede, 1980). Generally speaking, most of western industrial countries are located in the quaternary of individualism, with relative lower power distance and higher individualism index; while most of the Third World countries are located in the quaternary of collectivism, with relative higher power distance index and lower individualism index.

The predominant groups of international graduate students from collectivistic cultures included Chinese, Indian, Saudi Arabians, Kenyans, and Ghanaians. The predominant groups of international graduate students from individualistic cultures included Germans, Canadians, Austrians, and British. All international graduate students from the countries above were potential participants, representative of the two general cultural groupings at the university.

In addition to the consideration of cultural diversity, the relationship between the investigator and potential participants was another important issue to address in participant selection. Appropriate rapport between the investigator and participants can help make
participants feel at ease and more comfortable to speak openly and honestly about their thoughts during an interview (Maxwell, 2005). Therefore, in this study, the investigator strived to establish good relationships with the research population by taking classes, attending organization activities on campus, and working at Center for International Programs on campus before the participant selection started. As a result, the participants chosen in this study generally had good rapport with the investigator, which improved the validity of this research.

Based on the above criteria, ten participants were chosen and individually interviewed over a period of five months (see Table 1). Three of the ten participants in this study were classmates with the investigator, who knew these participants for at least one semester. Four other participants in this study were known by the investigator from various student organizations and their activities for at least one and half years. The other three participants were introduced to the investigator by her friends, and the investigator knew these participants for approximately three months. Generally speaking, all the ten participants trusted the investigator and viewed her as a peer in terms of being international students in a foreign country. The relationship between these participants and the investigator helped explore the issues at a deeper level because these participants were open to share their feelings and experiences, both positive and negative.

Furthermore, the ten participants were representative of the international graduate students at the university. Among the ten participants, six were from collectivistic cultures (two Chinese,
two Indians, one Saudi Arabian, and one Ghanaian), and the other four were from individualistic cultures (two Germans, one Austrian, and one British). Out of all international graduate students at this university in 2008-2009, 55% of them came from the above countries. Additionally, the ten participants were well balanced in terms of majors and gender, four from science majors and six from arts majors; four of the participants were male, and six were female. Moreover, the 10 participants covered many moderating demographic factors in Berry’s (2006) model of acculturation, varying in level of education, age, type of assistantship, language ability, length of stay in the U.S., and marital status (see Table 1).

**Interview Questions**

Interview questions were developed on the basis of a full literature review (see the Appendix B). The interview protocol was semi-structured with nine demographic questions and ten open-ended questions about the students’ academic life. Spontaneous questions were allowed during interviews. To discover comprehensive information, the ten questions were organized in the order from broad to specific by considering the pre-question effects.

Some of the nine demographic questions were developed based on Berry (2006)’s model of acculturation and adaptation, considering the moderating factors on individuals’ adaptation processes, including age, gender, level of education, marital status, and language proficiency.
Some of the nine demographic questions were developed on the basis of a literature review about international students’ acculturation, such as assistantship status and length of stay in the U.S.

Ten interview questions were developed based on a full literature review about international students’ acculturation in the last two decades. Previous research found seven themes of international students’ academic experiences: in-class experience, out-of-class experience, student-professor relationship, language skills, social support, difficulties, and expectations.

Based on the previous research findings, ten interview questions were developed from broad to specific by considering the pre-effect of questions. For instance, the first two questions were designed broadly and generally like “what outside-of-class and in-class experiences do you like or dislike, and why?” Then, specific questions were asked about these students’ in-class experiences, such as “what kinds of teaching and learning-related relationship influence your learning? How?” (See Appendix B)

Some interview questions overlapped to some extent, aiming to explore the same theme from different perspectives. For instance, to explore out-of-class experiences, two questions were asked in relation to the same topic: “what factors outside of the classroom have influenced your academic life?” “Could you give some examples of activities outside of class that you think improve your academic achievements?” (See Appendix B)
All interviews were audio-recorded, field notes were taken, and reflections on the interviews were recorded to enrich the data sources. The estimated time was 60-90 minutes to allow for an in-depth discussion. The interview questions were pretested with one international graduate student for the time and for the wording. Some changes were made to the wording after the pretest in order to make the questions clearer and to more directly address academic adaptation. For instance, a question was changed to be “can you tell me one story related to your academic life at BGSU” rather than “please tell me an exciting experience.” (See Appendix B)

Sources of Data

The data in this study were obtained from rich resources. The primary data were from individual interviews, including audio records, transcripts, field notes, and investigator’s reflections. Other sources of data were site observation field notes, notes from informal interviews with faculty members, and documents such as program descriptions.

Field notes of interviews were taken during all interviews. Two types of information were recorded: a) points that the participants emphasized by means of voice and gestures, and b) information that needed clarification or details, which were asked after the interviews. Audio recordings were analyzed for participants’ mood, speed of speaking, pitch, and laughter, all of which may have showed participants’ feelings and emotions. Reflections on the interviews were
written by the investigator at several different times: soon after each interview, once all
interviews were completed, and then during the data analysis process.

Observation was another source of data. The investigator conducted site observations and
wrote down raw field notes of classroom activities and campus services, which international
students were utilized. The field notes as well as the reflections of interviews were kept as a
research journal over a period of six months. All journal entries were numbered and identified as
memos. A memo is an introspective record, which helps to examine research goals, to discover
resources, and to lead toward carrying the inquiry (Maxwell, 2005). Besides the journals, the
informal interviews with faculty members and documents were also included as memos.
Documents such as the description of programs were obtained from the BGSU website.

Tools and Procedure of Interview

Individual interviews were conducted in English and on campus. The required written
signature of informed consent was completed before each interview. Participants were told that
all the information would be kept confidential before their interview in order to eliminate these
participants’ worries and also to encourage them talk more about their real thoughts. Two tape
recorders were used during each interview in case one had problems. All the interviews were
audio recorded, field notes were taken, and reflections of interviews were made to enrich the data
sources. Each of the 10 interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes but ranged from 45 minutes to 75 minutes.

Moreover, interview strategies were used to obtain high-quality data, such as listening skills, attention to body language, and transcribing the interviews soon after they were completed. For instance, the investigator consciously spoke less and gave participants time to organize their thoughts. The investigator chose to listen more during interviews because it allowed the investigator to generate timely questions for deep exploration (Hatch, 2002). In addition, the investigator used body language and facial expressions during interviews to show her engagement in the conversation and to encourage participants to talk more. Moreover, after the interviews, the investigator also transcribed the interviews soon and edited the field notes right away. All of these strategies improved interview quality and validity of data collection.

Data Analysis

Member checking with participants was conducted before coding to make sure the transcripts of interviews address the participants’ authentic perceptions. No misunderstanding was found. All written data, interview transcripts, field notes of interviews, reflections of interviews, observation notes, and program descriptions were coded and triangulated in an iterative way, including data reduction, data display, and data verification. Memos and summaries were taken down in each process of data analysis. Typically, interim case summary
was done for generating pattern codes in the process of data display. Additionally, during the whole data analysis, in order to bracket out the investigator’s experiences as an international student, peer debriefing was used to comment and challenge the emergent categories.

First of all, according to Miles and Huberman (1994), data reduction was conducted by using descriptive codes. Descriptive codes are used for summarizing information with little interpretation. Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this study, descriptive codes consisted of three or four capitalized letters. The process of coding started with reading the data to get an overall sense. Then data were reviewed line by line and assigned with information segments. All data were read and assigned information segments several times until all meanings of data were included. Then, descriptive data were used to reduce the information segments on the basis of the conceptual framework of acculturation. Memos were taken during this coding process to express how and why these descriptive codes were generated based on the conceptual framework of cross-cultural acculturation.

Second, since coding is an inductive process to search for patterns and to make general statements about the research topic (Hatch, 2002), data display was the second major procedure. Displays include many types of matrices, graphs, charts, and networks to help organize, compress, and generalize the meanings of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To display the data,
the investigator first sorted the data into categories and coded them. Data were analyzed more interpretively this time. To differentiate from descriptive codes, the codes of categories were used with capitalized and italicized words. Summaries were written about how the categories were generated and why the descriptive codes were selected for each of the category. This process resulted in a total of 13 categories based on text meanings and the conceptual framework of the phenomenon. The categorical coding was repeated several times to clarify the relationships. Memos of these codes and coding processes were taken down by the investigator. Finally, these 13 categories were displayed on a graph, showing the relationships between each other and the connections with student academic acculturation. Closely associated categories were identified through the display process. Finally, five themes were generated.

The next stream of analysis activity was conclusion drawing and verification to confirm the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All the raw data were reviewed again to verify the themes that emerged. These five themes were verified again in the conceptual framework, and two of the five themes were combined together according to the original data meanings and the understanding on the basis of the conceptual framework in this study. Therefore, four themes were generalized at last. In these four themes, 10 subthemes were identified as the influential causes affecting international graduate students’ academic acculturation.
Finally, the strategy of quantizing qualitative data was used in the data analysis to identify the major and minor subthemes. An inter-respondent matrix and an intra-respondent matrix were used to quantize the interview data, which generate qualitative effect sizes of the ten identified subthemes in this study (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003). That said, an inter-respondent matrix was used by quantizing the qualitative data to examine how many participants mentioned a particular subtheme; an intra-respondent matrix was used to count how many responses to interview questions as a unit were tied to each subtheme. Major and minor subthemes were then identified based on the overall of these two frequencies.

Specifically, the first step of quantizing data was to binarize subthemes by coding a “1” if participants mentioned these subthemes during interviews, and coding a “0” if not (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Then, an inter-respondent matrix (participant X subtheme matrix) and an intra-respondent matrix (unit X subtheme) were quantitatively formed by using the binarization numbers (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Frequencies of each subtheme were counted in the two matrixes, respectively. As a result, the inter-respondent matrix indicated how many participants discussed each of the ten subthemes, whereas the intra-respondent matrix identified how many units (responses) referred to each of the ten subtheme.
Validity Considerations in the Study

The first validity threat of the study was in the sampling phase, including whether the participants were representative of all international graduate students in the university; whether they shared sufficient and honest accounts of their experiences; and whether their responses were reliable and valid to the topic of academic adjustment. These were unavoidable threats, which may decrease the validity of the study. Thus, these threats were reported in the limitations section of this paper.

Another validity threat is that the study largely relied on individual interviews. Participants’ responses may be heavily influenced by the interactions between the investigator and the interviewees and other issues such as timing of the semester. As a result, some participants may express their authentic experiences in adjustment, and some may exaggerate their experiences. To decrease this threat, informal interviews with some instructors about international graduate students’ performance in class were conducted. In addition, site observations of the use of some campus services were also recorded in the library, the writing center, and shuttle bus stops. These services were mentioned by participants as being influential in their academic lives. Then, all the data were triangulated in the data analysis phase. With this strategy, this threat was diminished but not eliminated.
In the data analysis phase, the largest threat was the investigator. As an international graduate student, the investigator may have unconsciously overemphasized some information that she agreed with, and overlooked some information that she disagreed with. To decrease such threat, the investigator did a peer debriefing about the data analysis with some professors in her department.
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This study was conducted in a medium-sized public Midwestern university in the United States during the academic year 2009-2010. All data were obtained at a single university over the course of one year.

To arrive at the three major themes and ten subthemes, all text data were firstly divided into information segments, and altogether 333 segments of information were generated. After reducing the overlapping segments, 46 descriptive codes were generalized. Then, according to the research questions of this study as well as the conceptual framework of acculturation, these 46 descriptive were organized into 13 categories. At last, through further data display and verification by multiple sources of data of this study, ten subthemes within three themes were produced. These three themes as well as ten subthemes demonstrated what influenced international graduate students’ academic adjustment to a U.S. graduate school, which achieved the research purpose of this study. In addition, to generate qualitative effect size of the results in this study, inter-respondent and intra-respondent matrixes were used to quantize the qualitative data. As a result, among the ten subthemes, six major subthemes with larger percentages were distinguished from the other four minor ones. The themes and the subthemes as well as their relationships in each theme were reported as follows (also see Table C1 in Appendix C).
Theme One: Interactions with People in Our Academic Life

Subtheme 1: Relationship with Professors at U.S. Graduate School

Relationships with professors were described frequently by the participants in this study. According to these students’ descriptions, relationships with their professors not only included communication with professors in class, but also interaction with professors outside of class, as well as professional contacts with and personal feelings about their professors.

Interactions with professors.

When asked during the interviews about impacts on their academic lives, nine of the ten participants talked about their relationships with professors. These participants commented that professors were helpful, and more importantly, professors were willing to help. For example, one student said “I got support from my professors. They gave me a lot of thoughts.” Another one stated “they [professors] are helpful. When you have questions, they are patient and willing to help.”

Some participants in interviews emphasized that they liked the professor-student relationship in the U.S. more because it was much closer than that in their home countries. For instance, one participant said “my professors are very outgoing and friendly and deal with us like their friends.” Another mentioned “the contact to professor is closer than I ever experienced before in Germany, which is a good thing.” Noting the communication styles of the faculty,
another student said “the way professors with us, the way they talk, the distance in sense, are kind of informal. I like it.”

Yet, some international graduate students expressed difficulties in communicating with their professors due to language barriers or cultural differences. One participant during interviews expressed that “sometimes I got lost in communicating with professors and sometimes I ran out of words.” Cultural distance at times hindered opportunities for relationships, as one participant stated “coming from a totally different culture, it is difficult to establish a very close relationship with professors in English department.” In short, participants in this study generally recognized that interactions with professors were very useful to their study at the U.S. school. Yet some participants felt hard in getting close to their professors due to language barriers and a different cultural background.

Professors’ teaching.

