THE FACILITATIVE ROLE OF A COMMUNITY-BASED NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION IN FIRST-YEAR INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS’ SOCIOCULTURAL ADJUSTMENT IN A MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY

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Committee:

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Bruce Collet, Advisor

This study depicted, explained, and explored the facilitative role of a community-based non-profit organization, International Alliance, in first-year international graduate students’ sociocultural adjustment in a Midwestern university in the United States. Interviews were conducted with four first-year international graduate students selected out of 24 online survey respondents, the organization’s director, and two volunteers. Based on analysis derived from of social learning theory, international students’ social and network patterns, social capital theory, and the concept of community of practice, five categories were identified as crucial in facilitating sociocultural adjustment, and three factors were found to influence the five categories. The five categories were 1) “Hospitable Image”, 2) “Friendship Platform”, 3) “Accessible Help”, 4) “Group Fit Cultivation”, and 5) “Personalized Approach.” The three factors influencing the five categories were international Alliance’s mission statement, umbrella-structured operations, and volunteers’ cross-cultural training.
Dedicated To

My Mother and Father who live 6,945 miles away with their transcending love

And

International students who study in the U.S.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With great support from many people, I managed to complete this thesis. I would love to extend my sincere appreciation to my advisor, Dr. Bruce Collet, not only for his insight and expertise in the process of assisting me to complete this thesis, which was a transformative project in my academic development, but also for everything else I learned through working with him: critical thinking, researchers’ impartiality, meticulous scholarship, academic excellence and more. I am grateful to have Dr. Christopher Frey and Dr. Marc Simon on my thesis committee for their patience and direction.

I would also like to acknowledge my friends, who inspired and motivated me along the way by asking about and reading through drafts. My special thanks go to Julie George and Angela Garner, who have been tremulously supportive in my thesis writing.

Likewise, I would like to thank my MACIE thesis comrades, who experienced the same psychological pressure, for their encouragement and sweet bitter moments sharing.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Research on international students’ cultural adjustment has been increasing since 1982 (e.g., Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward, 1996) as more students are studying abroad. It is estimated that more than one million students and scholars have attended institutions of higher education abroad (Hayes 1998; Taylor 2005). According to the Open Doors report, which is published annually by the Institute of International Education (IIE) with support from the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, the United States continues to be the largest recipient of foreign students, hosting 671,616 international students in the 2008/09 academic year. Of this group, India remains the leading place of origin for the eighth consecutive year, with 103,260 students studying in the U.S.; China is the second leading sender with 98,510 students; South Korea ranks third with 75,065 students; Canada, the only non-Asian country in the top five, ranks fourth with 29,697 students, surpassing Japan with 29,264 students. Taiwan and Mexico rank sixth and seventh. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce International students contribute $17.8 billion to the U.S. economy through their expenditures on tuition and living expenses (Institute of International Education IIE Network, 2009).

Purpose

This study depicts, explains, and explores the role of International Alliance (IA), a pseudonym for a community-based non-profit organization, in facilitating first-year international graduate students’ sociocultural adjustment in a Midwestern U.S. university. The study finds that IA facilitates international students' sociocultural adjustment through categories that I define as 1) “Hospitable Image”, 2) “Friendship Platform”, 3) “Accessible Help”, 4) “Group Fit Cultivation”, and 5) “Personalized Approach”. I also find that these five themes are influenced by IA’s vision and mission statement, IA’s umbrella-structured operation, and cross-cultural training provided to IA volunteers. These results are analyzed
from the theoretical frameworks of social learning theory, international students’ social and network patterns, and the concept of community of practice. This study also provides recommendations on better facilitating the adjustment for new international graduate students in the United States.

Rationale

Students’ satisfaction with their educational experience and lives in the host countries is important not only in promoting mutual cultural understanding, but also in sustaining their school enrollment. They constitute one of the most commonly-studied groups of sojourners (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). Much research has explored their cultural adjustment, with a focus either on international students’ personality, gender, length of stay abroad, and previous cross-cultural experiences, or on the social support received from their host universities (specifically, orientation and counseling). There is however little literature on social support originating from outside of the universities in the form of local community-based non-profit organizations.

Findings from existing scholarship on first-year international graduate students may be categorized into the following ways. First, scholarship states that culture shock is usually most pronounced in the initial stage of cross-cultural experience, and sojourners need the most help during this period (Ward, Okura, Kennedy & Kojima, 1998). Second, targeting graduate students is because these students encounter more challenges and pressure than undergraduates, and many have assistantships and are expected to juggle studies with work.

The above findings relate to my own motivation for conducting this study. First, international graduate students outnumber international undergraduates in the university studied, thus making the research on graduate students even more relevant. Second, as an international graduate student myself, I am able to interpret the qualitative data from an insider’s perspective.
Informal Education

Informal education deals with daily experiences that are not planned or organized (also known as “incidental learning”). When these experiences are interpreted or explained by elders or peers they constitute informal education (Kleis, 1973, p. 4). International students’ interaction with their host outside the classroom to gain certain knowledge that helps them negotiate different situations can be classified as informal education. IA provides the platform where informal education can take place by offering opportunities for international students to interact with their host in various situations. With the hosts’ company, explanations, and advice, international students have the chance to acquire the salient skills to navigate in the new environment.

Context

International Alliance (IA) is located a small Midwestern city with a population of approximately 30,000, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. The racial makeup of the city is 91.84% White, 2.82% African American, 0.21% Native American, 1.83% Asian, 0.02% Pacific Islander, 1.81% from other races, and 1.46% from two or more races. Hispanic or Latino of any origin make up 3.48% of the population. The city is home to a large regional university, which is reflected in the fact that 46.6% of the population is between the ages of 18 to 24.

The university is a four-year public institution located in the Midwest about 20 miles south of a major city. For the 2008/09 academic year, the university reported a student body of around 17,309 on the main campus. In the same academic year, the makeup of the ethnicity on main campus for graduate students is: White 72.6%, Black 6.1%, Asian 4.2%, American Indian 0.3%, Other 14.4% (Institutional Research, 2010).

There is limited public transportation. The public transportation system in the city is City Transit, whose mission is to provide safe, affordable, quality public transportation within the
city limits. The campus fare-free shuttle transit system runs throughout campus and the town. The system is made up of three routes: the main route, the south route, and the north route (“Shuttle Route”).

Expected Findings

I hypothesized that International Alliance, the community-based non-profit organization, would be founded to provide practical and emotional support to assist first-year international graduate students in adjusting to their lives in the new environment. I expected that the practical and emotional support play a buffering role for international students’ difficulties in their sociocultural adjustment.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I first review the development of intercultural theories, from traditional theoretical approaches to culture shock to three contemporary theories of intercultural contact. Next, I focus on scholarship of international students’ sociocultural adjustment with an emphasis on different aspects of cultural adjustment. Lastly, I probe the existing research on cultural adjustment from the perspective of social supports that come from community-based non-profit organizations.

Historical Perspective on Intercultural Contact

In 1951, at a regional conference of the Research Institute of International Education, anthropologist Cora DuBois first spoke of “culture shock” to education exchange groups (Pusch, 2004, p. 14). In 1958 and 1960, Kalvero Oberg wrote about the notion of culture shock after observing the reactions of Americans working in Brazil (Pusch, 2004, p. 14). Since then intercultural contact has begun to carry the defining feature of culture shock, “a confusing and disoriented experience” and culture shock has been widely used to explain the difficulties of intercultural sojourn ing (Furnham & Bochner 1982, p. 162). Later research attempts to alleviate culture shock were propelled by the U.S. Peace Corps movement in 1960s and multinational trade during the postwar reconstruction period. Those major research explorations were predominately conducted by clinically-orientated psychologists who applied traditional psychotherapeutic models, which carried a clinical flavor (Furnham & Bochner, 1982, p.164). The social difficulties that sojourners usually experience are mostly interpreted within this medical model (Furnham & Bochner, 1982, p. 162). Table 1 summarizes the traditional theoretical approaches to culture shock.

In the 1980s, Stephen Bochner and Adrian Furnham developed a different view regarding the nature of intercultural experience, known as the cultural learning model of
Table 1: Traditional Theoretical Approaches to Culture Shock

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<th>Originator</th>
<th>Conceptual Formulation</th>
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<td>Grief and bereavement</td>
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<td>Locus of control</td>
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<td>Control beliefs predict migration</td>
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<td>Selective migration</td>
<td>Socio-biology (Neo-Darwinism)</td>
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<td>Individual fitness predicts adaptation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Applied social psychology</td>
<td>Feather 1982</td>
<td>Expectancy-values relate to adjustment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative life-events</td>
<td>Clinical psychology</td>
<td>Holmes and Rahe 1967</td>
<td>Migration involves life changes, and adaptation to change is stressful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>Clinical psychology</td>
<td>e.g. Brown, Bhrolchain, and Harris 1975</td>
<td>Social skill offers a buffering effect between life-events and depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value difference</td>
<td>Social psychology</td>
<td>Merton 1938</td>
<td>Value differences lead to poor adaptation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills and culture learning</td>
<td>Social psychology</td>
<td>Argyle and Kendon 1967</td>
<td>Lacking social skills may cause cross-cultural problems</td>
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intercultural contact. Unlike the previous clinically-orientated medical lens of perceiving sojournersocial difficulty in receiving cultures, they argue that “the major task facing a sojourner is not to adjust to a new culture but to learn its salient characteristics” (Furnham & Bochner 1982, p. 164). The acquisition of the host culture’s salient characteristics, especially knowledge necessary to negotiate everyday social encounters with members of the receiving society, is essential for a relatively stress-free and fulfilling life in intercultural interactions (Furnham & Bochner 1982, p. 164). The writers observed that “people who are new to a culture or subculture will not have been socialized in the rules and routines of behavior pertaining to that society, and will therefore at least initially be socially unskilled in their new environment” (Furnham & Bochner, 1982, p. 166). Henceforth, sojourners are in need of
education and training, particularly in relation to everyday social encounters with members of the host culture.

Bochner’s cultural learning model has been extended to incorporate two additional concepts. The first has been to combine the idea of social skills (Argyle, 1979; 1980) with intercultural competence (Furnham & Bochner, 1982). The second has been to draw attention to the importance of the social-support system of the sojourner as the context in which appropriate cultural-learning can take place (Bochner, Buker, McLeod, 1976; Bochner, McLeod & Lin, 1977; Bochner & Orr, 1979; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985a; Furnham & Bochner, 1982). Bochner’s cultural learning model derives its theoretical sources more from social psychology and education than from medicine, breaking through the traditional psychology-based analytical framework. The cultural learning model inspired two other contemporary theories on intercultural contact. The discussion of the theories is in the section below (Zhou, et al., 2008). Table 2 summarizes three contemporary theories of intercultural contact.

International Students’ Sociocultural Adjustment

International students, as one type of sojourner, began to be systemically studied after the 1950s, with a focus on their sociocultural and psychological difficulties (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Yet due to the heavy influence of psychology in sojourner literature, research on student sojourners’ adjustment was still clinically-oriented. In the 1980s there was a gradual movement away from the medical model, leading to the emergence of three contemporary models: culture learning, stress coping, and social identification (see Table 2). The three models mainly analyze three aspects of intercultural adjustment respectively in behavioral, affective, and cognitive areas. The culture learning model and the stress coping model can be utilized to facilitate sociocultural and psychological adjustment, where
sociocultural adjustment is placed in the cultural learning framework, and psychological adjustment in the stress coping framework (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992).

