The purpose of this study was to contribute a better understanding of the sense of belonging of international students in graduate-level business programs. The topic was important because, more than 800,000 international students are enrolled in business programs at institutions throughout the United States (Desilver, 2013). This number represents a growth of more than 40 percent over the last decade. The international students serve an important role in the social and academic development of their peers, both international and domestic.

Over the past decade, the number of international students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the United States has increased and data reveals the enrollment numbers will continue to grow. Not all international students who aspire to successfully complete degree requirements at their respective universities are successful in doing so. As such, to increase the chances of international students’ being successful in their respective university, education providers and scholars should clearly define and enhance academic support services (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bolsmann & Miller, 2008). Developing a better understanding of the academic and social integration of international students may improve student retention and satisfaction with degree programs.
This thesis is dedicated to my parents for their continuous help throughout my college career; and Azzi for morally supporting and encouraging me on a daily basis during this process.
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Elite Editing edited this thesis with restricted editorial intervention.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of the Problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale for the Study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions of Terms</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations and Limitations</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Remaining Chapters</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Achievement</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Skills</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture and Customs</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Connectedness</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Skills</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary: Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Research Design</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Instrumentation</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured Interview Protocol</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Protocol</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. FINDINGS</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of the Case</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings by Research Question</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Factors</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Communication</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Factors</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Communication</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Tinto’s model of student integration</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Triangulation of Methods</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Participant Characteristics</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Qualitative Themes, Codes, and Frequency</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Summary of Participant Responses for Academic Factors</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Summary of Participant Responses for Social Factors</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

International students are an integral part of the education enterprise of the United States (US). Economically, higher education is the fifth largest service export in the US (Obst & Forster, n.d.). Socially, the education of international students provides a context for developing global citizens who have the knowledge, skills, and experience to demonstrate: “(1) intercultural understanding; (2) mindfulness; (3) partnerships; (4) pragmatic hope; and (5) social entrepreneurship” (Bellamy & Weinberg, 2008, p. 20). In turn, global citizens play an important role in assisting the social and economic development of domestic and international communities, societies, and universities (NAFSA, n.d).

The population of international students enrolled in US universities has increased over the previous decade, and data indicates that their enrollments will continue increase in the foreseeable future (Desilver, 2013). To increase the chances of success of international students, education providers need to clearly define and enhance support services (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bolsmann & Miller, 2008).

The International Student Services (ISS) office advises international students on immigration status, adjusting to life in the US, differences in culture, and the norms of the US (Homeland Security, n.d.). These services are important, as they help to improve the academic and social integration of international students at educational institutions.

Rationale for the Study

Tinto (1993) suggests that students’ decision to persist in earning a degree is largely influenced by their ability to integrate academically and socially within educational institutions. However, little research exists that describes the perceived influence of social and academic integration on the decision of international students to persevere in completing their degrees. Educational institutions in the US seek the enrollment of international students
because of the financial contribution these students make; however, these same institutions do not have any clearly defined plans to support international students upon their arrival at their institutions (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bolsmann & Miller, 2008).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain better understanding of the academic and social factors that influence the sense of belonging of international students. Study participants were enrolled in a graduate level business program at a Midwestern research intensive university. This study is important, as the extent to which students are academically and socially integrated into their selected educational institutions is strongly related to their decisions to successfully fulfill the requirements of their degrees. A better understanding the experiences of international students, may enable educational practitioners and scholars to better meet the needs of the students and help them to integrate academically and socially at their universities.

**Research Questions**

The research questions addressed by this study were:

1. What academic integration factors influenced the decisions of international students to persist in earning a business graduate level degree at a Midwestern research intensive university?

2. What social integration factors influenced the decisions of international students to persist in earning a business graduate level degree at a Midwestern research intensive university?

**Significance of the Study**

International students form an important part of any higher educational enterprise in the US that offer programs awarding bachelor degrees or programs (for a period of not less
than two years) that are acceptable for full credit toward such a degree (United States Office of Education, 1978).

In the 2012–2013 academic year, more than 800,000 international students were enrolled in US colleges and universities; an increase of more than 40% from the previous decade (Desilver, 2013). This number is also expected to significantly increase in coming years, with the largest enrollment growth likely to occur in students from China and Saudi Arabia (Desilver, 2013). International students are electing to study in the US because of their perception that “a U.S. degree is a sound investment in their future careers” (Institute of International Education, n.d.).