International graduate students generally appreciated their professors’ teaching styles, which were informative and interactive. One participant mentioned “my professors usually make the class interactive, and make the class discussion environment relaxing.” Another noted “my professors make lessons interesting and close to practice.” Addressing different teaching styles, one participant expressed that “I like those professors who make the class more relaxing and interactive, those who are able to make use of experiences outside of the classroom to illustrate
the concepts in teaching.” Similarly, another student stated “I like my professors very much. Their teaching styles are very useful.” Moreover, one participant who worked as teaching assistant stated “another thing I learned from my professors was that I tried to be more informal in teaching, such as talking about other things or teaching in an interactive way.” In other words, professors’ teaching styles not only enhanced these students’ learning but also improved these students’ teaching.

Besides teaching styles, international graduate students also appreciated professors’ teaching skills. More than one participant said that their professors taught all what they know so that students learned more than being expected. For instance, one participant said “they [professors] try to teach more, and if they don’t know, they will try to get it back to you next time.” Furthermore, many participants stated that professors also cultivated their learning strategies, which made them learned far more than knowledge in class. Like one participant said, “professors are the facilitator[s], answering questions time to time and to guide [guiding] our discussion. It is kind [of] an independent way, which has cultivated my critical thinking.” In short, international graduate students not only learned much knowledge and experiences from their professors, but also obtained useful learning strategies and skills through their professors’ effective teaching.
Professors’ expectations and class behaviors.

It was not easy for international graduate students to adjust to their American professors’ class behaviors and expectations on students’ assignments. For instance, due to cultural differences, some international graduate students felt uncomfortable with their professors’ class behaviors, which they felt were too informal. During interviews, a participant indicated “when my advisor made jokes in front of me, it was a shock to me.” The informality went beyond discussion styles, as one student shared that “some professors went in class in shorts! Should be a little bit formal, I think.” Another student noted that language was a surprise: “some professors got really excited in teaching, sometimes, they cursed and swore. I know they did not mean that but it was difficult for me to agree [with such behaviors].”

In addition, international graduate students had to adjust to their professors’ academic expectations. For instance, one participant in this study said “[professors’] expectations are so different here, such as many reading assignments after school.” Another participant talked about her adjustment to her professors’ expectations on writing:

Different expectations from the teachers, especially those of grading and writing.

Specifically, how they [professors] graded the paper was very different from what I knew. They [professors] wanted a different style in writing. What I got from the comment was that my professors did not like my writing style at all, which they thought was too sophisticated.
They liked it to be very straightforward, very easy to understand. They don’t like when you use like long and complicated words. Maybe they want it to be more accessible here in the United States.

Similar to this student, another participant told a story about how her advisor’s expectations changed her academic goals:

When I talked about it [writing the thesis] with my advisor, he highly recommended not doing a thesis, although in the program’s description, it is emphasized [to complete a thesis]. I did not know why she gave me such suggestion, but I totally got lost from that. … Finally, I got the permission about writing a thesis. But after the back and forth, I do not want to do the thesis any more. So, I am doing a final project right now for graduation.

In short, international graduate students had to adjust to American professors’ class behaviors and academic expectations due to cultural differences. Unfamiliar behaviors and expectations from American professors usually affected these students’ learning processes and outcomes.

Professors’ support.

International graduate students in this study generally felt that support from their professors was far more than just academic help, which also included gaining confidence, language skills, and research experiences. As one participant said in this study, “I talked with my advisor about
difficulties and frustrations in my life and study. I usually got encouragement and self-confidence from him, which helped me to progress.” Another participant talked about language improvement with the help from his professor as “my writing skills were improved every time when I got comments from my professors for my papers.” Noting research abilities, one participant addressed that “we [one of her professors and her] talked about what we have done for research; she helped me with the final project.” In sum, professors’ support assisted these students’ knowledge learning and personal developments regarding confidence and language skills. More importantly, these students felt that they could ask for help from their professors whenever they need aid, even outside of class.

**Professors’ approachability outside of class.**

International graduate students generally appreciated their professors’ approachability outside of class. These participants in this study expressed that their professors were quite accessible at school. Many participants went to their professors during office hours or through an appointment. Like one student in this study said “I’d say they [professors] were very helpful. Whenever you have problems, you can talk to them, and they will help you. They even help you prepare for a presentation.” Among all professors, international professors were regarded more helpful than others by some participants.
International professors: Understanding us from intercultural perspectives.

One participant in this study particularly talked about her interactions with an international professor in her college. She claimed that she got more support and understanding from that professor because the professor had similar acculturation experiences to U.S. graduate study. This participant claimed “this professor I mentioned actually is much closer to me because she is not a U.S. citizen. She can understand the issues [acculturation] more. So, she can encourage me in a way I can easily accept.”

In summary, relationship with professors at U.S. graduate schools was shown to be a manifest subtheme influencing international graduate students’ learning behaviors and attitudes. Although these students spent a lot of time adjusting to their professors’ teaching styles and requirements, they generally appreciated their professors’ approachability and help during their adjustment processes. Besides interactions with professors at school, relationship with fellow students was also found to be significant on international graduate students’ adjustment to U.S. graduate schools.

Subtheme 2: Relationship with Fellow Students

Participants in this study indicated that their American colleagues were helpful in class discussion. However, American students seldom had contacts with them outside of class. By
contrast, international fellows were more helpful and approachable both in class and outside of class.

**Collaboration with American fellows in class.**

When participants talked about class activities, they generally expressed that they learned something through cooperating with Americans in class, such as language skills, cultural knowledge, and learning strategies. For example, one student said “my American classmates help me when I am not sure with English.” Another mentioned “they [Americans] help me with organization in writing.” Besides language, international graduate students also indicated that Americans could improve their understanding of American culture. One participant said, “I usually ask [American] students in class about American cultures”. Another participant gave an example as “when you read, you are not sure about something in texts. You find out it during class discussion with them [American students].” In addition to cultural knowledge, these students were also affected by their American fellows in learning behaviors. One participant stated that “they [Americans] are very active in class. They speak loudly, very brave to speak their opinions, right or not so right. We should learn that.” Another student found that he became efficient through working with his American colleagues and he said “Americans were ahead of time. They do things quick.” In short, international graduate students learned a lot from their American classmates, including language skills, cultural knowledge, and learning behaviors.
However, except for interactions in class, international graduate students had few chances to study with their American colleagues outside of class.

**Fellow American students’ attitudes outside of class.**

Although fellow American students helped in class, international graduate students generally felt distanced from them outside of class. One participant in this study indicated “my [American] classmates appear to be arrogant, not very much friendly. So there is not much communication as expected after school.” Similar to this participant, another student also shared that “the American students in my department just appear to be kind but you can clearly feel that kind of distance between our each other.” Thus, more than one participant addressed that American colleagues were not helpful to their academic study outside of class. Like one student addressed, “there was a distance. They [Americans] are not approachable personally. I would not say they are helpful outside of class.” Being asked why there were few interactions with American students outside of class, one participant explained “they [Americans] leave after class. They don’t stay after class. It seems that they have their own business to do. So we don’t talk after class.” In sum, a distance existed between these students and their American colleagues outside of class, which hindered their engagement in U.S. schools. However, there were exceptions about such interactions and relationship. If these students were friends with their American colleagues before taking classes, they helped each other outside of class.
American friends.

International graduate students expressed that relationships with American students would be different if they were friends. Like one participant in this study said, “if the American classmates are your friends, they talk to you a lot.” In that case, international graduate students can learn from their American friends regarding English and American cultures. For example, one participant expressed that “my American friends help me understand American educational system when we hang out.” Another participant really appreciated her American colleagues’ help outside of class and she stated “it is really good for me to learn from my American friends about American cultures because of my major in American Studies.” In short, with American colleagues’ help outside of class, international graduate students can improve their understanding of U.S. cultures and academic conventions. Thus, many international graduate students hoped to have American friends at school.

Need of friendship with Americans.

International graduate students usually wanted to make friends with Americans because they were not satisfied with the communication with their American peers at school. However, many international graduate students felt it difficult to establish the friendship with Americans. Therefore, they generally wished the school could create opportunities for them to communicate with American students. In this study, one participant expressed his hope to have American
friends as “I would like to have many American friends, not only for English practice, but also for cultural information collection. Such information could make me contribute in class discussion.” Another participant expressed the difficulty in finding American friends. He said:

I do not have many opportunities in interacting with Americans. Most of them are just pals academically. I want to have American friends because I want to know more about the culture. But I am a passive person. I won’t look for a friend actively. If there is a chance, I may do it.

Therefore, many participants wished their school to help them to establish the friendship with Americans. One student stated, “our school should help with icebreaking. They should create some opportunities for us to get to know American students.” Compared with the relationship with American colleagues, international graduate students were generally satisfied with the interactions with their international colleagues both in class and outside of class.

**Collaboration with international fellows.**

Participants in this study regarded that they learned a lot through working with their international fellows both in class and outside of class. For example, one participant in this study said “international students were more likely to share the process [than Americans]. So I learned both knowledge and skills from my [international] classmates when we worked together.”

Similar to this student’s experiences, another participant that “we [international colleagues and
he] discuss problems in class and after class from different perspectives. It is helpful for me to understand them [problems] more comprehensively.” These students also commented that they obtained the majority of learning achievements through collaborating with international colleagues. One participant suggested that “we [international classmates] work together after class. I learn most from my [international] classmates.” Besides learning outcomes, another participant also noticed his improvement in learning behaviors and he said, “they [international fellows] are cautious about answers when they did the thinking. They noticed the material very well. That made it easy to get clues from we have learned. We learned from each other.” Because of such help from international colleagues, participants of this study generally showed positive feeling for their international fellows.

Feeling for international fellows.

International graduate students generally felt closer with their international fellows than their American fellows. One of the reasons was that they shared cross-cultural experiences. For instance, one participant said “in general, I like stay[ing] with international students, because I am not the only foreign person here.” Another participant also expressed “when I interact with international people, other international students, actually it helps [my study] a lot, I think, because you have something in common.” In short, international graduate students regarded their international colleagues as greater helper in their academic adjustment. They worked together
both in class and outside of class. Because of these interactions, they learned from each other and built up a friendly relationship with each other.

To summarize, relationship with fellow students in terms of American colleagues and international colleagues heavily influenced international graduate students’ learning processes and outcomes. For instance, studying with American colleagues improved these students’ understanding of U.S. cultures and academic conventions. Working with international colleagues, these students obtained both knowledge and skills in their academic study. However, the results also indicated that there was not enough interaction between American colleagues and international graduate students outside of class, which impacted these students’ psychological adjustment to U.S. schools. Besides such distance between American colleagues, participants also experienced other prejudice from different places at school.

**Subtheme 3: Prejudice**

International graduate students felt uncomfortable with the prejudice they experienced in their academic life. During interviews, some participants mentioned prejudice they obtained from their professors, school services, and American students. Such prejudice mainly resulted from language accents, race, and sexual bias. For example, one female participant said:
Some professors look down upon women students, like you don’t really know much compared with men. [There are] a couple of problems, not only racism but also sexism.

Some people might feel that she is a woman, so she is not so qualified. That was not true. Another participant talked about the prejudice from school services that she experienced: “we [international students] cannot do it [student health insurance confirmation] online. But Americans, they can. I don’t know why it has the difference for us than everyone [American student.]” An international teaching assistant during the interview shared that “the person who was calling me is an American citizen, so he knows the regulation. So he is trying to take advantage of my situations to know the grade he was not supposed to know.” Besides the above experiences, some international teaching assistants in this study were also looked down upon by their students. For example, one participant told that “my [American undergraduate] students complained that I did not speak English at all. Hello! If I did not speak English, what language was I speaking?”

In short, studying at U.S. schools, international graduate students were treated unequally or unfairly from professors, school services, and American students. These unpleasant interactions not only influenced their mental health but also affected their learning processes.

**Subtheme 4: Family Concerns**

One of the interesting results in this study was that the only two married participants in this study emphasized that support from their family was extremely vital to their study at the U.S.
They explained that they felt guilty that they could not take family responsibilities when studying abroad, such as taking care of kids and their spouse. Thus, their family’s support was greatly appreciated. For example, one student expressed the impacts of her family on her study here as follows:

My family does not support me economically but in a spiritual way, which is very important to me. We communicate with each other through Skype verbally or emails in a written form. Such kind of communication is very important to me. Chatting with family members is very important to me. You got your family. It is really difficult for you to make such a big decision to be here alone. You have to sacrifice a lot. So family’s support is very important to me.

Also because of such family responsibilities, the two married participants highly valued their families’ opinions when making big decisions about staying abroad. For example, when one of the two participants applied for a doctoral program, he consulted it with his family back home. He said “You know, if I am here for another two or three years, I have to get to know what they think about it.”

To sum up, both communications with professors and Americans at school and interactions with family were shown significant to international graduate students’ learning processes and attitudes. These students may adjust to U.S. graduate schools faster when they have positives
relationships with professors, American students, international colleagues, and family members. In other words, relationships with professors, fellow students, and family can facilitate or hinder individual international graduate students’ adjustment to U.S. graduate study. Besides relationships with people, these students’ acculturation knowledge and skills were also found to be greatly influential in their adjustment processes as the theme two represented in the follow section.

**Theme Two: Acculturation Strategies of Adjusting to U.S. Graduate School**

**Subtheme 5: Language Learning**

Language barriers and English learning have influenced many international graduate students’ study at U.S. graduate school. Some participants in this study expressed their difficulties in class activities and assignments due to language inefficiency. One participant said “some words were beyond my control. Working with my second language, it was difficult for me to cut into class discussion sometimes.” Another participant stated that “the accent usually made people misunderstand me.” Language barriers impacted these students’ learning processes. For instance, one student in this study expressed that “I would prefer to write a paper than to do a presentation because I don’t think that fast in English.”