Intercultural adjustment can be broadly divided into two categories: sociocultural and psychological. As this study focuses on sociocultural adjustment, with cultural learning theory in conjunction with social-support serves as one primary research framework. According to social-learning theorists, intercultural problems arise for international students because they have trouble negotiating certain social situations. Therefore the key to facilitate international students’ adjustment resides in identifying social situations where social learning occurs, and then creating those environments. A major source of cultural information “will be those host nationals who function as culture friends and informal trainers” (Furnham & Bochner, 1986, p. 15) because most international students are unlikely to receive formal training in social skills in host cultures. Inquiry into identifying and creating supportive social learning conditions led intercultural adjustment researchers to investigate international students’ friendship patterns and social networks. Research has summarized that sojourning overseas students tend to belong to three social networks: monocultural, bi-cultural and multi-cultural (Furnham & Bochner 1982; Bochner, Bunker & Mcleod, 1976; Bochner, MacLeod & Lin 1977; Bochner and Orr 1979).

Examination of international students’ social networks, especially international’s relationships with hosts, can be buttressed by human cognitive development theorists. Lev Vygotsky and Barbara Rogoff for instance assert that the process of human cognitive development is the interaction between people and the social environments. Vygosky proposes that learning can be achieved by the scaffolding that comes from what he calls the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). In other words, in the initial stage of knowledge acquisition, people are able to better learn with temporary help from someone who has a better understating or a higher ability with respect to a particular task, process, or concept.
Table 2: Three Contemporary Theories of Intercultural Contact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Theoretical Origin</th>
<th>Conceptual Framework</th>
<th>Theoretical Premise</th>
<th>Factors Affecting Adjustment</th>
<th>Intervention Guidelines</th>
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<tr>
<td>Stress and Coping</td>
<td>Social psychology-stress, appraisal, and coping (Lazarus &amp; Folkman 1984); life events (Holmes &amp; Rahe 1967)</td>
<td>Cross-cultural travelers need to develop coping strategies to deal with stress</td>
<td>Life changes are inherently stressful</td>
<td>Adjustment factors involving both personal (e.g. life change, personality), and situational (e.g. social support)</td>
<td>Training people to develop stress-management skills</td>
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<td>(Affect)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Culture Learning</td>
<td>Social and experimental psychology-social skills and interpersonal behavior (Argyle 1969)</td>
<td>Cross-cultural travelers need to learn culturally relevant social skills to survive and thrive in their new settings</td>
<td>Social interaction is a mutually organized and skilled performance</td>
<td>Culture-specific variables such as: knowledge about a new culture, language or communication competence, cultural distance</td>
<td>Preparation, orientation and culture learning, especially behavioral-based social skill training</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Behavior)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Identification</td>
<td>Ethnic, cross-cultural and social psychology-self (Deaux 1996; Social Identity Theory, e.g. Phinney 1990)</td>
<td>Cross-cultural transition may involve changes in cultural identity and intergroup relations</td>
<td>Identity is a fundamental issue for the cross-cultural travelers</td>
<td>Cognitive variables such as: knowledge of the host culture, mutual attitude between hosts and sojourners, cultural similarity, cultural identity</td>
<td>Enhancing self-esteem, overcoming barriers to intergroup harmony, emphasizing intergroup similarities</td>
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<td>(Cognition)</td>
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Though the theory is not directly related to international students’ sociocultural adjustment, it does shed light on the significance of learning from the MKO, “hosts” in this case. This acquisition process of social skills with the help of the MKO on the non-classroom settings can be classified as informal learning. This non-classroom informal learning sheds light on the methods that cross-cultural training might be able to apply.

Although social learning theory and the study of social networks with respect to international students’ sociocultural adjustment are progressive, they are not perfect. The combination of a cultural learning model and the social support system of the student sojourner mirrors the “personal-environment fit” model of cross-cultural experience (Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007). The personal-environment fit model views adjustment as “a dynamic process that ultimately leads to achievement of appropriate fit between the person and the environment” (Ramsay et al, 2007, p.248). According to this model, adjustment includes two continuous learning cycles that focus on the environment (i.e.; interaction with hosts) or on the individual (i.e.; personality, cultural background, level of confidence) (Anderson, 1994; Kim 1995; Ramsay et al, 2007). Existing scholarship and the three major contemporary models of intercultural contact and adjustment still primarily revolve around the individual. In other words, they suggest that sojourners themselves are and should be active agents who can influence environments and should be responsible for the quality of their own lives in their host cultures (Anderson, 1994; Bandura, 1986; McInnis, 2001). Intercultural adjustment models that almost exclusively rely on individual efforts to reduce culture shock also include “anxiety uncertainty management” (Gudykunst, 1995, 1998), “self-awareness, nonevaluativeness, cognitive complexity, and cultural empathy” (Bennett, 1998, p. 220), and communication (Kim, 1977, 2001).
However, organizations can play a key role in helping student sojourners to cope with culture shock by providing social support (Adelman, 1988). Examining previous research, Zimmermann and Applegate (1994) find that social support in organizations serves as a coping mechanism for stress. Adelman (1988) argues that international student groups can function as a platform for collective experience, and enable those how are involved to share resources and information in coping difficulties in the new environment. Kim (2001) notes similar supportive functions in co-ethnic groups. Adelman (1988) further notes that “sojourners from collective cultures value collective social support more than those from individualistic cultures do”(cited in Lin, 2009, p.8). The issue is that services such as counseling are generally underutilized by international students due to international students’ help-seeking behavior. Studies by Schneider and Spilner (1986) and Johnson (1993), for instance, indicated that international students preferred seeking help from friends, parents and relatives for personal matters. However, due to physical separation and lack of knowledge of the host country, these sources of assistance are not as accessible and reliable as they might be within the home culture. Thus, international students are either not aware of the existence of the services, or do not trust hosts enough to vocalize their personal needs and concerns with someone they barely know. Therefore, the persistence initiated by hosts to reach out to international students is needed to facilitate their adjustment (Wan, et al., 1992).

Selltiz and Cook (1962), and Shattuck (1965) suggest that if sojourners are carefully introduced into a new society by close, sympathetic host culture friends they may encounter fewer problems than if they are left to fend for themselves (Furnham & Bochner 1982, p.171). Chapdelaine and Alexitch’s (2004) study also supported the hypothesized link between social interaction with hosts and culture shock. As the degree of social interaction with hosts decreases, the degree of culture shock increases. These findings support Furnham and Bochner’s (1982) argument that without meaningful social interactions with hosts,
international students are unlikely to learn and develop the culture-specific social skills that would enable effective cross-cultural interactions. In addition, these results are consistent with previous research associating social interaction with hosts with sojourner adjustment (Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Rohrlich & Martin, 1991; Ward & Searle, 1991; Westwood & Barker, 1990). Yet the social skills essential to socio-cultural adjustment are difficult to acquire in a formal academic setting (Furnham & Bochner 1982, p.172).

Community of Practice

The literature reviewed above makes evident the significance of building social support networks in assisting international students’ sociocultural adjustment through the community’s active outreach to international students in non-academic settings. Unaddressed thus far is attention paid to social support provided by programs of on-campus organizations, such as an international students’ office, English conversation partner programs, culture clubs, cultural festivals, and counseling. These types of services may operate as a source of advice and help for international students. Nonetheless, they cannot guarantee all the resources needed. In fact, as mentioned earlier, those on-campus services are generally underutilized by international students. The social support from off-campus community-based organizations is rarely included in the literature regarding the facilitation of international students’ adjustment.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) are non-profit organizations that are self-funded, operate within a single local community, and run on a voluntary basis. As a subset of the wider group of nonprofit organizations, community-based organizations address the local needs with generally a bottom-up approach. In regard to those community-based organizations whose mission is to serve local international communities, international students could benefit from interacting with those organizations’ volunteers by socializing and establishing friendships with them.
The services that off-campus CBOs provide to international students can serve as a platform where the collective resources are optimized and social network capital is formed. Off-campus community-based organizations can synergize the entire community and form an international-friendly community.

International Alliance (IA), the non-profit community organization studied in this research is one example of a CBO. The characteristics of CBOS mentioned above are demonstrated and analyzed in the Result and Discussion with specific reference to IA.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes my research objective, participant selection, and development of survey and interview questions, qualitative data analysis procedures, the relation between research objective and survey, interview questions, and finally the limitation of this study. The research question is how International Alliance (IA) helps first-year international graduate students adjust to life in the host community.

A main goal of this study is to depict, explain, and explore the facilitative role of a local community-based organization, International Alliance (IA), a pseudonym, in international students’ sociocultural adjustment in a Midwestern university in the U.S. IA was chosen mainly because I often heard international students talking about the events and services it sponsored. I was also involved in IA’s activities and services both as a participant and volunteer.

A qualitative approach was applied in order to fully interpret adjustment processes that could not otherwise be obtained through quantitative inquiry. Qualitative research is appropriate when “complex and detailed understanding of the issue” is needed; details that can only be established by observing, interviewing and interacting with people (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). This research employed a case study approach in terms of data collection and analysis because it was my determination that “quantitative measure and the statistical analysis simply did not fit the problem” due to processing of large descriptive data (Creswell, 2007, p. 40).

Participants

Data were collected for this study in three ways. The first set of data consisted of an online survey completed by first-year international graduate students who also participated in IA events. The second set came from interviews with students who were selected based on their responses to three key questions in the survey. The third set was obtained through
interviews with the director, one volunteer, and one member of the event planning team from International Alliance (IA). The process of data collection was as follows: all the first-year international graduate students on the IA’s email list were sent to a survey. Then, the Director of IA and two volunteers were interviewed while waiting for the surveys to be completed. After the surveys were collected and analyzed, four students were selected based on their answers for individual interviews, which were then conducted. Details about the selection of participants are elaborated in the procedure and data analysis sections.

Procedures

Before collecting data, I obtained research approval from the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) of my university to ensure that participants’ rights were protected by making their identity, the setting and the organization anonymous. The first batch of data was garnered from interviews with IA staff, including the director, one event planning member and one volunteer. The director of IA was specifically chosen for an interview because as a five-year full-time director, this individual was in the best position to provide holistic information of IA’s operations, and is the only full-time director in the history of IA. Furthermore, the director’s experience working with and befriending international students since 2000 as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher and as a director of IA since 2003 makes this individual a rich source of information regarding international students’ sociocultural adjustment issues.

The event planning member and the volunteer interviewees from IA were randomly selected from a list of six volunteers that the IA director provided. The rationale for using the interviewee pool offered by IA director was that IA is a relatively loose community-based organization made up of by volunteers, and its volunteers’ experience with the organization varies in terms of length, frequency, and depth. Not every volunteer can provide rich information regarding IA. The director listed three event planning team members and three
volunteers and their email addresses. I randomly selected two volunteers among the two groups, sent them my research proposal, and extended my invitation to interview them.

The second batch of data was collected through an online survey, which served as a tool to select student interviewees. The selection of student interviewees was more restrictive because the subjects were first-year international graduate students at the university. The online survey helped me concentrate on relevant data by seeking targeted subjects whose answers to the survey determined whom exactly I should interview. The survey had 18 questions, which included two demographic questions, two questions with multiple answers possible (mixed with open-ended questions), six open-ended questions, and eight multiple choice questions with only one answer permitted (see Appendix C).