Many international students pay a significant tuition fees to study at US institutions. Indeed, these students contributed more than $24 billion to the US economy in the 2012–2013 academic year (NAFSA, n.d.). This mass influx of capital into the US marketplace “means that for every [seven] international students enrolled, [three] U.S. jobs are created or supported by spending in the following sectors: higher education, accommodation, dining, retail, transportation, telecommunications, and health insurance” (NAFSA, n.d., p. 1). In fact, the US Department of Commerce revealed that “international education [was] the [fifth] largest service sector export” in the US (Obst & Forster, n.d., p. 3).

In addition to the economic benefit to the US, international students contribute to the social development of their peers by providing a context to examine different views on issues, such as religion, culture, and government (Marshall, Zhou, Gervan, & Weibe, 2012). These experiences are valuable in the creation of a better understanding of international perspectives on the role of government, religion, and interpersonal relationships (Obst & Forster, n.d.)

Domestic groups and foreign nations also benefit (both economically and socially) from 800,000 plus foreign students enrolled in the US education system (Desilver, 2013;
Obst & Forster, n.d.). In addition to creating jobs, international students provide domestic students with opportunities to examine global issues from international perspectives (NAFSA, n.d.). However, the economic and social benefit for domestic students and the US economy is largely dependent upon the academic success of international students.

Definitions of Terms

**Academic Achievement:** Student performance as reported by the letter and/or grade earned on standardized, and/or informal school tasks and activities (Trow, 1949).

**Academic Integration:** Includes the contacts related to studying and the institute itself (Hughes, Karp, O’Gara 2008).

**Culture and Customs:** The characteristics of a group of people, including, but not limited to, language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, and art (Zimmermann, 2015).

**Interpersonal skills:** Interpersonal skills or soft skills are the life skills used every day to communicate and interact with people, both individually and in groups (Skills You Need, n.d.).

**Language Skills:** Writing and/or speaking skills that allow for the use of structured words, phrases, and sentences that communicate meaning (Fromkin & Rodman, 1974).

**Social Connectedness:** “An aspect of the self that manifests the subjective recognition of being in close relationship with the social world” (Lee & Robbins, 1998, p. 3).

**Social Integration:** Includes successful contact with peers both within and beyond an institution (Hughes, Karp, O’Gara 2008).

**Sense of Belonging:** The fundamental human need of individuals to feel that they are accepted, respected, and valued members of a group or community (Hall, 2014).

Delimitations and Limitations

The study had several delimitations, including:
1. This study did not consider any differences in the cultural backgrounds of international students.

2. The study focused on the reflections and experiences of a small sample of international students from a larger pool of the international graduate student community enrolled at a Midwestern research intensive university. While there were similarities in the experiences of this sample, the results of this study were not intended to represent the experiences of all the international graduate students enrolled in graduate level programs across the US.

3. This research only focused on the perceptions of international students. It did not examine the perspectives of non-international students.

The limitations of this study, which are common in qualitative research, include:

1. The codes were created by the researcher and could be interpreted in a different manner by other individuals.

2. The researcher is an international student; this may have resulted in an unintended bias during data analysis.

3. This study focused on a single-case, and data was collected from a small group of study participants; thus, the findings cannot be generalized beyond the case or study participants.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

The remaining chapters are arranged in the following manner: literature review (chapter 1), methodology (chapter 2), findings (chapter 3), and finally discussion and recommendations (chapter 4). All references used in this study, along with a complete appendix, are provided at the conclusion of chapter 4.
CHAPTER I: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In recent years, the phenomenon of the sense of belonging among university students has been the focus of a considerable amount of research (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Booker, 2006; Bosetti, Kawalilak, & Patterson, 2008; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Goodenow, 1993; Hagerty, Williams, & Oe, 2002; Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, & Alvarez, 2007). Sense of belonging has been defined as the fundamental human need for individuals to feel a part of and be respected and valued members of a group or community (Sedgwick & Yonge, 2008). While sense of belonging is widely applicable to all university students, its impact may be particularly great on international students who come to the US striving to receive a well-rounded education.

The achievement of international students in colleges and universities in the US is critical. Many international students pursue careers in the US, and/or contribute to the social and economic development of their home countries (Mataczynski, 2013). Additionally, international students assist domestic students to better develop their understanding of the role of global citizens. To accomplish these tasks, academic achievement is paramount (Aydinol, 2013).