Realizing the importance of English, international graduate students highly valued language improvement in their academic life. Some participants in this study indicated that English skills
were very important to their study. One student said “we are in the environment. English is the first language used here. So we have to learn it well.” Another participant also addressed that “living in English speaking country, speaking is very important. Academic writing is also important because for most of time it is a big part of grades.” Almost every participant mentioned how language affected their learning processes and outcomes during interviews. For example, one student said “the most impressive experience for me as an international student is to improve my academic writing skills. Not just writing, but writing in a certain way in this new educational system because I have to write essays and papers. Another student mentioned “I spend a lot of time in improving English. I have told my friends to stop me and fix my English speaking whenever I made a mistake.” In short, studying in a foreign country, international graduate students had to overcome language barriers in their study. The poorer these students’ language competencies were, the longer they adapted to U.S. graduate study, because they faced more difficulties in academic communication at school and a larger amount of time needed for language learning outside of class. Besides language proficiency, international graduate students’ cultural knowledge and experiences were appeared to be another important subtheme impacting their academic adjustment processes as follows.
Subtheme 6: Academic Cultural Distance

Cultural differences in academics have been another inevitable adjustment for international graduate students. Unfamiliar class activities and intensive study tasks were not easy for these students to adapt to. However, international graduate students developed and improved strategies to adjust to U.S. graduate education, including good time management, persistence, and open minds towards intensive coursework.

**Preparation for class.**

International graduate students had to adjust to unfamiliar classroom activities due to cultural differences between their original culture and U.S. culture. Some participants in this study claimed that the class activities at U.S. graduate school were quite new to them, including class discussions, presentations, and leading group discussions. For instance, one student said “it is very important to express your ideas in American classroom. It is one of the main processes in class. But, oral presentation is stressful to me.” Another student was not used to such change and she stated “after coming here, we are made to talk a lot in class.”

However, international graduate students still appreciated the interactive and student-centered classroom activities because class participation made them feel part of the group. These students tried to adjust to the U.S. classroom and contribute to class. Therefore, many international graduate students spent time preparing for class, such as practicing presentation
skills, reading textbooks in advance, and searching extracurricular information for class discussion. Like one participant in this study said “I go to the library, search for information, and use it for class discussion.” Another student stated “almost every class, you have to do oral presentations. I am getting used to such activity. I just need some time to prepare it. Before presentation, I usually practice at home in front of a mirror.” One participant explained the importance of class preparation in their academic study:

If I know the topic, the communication in class is not hard for me. So, I need to understand the concept at the first place. Then I would feel more comfortable to talk and could contribute to the discussion in class.

In short, class preparation served as an effective strategy for international graduate students to adjust to unfamiliar American classroom activities and to facilitate their academic study at U.S. schools. Besides class preparation, international graduate students also faced intensive and diverse assignments in their academic studies.

**Working with diverse coursework and class assignments.**

International graduate students had to adjust to the intensive academic tasks at U.S. graduate school. Some participants in this study indicated that U.S. graduate education has had a great deal of coursework, including a lot of readings and small papers together with numerous deadlines. One participant said “we have a lot of readings and written assignments, very
intensive! If you do all the required readings, you cannot do anything else.” Another participant concluded that “here, you have a lot of small assignments. You always have due dates.” Many international graduate students complained about such intensive learning tasks. Like one student stated in the interview, “I have had a lot of readings here in the past year here than all I did at my home country before.” In order to adapt to such intensive coursework, these students utilized various strategies to facilitate their learning processes and outcomes.

**Strategies for academic adjustment.**

The first indispensable strategy was time management skills. International graduate students had to learn how to balance their study, work, and social life. For instance, one participant in this study stated:

You should have a good time arrangement skill to get things done. I have a 20-hour assistantship and 12 credit hours’ coursework every week. So you have to make it work for you and find time to do all the things you have to do.

The second strategy for international graduate students to deal with intensive coursework was to ask questions in class and to catch up outside of class. These international graduate students had their own ways to make up with cultural knowledge. Like one participant stated, “I did lots of readings after class to catch up with cultural information.” In addition, international graduate students worked hard to complete their learning tasks. One student in this study said “if
I have an assignment to do, I try to complete it as early as possible.” Another one said “I tell myself that you should have research in mind all the time, even when you talk to someone or when you walk, you think about your research. Learning is an on-going process.”

Last but not least, international graduate students tried to get involved in all kinds of assignments to enrich their learning and research experiences. For instance, one participant in this study said that “I like assignments to be different, to write a paper, to create a website, or to respond to an article because diverse assignments help me to be more engaged in learning.” Another one said “I like doing presentations. It gives me time to express myself and to get confidence.” Yet, these students were not used to all types of assignments at U.S. schools. For instance, one student stated “I don’t like that there is too much going online. It takes me a lot of time to do the posts, to write everything, and to read every single thread that other persons have written.”

In short, international graduate students had to adjust to unfamiliar classroom activities and intensive coursework at U.S. schools. They utilized various strategies to facilitate such adjustment, but their learning processes and outcomes were still heavily affected by the academic cultural differences.
Subtheme 7: Learning Motivations and Attitudes

International graduate students usually had high motivation to learn as well as positive learning attitudes, which facilitated their academic adjustment to U.S. schools. Such motivations and attitudes were expressed in this study as a result of future plans to work in the United States after graduation, aspirations of succeeding in a foreign country, and the personality of self-improvement.

Firstly, participants in this study particularly expressed how future plans related to their learning process. One student expressed what several others mentioned, saying “I talked to my professors about what I want to do in the future. We talked about how it should relate to my learning currently.” Many students indicated that future plans of working in the U.S. drove them to work hard at school in order to stand out from American students. For example, one student expressed her future plan during the interview: “I am looking for a job in the United States. You have to work harder than Americans because you know you have no backup in a different culture.”

Secondly, some participants said that they worked hard at school also because they strongly desired to succeed in academics, which could give them self-assurance. They said “when you get excellent performances in class, you may feel confident in the foreign country”. Such aspirations of succeeding in a foreign country heavily influenced these students’ learning process.
Thirdly, personality is another driving contributor to these students’ positive learning attitudes. One participant in this study claimed that “I always want to do my best.” Another student also stated that “I need to rely on myself.” Such characteristics usually drove these students to work hardest. For example, one student addressed that “you don’t have to do all the reading assignments, but you should do it. Then you can participate in class discussion and learn more about the topics.” Another student also expressed the similar ideas like “it is your responsibility to get things done.”

In short, highly motivated by future plans of working in the U.S., aspirations of success at school, and strong personality, many international graduate students studied hard and were more likely to succeed in their academic studies. Besides motivating themselves in learning, international graduate students also utilized various school services to facilitate their academic studies.

**Subtheme 8: Utilization of School Services**

**Utilization of campus facilities for learning.**

Participants in this study mentioned that they usually made use of campus facilities, which were closely associated to their academic lives. In this study, participants talked about how the shuttle bus, internet, the library, and the recreation center helped with their academic study as follows.
First, these students took the shuttle bus to campus because few of them had cars. Thus, the shuttle bus was their major mode of transportation between their apartments and campus. Second, these students were more likely to study on campus because they could use the computer labs and printers to facilitate their study. For example, one participant in this study said “I prefer to use the internet on campus, which is fast. There are computer labs on campus with a lot of open hours.” Another participant also had the similar experiences and he stated “also printers are there. You can print out stuff easily and for free. Most of my work is done in the computer lab in this building.” Although many international graduate students were not accustomed to using so much technology in learning, these students generally regarded the internet service useful to their study and research. For instance, one participant addressed that “the internet service is very helpful. I used it to communicate with others, to see news, to see what is happening in the world, and to search articles for class.”

Third, besides the internet service and computer labs on campus, utilization of the library was also frequently mentioned by participants during interviews. These students usually went the library for books and articles because they had intensive papers to be done. More than one participant expressed their positive attitudes towards the library services. For example, one participant stated “I worked in library a lot. I borrowed books and searched for articles. Really a great help.” Noting the online service, another participant addressed that “I think the best thing
about the library is that they have OhioLink, so they can bring books from other libraries.”

Moreover, one participant also mentioned that “each department should have their own library. You cannot work without the library.”

Fourth, these students used the recreation center for physical exercises in order to keep healthy. Participants in this study stated that the recreation center was a good place to get relief from stressful coursework. For example, one student said, “the recreation center can keep me happier and healthy. The recreation center provides a place to do exercise. It is a good thing to use the recreation center to help me relax.”

Utilization of office services.

Participants in this study also talked about their utilization of office services to assist their academic adjustment on campus. The most frequently mentioned services included the Bursar’s office, the health center, and the center for international students. Other services also were indicated during interviews, such as the writing center, the career center, and the student legal office. However, although some students expressed that although they experienced mental issues such as homesickness and stress, they did not mention that they visited the counseling center on campus.

First, finance was a big concern of international graduate students. Almost all participants in this study talked about their interactions with the Bursar’s office. Some of these students were
not satisfied with the Bursar’s service because they were made to spend a lot of time dealing with financial issues. For example, one of the participants said “everything is in a mess right now. We just got our contracts. It is annoying because you have to go to them thousands of times.” Another participant also complained that “I have to go to the Bursar’s millions of times because they always make mistakes.” Similar to this student, another participant also indicated that “they [the Bursar’s] were charging me all kinds of things you don’t have to pay. They made mistakes, and when you ask them, nobody knows the answer.”

Secondly, in addition to such financial concern, health care was another concern closely associated with international graduate students’ adjustment. For example, some European students said they were not used to paying health insurance because they had a different health insurance system in their home countries. Besides, some participants in this study complained that the health center was not efficient in working, which wasted their time and confused them. For example, one participant addressed:

The insurance office really needs to solve the thing with insurance. I have had different emails with different stories from every single place. Everyone is telling a different story [about the health insurance]. So you have to go there like millions of times. They have to consider that we don’t have much time to go around and do the stuff.
Other resources.

In addition to campus facilities and office services, participants in this study also indicated that they sought help from various student associations on campus. Student associations as well as some local organizations for international students usually helped them with language and cultural knowledge. For instance, one of these students said “Global Connections [a local organization] helped us orient at the beginning of arrival.” Another participant talked about student associations on campus: “I went to African dinner, Saudi Arabia dinner. I made friends there. We learned from each other.” In short, international graduate students used various resources on campus to facilitate their adjustment to U.S. schools, including school facilities, office services, and different organizations. Yet, these resources were not always useful as international graduate students expected. Thus, these students had to spend time dealing with their financial concerns or health insurance concerns, which influenced their learning processes.

In summary, international graduate students studying abroad employed various strategies to adjust to a new educational system, including language improvement, cultural information collection, learning motivation development, and school service utilization. Making good use of these strategies, international graduate students may be more likely to adjust more rapidly to a new environment. However, studying in the U.S., international graduate students’ academic
adjustment was greatly affected by the context of U.S. graduate schools as theme three represents in the next section.

**Theme Three: Graduate Experiences**

**Subtheme 9: Graduate Students’ Academic Concerns**

Participants in this study expressed their concerns about thesis/dissertation, final projects, and other academic research tasks. Some participants prepared for thesis/dissertation in advance. For instance, one interviewee said, “I knew that in the program’s description, to write a thesis is emphasized. So I thought I would write a thesis at the beginning of this program.” Besides the expectations of doing research, these participants also tried to accumulate their research experiences, such as searching for research information in their field, contacting with professionals in their field, and participating in formal academic activities, such as conferences.

However, many international graduate students still felt it was hard to adjust to research tasks of U.S. graduate school. For example, one participant said that now she realized that “the coursework is better than research. Research is frustrating sometimes. You spent a lot of time but no solutions, frustrating.” Another participant in this study also said “I need [to] get out of research, too stressful.” In short, different from undergraduate students on campus, international graduate students were more likely to be concerned about their research tasks, which were stressful enough to affect their academic adjustment. In addition to research concerns, many
international graduate students also had concerns about their campus-based assistantships. Such working experiences represented as both opportunities and difficulties to these students.

**Subtheme 10: Graduate Assistant (GA) Work**

*Opportunities from graduate assistant work.*

Most of the participants in this study were graduate assistants (GAs) on campus, working as teaching or research assistants. Only two were government-sponsored students with fellowships from their home countries. Interestingly, these two students both expressed that they wished to have a GA position because they thought the related work would benefit their adjustment to U.S. graduate school. Both of the two students said that they tried to find a job on campus. One finally got a teaching assistant position. He expressed that he was excited and could not wait to see how it would be going. The other student was still trying to get a job. According to her words, “I wish I could have assistantship. Then, I may have more experiences, knowing more about my major from my department, knowing more things, but not just things that what I am studying. I may learn others’ experiences in office.”

Indeed, GA work heavily influenced international graduate students’ academic life. Firstly, working as GAs, international graduate students had a great deal of opportunities to learn U.S. classroom cultures, to improve their understanding of knowledge in their academic area, and to accumulate working experiences in the United States. For instance, international teaching
assistants in this study generally found that the English as a Second Language (ESL) course of
teaching training was very useful for them to learn about U.S. academic cultures. Like one
participant talked about, “ESL class helps me get used to the active style of U.S. classroom and
multiple class activities. I also got to know how to use the online blackboard, prepare for class,
and lead class discussion in teaching.”

Secondly, teaching experiences improved international teaching assistants’ understanding of
U.S. academic cultures. For instance, one of the teaching assistants in this study expressed:

I got to know that American students expect much freedom in class. They are very active in
class. So, I paid attention to create an informal and interactive class for them. This also made
me understand my professors’ expectations in class and encouraged me to get more involved
in my own class.