The survey was first uploaded by the IA director to SurveyMonkey and sent out to 122 IA contacts who had participated in IA events, among whom were both undergraduate and graduate students. The survey instructions clearly stated that the survey is exclusively for first-year international graduate students and that those who are not part of the specified group should not take the survey. Due to rules regarding students’ privacy, I did not have access to the IA email list. Also, because of IA’s subscription to SurveyMonkey, I was not able to personally upload the survey. Nonetheless, I was the first to look at the survey, and agreed with its layout before the director sent it to 122 students. In the end, the survey was completed by 24 participants.

The last batch of data was gained by interviewing four first-year international graduate students who stood out among the 24 respondents as a result of their answers to the three key questions of the online survey. The three key questions are elaborated in the data analysis section.

Data Collection
As previously explained, two methods of data collection were utilized in this study: interview and survey. Interviews of IA staff and students were semi-structured; guiding questions were created with the flexibility to allow for follow-up explanations to be provided by interviewees during face-to-face interviews. The interview questions for students and IA volunteers were different due to heterogeneous inquiry perspectives. The research question can be answered by data collected from the angle of both service recipients and the service organizer. Students’ interview questions were designed to obtain their adjustment stories with experience with IA (see Appendix D). IA volunteers’ interview questions were created to capture the organization’s culture, volunteers’ attitude toward international community, and IA services for international students (see Appendix E). The survey was applied to more accurately select student interviewees and to provide certain quantitative and qualitative data for revising student interview questions.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and were transcribed by the researcher into electronic documents. Transcripts were checked by the researcher for accuracy by comparing the audio recordings and the transcripts three times. The transcripts were coded in the three-layer method with the first layer emphasizing key words, the second layer forming themes, and the third layer concentrating on parallel comparisons within student surveys and interviews, as well as a cross-section comparison between students and IA staff interviews. This data analysis process is in accordance with the qualitative analysis strategies that Creswell (2007) lists: working with words, identify codes, and reducing codes to themes (p.149). Creswell describes that “data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables or a discussion” (p. 148).
The coding of this study consists of three layers, with focus on words/codes, themes and cross-comparison of the themes respectively. During the first layer of analysis with the focus on words, I utilized the computer software NVivo to read through the transcripts. The software helped to identify word frequency in the transcripts, which assisted me in generating themes in the second layer of coding; however, word frequency is the not the only factor to determine themes. I also gathered interviewees’ similar opinions/ideas and summarized them into themes. The third layers is the cross-comparison of the themes, which is relevant because of the difference in interview questions and interviewees’ perspectives. I compared the themes generated out of students’ interviews to the themes of IA volunteers’ interviews to find relationships.

The selection criteria for student interviewees were based on their answers to the following key questions in the survey: **Question 9:** “Before arriving in the university, what level of difficulty did you think you might experience in adjusting to local life?”; **Question 10:** “What has been the actual level of difficulty that you have experienced so far in adjusting to life in the university town?”; and **Question 11:** “Please indicate to what degree you agree with the following statement: ‘Participating in IA events is helpful in my sociocultural adjustment to life in here.’” Sociocultural adjustment is defined as the ability to fit in and to negotiate interactive aspects of the new culture.” Q9 and Q10 determine the participant’s adjustment direction, which has three types: positive, actual adjustment difficulty is lower than expected difficulty; negative, actual adjustment difficulty is higher than expected difficulty; mirror, actual adjustment difficulty equals the expected difficulty. Q11 evaluates whether participation in IA helps the students’ sociocultural adjustment. These three questions were chosen because they were relevant to the research question, how does IA help international students adjust to new lives in the U.S. To answer this question, I selected the students who met two requirements. One was that the students had positive adjustment
direction, meaning that actual adjustment difficulty was lower than the expected difficulty. The other was that the students agreed or strongly agreed that participation in IA events helped their sociocultural adjustment. The survey analysis revolved around Questions 9, 10, and 11. The students interviewees were selected by listing all participants’ answers (see Table 3) and eliminating those whose answers did meet the two requirements.

Researchers Subjectivity and Limitations

Being an international graduate student in the U.S., my lens of viewing sociocultural adjustment is influenced by my own experience and observation of fellow international students. Also because of my participation, IA as a summer intern and student volunteer, I am aware that I may be influenced by the relatively close relationships with this organization I developed with this organization’s volunteers and international student participants.

The reader should keep in mind that this study is a case study with a relatively small sample in a Midwestern U.S. university, and is not meant to represent the entire population of international graduate students at this university.

Validity

To obtain correct and rich data to answer my research question, I created a survey to ensure that the student interviewees were first-year international graduate students and that they participated in International Alliance with respect to their sociocultural adjustment. I chose to interview the IA director purposefully and two IA volunteers randomly from name list provided by the IA director. The three IA interviewees were in the best position to provide information from the organization’s perspective because of their involvement in IA.

Digitally recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher to Word documents. Transcripts were checked by the researcher for accuracy by comparing the audio recordings and the typed transcripts three times. Finally, a report based on this study were presented to IA as a method of member check and a contribution of my research to the organization.
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

The results of the study address the question of how International Alliance (IA), an off-campus community-based organization, facilitates first-year international students’ sociocultural adjustment. Through surveying and then interviewing four first-year international graduate students, and two IA volunteers, and coding the transcripts, five major categories from the students’ perspectives and three major categories from IA organizational perspective emerged. Based on the results of the survey and follow-up interviews, I have found that International Alliance facilitates international students' sociocultural adjustment through categories that I define as 1) “Hospitable Image”, 2) “Friendship Platform”, 3) “Accessible Help”, 4) “Group Fit Cultivation”, and 5) “Personalized Approach”. I have also found these five themes within IA’s vision, its umbrella-structured operation, and cross-cultural training provided to volunteers. In this chapter, I first present the results of key Questions 9, 10, and 11 from the online survey (Table 3). I then elaborate on the five categories generated from interviews with international students and IA volunteers.

Key Questions from the Online Survey

The 24 first-year international graduate student participants of the survey came from diverse cultural backgrounds: eight Chinese, four Indian, three German, two French, one Cameroonian, one Austrian, one Puerto Rican, one Nepalese, one Lebanese, one Kenyan, and one Sri Lankan (See Table 3). The explanation for the disproportionate number in the survey participants can be derived from the constitution of the international students at the university. My research subjects are first-year international graduate students who enrolled in the Fall of 2009, the student survey participants are representative of the overall ethnic and national international students’ representation of the university (see Table 4).
All the survey participants were numbered from 1 to 24, and student interviewees were selected according to their answers to the three key questions No. 9, 10, and 11. The reason that these three questions were chosen as the key criteria for selecting student interviewees was this: to answer the major question of the study, how IA facilitates international graduate students’ sociocultural adjustment, I needed to select the students who met two requirements. One was that the students’ actual adjustment difficulty after arrival was lower than the expected adjustment difficulty before arrival. The other was that the students agreed that participation in IA events facilitated their sociocultural adjustment. To examine student participants’ expected and experienced difficulty, their answers to questions No. 9 and 10 were compared. Q9 explored the expected difficulty of adjustment before arrival. Q10 investigated the experienced difficulty of sociocultural adjustment 6 months after arrival. Participants’ answers revealed three types of relationships between expected adjustment difficulty and experienced adjustment difficulty. I categorize the first relationship as positive because the actual adjustment difficulty is lower than the expected adjustment difficulty. I categorize the second as negative because the actual adjustment difficulty is higher than the

### Table 4: Headcount Enrollment by Countries Where Survey Participants From

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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>79</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>140</td>
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<td>23</td>
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<tr>
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<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from *Headcount enrollment by country*. Office of Institutional Research.

expected adjustment difficulty. In the third relationship, the actual adjustment difficulty equals the expected adjustment difficulty. I categorize this as “mirror”. Table 3 summarizes all the participants’ adjustment types.

The results of the 24 participants in regard to the above adjustment types are as follows: ten participants (Nos. 3, 5, 7, 8, 12, 13, 20, 21, 23, 24) showed a positive relation; three participants (Nos.16, 18, 19) showed a negative relation; three participants (Nos.1, 2, 4, 9, 10, 14, 17, 22) revealed that the actual adjustment difficulty equaled their expected adjustment difficulty; three participants (Nos. 6, 11, 15) omitted these two questions. The participants who showed a positive adjustment relation were chosen for the next round of selection. Among these ten participants, the final international student interviewees either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “participation in IA events is helpful in their sociocultural adjustment.” Therefore, the ten participants whose answers to Q10 were “strongly agree or agree” were selected. These interviewees included Nos. 5, 12, 13, and 24 from China, No.3 from Sri Lanka, No.8 from India, and No.21 from Nepal.

Given that the research is a case study of international students as a whole at a university in Midwestern U.S. rather than an ethnic study of a particular student group, interviewing four Chinese students was unwarranted. Interviewee No.5 was chosen for two reasons: first, she/he demonstrated greater positive adjustment than the other three Chinese; second, he/she “strongly agreed” with the positive influence of IA on sociocultural adjustment. This suggests that No.5’s adjustment is possibly facilitated more by participation in IA activities than the other Chinese respondents. The final student interviewees are No.5 from China, No.3 from Sri Lanka, No.8 from India, and No.21 from Nepal.
Table 3: Results of Survey Key Questions and Participants’ Adjustment Direction

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>China (CHN)</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>India</td>
<td>CHN</td>
<td>Cameroon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>CHN</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>CHN</td>
<td>CHN</td>
<td>CHN</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CHN</td>
<td>CHN</td>
<td>France</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>India</td>
<td>CHN</td>
<td>France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Puerto Rico</td>
<td>Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CHN</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>CHN</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                 | No Difficulty     | 0                                    | √                                        | √                                            |
|                 | Slight Difficulty | 8                                    | √                                        | √                                            |
|                 | Moderate Difficulty| 8                                    | √                                        | √                                            |
|                 | Great Difficulty  | 5                                    | √                                        | √                                            |
|                 | Extreme Difficulty| 0                                    | √                                        | √                                            |
| Q10) Experienced Difficulty of Adjustment | No Difficulty | 3                                    | √                                        | √                                            |
|                                   | Slight Difficulty | 10                                   | √                                        | √                                            |
|                                   | Moderate Difficulty| 4                                    | √                                        | √                                            |
|                                   | Great Difficulty  | 4                                    | √                                        | √                                            |
|                                   | Extreme Difficulty| 0                                    | √                                        | √                                            |

Adjustment Direction:

- indicates mirror relation (the expected adjustment difficulty equals the experienced adjustment difficulty).

√ indicates participants’ answers. + indicates positive relation (the expected adjustment difficulty is lower than the experienced adjustment difficulty); - indicates negative relation (the expected adjustment difficulty is higher than the experienced adjustment difficulty); = indicates mirror relation (the expected adjustment difficulty equals the experienced adjustment difficulty).
Results by Category

This section provides results by categories that derived from interviews with No.5 from China, No.3 from Sir Lanka, No.8 from India, and No.24 from Nepal.