Academic Achievement

Academic achievement in the US is often defined in terms of performance ratings or in the form of a letter grade; however, international students also measure their academic achievement in terms of excellence in co-curricular activities and “sporting behavior, confidence, communication skills, punctuality, arts, culture, and the like” (Ganai, Ganai, & Mir, 2013, p. 1). Thus, integration within both the academic and social cultures of a university and/or college enhances the achievement of international students.
Several factors influence the ability of international students to integrate socially and academically, including, but not limited to, students’ language skills, culture and customs, social connectedness, and interpersonal skills (Lee & Robbins, 1998; Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007; Mori, 2000; Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002). Language skills pose significant barriers to the success of international students.

Language Skills.

A lack of proficient language skills poses a significant barrier to the integration of international students into classrooms. As Morreale, Osborn, and Pearson (2000) stated: Competence in oral communication—in speaking and listening—is prerequisite to students’ academic, personal, and professional success in life. Indeed, teachers deliver most instruction for classroom procedures orally to students. Students fail to absorb much of the material to which they are exposed. Their problems are intensified when they respond incorrectly or inappropriately because of poor speaking skills.

Further, having strong oral communication skills can help individuals adjust socially and enjoy satisfying interpersonal relationships (Morreale, et al., 2000). Despite excelling in academic coursework at institutions in their home countries, some international students may have deficiencies in the English language and struggle to achieve in US universities (Pedersen, 1991). Limited proficiency in English may also create be a barrier in interactions with non-international fellow students (Hayes & Wilson, 1994). Consequently, some international students may experience psychological issues when they are unable to communicate with their peers, including failure to meet academic aspirations and depression, stress, and loneliness (Lin & Yi, 1997; Hyun et al., 2007; Poyrazli et al., 2002).

Culture and Customs.

Differences in social interactions among international and domestic students may prevent international students from bonding and forming close relationships with their
American peers (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992); for example, students who come from collectivistic cultural backgrounds (e.g., China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Argentina, Brazil, and India) often struggle to understand how to bond with their American peers, as American culture emphasizes individualism, independence, assertiveness, and self-reliance (Cross, 1995).

Cultural differences may result in international students perceiving American relationships to be superficial and shallow (Cross, 1995). This cultural mismatch may also leave some international students with feelings of disappointment or even loneliness, as they fail to bond with their peers (Mori, 2000). Resultantly, international students often segregate themselves into groups comprised of fellow nationals (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985).

Social Connectedness.

To understand how international students relate to other individuals in an unfamiliar cultural environment, it is essential to analyze their sense of social connectedness. Many universities offer social support systems that have been designed to assist international students to integrate academically and socially. Typically, support services are offered by the ISS and implemented by institutions to encourage social connectedness; however, these services are often limited to an orientation session upon arrival and advice on immigration (Alfonso & Bailey, 2005).

During the mandatory orientation session, topics discussed include culture and customs, relationships, academia, and plagiarism. Students are also briefed on the services available on campus such as tutoring, the library, and health insurance is. To familiarize students with the campus, a tour is given. The Graduate Orientation program states that its mission is “to enable all graduate [students] to acquire advanced skills in the areas of professional development, instructional competencies, and techniques, and technology and research” (Graduate College, n.d., p. 1). It is assumed that by providing more opportunities
for international students to engage in activities within the higher education institution, integration rates will be higher (Hughes et al., 2008); however, in fact, it is unclear whether these efforts are effective.

Some international students, especially those with a high-level of social connectedness, are able to easily form relationships with their peers and participate in social groups and activities. However, less socially connected students are more likely to isolate themselves from their peers, which may lead to low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Lee & Robbins, 1998). Thus, support structures that help international students enhance their social connectedness may allow students to adjust more effectively to changes in their social environments and avoid unnecessary psychological stress. These support structures include briefings from the ISS during orientation to help international students to understand differences in living in the US (Baulch, 2013). These differences are explained in a PowerPoint Presentation during orientation (Graduate College, n.d.). Social connectedness is also related to interpersonal skills.