Thirdly, GA experiences also improved international graduate students’ communication
skills and teaching skills, which were beneficial to their competition in the job market. For
example, one of the participants indicated “teaching experience can help me to find a teaching
job in the future.” One participant shared his understanding of teaching as a GA like this: “I
definitely learned something new from my [American] students. They asked me questions,
making me to think and reflect on my teaching.” Another participant emphasized his
improvement of communication skills and he said, “the way to present knowledge is important.
My students are from various departments. So you should keep presentation simply and straightforward. That is what I am learning.”

Finally, working with their supervisors, international graduate assistants generally obtained the chance to improve their research experiences and abilities. For example, one participant expressed her GA experiences, “I helped organize a conference. It was good to see the formal academic life. I never been at a conference once, so being inside one, really cool.” Noting research abilities and skills, one participant addressed that “the way to search for information is improved. The time is shortened.” Another participant also concluded that “I know more about research, such as I know more about how to do [a] literature review.” In short, GA work improved international graduate students’ understanding of U.S. academic cultures, communication skills, and research experiences. These opportunities made international GAs more involved in academic work and facilitated their adjustment to U.S. schools. However, GA work also resulted in more difficulties, which hindered these students’ academic adjustment as follows.

**Frustration from GA work.**

The impacts of GA work on international graduate students were also shown in a challenging way. As GAs, international graduate students had to work 10 to 20 hours per week on campus. In addition, they had to register at least 12 credit hours of academic courses.
Accordingly, life was very stressful and busy for international GAs. Some participants said that time management was a critical strategy in their life. For example, one participant stated “one of the difficulties in my academic life was time conflicts. I need to arrange time between teaching and my own learning.”

Besides time issues, international GAs also experienced other difficulties, including nervousness, annoyance, frustration, depression, and stress. For instance, one participant talked about his nervousness and frustration with teaching experiences: “I was nervous to lecture. I tried hard to express some concepts, but from their [American undergraduate students’] responses, I could tell I did not do a good job.” Another participant told us his annoyance with GA work: “She [an American undergraduate student] came to Dean and complained about me for teaching in an incorrect way. I felt upset.” Feeling depressed in teaching, an international teaching assistant (TA) stated “I found it difficult to understand what [American] students said and they found difficult to understand me because of the totally different accents. When they asked questions, I asked them to repeat. The students don’t like it always.” Another TA also expressed her stress in teaching:

My [American undergraduate] students complained about my English and teaching.

Certainly, I did not know how things went in American class because I never been here
before. So I expected their [American undergraduate students’] cooperation in class. But they complained a lot. I was stressed at that time and even wanted to go back home.

**Fulfillment from graduate assistant work.**

Although GA work was challenging, international graduate assistants in this study generally concluded that they appreciated their GA working experience because they obtained a sense of achievement, strong personality, and feeling of contribution from it. One participant even said she loved her teaching assistant job: “I chose the teaching assistantship instead of the fellowship I was offered because I really like teaching.” Another international teaching assistant also said “teaching comes like a fresh air. When you teach students and when you see they understand, you feel your contribution. It is a good feeling. I like it. ”

Teaching experiences also helped international graduate students with their personal development. These GAs in this study generally said that they built up confidence in working with Americans, they felt their ability to work in the U.S. society, and they became tough and strong in mind. For instance, one participant said that “if I am a strong person, that’s because of these stressful experiences.” Another participant also stated “it [graduate assistant work] helps me to gain the confidence in communication with others. Now I get over it [stress from GA work] and am in the game.” In short, GA work was stressful and depressive, which influenced international graduate students’ mental health and learning processes. However, international
GAs generally gained a lot of opportunities to understand U.S. academic cultures and to improve their research skills through GA work. Moreover, these students obtained working fulfillment and self-confidence through working with Americans in the foreign country.

To summarize, different from undergraduate students, international graduate students had research concerns when they studied in U.S. schools. Moreover, since most international graduate students worked as GAs, they had both opportunities and difficulties from GA work. GA working experiences influenced these students in both behaviors and mental well-being, such as research skills, learning processes, personal development, and mental health. In other words, GA working experiences as well as research concerns greatly affected these students’ academic adjustment to U.S. graduate education.

**Major and Minor Subthemes**

Among the above ten subthemes within the three themes, some were more prevalent than others, such as GA work versus family concerns. Thus, in order to generate qualitative effect size of these subthemes and to identify the major and minor subthemes on international graduate students’ academic adjustment, mixed data analyses were used in this study. Table 2 shows what percentage of international graduate students may in this study mentioned each of the ten subthemes that emerged from the interviews. Table 3 indicates what portion of responses to the interview questions constitutes each subtheme. According to the overall percentages on the basis
of the above two matrices and the in-between distances of all the ten subthemes, six major
subthemes and four minor ones were identified as shown in Table 4. Those subthemes with
overall percentages higher than ten percent were major subthemes. Table 4 demonstrates the
overall impacts of each subtheme. Subthemes with overall percentages larger than ten percent
were identified as major subthemes. Compared with minor subthemes, major subthemes imply a
larger impact on participants’ academic adaptation and call for more attention and support.
School policies and practices in relation to major subthemes should be prioritized. Results were
shown as follows.

**Frequencies of Subthemes by Participants**

The inter-respondent matrix (see Table 2) showed how frequently participants mentioned
each of the subthemes during interviews in this study. The different frequencies of the ten
subthemes indicated that they were not equally important in international graduate students’
academic adaptation.

The most frequently mentioned subthemes were language (ST5), academic cultural distance
(ST6), and GA work (ST10), with the same 13.9% among all. These three subthemes were
followed by the subtheme of academic relationship with professors (ST1) with 12.5%. In
contrast, the least frequently mentioned subthemes were prejudice (ST3) and family concerns
(ST4), with the same frequency of 2.8%. Altogether, in terms of themes, theme two was most
frequently mentioned by participants, with the percentage of 48.6%, followed by theme one and theme three, with 29.2% and 22.2%, respectively.

Table 2

*Inter-respondent Matrix*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Theme 2</th>
<th>Theme 3</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
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<td>ST2</td>
<td>ST3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
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<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total%</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* P: participant; ST: subtheme.

**Frequencies of Subthemes by Responses**

The intra-respondent matrix in Table 3 indicates how intensively the data/responses to all interview questions are represented in each subtheme. The data were divided into units in terms of participants' responses to each of the question during interviews. The results showed that the
most frequently mentioned subtheme were learning attitudes (ST7) and academic cultural 
distance (ST6), with 17.8% and 17.3% respectively, followed by utilization of school services 
(ST8) and academic relationship with professors (ST1), both of which registered 12.4%. In 
contrast, the subthemes with the lowest frequencies were prejudice (ST3) and family concerns 
(ST4) at 1.8%. Altogether, the most frequently mentioned theme was theme two, with the highest 
percentage of 59%, followed by theme one and theme three, with 28% and 13% respectively.

Table 3

\textit{Intra-respondent Matrix}

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Theme 2</th>
<th>Theme 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>ST1</td>
<td>ST2</td>
<td>ST3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q1</td>
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<td>Q2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Q8</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total%</td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Note:} Q: question; ST: subtheme.
Overall Frequencies of Subthemes

As shown in Table 4, according to the overall percentages and the in-between distances of all the ten subthemes, six major subthemes and four minor ones were identified. Those subthemes with overall percentages higher than ten percent were major subthemes. They included subtheme 6 of academic cultural distance (16.5%), subtheme 7 of learning attitudes (15.8%), subtheme 1 of academic relationships with professors (12.5%), subtheme 5 of language (12.1%), subtheme 8 of utilization of school service (12.1%), and subtheme 2 of academic relationships with peers (11.8%). The minor subthemes in this study were found to be subtheme 3 of prejudice (2.0%), subtheme 4 of family concerns (2.0%), subtheme 9 of research concerns (6.4%), and subtheme 10 of GA work (8.8%).

Table 4

Overall and Average Percentages of Subthemes

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Theme 1</th>
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<th>Theme 2</th>
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<th>Theme 3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ST1</td>
<td>ST2</td>
<td>ST3</td>
<td>ST4</td>
<td>ST5</td>
<td>ST6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total by P</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% by P</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total by R</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% by R</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall %</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ST: subtheme; P: participants; Q: question; R: responses.
In sum, this section identified six major subthemes and four minor subthemes influencing international graduate students’ academic adjustment to U.S. graduate schools. Accordingly, the six major subthemes affected these students’ adjustment more significantly than the other four minor subthemes. For instance, one of the major subthemes, academic cultural distance heavily influenced these students’ adjustment. That said, international graduate students, who were familiar with the U.S. education system regarding classroom activities, academic conventions, cultural background, and coursework, were more likely to adjust to U.S. graduate school than those who were unfamiliar with U.S. academic cultures. In other words, major subthemes were shown more significant impacts than minor ones on international graduate students’ academic adjustment.

Summary

This chapter reported the results of this study by means of three generalized themes as well as ten subthemes. The three themes represented international graduate students’ academic experiences at a U.S. graduate school, including interactions with people in our academic life, acculturation strategies of adjustment, and graduate student experiences. The three themes showed how these students adjusted to the U.S. graduate school from three different aspects in terms of interacting with others, depending on themselves, and interacting with the context of graduate life at school.
Moreover, ten subthemes were indicated within the three themes in details. Major subthemes and minor subthemes were identified through mixed data analyses, which generated qualitative effect sizes of the data in this study. The results showed that four major subthemes were from theme two and the other two major subthemes were from theme one, which means theme two had the most impacts on these students’ academic adjustment. That said, acculturation strategies international graduate students employed during adjustment greatly affected their academic adaptation processes and outcomes. Meanwhile, interactions with others were also very important to these students’ academic adjustment. Last, the impacts of cultural context did influence these students’ adjustment but not as largely as the other two themes.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The results of this study represent that international graduate students’ academic adjustment to U.S. schools are affected by academic relationships, academic adjustment strategies, and distinct graduate student experiences. Ten subthemes are generated from the above three themes. The impacts and implications of these themes are summarized below, following by discussion about how the findings of this study relate to relevant scholarly literature on the research topic.

Four Subthemes Identified from Theme One

The results of this study show that international graduate students’ relationships with people in their academic lives are important to their adjustment to U.S. graduate education. People who impact students’ adjustment include professors, colleagues, school staff, and family members. Academic interactions with professors, fellow students, and school staff may facilitate international graduate students’ studies. Yet, on the other hand, discrimination and unfair treatments may also arise from these interactions occasionally, which challenge students’ academic adjustment. Besides interactions with people at school, family support is found very valuable to married international graduate students’ academic adjustment in the U.S. Therefore, four subthemes are generated from this theme: relationship with professors, relationship with peers, prejudice, and family concerns. The details of how these four subthemes impact international graduate students’ academic adjustment to U.S. graduate study are discussed below.
Subtheme 1: Academic Relationship with Professors

Many studies on international students have found that student-professor relationships and professors’ teaching approaches were key causes that impacted international students’ academic adjustment. Research has reported that international students faced various adjustments to a different teaching style and a difficult cross-cultural communication with teachers. Student-teacher communication was also found to affect international students’ learning processes in terms of class choosing and registration (Constantine, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005; Li, 2007; McClure, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

This study confirms that impacts of student-professor relationship on international graduate students’ academic adjustment to U.S. schools. As the results show, participants generally appreciate professors’ help and approachability outside of class although they have to adjust to American professors’ teaching and expectations. Generally speaking, the impacts of relationship with professors on students’ academic lives are represented from two aspects: help from professors outside of class and academic communication in class.

Help from professors outside of class.

The results demonstrate that international graduate students can obtain valuable support from their professors even outside of class. Firstly, professors can help international graduate students become aware of their learning and research goals. Like one participant in this study
said that he contacted his advisor for feedback on academic performance. Such interaction was very helpful in his learning process because it kept him on the right track and pushed him to progress.

Secondly, international graduate students can get a deeper understanding of their academics through communicating with professors individually. For example, one student stated that she got a deep understanding of a topic through discussing it with her professor in person. Such information was difficult to get from textbooks alone.

Thirdly, by talking with professors international graduate students can get extra tutoring on their academic studies. For instance, professors can know these students better through interactions outside of class and then give them individual instructions on learning. According to the participants in this study, American professors are willing to help their international students outside of class and often encourage them to use office hours.

In sum, interactions with professors outside of class may enhance international graduate students’ learning motivations and academic achievements, facilitating these students’ adjustment to U.S. schools. Professors’ feedback can effectively keep students working towards academic goals. Moreover, individual tutoring from professors outside of class can largely facilitate students’ knowledge acquisition.
Academic communication in class.

According to this study, international graduate students generally like their professors’ teaching in class, although they have to adjust to professors’ unusual expectations and informal behaviors. Results show that in international graduate students’ eyes, American professors have the ability to make the class interactive and informal, which let students easily get involved and participated in class activities. Professors’ scaffolding methods in teaching also greatly improve students’ critical thinking and learning strategies. Moreover, professors generously share their knowledge and experiences, which are far more valuable than merely textbook teaching. Overall, international graduate students highly appreciate their professors’ knowledge teaching and experiences sharing.

However, international graduate students have to spend time figuring out their professors’ expectations of coursework, which are usually unknown and unusual to these students, especially to those who have never studied in U.S. schools before. For example, one participant was an outstanding student with excellent knowledge and experiences in his field of study. But he did not get a satisfactory result on his exams because he did not quite understand his professor’s expectations. Cultural differences may be one of the reasons why international students cannot easily understand their professors’ expectations. Accordingly, this understanding may heavily affect international graduate students’ academic performances and final grades. That said, unlike
American students, international graduate students have to spend time understanding the implicit professors’ expectations in order to succeed in academics.