_Hospitable Image_

Student participants report that their initial contact with IA gives them the first impression that not only IA, but also the university and the entire community are friendly to international students. Student interviewees stated that events organized by IA and IA volunteers’ initiation in knowing international students demonstrated their genuine goodwill towards international students. The friendliness and sincerity of IA volunteers make new internationals less nervous about their transition. Based on the interviews, the two specific types of assistance viewed as instrumental in welcoming new international students were welcome bags and volunteers’ initiation in starting a conversation.

IA set up an information table in a dorm where new internationals stayed temporarily on campus until they found a place to live. Usually a week before new international students are required to attend their orientation on campus, IA volunteers will set up the reception table, greet new international students, introduce IA, distribute welcome bags, and ask for contact information so that new students can be contacted about participating in IA events. A welcome bag contains a toothbrush and toothpaste, a shower kit, a shaving kit, an international calling card, a grocery shopping gift card, as well as a folder of flyers advertising IA events and local services. Students report that the welcome bags bear more than a welcome; they express the organization’s care towards international students.

Students stated that they are normally afraid to initiate a conversation with anyone in the initial stage of arrival. Students are less nervous when they participate in IA activities. IA has
volunteers who greet international students, distribute name tags, initiate small talk, and introduce the event. Throughout the event, students are approached by IA volunteers.

Accessible Help

Students listed the accessibility of help from IA as being influential in their positive sociocultural adjustment. Two aspects of the assistance are elaborated here.

Multiple Means of Connecting with IA and Multiple Events to Offer Help

IA has various methods of connecting with new international students. These methods include the information table at the contemporary dorm housing, classroom announcements by ESL instructors at the university, monthly newsletters sent through IA email, IA Facebook fan page, and IA website, as well as IA fliers at the Graduate Students Orientation whose primary goal is to improve the performance of teaching assistants and research assistants. Graduate Students Orientation is a one-week seminar that is required as a contractual condition for new graduate assistants. Christian Campus House (CCH) and Christian Student Network (CSN), pseudonyms for the two campus ministries partnering with IA also spread the word of IA events to international students. Multiple events were organized to offer help.

Students reported that the following activities help reduce international students’ concerns about food, transportation, and logistical issues: Free Food and Furniture in August, International Potluck in October, Thanksgiving Dinner in November, monthly grocery shopping trips to international markets, and Friendship Friday.

Friendship Platform

Student interviewees reported that IA events act as a platform where international students can interact with both Americans and other international students. Two prominent actions are identified under this category.
Opportunities of Fellowship Formation and Invitation by American Families

International Alliance organizes various events with reference to the university’s calendar so that international students can seek assistance from IA. IA’s programs include New International Students Welcome Night, Free Food and Furniture, Barn Dance, Amusement Park, International Potluck, Thanksgiving Dinner, Welcome-Back Bowling Night, Spring Break Trip to Amish Country, monthly grocery shopping trips to international markets, Friendship Friday, and free Community English classes. Two campus ministries partnering with IA also hold cultural events, gatherings, and retreats that are open to American and International students. The participation in IA activities increases the chance of meeting people, engaging fellowship and forming friendships, which can expand the social support sources.

International Alliance events offer its volunteers opportunities to connect with new international students. These events serve as the basis for further interaction between IA volunteers and international students. Many international students are invited to IA volunteers’ homes after they have met and talked quite a few times in IA events.

Group Fit Cultivation

Another theme reported by student interviewees is that international students feel comfortable talking with people who are in a similar situation. Students state that they can sense the feeling of being in a group where people can identify with each other. Two components of this theme are presented here.

Similar Needs, Easier Connections and Small Group Formation

Participants state that they are more at ease when talking with others who are experiencing a similar adjustment, having similar needs, and facing similar challenges. The similarities of the transition experiences bridge fellowship and friendship. The study also showed that international
students found and joined small groups that complement their identities or interests. Through meeting and talking with people in IA events, international students can be drawn toward self-determined small groups of people united according to cultural backgrounds, hobbies, and adjustment stages. For instance, students who are passionate about playing soccer or cricket form their own sport teams and practice together. As well, students who are married can exchange relationship ideas with other married students.

**Personalized Approach**

The approach of IA was found to be “personalized” in regard to its bottom-up methods of approaching international students, interacting with them, and providing them with help. This category emerges when participants compare their experience with CIS on campus and IA. CIS works with both American students wanting to study abroad as well as international students who wish to study in the United States. The two entities are found to offer very different types of assistance to international students. Two subthemes were illustrated to support this category.

**The Informal Setting of IA Events**

Almost all the IA events are held in a casual setting off campus rather than classrooms in campus buildings. Participants are predominately international students and IA volunteers. Few university faculty attend IA events. Participants create a relaxed atmosphere where international student are less nervous.

**Concerns for Each Individual International Student**

Interviewees state that IA provides assistance to international students in a customized way. IA provides help in both material and emotional aspects. IA volunteers’ presence and help in difficult times provide guidance for international students.
Results by Factor

Three factors that helped facilitate the five themes impacting international students’ sociocultural adjustment were identified through analyzing interviews with the IA director and two volunteers. They are IA’s vision and mission statement, umbrella-structured operation, and cross-cultural training for IA volunteers.

IA’s Vision and Mission Statement

Serving the intentional students communities with “no-strings-attached” is International Alliance’s vision. International Alliance’s mission statement is to 1) Connect with the international community “by serving you and providing cultural events for you”, 2) Make friends “by inviting you into our homes”, 3) Learn about “your culture while sharing aspects of ours”, and 4) Create opportunities “for you to observe and participate in our spiritual communities, if you choose to” (“mission statement”).

This study found that this vision not only ties volunteers and partner churches together, but also reduces international students’ concerns. It does all of this while simultaneously removing the obligation from international students to repay such assistance. With this vision, participating international students do not need to worry about compromising or changing their value systems and religious beliefs. IA volunteers respect international students’ cultures and religious beliefs. IA creates a rule that restricts international students from religious proselytizing or trying to convert them to a specific religion (“history”).

However, the possibility of recruiting potential church members through connecting with international community cannot be ruled out partly due to the predominately religious composition of IA and its mission statement and partly because of intertwinement of volunteers’ motivation and interaction with international students.
**Umbrella-structured Operation**

IA consists of seven churches and two campus ministries. The top-down structure begins with an executive board, consisting of eight members who represent IA partner churches. The board provides accountability for the director, and helps IA create policies with legal ramifications. For example, any time that IA transports students or internationals outside of the university town, there is a travel waiver or release form to fill out for both the volunteers and the internationals. In addition to the board, IA has a planning team, consisting of one to two representatives from each partner church. The event planning team meets together with the director three or four times a year to plan semester events, discuss further projects and potential activities, and share feedback gained from previous events.

Interviews with IA volunteers reveal that the umbrella-structure of the organization helps to guarantee the smooth operation of events. Facilitation includes providing transportation, preparing food, organizing the welcoming reception and cleaning up after events. If one church felt burdened, another church can supplement the activity.

**Volunteers’ Cross-cultural Training**

While talking with the IA director, I found that IA organizes and strongly recommends its volunteers to participate in its “Navigating Cultural Bumps” workshop training. In the last two years IA has changed its approach of offering workshops. Instead of offering this workshop once a year, IA offers these workshops several times throughout the year, especially right before the Fall semester when the largest number of new international students arrive. IA advertises the workshop through its newsletters via email. The planning team also shares the responsibility of getting the word out to their representative churches. Volunteers can attend these workshops as
many times as they want, though attending the workshop is not a prerequisite of volunteering at the IA events.

For larger events, such as the Barn Dance, a brief orientation is usually held before the event begins. It is a 15-20 minutes meeting where the Director highlights some of “the dos and the don’ts” of interacting with international students. Guidelines include what to do when volunteers are asked questions that make them uncomfortable.

Relationships among Five Categories and Three Factors

In this section, I present the results regarding the relationships within the five categories and the three factors, and the relationships between the three factors and the five categories. I find that among the five categories, 1) Hospitable image lays the foundation for friendship platform and at the same time hospitable image is the result of the personalized approach, 2) Friendship platform accelerates group-fit cultivation, 3) Accessible help is the result of friendship platform and group-fit cultivation, and 4) Personalized approach enhances hospital image and friendship platform.

Among the three factors, umbrella-structured operation and cross-cultural training for volunteers are found to facilitate the realization of the mission statement; I find that the mission statement determines the structure and volunteer training for the volunteers.

The study reveals the relationships between the five categories and three factors. The approach to and the process of facilitating international students’ sociocultural adjustment is influenced by the organization’s mission statement. That is, International Alliance’s mission statement serves as the fundamental guide for the five categories identified as assisting international students’ sociocultural adjustment. The above relationship (within categories and between categories and factors) are discussed in detail in the following chapter.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this study was to depict, discuss, and explore the facilitative role of International Alliance in the sociocultural adjustment of the first-year international graduate students. In this chapter, I examine and explain how the findings discussed in “Results” answer the research question of my study, that is how IA facilitates international students’ sociocultural adjustment. I first present the explanations for the results of the online survey key questions, and then I continue to explain with reference to relevant literature why the five categories are essential for IA’s facilitative role in international students’ sociocultural adjustment.

Online Survey Key Questions Results Analysis

Expectancy violation theory can be applied to the procedure of selecting international student interviewees by comparing international students’ expected and experienced adjustment difficulty. Expectancy violation theory is an extension of expectancy value theory, a socio-psychological theory of cultural adjustment. In expectancy value theory, Weissman and Furnham (1987) suggest that fulfilled expectations lead to positive evaluations and easy adjustment, while unfulfilled expectations that lead to negative evaluations and difficult adjustment (as cited in Landis, Bennett, & Bennett, 2004, p. 313). Burgoon and Walther (1990) further explore the role of expectations which eventually leads to the creation of expectancy violation theory. Unlike expectancy value theory, expectancy violation theory believes that not all unfulfilled expectations lead to negative evaluations and difficult adjustment. Burgoon and Walther argue:

Unfilled expectations may be evaluated either positively or negatively. Expectations perceived as negatively violated (things turn out worse than expected) do lead to negative evaluations. However, those expectations perceived as positively violated (things turned
out better than expected) lead to positive evaluations and outcomes (as cited in Landis, et al., 2004, p. 313).

These hypotheses have been confirmed by recent research on international students in New Zealand (Rogers & Ward, 1993), corporate employees in Japan (Black & Gregersen, 1990), and returned U.S. students (Martin, Bradford, & Rohrlich, 1995), revealing that expectations perceived positively lead to positive adjustment.

The results from online survey participants No. 5 from China, No. 3 from Sri Lanka, No. 8 from India, and No. 21 from Nepal stood out, and hence comprised the interviewee population. Table 4 summaries the average individualism scores of the regions where the 24 study participants come from. The table draws from Geert Hofstede’s (2001) five cultural dimensions. The lower the individualism scores, the higher the value societies place on collectivism.

Adelman (1988) claims “Sojourners from collective cultures value collective social support more than those from individualistic cultures do” (cited in Lin, 2009, p. 8). The online key questions No.9, 10, and 11 test the influence of social support on international graduate student participants’ adjustment. If the final student interviewees are those from collectivist cultures, it will confirm Adelman’s claim. The final student interviewees are all from Asian countries, which confirms Adelman’s research result.