**Interpersonal skills.**

Interpersonal skills are those life skills that are used on a daily basis. Individuals who have worked on developing a strong set of interpersonal skills are often more successful in their lives (Skills You Need, 2011). Some interpersonal skills include: (1) verbal communication (i.e., what is said and how it is said); (2) non-verbal communication (i.e., what individuals communicate without words such as body language); and (3) assertiveness or having the ability to communicate values, ideas, and opinions freely and without hesitation (Skills You Need, 2011). International students who have a strong command of English and are able to be assertive and confident are better able to adjust to their environment. Indeed, a direct correlation has been found between language proficiency and levels of assertiveness, confidence, and the ability to adapt to changes in environment (Poyrazli et al., 2002).
Interestingly, international students from different cultures are often not aware of how to be assertive. Consequently, compared to their non-international peers they are more likely to become lonely and psychologically stressed (Poyrazli et al., 2002). Each international student is unique; however, evidence suggests that European or students from other western backgrounds experience fewer adaptation barriers than international students from non-western locations (Tomich, McWhirter, & Darcy, 2003).

Summary: Conceptual Framework

The review of literature shows that the concept of sense of belonging among international students’ in institutions of higher education in the United States is not new and has been the focus of a considerable amount of research over the years. Understanding the factors that impact international students’ sense of belonging is fundamental in determining their success as they embark on obtaining a graduate-level-business-degree.

To better understand the impact of these factors, this research is centered on Vincent Tinto’s (1975) theory of integration. Thus, the framework used for this study is that of Tinto’s (1975) model of student integration. This model was developed to assess rate of student withdrawal by examining the extent to which students academically and socially integrate within their institution. It is widely accepted today as it appeals to people as “making sense” and referred to quite frequently when assessing student retention or dropout rates (Refer to Figure 1, p.11.)
Figure 1 Tinto’s (1975) Model of Student Integration. Adapted from “Summer bridge programs: A quantitative study of the relationship between participation and institutional integration using Tinto’s Student Integration Model at a mid-sized, public university in Massachusetts,” (Arena, 2013).
CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

A qualitative within-site instrumental case study method was utilized to develop a better understanding of the sense of belonging of international students enrolled in graduate level business programs at a Midwestern research intensive university. In the study, a convenient case was selected, participants were recruited, and data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The data was then themed and coded for analysis. Based on the data analysis, a discussion of the findings and recommendations for practice and further research were made.

Qualitative Research Design

This case study utilized a qualitative approach by using semi-structured interviews along with a focus group. To increase the reliability of this study, the case consisted of three data point collections. These data collection points were (1) semi-structured interviews with males (n=3), (2), semi-structured interviews with females (n=4), and (3), a focus group (n=6).

Study Instrumentation

The instruments used in this study were designed to measure participants’ sense of belonging at a Midwestern research intensive university. The tools used to collect the data enabled the researcher to collect data, analyze and interpret findings, and offer suggestions for higher education institutions. The study was reviewed and approved by a Human Subjects Review Board (see Appendix A.)

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to collect data for this research. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate for this study, as they allowed the researcher to seek clarity through the development of probes (Creswell, 2005). These probes led to participants engaging in robust discussions in relation to their responses. The instrument
contained four overreaching questions and had twelve probes (see Appendix B.) This study used the same instrumentation for the interviews with male (n=3) and female (n=4) participants.

**Focus Group Protocol**

The focus group protocol was developed to collect data for this case (see Appendix C.) It allowed participants to voice their opinions and add to each other’s responses. Further, “The fact that group participants provide an audience for each other encourages a greater variety of communication” (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 108). In the focus group, participants were free to talk with other members in answering questions or probes. Exchanges between participants allowed the researcher to learn more about the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of participants and gather robust data on their shared views (Gregory & McKie, 1991).

**Data Collection**

Participants were recruited via an email invitation (see Appendix D). The invitation was sent to all international students then currently enrolled in graduate level business programs at a Midwestern research intensive university. The Assistant Director of the ISS office e-mailed the recruitment script, interested participants were then asked to email the researcher to indicate their interest in participating in this study.

**Procedures**

The Assistant Director of the ISS office was contacted to help identify potential participants. As stated above, participants were sent a recruitment email to determine their willingness to participate in the study. Some time later, a second recruitment email was sent reminding potential participants to respond if they were willing to participate in the study.