Besides professors’ expectations, international graduate students also adjust to their American professors’ informal class behaviors in terms of attire and words. Some participants in this study expressed that their American professors were too informal in dress, which distracted the in class. These participants also compared their professors’ attire to that in their home countries, and then explained that in their home cultures, informal attire usually decreased students’ respect for teachers. Moreover, some participants felt very embarrassed and bothered when American professors used profanity or made jokes in class. In other words, professors’ attire and behaviors may impact international graduate students’ learning processes and feelings due to a different cultural understanding.

To sum up, professors’ teaching, expectations, and behaviors in class can largely influence international graduate students’ academic adjustment. For instance, to achieve good course grades, international graduate students need to figure out their American professors’ expectations, which are usually unfamiliar to these students because of cultural differences. Similarly, international graduate students may easily be bothered by their American professors’ “inappropriate” behaviors in class due to a different understanding of classroom cultures. Accordingly, student-professor communications in class in terms of teaching styles, professors’
expectations, and teaching behaviors deeply affect international graduate students’ learning processes and outcomes.

**Practical suggestions.**

Acknowledging the impacts of professors on international graduate students, U.S. universities may think about policies and initiatives to help students develop quality academic relationships with their professors. For example, the international student office could provide orientation sessions on American academic relationships to help international graduate students know about American academic conventions and customs, such as appropriate class behaviors, effective interaction skills with professors, and plagiarism rules. Once international graduate students get familiar with necessary academic conventions and norms, they may have adequate knowledge and skills to effectively communicate with their professors and smoothly adjust to U.S. graduate life.

Besides school support, departments can also make some effort to help their international graduate students. For example, individual departments may assign academic mentors to international graduate students for academic adjustment counseling. Departments may also develop academic learning communities to improve these students’ research experiences and skills. Such learning communities may consist of faculty and American graduate students from different grades, who can share their research experiences. With more opportunities to work with
department faculty and staff, international graduate students can more easily get engaged in academic study at U.S. schools.

In short, when U.S. institutions assist with their international graduate students, they should provide these students with not only sufficient knowledge and skills in communicating with professors, but also adequate opportunities of interacting with professors in their departments.

Subtheme 2: Relationship with Fellow Students

Previous research has found that peer interactions challenged international students’ acculturation, which resulted in these students’ feelings of isolation and difficulties in communication with others (Authur, 1998; Baden, 2005; Campbell and Li, 2008; Li, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Ying and Liese (1994) found that good relationships with American peers considerably facilitated international students’ adjustment to the host country. In a quantitative study, Kagan and Cohen (1990) identified peer support as a significant predictor of international students’ cultural adjustment. Swagler and Ellis (2003) also found significant impacts of peer support on international students’ acculturation. While these articles emphasized international students’ social acculturation, this study particularly focuses on how peer relationships influence international graduate students’ academic adjustment to U.S. graduate school. It demonstrates influence from three aspects: peer collaboration in class, interactions with American peers outside of class, and interactions with international peers outside of class. In this
study, participants demonstrate how relationships with Americans and other international students influence their academic study in class and outside of class.

**Peer interactions in class.**

International graduate students in this study generally regard peer collaboration in class as very helpful to their academic adjustment to U.S. graduate study. Through working with other students, international graduate students can obtain not only complete academic knowledge but also various learning strategies. Firstly, perspectives from different classmates can deepen international graduate students’ understanding of academic topics. As one student stated, “when you read, you are not sure about something in texts, you find it out during discussion with other students.” In other words, international graduate students can gain more comprehensive knowledge when sharing ideas with others in class.

Secondly, classmates can be valuable learning resources that international graduate students turn to for help. Usually, international graduate students ask their American classmates about cultural background information. In that case, they can save a lot of time searching for information. For instance, participants in this study asked their American classmates about cultural knowledge, like American history and laws. Moreover, working with American peers, international students can also improve their academic English skills, such as academic writing.
Third, international graduate students may obtain effective learning strategies through collaborating with others in research projects. For instance, participants in this study found that some Americans were efficient in developing ideas, whereas some international peers were cautious to generalize answers before they went over everything. Both of the two kinds of strategies were workable with advantages. Therefore, through working with peers, international graduate students can learn multiple and useful learning strategies.

Taken together, peer collaboration in class can greatly influence international graduate students’ academic learning skills and outcomes. They may learn faster and deeper in academics, obtain more American cultural knowledge, and develop more strategies in research through peer collaboration in class.

Influence from American peers outside of class.

The results of this study showed limited contact between international graduate students and their American classmates outside of class. International graduate students generally do not like such distance from their American peers, but they do not feel they can do anything alone to improve this situation. Thus they expressed that the school should do something to improve communications with American peers outside of class.

First, international graduate students generally wished to have more contacts with Americans outside of class because, in their minds, American students can help them know more
about U.S. graduate study in terms of American professors’ expectations and American academic cultures. However, there were few opportunities for these students to interact with American peers because Americans usually left soon after class. Some participants in this study said that they did not know how to improve such situations. Therefore, they hoped schools could help them get involved in Americans’ lives outside of class.

Second, international graduate students feel upset when they sense American peers’ cold attitudes, which hinder their adjustment to U.S. graduate schools. For example, some participants in this study said that they felt like “foreigners” when they realized the distance between American classmates and them. Another student said that her American peers acted arrogantly toward her, which made her very uncomfortable.

In sum, American graduate students’ attitudes towards international graduate students can deeply influence these students’ academic adjustment to U.S. schools. Representing social support and attitudes from the host country, American students’ positive attitudes may greatly assist international graduate students’ adjustment. In contrast, Americans’ negative attitudes may easily result in international graduate students’ acculturative stress.

Influence from international peers outside of class.

The results of this study showed that compared with the interactions with Americans, international graduate students have more interaction with each other outside of class. They help
each other in academic learning, language improvement, and academic adjustment to U.S. graduate education. First, international graduate students spend time working together outside of class, discussing academic projects, and preparing for exams. By working together, international graduate students can obtain research experiences and skills from each other. Additionally, by sharing ideas with each other, international graduate students can also deepen understanding of academic knowledge from different perspectives.

Second, international graduate students use English when communicating with each other, which help them improve language proficiency as well as communication skills. For instance, more than one participant mentioned that they liked to work with other international students rather than those from their home country because they could improve English speaking skills when English was the only workable language in communication.

Third, international graduate students are more likely to help each other adjust to U.S. graduate education because they share a common experience in studying abroad. It is also more likely for them to establish a network of friends, through which they receive and give support. For instance, one participant in this study said that he got help with technology from his international peers. He stated “they were very helpful and patient to teach me. I appreciate that. I am willing to help them as well.”
In short, results indicate that international fellow students are willing to help each other outside of class. They work together, they share their acculturation experiences, they learn English together, and they help each other to adjust to the foreign country.

**Practical suggestions.**

Several suggestions can be generated based on the above discussion and the results of this study. First, the international student offices should add sessions to the orientation program for international graduate students on building relationships with their American graduate student peers. These sessions can especially teach these students how to start a conversation with American peers, or ways to improve interaction with Americans outside of class. Moreover, the office can invite some American graduate students to these orientation sessions to answer questions about peer relationships. In short, these strategies may help international graduate students learn some effective communication skills and know better about American students’ expectations of peer relationships.

Second, departments can establish graduate student associations to improve international graduate students’ interactions with other students. Departments may pay American graduate assistants to work in such associations, giving international graduate students an opportunity to know about their American peers. These associations may also organize various academic activities, such as workshops, for international graduate students to get involved in. In this case,
international graduate students can not only work with their American peers, but also learn about American academic cultures through participating in these academic activities.

To sum up, since there is a need for international graduate students to communicate with American graduates, it is necessary for U.S. institutions to bridge the distance between American graduate students and international graduate students outside of class. U.S. institutions should also consider how to call for American graduates to help with their international peers’ adjustment to U.S. graduate study.

**Subtheme 3: Prejudice**

Previous studies on international students’ acculturation have found that international students who experienced prejudicial treatments had serious acculturative stress and mental problems. Such prejudices were shown as gender discrimination, racial stereotypes, and language discrimination (Banazzo & Wong, 2007; Constantine et al., 2005; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Simpson, 2008). Wadsworth, Hecht, and Jung (2008) also found that discrimination was a significant predictor of international students’ educational acculturation. This study finds that international graduate students also sense prejudice in their academic lives. In addition, this study demonstrates how such feeling and experiences influenced these students’ adjustment to U.S. graduate schools from two aspects: impacts on mental health and influences on their learning processes.
First, international graduate students are sensitive about being treated as “foreigners” at U.S. schools. They may easily feel excluded by American professors and students when they are looked down upon because of their accents and foreign identities. For instance, people turn to them whenever they like ideas from another perspective, which remind international graduate students that they are different from others. Additionally, lacking the sense of belonging also makes international graduate students feel distant and marginalized by the host country. As two participants stated during the interviews, “everyone knows that you are a foreigner” and “I am the only one who belongs to another culture in my class.”

Second, besides personal challenges resulting from status as a foreigner, international graduate students also talked about unequal treatments at graduate school. For instance, a female participant said that she was given fewer research opportunities because her professors assumed that male students were more intelligent. In another example, international graduate students noted that they were required to visit school offices in person for some document processing, whereas American students could do the same online. Without any explanation from the school, these students felt unequally treated on campus.

In sum, international graduate students may easily sense marginalized and discriminated during their interactions with people at school. For instance, they feel marginalized when American colleagues leave soon after class and seldom talk to them outside of class. Such
feelings may result in these students’ mental disturbances and hinder their adjustment to U.S. schools.

Practical suggestions.

One thing U.S. institutions can do to decrease prejudice is to improve student services interactions with international students, such as providing as many as options for international graduate students as those for American graduate students. If there are situations where difference in treatment or process is unavoidable, student service offices should strive to explain the reasons for such difference to international graduate students. In other words, U.S. institutions should be aware of international graduate students’ feelings and try to increase these students’ sense of belonging.

Subtheme 4: Family Concerns

Previous studies have found that family support was a predictor of international students’ cultural acculturation, with positive impacts on these students’ psychological health (Constantine, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005; Kagan & Cohen, 1990). However, research has mainly discussed family support as one kind of social support as well as its impacts on international students’ cultural and psychological acculturation. Different from those articles, this study identifies family concerns as family responsibilities as well as family support as a subtheme. It also explores how family concerns influence married international graduate
students’ academic lives in terms of time management and decision making. Thus, this study
discusses family impact on international graduate students’ adjustment from a new perspective.

Results of this study show that family concerns heavily influence married international
graduate students’ academic lives. This is different from family impact on international students’
acculturation in a general sense. In this study, family concerns particularly appear to be family
responsibilities, which influence married international graduate students’ academic lives in terms
of time management and decision making.

First, married international graduate students feel more or less guilty when they cannot meet
family obligations because they are studying far away from home. Accordingly, these students
feel it is necessary to communicate with their families for a certain amount of time every week.
In addition, they also arrange time back home more frequently than unmarried students.
Therefore, married international graduate students’ academic study is indirectly affected by these
time arrangements.

Second, married participants note that they highly valued their families’ opinions when it
comes to decisions about their academic study, particularly regarding future plans. For instance,
one participant discussed with his wife via phone whether he would stay in the U.S. for another
several years for a doctoral degree. In this sense, families’ opinions can largely decide these
students’ academic goals and processes.
In short, family concerns can impact married international graduate students’ academic adjustment to U.S. schools in terms of time management and decision making. Married students may be more likely to change their study plans according to their family’s opinions. In other words, families’ support is more important to these students’ academic adjustment.

**Four Subthemes Identified from Theme Two**

Studying at U.S. graduate school, international graduate students usually spend a lot of time improving their English, because graduate school requires high-level academic English skills. In addition, unfamiliar academic patterns of U.S. graduate education are another transition issue in international graduate students’ academic adjustment. That said, students with better academic English skills and who are comfortable with American academic conventions may adjust to U.S. graduate school more smoothly than those without these skills. Besides language and academic cultural differences, international graduate students’ learning attitudes may also influence these students’ adjustment to U.S. graduate school. Moreover, the utilization of school services may be another strategy impacting international graduate students’ adaptation to U.S. campus. Therefore, in this theme about acculturation strategies of adjusting to U.S. graduate school, four subthemes are generated: language, academic cultural distance, learning motivations and attitudes, and utilization of school services. The impacts of these four subthemes on international graduate students’ academic adjustment are examined below.
Subtheme 5: Language

Language was identified in former studies as a significant factor influencing international graduate students’ academic lives (Andrade, 2008; Swagler & Ellis, 2003). This study confirms the past research results. Additionally, it further explores the impacts on these students’ academic adaptation from two aspects, difficulties in learning and time working on English.

According to the results of this study, language impacts international graduate students’ academic adjustment in two ways: resulting in difficulties in learning and causing extra work on high-level language skills. The following discussion demonstrates what difficulties in learning may result from language barriers, and how language may influence students’ learning processes.

Difficulties in academic study due to language barriers.

Language proficiency is important for international graduate students to understand others, express themselves, and obtain academic information during their learning processes. In other words, language may cause many difficulties in international graduate students’ academic adjustment. Moreover, some international graduate students may encounter deeper challenges than others because of lower language proficiency. Thus, these students may experience more language barriers in study and a relatively slower adaptation process to U.S. graduate school.

For example, the results of this study show that many international graduate students run out of words when communicating with professors and peers, making these students anxious,
frustrated, and depressed. Even international graduate students who are English-native speakers may encounter difficulty because of different accents and idioms in the U.S.

**Work on high-level of English skills.**

Realizing the importance of language, international graduate students generally spend time improving their academic English skills. For example, international graduate students make great effort to adjust to American-style writing in academics, because academic writing of scholarly papers or project reports largely determines students’ final grades. In this study, some participants stated that they took a long time to adapt to an American style, which was described by these students as more straightforward and easily accessible to readers. Some participants purposefully took writing classes in order to learn American academic writing conventions.