Table 5: Participant Average Individualism Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regions</th>
<th>Asian Countries</th>
<th>East Africa</th>
<th>Latin America</th>
<th>European Countries</th>
<th>World Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individualism Score (1-100)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Five Categories

_Hospitable Image_

Since the Fall of 2008, at the request of the university, International Alliance (IA) has not transported international students from airports to campus. Unable to provide free transportation for new international students, IA is not able to reach students the moment they arrive in the U.S. To help new internationals as soon as they reach the university and to make them aware of the free services that IA provides for them, IA staffs an information table in a dorm where new internationals stay temporarily until they find a place to live. At the information table, IA offers each new international student a welcome bag. Students find that the welcome bag carries more than a welcome. For example, Arthur felt what IA offered was a welcoming gesture, and indicated that “we [IA] care about you so please have these basic things.” When he received the welcome kit, he felt that IA genuinely harbored goodwill toward international students and this feeling made him happy. He said that when he came to the U.S. he never expected help to seek him out. He further explained “I do not deserve help. I am a graduate student, over 18 years old, and I never thought about coming here to ask for help.” He expressed his surprise and gratitude as he recalled the IA volunteers he met on his first visit to campus. He described these volunteers as “a group of very friendly people who are here trying to help you, trying to speak to you, trying to communicate, showing that they care about you in the best possible way.” Thinking that IA must have spent a large sum of money, and invested much time and care on these “beautifully arranged bags,” he felt that although he is a stranger in this city, he has a support system through IA.

Gudykunst’s (2003) Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory states that in a cross-cultural situation, uncertainty and anxiety arise because of cultural differences and a lack of
understanding of cultural rules; therefore, management of uncertainty and anxiety paves the way to effective communication. To decrease uncertainty and anxiety in intercultural communication, Gudykunst believes that one needs to cultivate the ability to process complex information about strangers, flexibility of attitude, tolerance of ambiguity, and empathy. One limitation of the theory is that it relies on the individual to make the effort. This does not mean that individuals should not take responsibility, but Selltiz & Cook (1962) and Shattuck (1965) suggest that if individuals are carefully introduced into a new society by close, sympathetic host culture friends they may encounter fewer problems than if they are left to fend for themselves (Furnham & Bochner, 1982).

Accessible Help

All four international student interviewees listed food and transportation as the two aspects that they needed the most assistance with during their initial adjustment. Their major concerns are understandable because the nearest international grocery stores are located 30-40 minutes away. For new internationals, obtaining a car right after arrival is difficult. IA organizes free monthly international grocery shopping trips during the Fall and Spring semesters. Thus IA volunteers take an average of 25 students on each trip, driving a van borrowed from churches as well as private vehicles owned by IA volunteers. The trip usually covers three international stores: an Asian store, an Indian store, and a Middle Eastern store. IA also has the flexibility of making different stops at other international stores according to the students’ requests and preferences. In addition to monthly shopping trips, students are welcome to contact IA volunteers for rides to local grocery stores within the town. With respect to initial food adjustment, IA plays a crucial role in helping new international students meet those immediate needs.
Arthur reported that he seldom cooked back home in India, as his family is affluent enough to have maids to do the cooking and other chores. Without IA’s monthly trip, he would have had a hard time finding the right Indian ingredients, and cannot imagine what his life would have been like. He admitted that he still is adjusting to American food. IA’s grocery trips are nearly his only means of an Indian food supply. International students’ immediate needs not only involve food and transportation, but also furniture and kitchenware such as utensils, plates, bowls, and microwave ovens.

IA has a Free Food and Furniture event every August just before the Fall semester starts. Ben, an international student from Nepal recalled this event: “I saw students taking various things: plates and forks, air-conditioners, pillows, chairs, desks, everything; you name it. This was so helpful by providing us the immediate things that we need.” Arthur also benefited from this event. Now his apartment is well-stocked thanks to IA’s furniture giveaway. Meghan, a Chinese student who did not receive the item that she hoped for, exclaimed, “If you cannot find things that you need, you can write down your requirements, IA will help to look for the items.” Likewise, students who did not have the opportunity to attend this event were encouraged to contact IA volunteers regarding items that they need.

IA’s assistance is not limited to material. For Grace, a graduate student from Sri Lanka, IA is “always there for her” because IA volunteers, especially the IA director Jen, took care of her when she was sick. She said that “If I did not know IA, I do not know what I should do. I was alone; I didn’t have many friends over there at that time. The only friends I had were Jen, David and other International Alliance friends.”

To interpret this category, I refer to the literature on international students’ help-seeking behaviors. Zahi’s study (2002) indicates that international students prefer to use family and
friends as a means of support for personal problems. This may be attributed partly to the lack of understanding of student services availability on campuses, and partly to unfamiliarity with the specifics of services and for whom they are intended. Baloglu (2000) further indicates similar results regarding international students considering family and friends as the most important support systems. In summary, actively approaching international students with clearly-stated services is crucial in assisting them to meet their needs to adjustment to life in the new environment.

**Friendship Platform**

International Alliance organizes various events that correspond to the university’s calendar for international students. During these events, international graduate students become acquainted with not only IA American volunteers, but also fellow international students.

Kevin, one of the few American university student volunteers with IA, thinks the best contribution of IA in helping international students is to foster positive connections between international students and Americans. In fact, Kevin believes that one of the best ways that IA helps international students is by connecting them with American families outside school. Many IA volunteers have families in the surrounding area; hence, students are often invited into a family’s home for social events or for general gatherings such as potlucks. As university life is only one aspect of American life, connection with American families provides another cross-cultural learning engagement opportunity for both international students and American families. Kevin considers it “really, really meaningful for international students to get to develop friendships with them [American families] and IA facilitates this connection.”

Grace also engaged friendships with IA volunteers. After attending IA events, her life became “very easy because I made good friends and I enrolled in all the activities.” She also
states that IA gives her the opportunity to adjust to American culture with ease. Grace talked of improvement in her spoken English. She admitted, “It is really hard to understand, the way they [Americans] are talking and everything”. Grace explained that “My English speaking abilities and English knowledge” increased because of frequent interaction with IA volunteers who “taught me how to live in the American culture.”

For Arthur, IA helped “tremendously” in meeting his needs during the initial transition. He confirmed, “It is one beautiful thing that my needs are met with the facilitation from IA.” However, Arthur also reported that “I no longer go to IA events that often because I found that no more need for me.” The church now takes him shopping in the winter. Nonetheless, were it not for his church, Arthur would have turned to International Alliance for help. He went on explaining, “I could have asked IA, but the church pitched in to help me. So it’s now like I depend on the church, but it’s the same way like IA helped me.” He feels like his needs are all met and that IA has helped him enough.

Statements like those above from international student interviewees can be related to Furnham and Bochner’s (1986) social skills learning theory. The theory suggests that a major source of cultural information “will be those host nationals who function as culture friends and informal trainers” (p.15). While international students who have approached IA for help have received help, there are still students who are “afraid” to ask. IA student volunteer Kevin believes that international students might feel like they are burdening IA. He states,

When you really get to know like someone as a friend, you don’t feel as guilty asking them for help because you help each other. I think that the best thing that can happen is that these deep friendships form so that the students don’t feel like they owe someone who’s helping them with something.
Kevin recounted how he drove his Russian friend to take the TOEFL test in a nearby city. At the test site, his friend lost an item that was important to him. Kevin gladly went back to the site to retrieve it the following week. Kevin said that he was glad that there exists a level of trust between him and his friend where his friend wouldn’t have to feel guilty for asking him for help.

Friendships with hosts who “function as culture friends and informal trainers” can serve as a major source of cultural information (Furnham & Bochner, 1986, p.15) because most international students are unlikely to receive formal training in the social skills of the host culture. Furnham and Bochner’s social skills learning theory can also be found in Vygotsky’s (1978) theory on human development. Vygotsky believes that the acquisition of social skills is through scaffolding with the “More Knowledgeable Other” (MKO). The MKO refers to anyone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner with respect to a particular task, process or concept. Vygotsky proposes that in the initial stage of knowledge acquisition, people are able to learn better with temporary help from someone who has a better understanding or a higher ability with respect to a particular task, process, or concept. In the case of cultural adjustment, if international students choose to interact with these MKOs, they would be able to learn the needed social skills better and faster so as to navigate in the new culture through “scaffolding” with the MKO.

*Group Fit Cultivation*

Arthur used “fellowship” to describe his experience with IA: “All of us [new international students] are in a similar state of mind and heart and it’s good if you can just get in with a group of like-minded people. Imagine if IA were not there, would so many international students be put in a room with 50 other international students, eating, dancing, and mingling? Not possible because I would rather be in my own apartment taking care of my own needs.” When IA
organizes events, IA volunteers invite international students for dinner, offer rides for grocery shopping, or inform students of IA activities. These activities cultivate the “fellowship”. Ben agrees that IA is instrumental in that it makes the international students happy because it facilitates a sense of community where those new to the area can say “Hi, hi, hi, and start connecting with each other.” Ben went on detailing his feelings: “this aspect of psychology where they say you have to associate with other people to make you feel better. That’s what we all need. We all need to socialize, we all need friends.”

International Alliance, for Grace, offers more than classes where she learns English but also provides opportunities; it is a “family, my [Grace’s] first home in the U.S.” The friends she made through IA are not only Americans, but are also from other countries. Since Grace was a spouse of a PhD student first, and later a graduate student herself, through IA she came to know other spouses who became her good friends and with whom she has enjoyed spending time. She recalled, “It was very easy to pass my time at this house [the place Grace and her friends often meet], rather than stay at home doing nothing. It helped me enhance my every day, especially, they helped me get away from my loneliness at home.” She now lives in Texas, “Here in Texas. I don’t have anything like that [IA].” She also likes to come back to her “first home in the U.S.” with her husband or alone whenever she wants because she knows “they [IA volunteers] are there for me.”

Research has found that sojourning overseas students tend to belong to three social networks: monocultural, bicultural and multi-cultural friendships(Furnham & Bochner 1982; Bochner, Buker & Mcleod, 1976; Bochner, MacLeod & Lin 1977; Bochner & Orr 1979). Monocultural networks consist of friendships with other sojourning compatriots; bicultural networks consist of bonds between host national such as academics, students’ advisors, and university staff;
multicultural networks are the student’s multicultural circle of friends and acquaintance. IA events facilitate the freedom for international students to choose with whom they are comfortable to interact. International students attending IA events are able to connect with their co-nationals, Americans, and students from other cultural backgrounds. Nationality is not the only criterion that draws people into small groups. Common interests in leisure activities as well as marital status are also factors that attract international students together to form various small groups where they can connect further.

**Personalized Approach**

In the interviews, I asked student participants to compare their experiences with International Alliance to those with the Campus International Service (CIS). Arthur said that IA and CIS are complementary, but he cannot say which one is doing better in helping international graduate students adjust to life in the university town. He regarded CIS as an information center to “inform you [international students] about the laws of the US” and as a teacher who asks “you to go and sit in a class and take notes”, and teaches you “certain things one should do in America or should not do, and how to behave and what to expect.” He felt that IA did things differently: “It’s more like, they [IA] give you the rights and they give you stuff. When you look at the brochures and booklets in the welcome bag, you find that IA informs you about the shops, these different shops you can contact and where to get what.” Arthur’s comments suggested that IA’s approach is very personal: a combination of a support system and an agent for cultural adjustment. He further explained, “They will not ask you to sit down and take notes. They [IA volunteers] will ask ‘Hey, do you need a ride? Do you need a microwave? Do you need anything?’ That’s what they will ask.” Both organizations serve international students, but IA
emphasizes a personal approach over an academic or legal one. That was why Arthur believes CIS and IA are complementary.