Upon receipt of the responses, participants (n=13) were able to elect to either participate in the semi-structured interview or the focus group. The participants were split into three groups: semi-structured interviews with male international students (Group 1: n=3),
semi-structured interviews with female international students (Group 2: n=4), and a focus group (Group 3: n=6). There were seven participants in the semi-structured interview protocol and six participants in the focus group. In total, the researcher gathered approximately 140 minutes of data; that is, approximately 20 minutes of data for each semi-structured interview participant, and 60 minutes of data for the focus group. The data was recorded on a digital audio recorder on a MacBook Pro and transcribed by Rev Transcription Services. In collecting the data for the semi-structured interviews and the focus group the following steps were implemented:

Step 1: Participants were contacted via an email recruitment letter.

Step 2: The researcher met with the participants and provided a copy of the informed consent document (see Appendices E and F) and a demographics survey to identify their main activities prior to attending the institution, where they were from, and their approximate age (see Appendix G.)

Step 3: The researcher conducted the interviews with the participants and the focus group. An audio recorder on a MacBook Pro recorded the interviews using QuickTime.

Step 4: The researcher sent the recorded audio files to Rev Transcription Company.

Step 5: After receiving the transcriptions, the researcher analyzed the data using the Nvivo v. 9 software application.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, the constant comparison method was utilized. This method is used to analyze qualitative data and develop a grounded theory (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). The researcher chose to use this method to analyze the data and evaluate the perspectives of the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This method of analysis permitted the researcher to
evaluate the research topic from different points of view. Codes and themes from the interviews are set out in Appendix H.

Themes

The researcher analyzed data on the basis of a priori themes of academic and social factors. Under each theme, two questions were investigated in the research and analysis phases. These two questions served as the main codes for the analysis stage. After the data was assigned to a theme, it was further analyzed to determine the codes of each theme.

Codes

Codes were established on the basis of the participants’ responses. Each interview was examined and common responses to the questions administrated in the semi-structured interview and focus group were sought. The two a priori themes were academic and social factors. Academic factors consisted of the following three codes: academic communication, relationships, and time. Similarly, social factors consisted of the following three codes: social communication, relationships, and time. After the codes had been identified, further analysis took place via a word frequency analysis. Word frequency analyses queries lists of reoccurring words or concepts in data. By conducting a word frequency analysis in this study, possible themes in the data were detected at an early stage of the research. Determining which words or concepts occurred the most frequently in the data sources further increased the validity of the emerging codes, as it indicated that the same ideas were being repeated by different participants multiple times.

Procedures

A query was run to examine the most frequently occurring words in a percentage form. A word map was also viewed to analyze reoccurring and high-frequency words. This method of data analysis further enhanced the reliability of the data.
After coding and theming the data, the experiences of international students who participated in the semi-structured interviews (n=7) and those who participated in the focus group (n=6) were compared for significant variations; however, further analysis showed no significant variations. However, the results of the semi-structured interview reinforced the results of the focus group. Further, results from the semi-structured interviews with the males (n=3) supported the results from the interviews with the females (n=4) and the focus group participants (n=6). This resulted in triangulation of data and reinforced the findings. Finally, the researcher carefully reviewed each transcript and identified quotations that supported each theme and code.

Reliability

Qualitative research is a form of research in which the researcher collects and interprets data; thus, the researcher is a part of the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Due to the close involvement of the researcher in qualitative research, steps must be administrated to ensure that the reliability of the data collected is maintained. In this study, reliability was controlled using three data points: male international students enrolled in business graduate level programs (data point 1), female international students enrolled in business graduate level programs (data point 2) and the focus group (data point 3). As such, reliability was achieved via triangulation. Figure 2 shows how the triangulation method was used to validate and increase the reliability of the data. (Refer to Figure 2, p.17.) Chapter 4 provides a thorough analysis of responses of the participants.
Figure 2 Triangulation of Methods

Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the methodology used in this study. The data were first analyzed based on the *a priori* themes of academic and social factors. The researcher also developed three codes for each theme. An analysis of the three data points was conducted to achieve reliability. The data resulted in a triangulation that supported the findings of the study.
CHAPTER III: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter contains a detailed description of the findings. Two semi-structured interview protocols and a focus group were conducted to gather the data. The overreaching purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of academic and social factors that influence international students’ sense of belonging.

Description of the Case

Institution

The research took place at a Midwestern research intensive university. The institution was founded in 1910 and more than 20,000 students were enrolled at the time of this study. Seventy different countries represented on the campus. The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education identified this university as a Doctorate-granting research university with high research activity (Carnegie Classifications, n.d.).