In short, language is likely to cause some level of difficulty in international graduate students’ adjustment to U.S. graduate education. Accordingly, international graduate students are generally willing to work on language to gain good grades at U.S. graduate schools. In this sense, language is found to be an influential subtheme impacting international graduate students’ academic adjustment.

**Practical suggestions.**

Suggestions for U.S. schools include opening various ESL courses, establishing an English language learning community, and looking for language partners for international graduate
students. Firstly, U.S. graduate schools should provide adequate and various ESL courses each semester for international graduate students. International graduate students should be encouraged to take at least one of them each year. More importantly, ESL courses should be designed as a long-term tutoring class, where ESL teachers can longitudinally monitor language improvement for one or two years, and where students can have a fixed language tutor who knows them better. Secondly, an English language learning community should be established on campus to help international graduate students to practice English. In this community, language instructors work a regular and consistent schedule, and international graduate students can go to them for help at any time. Thirdly, schools may help international graduate students to know some Americans as language partners, including American students on campus and people in the local community. More importantly, schools should let international graduate students know that they have such services available to them and encourage them to join in. Taken all together, universities should seriously consider how to help international graduate students with their language barriers and language improvement at U.S. graduate school.

Subtheme 6: Academic Cultural Distance

Cultural distance was defined as a pre-arrival moderating factor in Berry’s (2006) acculturation model, influencing sojourners’ social acculturation. Research has also found that academic cultural differences usually resulted in international students’ acculturative stress.
(Brown, 2008). This study not only explores influential academic cultural differences but also demonstrates how these differences affect international graduate students’ learning processes and learning behaviors.

Results of this study show that besides language, international graduate students have to adjust to different academic cultures at U.S. graduate schools. For instance, participants of this study expressed that they were not familiar with American academic forms and not used to the intensive work in U.S. graduate education. Therefore, impacts of academic cultural differences on international graduate students’ adjustment can be discussed from the following two aspects: unfamiliar classroom activities and learning resources, as well as intensive and various forms of assignments.

**Unfamiliar classroom activities and learning resources.**

International graduate students are more likely to spend time on American classroom activities because they usually do not have much background knowledge about American cultures. The results of this study indicate a close relationship between unfamiliar class activities and students’ learning processes. For example, participants generally prepared for class in order to get more involved in class discussion. For another example, one participant in this study said he researched the topic of suicide in the U.S. before taking the class about human rights, because he had a different understanding of suicide according to the laws of his home country.
Moreover, since unfamiliar academic cultures challenge international graduate students’ academic learning, many of them are more willing to choose those professors who can bridge cultural distance. In this study, some participants complained that their professors used too many American examples in class, which made them very confused. They also felt frustrated about such situations because it was impossible for them to prepare for that kind of class discussion from textbooks. During the interviews, many participants expressed that they liked those professors who could use examples of different cultures to illustrate the same concept, which was easy for them to understand.

In short, unfamiliar academic cultures may result in international graduate students’ difficulties in learning and then change their learning behaviors and class registration. Thus, both students’ learning processes and knowledge acquisition at U.S. schools are affected.

**Intensive and various forms of assignments.**

Intensive coursework and various new forms of assignments at U.S. graduate schools may impair international graduate students’ mental health. The heavy workload also results in more challenges to adjustment than students expect. First, as the results of this study suggests, international graduate students are not used to the intensive assignments at U.S. graduate education. They feel stressed because they face many deadlines for small assignments. Some participants stated that they were not used to such intensive work because in their home countries
there was only one big paper or one big exam at the end of semester rather than many papers and exams here.

Second, international graduate students also report feeling exhausted dealing with unfamiliar forms of assignments at U.S. schools. For instance, some participants in this study talked about difficulties with online assignments because of the advanced technology. One participant explained that in his home country people did not so heavily depend on technology in education. Thus, he had to take time learning how to use some software and improving computer skills.

In sum, due to cultural differences, international graduate students have to spend time in adjusting to the intensive academic study life at U.S. schools. In addition, they also have to make extra effort to make up cultural knowledge and classroom experiences outside of class to become familiar with learning resources in U.S. classroom. Therefore, academic cultural distance in terms of intensive and unfamiliar coursework impacts both students’ learning attitudes and their learning behaviors at U.S. schools.

**Practical suggestions.**

Based on this study, some suggestions are posited. First, schools should orient international graduate students to American academic conventions and norms as soon as these students arrive
on campus. Additionally, various tutoring sessions including necessary technology knowledge and skills should be designed and provided to these students as well.

Second, school faculty should learn how to bridge cultural distance in class with their international graduate students. Diverse resources and examples should be prepared for class. In addition, professors should give extra reading materials to their international graduate students to improve their background information for class. In all, both schools and faculty should help international graduate students with their academic study in graduate school.

**Subtheme 7: Learning Motivations and Attitudes**

Previous articles on international students’ acculturation found that individual personalities and attitudes towards the host country were important to these students’ acculturation (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007). Similarly, this study also finds that learning motivations and attitudes impact international graduate students’ academic adjustment to U.S. graduate education. It interprets how motivations and attitudes are generated and influence students’ learning processes from two aspects: future plans and aspirations of success.

According to the results of this study, learning attitudes are found to be critical for international graduate students to overcome difficulties in their academic adjustment to U.S. schools. Two impacts of learning attitudes include, first, how these students associate their current study with future plans of working in the U.S., and second, how aspirations of success
motivate these students work hard at U.S. graduate school. Therefore, the following section explains how learning attitudes may influence international graduate students’ academic adaptation from two aspects: future plans and aspirations of success.

**Future plans of working at the U.S. after graduation.**

International graduate students’ future plans of working in the U.S. may be closely associated with their learning expectations and motivations. First, future plans largely decide international graduate students’ learning expectations and learning processes. For instance, international graduate students may relate their future plans with current learning, including which courses to take, which research topics to choose, and which level of degree to pursue. Taking one participant in this study as an example, he usually talked about his future plans with his professor to get feedback about whether he was working toward those goals. Another participant also indicated that she overcame stressful presentations because she aimed to teach in the future so that she should not be scared by speaking in front of people. Some doctoral students stated that they chose to study for a Ph.D. degree mainly because they wanted to find a teaching job at U.S. universities. Taken all together, future plans can affect international graduate students’ academic study and adjustment process.

Second, future plans may push highly motivated international graduate students to study hard. To find a job in the U.S. after graduation is not easy for international graduate students. To
compete with Americans in the job market after graduation, international graduate students generally work hard at school. Some participants in this study mentioned that they tried to take as many courses as they could in order to prepare for a variety of positions. Accordingly, international graduate students are more likely than Americans to feel the fierce competition in the job market because they have little or no support in the U.S. Therefore, future plans to work in the U.S. can strongly motivate international graduate students’ academic effort.

**Aspiration of succeeding in a foreign country.**

As the results show, aspiration to succeed in the U.S. not only drives international graduate students to work hard at school but also improves these students’ confidence, which greatly facilitates their academic adjustment to U.S. graduate schools. The results of this study show that international graduate students have a strong desire to succeed in the U.S. Such desire plays an important role in motivating students to always achieve a higher performance. Moreover, success in academics strengthens these students’ confidence, which assists their academic adaptation to U.S. graduate schools. For instance, some participants expressed comfort and confidence in establishing a close relationship with the professor only when they had performed well in that class. On the contrary, if they did poorly, they were not willing to make an effort to get to know the professor. In short, positive learning attitudes may not only drive students to work hard at school but also help them overcome acculturation difficulties. In this study, international
graduate students’ encouraging learning attitudes are shown closely associated with their future plans of working in the U.S. and aspirations of success.

**Practical suggestions.**

Suggestions for U.S. schools to increase international graduate students’ learning motivations include a) schools may help their international graduate students to develop appropriate career goals through demonstrating the employment data of international alumni and b) schools can also give students more information about the local job market and guide them to choose a proper career. Thus, international graduate students may feel optimism for the future and then have positive learning attitudes to adjust to U.S. graduate school.

**Subtheme 8: Utilization of School Services**

The author found no previous research about how international graduate students utilized school services and facilities to improve their learning in U.S. universities. Yet, this study explores the popular and indispensible school facilities and office services in international graduate students’ academic lives. In addition, this study interprets how these facilities and services can help in international graduate students’ academic adaptation to U.S. graduate campuses.

According to the results of this study, school services impact international graduate students’ academic adaptation, including campus facilities, office services, and other resources
like student associations. International graduate students frequently use these services because
these services may make students easier to adapt to learning on U.S. campuses.

**Utilization of campus facilities.**

The results of this study show that international graduate students usually make good use of
campus facilities such as the library in their academic study. For instance, students borrow books
and search for research articles in the library. In addition, they study in library because it is a
quiet and comfortable place to study.

Besides the library, international graduate students also use the university computer labs for
studying. The computer labs are popular because a) students can print out papers and articles for
free by using the printers in these labs, b) the internet is usually very fast on campus, c) the labs
have various office supplies such as scanners and copiers, and d) some international students do
not have computers or internet access at home for online assignments.

Another campus facility that international graduate students reported using often is the
shuttle bus. Most international graduate students do not have private cars in the U.S., so they
have to take the school shuttles to class or to the library. In this case, students must consider their
working time on campus because the shuttle has limited operating hours. During breaks and
holidays, international graduate students have usually felt inconvenienced in getting to campus
because the shuttle closes during these periods.
Utilization of office services.

International graduate students also usually seek academic help from school office services, such as the writing center, the career center, and student legal services. These office services play a critical role in these students’ academic adjustment to U.S. graduate school. For instance, international graduate students use the writing center for their paper editing and academic writing skills developing.

Moreover, international graduate students also often use the career center to search for assistantships, revise their resumes, and practice for job interviews. Furthermore, some participants in this study expressed that they felt safe having the legal service. For instance, some participants use the legal service on campus to protect themselves from unfair treatment.

Besides the above services, international graduate students also attend the international student office’s orientation sessions, which can them with academic preparations. For example, participants in this study said that they got useful some information on plagiarism and publications during orientation. Such information effectively helped them adjust to U.S. graduate education.

Last but not least, international graduate students often interact with the insurance office and the Bursar’s office because of their health concerns and financial issues. For instance, most
international graduate students have on-campus jobs as graduate assistants. Thus, they must deal with their payments and tax return issues with the Bursar’s office.

In short, various office services are used by international graduate students to assist their adaption to U.S. campuses. Accordingly, the quality of these office services greatly impacts students’ adjustment, making it smoother or more challenging. In other words, international graduate students may make good use of office services to facilitate their academic adjustment. In contrast, their lives may also be easily disturbed by poor office services.

Utilization of other resources.

According to the results, international graduate students also ask for help from student associations on campus and some organizations in the local community. International graduate students usually attend the activities held by these organizations to learn more about American cultures, to practice English, to exchange research ideas, and to seek research partners. Some international graduate students can adjust to U.S. schools faster than others because they can make a better use of these resources. Accordingly, like school facilities and office services, these resources also influence international graduate students’ academic adaptation.

Practical suggestions.

Based on these findings and discussions, this study suggests that U.S. schools should first make clear about their international graduate students’ needs on campus in terms of school
facilities and supplies. For example, this study show that transportation should be provided to international graduate students during holidays and school breaks. Additionally, school services such as the health center and the bursar’s office should improve their services for international graduate students. For instance, these offices should provide complete information for international graduate students and explain documents thoroughly when necessary. Last, schools should also coordinate students associations and local organizations to help international graduate students’ academic adjustment. In short, schools should aware international graduate students’ needs and then try best to support them in terms of school facilities and office services on campus.

Two Subthemes Identified from Theme Three

Results of this study show that international graduate students are most concerned about research tasks. These students usually work hard towards their research goals regardless challenges and difficulties. Beside research concerns, graduate assistant experiences serve another main component of international graduate students’ academic lives, which heavily influence their academic adaptation. Many international graduate students work as graduate assistants at U.S. graduate schools. Through working as graduate assistants on campus, international graduate students become familiar with American academic cultures, gain opportunities to improve research skills, and establish confidence for the challenges of academic
life. Yet, international graduate assistants also occasionally suffer depression, frustration, and stress from their assistant experiences. To sum up, two influential subthemes beneath the theme three of graduate experiences are generated: research concerns and graduate assistant work.

**Subtheme 9: Research Concerns**

This study discusses the impacts of research on international graduate students’ academic lives. No previous article was found about the relationship between research concerns and international students’ academic adjustment. Thus, this subtheme is a newly discovered impact on students’ acculturation. It is also a distinct subtheme influencing international graduate students’ academic lives, differing from those for international undergraduate students or U.S. graduate students.

Research concerns serve as a major motivation for international graduate students’ professional and academic activities. First, international graduate students generally understand the importance of their research as an ultimate goal, so they make greatest effort to improve research experiences and skills. Like some participants in this study said, they tried to grab every opportunity to work with their professors to improve understanding of research. They also actively participated in many academic conferences if there was any open chance to them. Additionally, they were more likely to choose research courses on purpose. In short, these research activities serve as a large portion of international graduate students’ academic lives.
Second, research is not an easy work for international graduate students, especially those who are unfamiliar with American academic conventions, which occasionally result in stress and frustration. However, international graduate students still express a strong desire to do research. As one participant said, if you make achievements in American scholarly field, you win not only Americans’ respect but also the respect from your home country. Motivated by such kind of feelings, international graduate students are more likely to dedicate themselves to a research career. To sum up, research is shown to be one big concern in international graduate students’ academic lives. Students desire to do research and spend time to improve research skills, though they may experience frustration and stress from research.