Grace reported that she only contacted the CIS for her passport and “official things.” Other than that, “For the personal things, I didn’t contact them and I do not have much connection with them.” For personal matters, she always contacts friends from IA for advice and help because IA provides services and never expects anything from her.

This category can be interpreted in reference to non-profit organizations’ typical bottom-up approach. This approach provides a platform to help identify, discuss, and solve local issues by increasing people’s awareness of the issues, creating agendas and methods to address the issue, and widening the scope for participants to solve the issues (Panda, 2007). This approach taps the local expertise according to a specific context. In the case of IA, the organization recognizes the difficulty of new international students’ adjustment to lives in the university town. IA then creates services, and cultural events, as well as mobilizes the local people to help this particular group of students. A personalized approach is an appropriate method to reach out to international students and help to meet their needs.

Relationships among the Five Categories

In the Results chapter, I listed the relationships among the five categories: 1) Hospitable image lays the foundation for friendship platform. 2) Hospitable image is the result of personalized approach. 3) Personal approach enhances hospital image and friendship platform. 4) Friendship platform accelerates group-fit cultivation. 5) Accessible help is the result of friendship platform and group-fit cultivation, and. I explain these relationships by linking the theories in the Literature Review chapter.
Hospitable image lays the foundation for friendship platform. Hospitable image is the result of a personalized approach. Selltiz and Cook (1962), and Shattuck (1965) suggest that if sojourners are carefully introduced into a new society by close, sympathetic and friendly host in the new environment, they may encounter fewer problems than if they are left to fend for themselves. Therefore, the friendly first impression of the host culture is the first step for further interaction with the host. Gudykunst’s (2003) Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory also states that one way to lessen anxiety in cross-cultural contact is to expand sojourners’ comfort zones by cultivating casual and friendly atmospheres in the initial stage.

Hospitable image is the result of IA’s personalized approach. IA’s bottom-up approach expects its volunteers to recognize and understand international students’ needs to help them satisfy their needs. IA volunteers’ initiation in starting conversations and inquiring about international students’ lives lead to the formation of hospitable image.

A personalized approach enhances hospitable image and friendship platform. Like the above analysis, a personalized approach solidifies the hospitable image and friendship platform by more frequent and deeper interactions.

The friendship platform accelerates group-fit cultivation; friendships help international students to find the social networks they feel comfortable with in monocultural network, bicultural, or multicultural networks (Furnham & Bochner 1982; Bochner, Buker & Mcleod, 1976; Bochner, MacLeod & Lin 1977; Bochner & Orr 1979). By rightly positioning themselves, international students can find groups where their identities best fit. The groups are not solely formed by nationality, but also by hobbies, interests, field of study, and marital status. In this multiple identities formation, if international student choose to do so, they are able to constitute more social network and social capital.
Accessible help is the result of friendship platform and group-fit cultivation. International students’ preference for friends and families in help-seeking behaviors (Baloglu, 2000; Zahi, 2002) demonstrated the significance of friends and families in international students’ help repertoire. Not every international student is able to have family around all the time; therefore, friends seem to be the first choice when international students need help.

Three Factors

In this section, I elaborate on the three factors that emerged from the interviews with the director of IA and the two volunteers from the organization, specifically on how they interpret the organization’s vision and mission statement, as well as what they believe to be the commonalities that tie volunteers and IA partnering churches together.

IA’s Vision and Mission Statement

Serving the intentional community with “no strings attached” is one major component of IA’s mission statement, which includes 1) Connecting with the international community by serving them and providing cultural events for them. 2) Making friends by inviting international students into hosts’ homes. 3) Learning about students’ cultures while sharing aspects of the hosts’ culture. 4) Creating opportunities for students to observe and participate in the organization’s spiritual communities, if they choose to do so. IA director, Jen, articulates what ties IA together: “Volunteers are Christians and our desire is to serve the way that Jesus Christ did, which really was with no strings attached.” Jen believes that a major strength of IA is that it follows the manner of selfless serving attitude that Jesus Christ encouraged on Earth: “He didn’t do something in order to get something.” Jen hopes that international friends as well as others within the community can experience “unconditional serving and unconditional love.” She admitted, “We don’t do it perfectly, but hopefully that’s what they [international students] are
experiencing since our overall goal is to serve. We want to create events and services that actually do that.” Reflecting that IA tries to create as many opportunities as possible for internationals to engage in American culture. This is the guiding principle that motivates IA to organize events and cultural learning opportunities, such as the International Thanksgiving Dinner, Fall Festival party, potluck dinners.

In regard to IA’s services, the organization wants to attend to the needs of international students; thus, IA provides services like the free English class, the TOEFL prep class, free furniture, and monthly shopping trips to international grocery stores; services which meet international students’ needs. Regarding knowing international students’ needs, Jen explained, “I would say all of the planning team members are actively involved in the international community. So I think we have a pretty good pulse of what some of those needs are.” She also conceded that IA may not be able to meet every single need but that the organization really does try to. Jen revealed that she frequently receives calls from students, and IA provides service not only just to the whole international community, but also to individual internationals who might be experiencing a crisis.

Kevin, an American university student volunteer with IA, recalled his two motivations to volunteer at IA. The first reason was the willingness of the organization to serve the international community without any compensation or “strings attached.” Another reason that he was passionate about volunteering at IA were the opportunities that IA provided for him to connect with international students.

Kevin believes IA is tied together through the volunteers’ relationships with international students. He feels IA volunteers are discovering what he discovered, which is that volunteering through IA enriches one’s life. The volunteers are drawn together because they recognized the
needs of international students and the importance of fostering interactions between themselves and the international students that they assist.

Mary, a representative of an IA participating church, thinks the commonality in IA is that volunteers want to give back to the community, and by giving back to the community, they are doing God’s work. She articulated, “Even though volunteers have different faiths, such as Methodist, Lutherans, Covenant, we all believe in God. Maybe our tenets are different, but I think that our common goal is all the same: to lead people [IA volunteers] closer to Christ by serving international communities with no strings attached.”

This section summaries the core value of the organization: “serving international communities with “no-strings attached”. However, the predominately Christian churches and volunteers composition of IA makes it important to question the degree to which the organization serves with whether the organization ‘no-strings attached’ when it comes to religious proselytizing. To what extent does IA’s religious aspect influences international students’ sociocultural adjustment? This study did not address this question. First of all, IA’s religious aspect is more related to the motivation of the volunteers. They participate in IA events most probably to fulfill their own beliefs and values; however, though this does not mean that volunteers participate in order to convert international students. Secondly, the goal of this study is not to investigate the motivation of IA’ volunteers but rather demonstrate how the IA services facilitate international students sociocultural adjustment. Lastly, although values are often embedded in service delivery in the sense of volunteers’ motivations and expected outcomes, the religious nature of IA with respect to its service requires further investigation. Examination of international students’ value systems in a quantitative manner is also needed to answer the
question of the extent to which IA’s religious aspect influences international students’ sociocultural adjustment.

_Umbrella-structured Operation_

Prior to the formation of International Alliance in 2000, and prior to 2000, there were three different churches organizing events for international students. One church hosted a Thanksgiving dinner every year, another church held an annual welcome picnic in August, and a third church helped to pay for an English class. The English class was located in a church, and this allowed the current IA director, Jen to connect with church members. Jen and church members’ conversations led to more serious discussion of cooperation to help international students. Therefore, representatives of these three churches started meeting at a local restaurant at 7 am once every other month to talk about ways that they could work together to help international students. Jen reported that also around the same time the university’s Center for International Students (CIS) asked one of these three churches to help with airport pickup and temporary housing for new international students.

In 2000, the interested church representatives decided to name themselves “International Alliance”. More local churches expressed interest in becoming partners. The founding members thought it would be beneficial to become a non-profit organization. Hence, IA obtained its 501C3 tax exempt status in 2003. 501(c)(3) exemptions apply to “corporations, and any community chest, fund, or foundation, organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, testing for public safety, literary, educational purposes, to foster national or international amateur sports competition, promote the arts, or for the prevention of cruelty to children or animals” (Internal Revenue Service, 2008, p. 19). In 2004, the board of IA asked Jen to consider becoming the director because the organization had grown so much. In 2004 Jen left
her job at the university to work full-time as the director of International Alliance. Since 2004, IA has grown to nine different partners, including churches and campus ministries. Today IA is still in conversations with other local churches interested in joining.

The top-down structure of begins with an executive board, consisting of eight members who represent IA partner churches. The board provides accountability for the director and helps IA create policies with legal ramifications. For example, any time that IA transports students or internationals outside of the university town, there is a travel waiver, or release form to fill out for both the volunteers and the internationals. In addition to the board, IA has a planning team, consisting of one to two representatives from each partner church. The event planning team meets together with the director three or four times a year to plan semester events, discuss further projects and potential activities, and share feedback gained from previous events.

Regarding funding, IA mandates its partner institutions/organizations to contribute financially to IA within two years of partnership initiation. IA receives financial donations from its participating partners, as well as individual donations from community members. IA has also solicited grants and held a benefit dinner as well as participated in an auction for nonprofit organizations to raise financial resources. IA has looked at a variety of means, and Jen states, “it has been really encouraging this year, in a time where economically in our country things haven’t been going the greatest for a number of people, this year has been our most profitable year financially.”

*Cross-cultural Training for Volunteers*

The backbone of IA is its volunteers who interact with international students. Their attitude and behavior towards the international community, as well as their intercultural communication
competence, defines IA’s image. In this section, I first delineate the three IA volunteers’ backgrounds, and then discuss their observation of IA volunteers in terms of cultural sensitivity.

Jen worked as the acting director of the English as a Second Language (ESL) program at the university before serving as the first full-time IA director. As a graduate assistant in the TESOL program at the university, she taught a free family English class for spouses of graduate students. She enjoyed the teaching so much that when she became the director of the ESL program, she hoped to start another similar program that internationals in the community could attend. For several years, she volunteered with one of the first three churches hosting events for internationals. She did not do much other than this free Community English class and meeting people at a local restaurant to plan and coordinate volunteers.

As IA director, Jen speaks about IA at different church events. She thinks maybe a lot of community members are not aware that within the relatively small university town exists a sizable international community. She believes it is important and exciting “to them [community members] to see that the world is actually here.” More importantly it is an exciting opportunity to get involved with people from different parts of the world and engage with others. If community members express their interest in volunteering, IA welcomes them and has no prerequisite for the volunteers. Likewise, volunteers can serve for however long or for whatever event that they want to. However, IA does provide training throughout the year “because we [IA] do want to educate volunteers in navigating cultural bumps that are going to occur when cultures clash.” There are a couple hundred volunteers, which is difficult for one director to oversee. She explained that the purpose of the workshop is “to educate the volunteers on engaging with non-native English speakers, such as how we [IA volunteers] can show sensitivity, how to plow through misunderstandings that are bound to occur.” IA aims to create many opportunities to
educate IA volunteers, and trusts that once they have gone to IA workshops that volunteers are more confident to serve “with no-strings attached.” In this case, this IA workshop not only gives its volunteers tips on how to deal with cultural bumps, but also emphasizes no religious-mentioning during interaction with international students.