Participants

The participants recruited for this study were full-time international students enrolled in a graduate level business program. Participants came from countries in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. The majority of participants had not been to the US previously and had been enrolled at the institution for less than two years, except for two participants who had completed their undergraduate degrees at different institutions in the US. The characteristics of the participants are set out in Table 1.
Table 1

Table of Participant Characteristics

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</table>

Findings by Research Question

In an effort to maintain participant confidentiality, pseudonyms are used when referring to specific findings from the study. Additionally, only the triangulated findings (i.e., similar findings across male international students enrolled in graduate level programs, female international students enrolled in graduate level programs, and the focus group of international students enrolled in graduate level business programs) are reported. The findings were both themed and coded (see Table 2).
Table 2

Qualitative Themes, Codes and Frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Frequency (#)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic factors (Total)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Academic communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>27</td>
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<td>Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Factors (Total)</td>
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<td>Social communication</td>
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<td>Relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time</td>
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The findings indicated a relationship between the two primary elements of the conceptual framework for the study; that is, academic and social factors. A detailed summary of the findings for each participant are set out in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3

Summary of Participant Responses for Academic Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Academic Factors</th>
<th>Academic Communication</th>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>Time</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Kate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicky</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moe</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>Kim</td>
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<td>3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Eddie</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
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<td>Sam</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
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<td>2</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4
Summary of Participant Responses for Social Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Social Factors</th>
<th>Social Communication</th>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>Time</th>
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</thead>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Vicky</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Academic Factors

“Maybe it’s the language barrier [which makes it difficult to understand the professor] in class, but [in America] teachers are always open for a discussion, and students here are willing to talk, discuss, and express their opinions, but in our country, we are not willing to talk during class.”

- Kate

As first pointed out by Tinto in 1975 “it is the characteristics of an institution or program such as its resources, facilities, structural/organizational arrangements, and its members, that can limit or facilitate the development and integration of individuals within the institution or program” (Ascend Learning, 2012, p. 4). These factors have a great impact on the sense of belonging of international students. One participant in the study, Tess, stated: “I don’t feel I belong here. Even though I like [the university], [the] people are kind [to] each other and environment here is very good, but I still [do not] feel I belong here.” Participants in this study attested to experience difficulty in feeling that they belonged to their institution.
The participants identified three main factors under the theme of academic factors (see below).

*Academic communication*

“*I'm really having [a hard] time understanding [the professor].’’*

— Peter

All of the participants interviewed indicated that they experienced difficulty in communicating in English and that this made it difficult for them to understand the professor in class. Peter stated: “[The language is] difficult, and you have to [understand the] concepts yourself.” Due to difficulties of understanding the professor in class, international students also had to spend more time reviewing the material taught in class to ensure that they understood the lessons or the concepts taught. This language barrier made it problematic for international students in classes. One participant noted: “[The English language is hard to understand] because the professor always [talks] about a product I never heard about, or a commercial.” Such products or commercials may be exclusive to the US; many international students may not have been exposed to erotic cologne advertisements, as these are banned from airing in certain parts of the Middle East (Edwards, 2012).

Many participants in the focus group experienced similar difficulties in relation to communicating in English. One participant noted: “[The professor] talks too fast, or [picks on you to] answer a question, that’s really hard for me because I have to gather what he said and then prepare my answer to him.” When randomly chosen in class, the international students interviewed indicated that they needed time to process the question before answering. It is apparent that a lack of a strong English language skills made it challenging for international students to take part in classroom discussions, ask questions, or follow the professor during class time.
The majority of the participants in the focus group, along with those interviewed individually, had difficulty with academic language or the language used in the classroom and assignments (e.g., words such as “arbitration,” or “statutory laws”). Lynn stated: “Actually, I cannot follow all the information they give in class.” Vicky, another participant, noted: “I’m not that fluent in English.” This lack of fluency in communicating in English hindered the ability of international students to process the information being taught in class.