**Practical suggestions.**

Understanding the impacts of research on international graduate students’ academic lives, U.S. institutions should open workshops or training classes about research skills for international graduate students. These tutoring sessions may focus on American research conventions and norms, which can facilitate international graduate students in adjusting to the American academic world. In addition, U.S. schools may build up a network of research news, where professors, organizations, or other scholars can publish news and messages about academic conferences and lecturers. Thus, international graduate students could participate in these
activities. In these cases, U.S. universities can help international graduate students with their research concerns.

Subtheme 10: Graduate Assistant Work

GA experiences were identified as challenges in international graduate students’ acculturation to U.S. schools (Paige, 1990). In contrast to previous research, this study emphasizes how GA experiences can assist international graduate students’ adjustment in terms of opportunities and personal improvements. This study interprets the impacts of GA experiences on students’ academic lives from a new perspective. It also discusses the process of how GA work influences international graduate students’ academic adaptation to U.S. schools from three aspects: opportunities, mental problems, and personal developments.

Based on the results of this study, the impacts of graduate assistant experiences on international graduate students’ academic adjustment are demonstrated from three aspects: opportunities from GA work, challenges because of GA work, and personal development from GA experiences.

**Opportunities from graduate assistant work.**

Results of this study indicate that GA work actually creates many opportunities for international graduate students in their academic study at U.S. schools. Such opportunities can be
represented as understanding of American academic conventions, engagement in research, and improvement of academic communication skills.

First of all, GA work can provide greater opportunities to understand American academic conventions, which may help with international GAs’ academic adjustment. For instance, working as teaching assistants, international graduate students can interact with American students inside and outside of class. Several international teaching assistants in this study found that they understood American academic conventions and norms more through such interactions. For instance, when misunderstandings arise between American students and international teaching assistants and then problems are solved, these international teaching assistants’ understanding of American academic cultures will be enhanced. Additionally, international GAs’ understandings of academic knowledge can also be improved during interactions with American students. For instance, American students’ questions about textbooks usually cause international teaching assistants to reflect on their own academic learning and research.

Second, GA work can make international graduate students more engaged in research. For example, teaching assistants can collect data in their class for research, and research assistants can assist in their professors’ research projects. Thus, international GAs’ research experiences and skills are greatly improved during their GA work. Additionally, international graduate students may have more opportunities to publish with their professors. In other words, GA work
can make international graduate students more professional and more involved in academics and research.

Third, GA work can increase international graduate students’ academic communications and interactions with scholars and researchers in their field. For example, one GA in this study said that when she helped her professor to organize an academic conference she had the chance to meet many famous scholars in her field of study, and learned a lot of academic news through communicating with these people. In short, GA work is found to heavily influence international graduate students’ academic adjustment to U.S. graduate education. It can deepen these students’ understanding of American academic cultures, make them more involved in academic activities, and increase their interactions with scholars and researchers.

**Challenges because of graduate assistant work.**

According to the study, GA work results in international graduate students’ stress, which heavily affects their academic adjustment. Firstly, GA work is generally reported to be intensive, exhausting, and time-consuming, which can easily disturb international graduate students’ own learning. International GAs usually feel stressed because they have to spend a lot of time and effort to complete their GA work. For example, some participants in this study said that they had to work three days a week, from morning to evening. They usually felt so tired when back from work that they did not want to do their own assignments.
Secondly, GA work usually results in frustration and depression when international graduate assistants have unsatisfactory relationships with their working professors or students. For instance, some participants mentioned that they received complaints from their students about poor speaking English and ineffective teaching skills, which resulted in unhappiness and/or depression. One participant said that she considered going back home sometimes because she was so depressed in teaching. Some other participants also expressed difficulties, anxieties, and stress in teaching.

In all, GA work is said to be intensive and resulted in international GAs’ stress and anxiety, which disturbs their learning processes and adjustment to U.S. graduate school. Moreover, GA work can be frustrating enough to result in international GAs’ stress, which makes these students’ adjustment more challenging.

**Personal development from graduate assistant experiences.**

Although GA work challenges international graduate students’ academic adaptation to U.S. schools, it may also improve these students’ confidence and personal improvements in academic study. GA experiences usually improve international graduate students’ abilities in working in the U.S., including teaching skills, research ability, and coordinating strategies. Once international GAs overcome the challenges of GA work, they can gain self-confidence step by step, particularly in speaking in front of others, communicating with professors, and believing in
themselves during hard times. For instance, one participant in this study said that she has grown to be a strong person through her three years of GA work. In all, GA work can provide international GAs with self-confidence and a stronger personality, which may greatly help them overcome adjustment difficulties in their academic lives.

**Practical suggestions.**

Suggestions for U.S. universities in terms of international GA work included less working hours and more tutoring of GA work for international GAs. First, the main task for international graduate students should be study rather than work. Intensive GA work could result in more challenges for international graduate students’ academic adjustment other than opportunities for them. Thus, U.S. schools should consider decreasing working hours of international GAs. Second, appropriate tutoring and training about GA work may be offered for international GAs, such as counseling services. When international GAs experience any discrimination or unfair treatment at work, they can turn to these services for help. Better supported by U.S. institutions, international GAs may easily and relatively quickly adjust to GA work on campus. In other words, U.S. schools should provide services and support to help international GAs to successfully complete their work and adjust to U.S. campuses.
Major and Minor Subthemes in this Study

The results of this study identified six major subthemes and four minor subthemes by using mixed method data analysis. Among the six major subthemes, the most frequently mentioned four subthemes include language, academic cultural distance, learning attitudes, and academic relationship with professors. These four subthemes have been identified by many previous studies on international students. However, most of these studies used quantitative methods when they explained the relationships between these subthemes and international students’ acculturation. Unlike the previous research, this study used qualitative methods to explore the details of these students’ acculturation experiences. It not only specified these subthemes from various aspects but also further explored how these four subthemes influenced international graduate students’ academic adaptation to U.S. graduate schools.

One other thing in this study is worthy of mention: the least frequent subtheme was found to be family concerns. However, this subtheme may be have evolved into a major subtheme if the study had focused more on married students. Although only two participants of the ten participants mentioned family concerns, these two participants were the only two married international graduate students in this study. Moreover, both of the two married participants particularly emphasized the significant affects of family concerns in their academic lives during interviews. Therefore, though this subtheme was identified as a minor subtheme in this study, it
was also indicated to be extremely critical to married participants. The other eight participants did not mention family concerns during interviews probably because of their different marital status. Thus, further investigation of this subtheme on married international graduate students is needed in the future research.
CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

The research purpose of this study is to explore international graduate students’ academic adaptation to U.S. graduate schools. Using a qualitative research method, this study not only identifies the influential subthemes of international graduate students’ adaptation but also explores how these subthemes can impact these students’ adaptation in the U.S. Three themes and ten subthemes generated from this study are concluded as following sections.

Three Themes Related to International Graduate Students’ Academic Adaptation

Generally speaking, the three identified themes demonstrate international graduate students’ academic experiences from three aspects: interactions with others, individual strategies of adjustment, and impacts of the context in a U.S. graduate school. These themes are closely associated with international graduate students’ academic lives and largely influence these students’ learning behaviors and well-being in adjustment process. First of all, academic interactions with people such as professors, peers, staff, and family affect international graduate students’ learning processes and outcomes. Support and help from professors and peers usually increase international graduate students’ understanding of American academics and improve their academic performances. On the other hand, international graduate students also report feeling marginalized and discriminated against during interactions with others at school. Participants reported that such experiences easily caused their mental stress and delayed their
acculturation to U.S. schools. Besides relationships with professors and peers, family responsibilities also heavily influence married international graduate students’ adaptation, increasing or decreasing their academic adjustment difficulties.

Second, international graduate students generally make use of various acculturation strategies regarding language, learning attitudes, and school services to adjust to academic cultural distance in U.S. graduate education. For instance, international graduate students make greatest effort to improve their academic English skills, such as academic writing skills, to meet U.S. graduate schools’ requirements. Moreover, international graduate students usually do extra work outside of class to learn about American cultures and academic conventions in order to catch up with American students in class. Additionally, international graduate students usually build strong aspirations to succeed in their studies because of future plans to work in the U.S. These strategies may heavily motivate students’ learning attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, school services on campus can make learning easier for international graduate students, such as the writing center and the library. Yet, when there are misunderstandings, such as different treatment of international graduate students, these school services may also cause consternation.

To sum up, these strategies in terms of language, learning attitudes, and school services affect international graduate students’ adjustment to U.S. graduate schools. Making good use of them, international graduate students can adjust to the unfamiliar academic life much smoother.
Third, graduate assistant work on U.S. campuses impact international graduate students’ academic lives in terms of time management, mental health maintenance, personality development, and the accumulation of research experiences. For instance, through working as assistants at U.S. schools, international graduate students can improve understanding of American academic patterns, which will help their academic adjustment to U.S. graduate education. Moreover, working guidance from American professors, international graduate students can be quickly engaged in the academic world and improve their research skills. These research experiences will not only help with their academic adjustment to U.S. graduate study but also benefit their achievements in American academics.

On the other side, challenges from GA work may make international graduate students’ adjustment more difficult, resulting in greater depression and distress in their adjustment processes. Yet, international GAs generally gain personal improvements from GA working experiences, such as a strong personality and self-confidence, which may facilitate their adaptation to U.S. schools. To sum up, graduate assistant working experiences are closely associated with international graduate students’ academic experiences at U.S. schools, bringing both opportunities and challenges.

In summary, this study identifies the above three themes in international graduate students’ academic adaptation to U.S. graduate school. It demonstrates the impacts of each theme on these
students’ adaptation from various aspects. These aspects are then identified as subthemes in this study: four subthemes in theme one, another four subthemes in theme two, and two subthemes in theme three. These ten subthemes are concluded in the following section.

**Ten Influential Subthemes in this Study**

From the three themes generalized in this study, ten subthemes altogether are further explored, regarding academic relationship with professors, academic relationship with fellow students, prejudice, family concerns, language, and academic cultural distance, learning attitudes, utilization of school services, research concerns, and graduate assistant work.

Some of the ten subthemes were already identified as influential causes of international students’ acculturation by other studies, such as relationship with professors, relationship with fellow students, and prejudice. However, building on previous research, this study not only confirms the presence of these experiences among a group of international graduate students, but also focuses on their impact on academic adaptation. For instance, many studies reported that interaction with professors is influential on international students’ psychological acculturation. However, this study emphasizes its impacts on students’ academic adaptation in terms of academic goals establishment, academic knowledge acquisition, research engagement, and American academic cultures learning. Additionally, impacts of academic relationship with fellow graduate students are analyzed from both collaboration in class and interactions outside of class.
Furthermore, prejudice in this study is discovered to be influential on international graduate students’ research involvement and time management besides the impacts on these students’ mental health.

Moreover, some unexplored subthemes are discovered in this study, including family concerns for married international graduate students, research concerns, and graduate assistant experiences in terms of both opportunities and challenges. For instance, this study reports that family concerns impact married international graduate students’ academic lives in terms of decision-making and time management. In addition, utilization of school services influences international graduate students’ language improvement, mental health, and physical health for academic adjustment. Moreover, research concerns largely guide international graduate students’ learning behaviors and academic adaptation to U.S. graduate school. Last, graduate assistant work is found to bring benefits and risks to international graduate students’ academic adjustment.

In short, the ten subthemes that emerged from this study are closely associated with international graduate students’ academic adaptation rather than general social or psychological acculturation.

**Major and Minor Subthemes**

This study distinguishes six major and four minor subthemes by quantifying the qualitative data and comparing the overall frequencies of each subtheme. The least frequently mentioned
subthemes in this study are prejudice and family concerns. This shows that although a few of international graduate students report the impacts of prejudice, many other international graduate students do not regard prejudice influential in their academic lives. One possibility could be that these students may think that prejudice influences their social and psychological acculturation, but does not specifically impact their academic adaptation.

The subtheme of prejudice is not shown to heavily impact international graduate students’ academic adjustment to U.S. schools. However, the subtheme of family concerns may be an important influence on married international graduate students’ academic adaptation. The sample in this study includes eight unmarried students and two married students. Both of the married participants highlighted family concerns in relation to their graduate study during interviews. Thus, additional investigation is needed to examine the impacts of this subtheme on married international graduate students’ academic adaptation. For example, group comparisons may be conducted to see whether there is a significant difference between unmarried and married international graduate students by family concerns in their academic adaptation.

Implications

This study not only contributes to knowledge in the field of cross-cultural acculturation with original findings, but also gives practical suggestions to US schools and international graduate students studying in the U.S. It not only benefits U.S. universities by showing their international
graduate students’ academic needs, but may also help international graduate students to seek opportunities and to overcome difficulties in their academic lives in U.S. graduate schools.

**Contributions to Knowledge of Acculturation**

First, this study confirms the application of Berry’s model to international graduate students’ academic adaptation. This study explores the relationships between moderating factors and international graduate students’ academic adaptation in Berry’s model, including language, social attitudes in terms of prejudice, family concerns, and distance from American colleagues, and social support in terms of help from professors and fellow students and utilization of school services.

Second, the study examines international graduate students, an underrepresented group in cross-cultural acculturation research. Few previous articles studied this group’s acculturation needs. Moreover, this study specifically investigates these students’ academic adaptation rather than social or psychological acculturation. Since academic life is a major part of international graduate students’ lives, these students’ academic experiences should be highlighted in the study of their acculturation. Such a study may help U.S. institutions to better understand these students’ academic needs and thus to better facilitate these students’ adaptation to U.S. campuses.
Third, the study explores some subthemes’ impacts on international graduate students’ academic adaptation from new perspectives, such as family concerns, utilization of school services, and research concerns. For instance, family concerns in terms of family responsibilities are usually a primary focus of married international graduate students’ adjustment processes. This study shows the concern about family impact these students’ future plans and decision making regarding academic study. In other words, this study demonstrates original interpretations of subthemes’ impacts from multiple aspects.