Kevin, one of the very few IA American student volunteers, who grew up in a diverse cultural setting, thinks this university town is less diverse than what he was used to in Florida. He felt “lucky” to study in the college of musical arts at the graduate level in the university because his classmates are from Romania, China, Russia, and Malaysia. He has many international students in his program and feels that he has chosen to interact with people from other countries. Yet he believes that friendships with international students do not just happen: “If I did not make an intentional effort probably most of my friendships would be with other Americans. When I first came here, I contacted the CIS and asked if there was any way I could help with them, so I definitely was intentional about it [connecting with international students].”

He recalled that the first time he heard of IA and participated in an IA event was through an international student who was in the same program. Kevin confirmed, “She knew that I was interested in helping with international students formally or informally. It was cool going to their different events because I saw people who I had been meeting in other places, like some of the students I met in the Graduate Student Orientation or people other people had introduced me to.” At first, he just went to the different events and when he started to know Jen a little bit more he asked her if she needed volunteers. Jen then informed Kevin of different opportunities to volunteer. His first volunteer activity was taking students to the airport around Thanksgiving. Now that is mostly what he does; providing transportation to the airport for international students.
In regard to being a volunteer at IA and serving international students, Kevin believes, “they [international students] teach me much more than I teach them about the world. They teach me about myself; they teach me about how little I know about the world. And every time I interact with international students I am always edified and grow in my appreciation and understanding of other cultures. I mean it is awesome. There are people here from all over the world, like literally, and it’s cool as an American, too, because we grow up with such a narrow outlook on global events. Usually we are so focused domestically. And so I’m always learning new things. To learn while I am serving.”

He thinks being a student volunteer at IA grants him advantages. The first advantage is because there are actually not too many student volunteers, most of his interactions happen with other volunteers who are already established, who have jobs, or who are older and retire. He enjoys and appreciates working with them because “they have more wisdom than I do, so I can learn from them about things. They seem to always care about me and remember my name and ask how I’m doing, even though some of them I have only met a couple times.” Another advantage of being a student volunteer with IA is that international students might feel more comfortable to come to him for help because they have more things in common, such as age, student identity, and living far away from home. He is particularly attracted to international students because they have a lot of needs, needs that he can relate to, when they come here. He admits that he cannot meet all their needs but he thinks that if “I was in another country I would love to have someone from that country live life with me.” He believes international students in the U.S. are not just here to attend the classes but to also experience American culture and American friends. He detailed, “I think that is the biggest way I can help and that I have helped them, is just letting them know that I support what they do and that I am their friend, and I don’t
judge them because their English is poor. That I can just be a presence in their life for encouragement.” He said that the encouragement and support comes in different forms. He hopes that he can make the students feel comfortable enough with him that they can ask for help.

Mary, an event planner member and a representative of an IA participating church, was born in Asia and was adopted by Americans. Her father was a minister in the military. She grew up around military bases all her life. She lived in Alabama and now lives in Ohio. She came to the university town in 1990 and married here, had two children and earned a doctorate degree from the university. A diversity professor by degree, she had travelled abroad many times and taught family diversity at the university. She now teaches diversity in healthcare at a college in a nearby city.

Significance of the Categories and Factors

The five categories: 1) “Hospitable Image”, 2) “Friendship Platform”, 3) “Accessible Help”, 4) “Group Fit Cultivation”, and 5) “Personalized Approach” not only answer the question, how IA facilitates international graduate students’ sociocultural adjustment, but also prove the buffering role of practical and emotional supports in cultural adjustment. The intertwined relationships among the five categories demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of sociocultural adjustment facilitation.

The facilitation provided by IA can be separated from the organization’s mission, structure, and its volunteers, therefore, the three factors: 1) IA’s vision and statement, 2) its umbrella-structured operation, and 3) cross-cultural training provided to volunteers, are generated to answer the research question from the organization’s perspective. IA’s vision and mission statement is found to serve as the guide for the five categories.
The deconstruction of IA’s services and the organization’s operations can direct possible improvement of the overall services if needed.
CHAPTER VI: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I first list the challenges that IA is currently facing. These challenges are derived from interviews with IA director and two IA volunteers. I then offer recommendations on addressing these difficulties toward the goal of facilitating international graduate students’ sociocultural adjustment. I also make recommendations for future research. I conclude the entire study with a summary of major findings.

Challenges for IA

IA director, Jen, summarizes two major challenges, one internal and one external. The internal challenge is that the organization may not be able to meet every international student’s needs. According to the director, IA certainly wants to try its best, but there are some occasions when the organization simply cannot. With respect to this challenge, Jen stated, “financially, we’re not at a point where we can give out money. It is always difficult for me or IA volunteers to say ‘I am sorry, we cannot help financially,’ especially when someone is facing a desperate situation.” The external challenge that IA faces is just “being misunderstood”: that some people are suspicious of IA’s intention. Some community members believe that IA is created to evangelize and convert international students to their beliefs. Jen admitted, “IA has invited them [those who are suspicious of IA’s intention] to come to IA’s events and services so they can see for themselves. So far no one has come.” Jen thinks ultimately it hurts the international students in that the suspicion of IA might prevent community members from mentioning IA to international students. Thus, international students are kept away from participating in IA events.

Mary, an IA event planning team member and a representative of a partnering church in IA, explains that the major challenge for IA comes from outside the organization. This major challenge consists of two aspects: firstly, not all churches are on the same page. Mary expects
more people and churches to be involved in serving international communities; however, only nine churches are partnering with IA. Certainly there are far more than nine churches in this university town. She recalled, “The church that I used to attend, where the congregation is rather wealthy, is not involved in IA.” Mary indicates that different missions might deter churches from partnering with IA because of the organization’s approach: “how we [IA] don’t evangelize. Serving with no strings attached.” Mary considers that the second challenge is the out-reach to international students and other churches. She states, “Not everyone knows about us [IA] probably because the communications are not out there.” She articulates that advertising through local media could have helped a lot; however, that could be against IA’s mission because “no-strings attached” means that IA will not force international students or other churches to participate. In addition to the major challenges, Mary also lists challenges in her partnering church. There are times when she worries about people and resources: “Oh, is there going to be enough volunteers? Is there going to be enough food? Are we going to have enough to give? Is anyone going to show up? Are we doing this in vain?” She reckoned that she can only do so much in her church and trusted her church members to ensure that the church provided what they needed to provide.

Another “obvious challenge” according to Kevin, a university student volunteer with IA, is that IA is not recognized as an official university organization. Thus, he feels the university faculty and campus organizations may hesitate to make announcements about IA at new international students’ orientations because “the university does not know IA and they do not consult with the IA director.”
Recommendations for IA

According to IA, serving the local international community with “no-strings-attached” is the reason for its existence. Therefore, from the perspective of IA, making more international students aware of IA’s events and services as well as inviting them to come join IA activities is relevant to better assisting international graduate students’ sociocultural adjustment. In fact, IA has various means to reach international students: an information desk at temporary housing, an e-newsletter, a Facebook fanpage, a website, and connections with on-campus international students’ groups. However, as an off-campus community organization, IA does not have access to on-campus organizations resources, such as advertising and organizing events. Hence, to have an IA student organization is relevant. Since 2009, the IA executive board has been planning to have an IA student organization, but it has not yet been developed. If the IA student organization’s structure is not compatible with university policies, it will not be recognized as an official campus organization. To be recognized as an official university campus university, I recommend IA cooperates with its two on campus ministries, Christian Campus House (CCH) and Christian Student Network (CSN), to see how these two religious organizations obtain the recognition from the university.

In regard to providing better services, international student interviewees all expressed their gratitude for IA’s assistance, and felt that “what IA did is more than we [international students] deserve and [we] never thought about how IA could help more.” Nevertheless, I recommend that IA encourage and recruit more Americans graduate students to participate and interact with international graduate students in IA events. Previous scholarships states that “contact not only strengthens language skills but can also improve the impact of social context factors by improving mutual understanding and acceptance” (Perrucci & Hu, 1995, p.507).
However, facilitating interactions between American and international students is not easy for IA due to its off-campus community identity. Thus, this responsibility for cultivating mutual understanding and interactions should be shouldered by the university. University student affairs staff can assist American and international students to interact casually by sponsoring programs that explore a controversial issue from several cultural perspectives, as well as hosting small-scale activities that increase students’ comfort levels.

Recommendation for Future Research

One key result of this study is that International Alliance’s mission statement serves as the fundamental guide for its approaches to international students and its overall operations. The predominantly religious composition of IA makes it impossible to rule out the influence of the religion on its operation. However, the extent to which the religious aspects of IA affect its facilitation of international graduate students’ sociocultural adjustment needs further research.

Further exploration of the relationship among International Alliance, the university, and other community entities in the university town would better illuminate the position and role of IA in international graduate students’ sociocultural adjustment. Research on and examination of the university policies regarding religious organizations and church-state separation policy in the U.S. could also shed light on the function of community-based non-profit organizations in cross-cultural understanding between international students and hosts in general.

Conclusion

This study provides a detailed description of International Alliance in facilitating local international graduate students’ sociocultural adjustment, and explains this facilitation from the analytical frameworks of social learning theory, international students’ social and network patterns, social capital theory and the concept of community of practice. The investigation
generates five categories essential in assisting international graduate students’ sociocultural adjustment: 1) “Hospitable Image”, 2) “Friendship Platform”, 3) “Accessible Help”, 4) “Group Fit Cultivation”, and 5) “Personalized Approach.” Interviews with the IA director and two IA volunteers aided in identifying three factors that influence the five categories. They are 1) IA’s mission statement, 2) IA umbrella-structured operations, and 3) cross-cultural training for IA volunteers. Cross-examinations of the categories and factors reveal that IA’s mission statement is the fundamental guide for IA’s approaches to international students and its overall operation.

This case study of International Alliance cannot be generalized without context; however, the effective force of community-based non-profit organizations at the local level and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the international level cannot be ignored. This study is a demonstration of the positive role that a local community organization can play in helping international students.
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APPENDIX A: Consent Letter for First-year International Graduate Students Survey

Consent Letter for First-year International Graduate Students Survey

Dear first-year international graduate students:

You are invited to be in a research study on the facilitative role of community organizations in first-year international graduate student sociocultural adjustment to life in the U.S.: a case study of a community organization in University Town.

My name is Huang Shanshan. I am a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Cross-Cultural and International Education (MACIE), School of Educational Foundations, Leadership & Policy Studies, College of Education and Human Development, Bowling Green State University (BGSU). This research project is for my completion of the thesis requirement of a Master’s program.

This case study will use the data collected from a questionnaire survey completed by first-year international graduate students in Midwestern University [MU] who participated in International Alliance (IA)’s events to select 3-4 interviewees among first-year international graduate students according to their programs of study and ethnic origins.

Only first-year international graduate students in [MU] will be selected to participate in this survey. The link of this online survey will be sent through IA’s email lists to the targeted group. I estimate your participation will take approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life, and participation may help you reflect on your sociocultural adjustment. Some questions might cause discomfort due to retelling of different adjustment experience. You can refuse to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you can refrain from answering any questions without penalty or explanation.
Your decision to participate or not participate in this survey will not impact your grades, class standing, or relationship to [MU] in any way. You are free to discontinue participation in the survey at any time. By completing this survey and submitting it, you are indicating your consent to participate in the study.