Contribution to Practices

This study gives practical suggestions for U.S. institutions about how to help international graduate students with their academic based on the findings. It may help school administrators and faculty better understand international graduate students’ academic difficulties and needs. It may help U.S. institutions improve policy decisions and practices related to international graduate education. For instance, sessions about American academic conventions and academic relationships should be added to the orientation program for international graduate students as soon as these students arrive on campus; more graduate student communities should be established in departments; American professors should get some training to better understand their international graduate students’ academic needs; and mentors may be assigned to bridge the cultural distance between American professors and international graduate students.
Other major suggestions also include following points. Firstly, U.S. schools should become aware of their international graduate students’ dissatisfaction and needs in relation to their academic learning processes and well-being through interviews or surveys on campus. Secondly, based on these students’ needs, U.S. should provide necessary institutional support, including not only knowledge orientation and skills improvement, but also opportunities for practice. For instance, U.S. schools should create opportunities for international graduate students to interact with their professors and American colleagues outside of class. Thirdly, U.S. schools should improve certain school services, such as to open adequate ESL courses each semester, to help international graduate students develop an appropriate career goal and positive learning attitudes, to provide counseling sessions about getting rid of stress, and to coordinate with student associations to help international graduate students engaged in campus activities and to increase their sense of belong. Fourthly, U.S. schools should consider to decreasing international graduate assistants’ workload and providing them with aids such as tutoring and counseling. Last, individual departments should consider to getting their international graduate students more involved in research through assigning mentors, open workshops, establishing learning communities, and carrying on student association events.

Last but not least, the study hopes to make international graduate students aware of the impacts of these identified subthemes on their academic lives and thus treat these subthemes
seriously in their learning. For instance, international graduate students may purposefully accumulate knowledge of American academic conventions and cultures before they come to U.S. graduate school. They may also turn to some school services for help when necessary during their adjustment to U.S. graduate education. They may make future plans with their family members or professors to facilitate their academic study at U.S. graduate school. Lastly, they may better understand the pressures and rewards of graduate assistantships and the adjustment to U.S. academic life.

In all, this study not only contributes to knowledge in the field of cross-cultural acculturation with original findings, but also gives practical suggestions to U.S. schools and international graduate students studying in the U.S. It not only benefits U.S. universities by showing their international graduate students’ academic needs but also help international graduate students to grab opportunities and to overcome difficulties in their academic lives in U.S. graduate schools.

Limitations

This qualitative study has the unavoidable limitation of a lack of generalizability due to the limited number of participants, the specific setting, and the limited amount of time. Firstly, there were only ten participants being interviewed in this study, which cannot represent all international graduate students in the United States. According to the Council of Graduate
Schools in the United States, there were nearly 280,000 international graduate students at American universities in Fall 2008. The ten international graduate students are not enough to represent these many international students in U.S. graduate school. Thus, the generalizability of the findings in this study is very limited. Moreover, among the ten participants in this study, two were Chinese, two were Indians, one was Saudi Arabian, one was Ghanaian, two were Germans, one was Austrian, and the other one was British. The above seven countries cannot represent the diversity of international graduate students. Thus, the results of this study based on a sample of international graduate students from seven countries do not reflect the individual experiences of all international graduate students in the U.S. Furthermore, besides the country of citizenship, the ten participants in this study were also not sufficient representatives of all international graduate students in U.S. graduate school in terms of programs, gender, age, and many other characteristics. Therefore, due to the limitation of participant selection in this study, the findings cannot be generalized in a larger context.

Secondly, the setting limits the findings of this study. The study was conducted in a public university in the U.S. Midwest. That said, the findings of this study in the public university may not represent international graduate students’ experiences in many private universities. Moreover, the university is located in a small town with an approximately 30,000 people, where more than 90% of the population is White. Since the low diversity in the locality may influence
international graduate students’ experiences at school, the findings of this study may not represent international graduate students’ academic lives in other public universities.

Thirdly, this study was conducted during a limited time period from summer 2009 to spring 2010. The time for data collection was limited to these three semesters and the data collection process was not repeated on participants. Thus, the data may not be comprehensive enough to represent participants’ thoughts on the topic. For instance, some participants were first-year graduate students during the interviews. They may have different views on the same topic if they were interviewed again during their second year of study. Therefore, the time limits of this study also limited the breadth of its findings.

Suggestions for Future Research

The first suggestion for future research is a scale construction. The findings of this study could be used to establish a scale about factors related to international graduate students’ academic adaptation. The identified subthemes in this study could be included as scale items for a pilot test.

The second suggestion for future research is to explore the impacts of some identified subthemes on a specific group of international graduate students. For instance, future research may be conducted to examine the impacts of family concerns on married international graduate students, or the impacts of graduate assistant experiences on female international graduate
students at U.S. graduate schools. In all, since international graduate students’ academic adaptation has been shown to be important to both U.S. institutions and international graduate students studying at U.S. schools, this field of study should be developed through professional research and deep investigations. This study has explored international graduate students’ academic adaptation in terms of three themes and ten subthemes, so that research should further investigate how these subthemes may influence different groups of international graduate students in terms of their marital status, age, gender, and nationality.
References


Appendix A

HSRB Approval

August 14, 2009

TO: Yuchun Zhou
Educational Foundations, Leadership and Policy Studies
(MACIE)

FROM: Hillary Harms, Ph.D.
HSRB Administrator

RE: HSRB Project No.: H10T028GE7

TITLE: International Graduate Students’ Academic Experiences

You have met the conditions for approval for your project involving human subjects. As of August 14, 2009, your project has been granted final approval by the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). This approval expires on August 3, 2010. You may proceed with subject recruitment and data collection.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is attached. Consistent with federal OHRP guidance to IRBs, the consent document(s) bearing the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp is the only valid version and you must use copies of the date-stamped document(s) in obtaining consent from research subjects.

You are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB and to use only approved forms. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures (including increases in the number of participants), please send a request for modifications immediately to the HSRB via this office. Please notify me, in writing (fax: 372-6916 or email: hrsrb@bgsu.edu) upon completion of your project.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

Comments/Modifications:

c: Christopher Frey

Research Category: EXPEDITED #7
Appendix B

Interview Questions

Demographic Questions:

1. How long have you been stayed in the U.S.?

2. What is your country of citizenship?

3. What is the year of your birth?

4. What is your level of education?

5. What is your major?

6. (1) Do you have an assistantship?

   (2) If yes, what kind of your assistantship?

7. (1) Are you married?

   (2) If yes, do you have spouse or children with you here?

8. (a). Have you taken an English test?

   No./ Yes-(Please specify)____________

   (b). Would you mind telling me the range of your scores?

   TOEFL-below <80; 80-95; >95

   IELTS- below 5; 5-6.5; >6.5

   Other-please specify
Narrative Questions:

1. As international students, we have to deal with a new environment, cross-cultural social life, living experiences, learning, and many personal issues. What factors outside of the classroom have influenced your academic life?

2. What kinds of in-class experiences do you like or dislike? Why?

3. Could you tell me one story related to your academic life at BGSU?

4. What could BGSU do to improve the academic life of international students? How these initiatives would help international students?

5. What kinds of teaching and learning-related relationship influence your learning? How?

6. Could you give some examples of activities outside of class that you think improve your academic achievements?

7. What campus services are helpful to your academics? How?

8. (Only for students who have assistantship at BGSU) How do your graduate assistant experiences influence your academic life at BGSU?

9. What difficulties have you met when studying at BGSU? What caused these difficulties?

10. (a). What English skills are important in your academic life, and why do you think they are important to you? (English skills including: listening, speaking, reading, writing)

    (b). How did you improve your English skills?
Appendix C

Table C1 of Results

Theme One: Interactions with People in Our Academic Life

Subtheme 1: Relationship with Professors at U.S. Graduate School

Interactions with professors.
- Professors were helpful and supportive to us whenever we needed help. (+)
- Professors were willing to help us. (+)
- The professor-student relationship was closer in the U.S. school. (+)
- Difficulties in communication due to language barriers or cultural differences. (-)

Professors’ teaching.
- We liked professors’ informative and interactive teaching styles. (+)
- Professors taught all what they know so we learned more than expected. (+)
- Professors also cultivated students’ learning strategies in class. (+)

Professors’ expectations and class behaviors.
- Some professors’ class behaviors were too informal to us. (-)
- Professors’ academic expectations were different and unfamiliar to us. (-)
- Advisor’s expectations changed one participant’s academic goals. (-)

Professors’ support.
- Professors’ encouragement improved our self-confidence. (+)
- Professors helped with our language skills. (+)
- Professors supported our research. (+)

Professors’ approachability outside of class.
- We appreciated professors’ approachability outside of class.

International professors: Understanding us from intercultural perspectives.
- International professors encouraged me in a way I can easily accept.”
Subtheme 2: Relationship with Fellow Students

Collaboration with American fellows in class.
- They helped me when I was not sure with English. (+)
- They improved our understanding of American culture. (+)
- They influenced our learning behaviors through collaborating in class projects. (+)

Fellow American students’ attitudes outside of class.
- We can clearly feel that kind of distance between our each other. (-)
- There was a distance. They are not approachable personally. (-)
- They left after class. So we didn’t talk after class.” (-)
- They appeared to be arrogant, not very much friendly. So there was not much communication as expected after school.” (-)

American friends.
- If the American classmates were your friends, they talked to you a lot. (+)
- My American friends helped me understand American educational system when we hang out. (+)

Need of friendship with Americans.
- I would like to have many American friends. (-)
- Our school should help with icebreaking. They should create some opportunities for us to get to know American students. (-)

Collaboration with international fellows.
- International students were more likely to share the process than Americans. (+)
- We work together after class. I learned most from my international classmates. (+)
- Through working together, our learning behaviors were also improved. (+)

Feeling for international fellows.
- I liked staying with international students because I knew I was not the only foreign person here. (+)
- We had something in common. (+)
- We learned together and helped each other. (+)
Subtheme 3: Prejudice
- Some professors looked down upon women students. (-)
- I didn’t understand why it had the difference for us than American students. (-)
- The American was trying to take advantage of my situations to know the grade he was not supposed to know. (-)
- My American undergraduate students complained that I did not speak English at all. (-)

Subtheme 4: Family Concerns
- My family did not support me economically but in a spiritual way, which was very important to me. (+)
- It was really difficult for you to make such a big decision to be here alone. You had to sacrifice a lot. (-)
- If I was here for another two or three years, I had to get to know what they think about it. (-)

Theme Two: Acculturation Strategies of Adjusting to U.S. Graduate School

Subtheme 5: Language Learning
- Working with my second language, it was difficult for me to cut into class discussion. (-)
- The accent usually made people misunderstand me. (-)
- We were in the environment. English was the first language. So we had to learn it well. (-)

Subtheme 6: Academic Cultural Distance

Preparation for class.
- Oral presentation was stressful to me. (-)
- After coming here, we were made to talk a lot in class. (-)
- I needed to understand the concept at the first place. (-)
- I needed some time to prepare it. (-)

Working with diverse coursework and class assignments.
- We had a lot of readings and written assignments, very intensive! (-)
- You always had due dates. (-)

Strategies for academic adjustment.
- You should have a good time arrangement skill to get things done. (+)
- I did lots of readings after class to catch up with cultural information. (+)
- I liked assignments to be different because diverse assignments helped me to be more engaged in learning. (+)
- I didn’t like that there was too much going online. (-)

Subtheme 7: Learning Motivations and Attitudes

- Future plans of working in the U.S. drove them to work hard at school in order to stand out from American students. (+)
- When you got excellent achievements, you can feel confident in the foreign country. (+)
- I always wanted to do my best. (+)
- It was your responsibility to get things done. (+)

Subtheme 8: Utilization of School Services

Utilization of campus facilities for learning.
- Most of my work was done in the computer lab. (+)
- The internet service was fast on campus. I used it to communicate with others, to see news, to see what is happening in the world, and to search articles for class. (+)
- I worked in library a lot. I borrowed books and searched for articles. Really helps. (+)
- Each department should have their own library. You cannot work without the library. (-)

Utilization of office services.
- I had to go to the Bursar’s millions of times because they always make mistakes. (-)
- The insurance office really needed to solve the thing with insurance. I had different emails with different stories from every single place. (-)

Other resources.
- Global Connections helped us orient at the beginning of arrival. (+)
- I went to Saudi Arabia dinner. I made friends there. We learned from each other. (+)

Theme Three: Graduate Experiences

Subtheme 9: Graduate Students’ Academic Concerns

- I knew that in the program’s description, to write a thesis is emphasized. So I thought I would write a thesis at the beginning of this program. (-)
- Research was frustrating. You spent a lot of time but no solutions, frustrating. (-)
Subtheme 10: Graduate Assistant (GA) Work

Opportunities from graduate assistant work.
- *I learned how to use blackboard, prepare for class, and lead class discussion in teaching.* (+)
- *This also made me understand my professors’ expectations in class and encouraged me to get more involved in my own class.* (+)
- *Teaching experience can help me to find a teaching job in the future.* (+)
- *I definitely learned something new from my American students. They asked me questions, making me to think and reflect on my teaching.* (+)
- *I know more about research, such as I know more about how to do literature review.* (+)

Frustration from GA work.
- *One of the difficulties in my academic life was time conflicts. I need to arrangement time between teaching and my own learning.* (-)
- *I was nervous to lecture.* (-)
- *My American undergraduate students complained about my English and teaching. I was stressed at that time and even wanted to go back home.* (-)

Fulfillment from graduate assistant work.
- *If I am a strong person, that’s because of these stressful experiences.* (+)
- *It helped me to gain the confidence in communication with others.* (+)