The information you provide will remain confidential and your identity will not be revealed. No individual information will be shared; only aggregate results will be reported. Data will be stored in a password protected database and will be destroyed after the study is completed by May 2010. Please note that e-mail is not 100% secure, so it is possible that someone intercepting your e-mail will gain knowledge of your interest in the study. Please also remember to clear your browser’s cache and page history after you submit the survey in order to protect your privacy. Some employers use tracking software to monitor and record keystrokes, mouse clicks, and web sites visited. This could impact the confidentiality of your responses. Therefore, you may wish to complete the survey on your home computer or a public computer.

In addition to surveys, a sub-sample of willing participants will be interviewed in order to expand on their opinions regarding cultural adjustment. This interview will take approximately 40-60 minutes and will be conducted at the convenience of the interviewee. The only individual who will have access to the interviewees’ name and number will be myself, the researcher. Moreover, the interviews will be audio taped for the purpose of accurate transcription. Only the interviewer (myself) will have access to these recordings. All the recordings will be destroyed after the research is completed. If you wish to participate in interviews, please write down your email address after you submit the online survey. I will contact you afterwards and complete a consent form before interviews.

If you have questions about the study itself before, during, or after the study, please
contact me: Shanshan, 419-819-9465, huangs@bgsu.edu or you can also contact my advisor Dr. Bruce Collet, 419-372-7354, colleba@bgsu.edu. If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu)

Thank you!

Shanshan Huang

Master of Arts in Cross-Cultural and International Education

Bowling Green State University

BGSU HSRB-ID#: H10T084GE7

Effective: 10/21/200

Expires: 10/07/2010
APPENDIX B: Consent Form for Interviewees

**Consent Form for Interviewees**

You are invited to be in a research study on the facilitative role of community organizations in first-year international graduate student sociocultural adjustment to life in the U.S.: a case study of a community organization in [University Town].

I. Purpose/Benefits

My name is Shanshan Huang. I am a graduate student in Master of Arts in Cross-Cultural and International Education (MACIE), School of Educational Foundations, Leadership & Policy Studies, College of Education and Human Development, Bowling Green State University (BGSU). This research project is for completion of the thesis requirement of the MACIE program. The data collections in this case study consists of two parts: 1) Online survey and follow-up interviews with first-year international graduate students in [MU] from diverse programs of study and countries origin, who also participated in IA events 2) Interviews with IA staff. The purpose of the study is to find out how participation in IA’s events assists international students’ sociocultural adjustment to life in [University Town].

The benefits of the study include the following: 1) Contribute to the literature about facilitating international graduate students' sociocultural adjustment in general, and IA in [University Town] in particular. While there exists a fair amount of scholarship regarding facilitation provided by universities to assist international student adjustment, more attention should be paid to the service offered by off-campus community organizations 2) Generate recommendations to IA to better serve the international community in [University Town].

II. Procedure/Time required
This is a voluntary study. Only three to five first-year international graduate students in Midwestern University [MU] and three IA staff will be selected to participate in the interviews. Each interview will approximately last one hour. The interviewees will be selected according to the result of the online survey. The survey will be sent through IA’s email lists.

III. Risks

The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life.

IV. Recording and data management.

This is a voluntary study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you can refrain from answering any questions without explanation. The following are the procedures that will be used to record and manage data. I will record all interviews with a digital recorder and transcribe them into Word documents. The recorder will be visible during the entire interview, and participants may elect to stop the audio recording or stop the interview at any time during the process. Also participants will be informed that their identities will be masked in the transcripts through the use of a pseudonym or number. Access to digital recordings and transcripts of the data will be limited to myself. Recordings and transcripts will be kept in a locked file cabinet in 109 Education Building, BGSU until the completion of the study, and then I will destroy them by May 2010. All these procedures will be made known to study participants before the interview process begins.

I will answer your questions concerning this study. You may request a summary or copy of the results of the study. If you decide to participate in the study, please print a copy of this email for your files.

VI. Contact information

If you have questions about the study itself before or during or after the study, please
contact me: Shanshan, 419-819-9465, huangs@bgsu.edu or you can also contact my advisor Dr. Bruce Collet, 419-372-7354, colleba@bgsu.edu. If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu)

Thank you!

Shanshan Huang
MACIE, School of Educational Foundations, Leadership & Policy Studies
College of Education and Human Development
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, OH 43403

By signing below, you acknowledge and understand the consent form and are willing to participate in the interview.

Signature of Participant          Date
---------------------------------  ---------------------------
Online Survey for First-Year International Graduate Students

Participant information:

1. Country of origin ______________________

2. Program of study ______________________

3. How did you first hear about International Alliance (IA)?
   • Students/friends from my country
   • Students/friends from another country
   • American students/friends
   • English class teachers at Midwestern University [MU]
   • Professors/faculty from my program
   • IA staff (including director and assistant) and/or volunteers
   • Campus International Service (CIS)
   • Other: ______________________

4. When did you first interact with International Alliance?
   • IA information table
   • New International Activities in August (e.g., County Fair, Amazing Town Race, Movie Night at Country Mall)
- New International Student Welcome Night at Lutheran Church (August)
- Free food and furniture (August)
- Barn dance (September)
- International shopping trips (September, October)
- Friendship Fridays
- Dinner Connections
- Community English
- Other: __________

5. How helpful were the IA Welcome Packets in providing you with information about the university town and IA?
- Very helpful
- Somewhat helpful
- Neutral
- Not helpful at all
- Didn’t receive one

6. What information was not included that you think would be helpful to future new international students?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
7. How helpful were the IA Welcome Bags

- Very helpful
- Somewhat helpful
- Neutral
- Not helpful at all
- Didn’t receive one

8. What item/items could be included in future IA Welcome Bag that would be helpful to arriving international students?

______________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

9. Before arrival, what level of difficulty did you think you might experience in adjusting to local life?

- No difficulty
- Slight difficulty
- Moderate difficulty
- Great difficulty
- Extreme difficulty

10. What has been the actual level of difficulty that you have experienced so far in adjusting life in the new place?

- No difficulty
11. Please indicate to what degree you agree with the following statement: “Participating in IA events is helpful in my sociocultural adjustment to life in here” Sociocultural adjustment is defined as the ability to fit in and to negotiate interactive aspects of the new culture (Searle, W., & Ward, C. 1990)

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

12. If you **strongly agree or agree** that participation in IA events is helpful in your sociocultural adjustment to life in here, then in what aspects does participation in IA events help your adjustment?

- It has provided a platform where I can interact with Americans IA volunteers and develop friendships.
- It has provided a platform where I can interact with other international students and develop friendships.
- I received furniture and household items I needed.
I have had the chance to learn about American culture and experience American games or customs.

I received rides to area stores and banks when I first arrived.

I received information about academic, cultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal adjustment about life in [University Town] when I first arrived.

I received information about IA and [University Town] when I first arrived.

Other

13. If you disagree or strongly disagree that participation in IA events is helpful in your sociocultural adjustment to life in here, then in what ways can your experience at IA be enhanced?

(Check all that apply) Sociocultural adjustment is defined as the ability to fit in and to negotiate interactive aspects of the new culture (Searle, W., & Ward, C. 1990)

- IA volunteers need more initiative in approaching international students
- More get-to-know-each other activities to break cultural barriers
- Bring in more Americans, including students, professors, and university personnel
- Other

14. If you are neutral that participating in IA events is helpful in your sociocultural adjustment to life in here, please write the reason that you came to IA events?

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________
15. When you reflect upon your arrival until the present, is there an area of your adjustment that has not been dealt with by IA?

___________________________________________________________________________

16. How likely are you to participate in future IA activities or utilize their services?

- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Not likely

17. What are your reasons for participating in IA events and/or services?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

18. Do you have additional comments to make about IA or about your sociocultural adjustment that have not been addressed in this survey?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Completion and submitting the survey indicates consent to participate in the study.

In addition to surveys, a sub-sample of willing participants will be interviewed in order to expand on their opinions regarding cultural adjustment. Please write down your email if you are willing to participate in the interview. I will contact you when the survey is completed.

Email: __________________________________________
APPENDIX D: Interview Questions for First-Year International Graduate Students

Interview Questions for First-Year International Graduate Students

Introduction:

In this interview I am going to be using the term “sociocultural adjustment”. By this, I mean the ability to fit in with and to negotiate aspects of the new culture. Do you have any questions about what I mean by “sociocultural adjustment”?

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How long have you been in this town?
3. Have you been to the States before?
4. When you first arrived in this university town, what were your immediate needs? Probes: material needs (housing, supplies), academic needs, social needs, cultural needs
   a. (If applicable) How did you solve these urgent problems?
5. What are the cultural differences here that you have found hard to adjust to?
   a. (If applicable) How have you dealt with these cultural differences?
6. What are the IA events that you have participated in?
7. Do you think participation in the IA events has helped to make your life easier?
   a. If so, in what ways has your participation in IA events helped you adjust to life in here? Can you give me some examples?
8. Do you have any peers who are also international graduate students but have never come to IA events? (If applicable) What do you think are the reasons that have prevented them from participating?
9. Compared with participation in the orientation provided by the University’s Campus International Service (CIS), between this orientation and IA, which has been more helpful for you to adjust to life in here? Why?

10. Compared with participation in the University’s Graduate Student Orientation, which has more helpful for you to adjust to life in here? CIS, IA, or Graduate Student Orientation? Why?

11. When you look back at your life in here so far, what areas have you adjusted to quickly? Which areas have you adjusted to rather slowly? Can you give some examples of each? Can you give some examples?

12. Which areas have you adjusted to rather slowly? Can you give some examples?

13. Is there an area of your sociocultural adjustment that has not been dealt with by IA? (If applicable) Why do you believe IA had not addressed this?

14. What are your suggestions for incoming international graduate students?

15. Do you have any advice for IA with respect to assisting international graduate students?

16. What are your future plans?

17. Do you have anything else you would like to add?

Thank you so much for your participation in this study.
Introduction:

In this study I am using the term “sociocultural adjustment”. By this, I mean the ability to fit in with and to negotiate aspects of the new culture. Do you have any questions about what I mean by “sociocultural adjustment”?

1. Tell me more about the history and growth of International Alliance (IA)?

2. How did you come to join IA?

3. IA works with ten churches in this town. What are the commonalities that tie these churches and IA?

4. How do these commonalities influence IA’s work with the international graduate students at the university?

5. How do the different churches work together? What are the general procedures for making decisions?

6. What are the principles guiding your construction of activities for international graduate students?

7. Tell me about IA’s volunteers. Probes: What are their backgrounds? What motives them to volunteer with IA? How long do your volunteers stay with IA?

8. Do volunteers have cross-cultural experiences before they volunteer with IA? *Probes: Travel abroad? International friends?*

9. Does IA provide cross-cultural training for volunteers? If so, can you describe?
10. Are there internal challenges IA has had that have hindered its growth or efficiency? If so, what are they? How have you addressed them?

11. Are there external challenges IA has had that have hindered its growth or efficiency? If so, what are they? How have you addressed them?

12. Are there any new programs on the horizon for IA? If so, could you describe them?

13. Do you have anything else you would like to add?

Thank you so much for your participation in this study.