Relationships

Participants in the study were asked questions regarding relationships they have formed with their professors, colleagues, and with those beyond the university setting. In regards to relationships within the institutional setting, participants were able to connect with their professors. In fact, international students felt a difference between the interactions they had with professors back home and in America. “Actually teachers here [are] just like friends. They [do not show] so much authority. In our country we just respect our teacher much more. It's just like ... I mean, you can just not disturb [him] during the class.” Professors created a friendly atmosphere for the students in class. All of the participants agreed that the classroom atmosphere setting here is very different to than that of their home country, “but [in America], [the professor] listens to your ideas and agrees with you” attested Moe. Another participant said, “[In my home country] you should agree with the professor, but here no, you can discuss with the professor and I think here the professor [tries] to be a student’s friend instead of be the professor.” The participants were able to form relationships with their professor’s. Peter said, “I try to talk to all of my professors and tell them my problems.” The participant’s discussed any issues with their professors since they considered their professor’s friends, rather than authority figures.

Time

The participant’s felt a time constraint and inability to manage attending social events
due to the amount of school work they have. “I seldom attend [any event on campus] because we have a lot of courses to take so after class we are so tired we just need to go home and rest.” Another participant also agreed to the lack of time to do other activities besides schoolwork, “I am [taking] 36 credits in one year, so it’s very stressful for me. I’m taking [many courses]. It was difficult for participants to complete their classwork on time and attend social activities around campus. Additionally, many participants attested to a lack of ability to balance their work, thus having to stay up all night. “For this semester it was kind of difficult to balance, I was on campus all the time, I’ve been home at 3 or 4am sometimes.” In order to finish their work on time, they had to sacrifice sleep to work on their assignments.

Participants in the semi-structured interview had the same issues. Kate said, “I really wish I was doing a lot better but I’m doing what I can while trying to stay sane like eating and sleeping.” Mike agreed and attested, “It’s quite an intense program and it’s a lack of time.” Time was a constraint for the participants, which prevented them from being active and attending events.

Due to a lack of time, participants were not able to participate in many social activities. According to Tess, “I don’t have much social activity. We have a 12-month program and I have to take 5 subjects each semester. [I] really have no time at all, it’s always school, assignments, and then back to [the] room to sleep.” She then went on to say, “I don’t have free time. There are too many course and there is only [so] much time.” Participants were not able to balance schoolwork and being social at the same time.

Social Factors

“I have a friend, but we seldom meet each other because we are really busy.”

-Kim

The participants’ in the study were not able to form tight bonds with their American peers, which was primarily due to difficulty in interacting or communicating with them in
English. “Maybe I’m not very sociable, or [Americans] have different [ways of]
communicating” said Kim. They also found relationships in the states to be that of benefit,
rather than real friendship. Peter attested, “Here I feel like friendships are just based on
purpose.” They were not able to do a lot socially because of time constraints. “I am really
busy most of the time, even on weekends” said Moe. The participants identified three main
factors under the theme of social factors; these domains are described below.

Social Communication.

“The domestic peers do not interact [with international students] as compared
to [my] international peers.”

-Vicky

The participants in this study had a very hard time connecting with their American
peers, therefore they felt much more comfortable interacting and being with international
students. “I don’t think it’s easy for international student’s to communicate with
[American’s] said Lynn. Participants were able to make friends with other internationals.
One of the main reasons the participant’s felt a difficulty interacting with Americans is due to
the English language. “Maybe our English is not that fluent” Lynn continued on to say.
Roger agreed that there is a different wavelength between international students and their
domestic peers, “I find the conversation a little one-sided.” Those in the focus group agreed
with the notion of a culture shock, language barrier, and inability to personally understand
Americans. “I think [it is difficult] interacting with Americans. I don’t understand their
culture.” Peter also said, “I am having a hard time understanding them.”

Due to these issues, the participants in this study socialized often with other
international students because they were not able to connect on a personal level with their
domestic peers, as they were able to with international students. Peter continued on to say, “I
don’t find American’s really friendly [and] most of the friends I have are international. There
is more focus on individual lives [in America], but we come from a collective culture.” A focus group participant also said, “Not everyone is able to talk with internationals. Some people don’t want to [socialize] with us.” The participants attested that the major reason was because of a language issue. “The language has difficulty,” said one participant. Another participant went on to say, “If there is a problem it would [be the] language.” Vicky also said, “I’m not that fluent in English which is a problem.”

Relationships

In regards to social relationships in America, the participants in the group felt a difference between friendships in the United States and friendships back in their home country. “Americans are very polite. They are easy to talk to and make friends with them, but I don’t feel we are getting the friendship we have in my country, because I have friends from my country that are like brothers to me.” said a focus group participant. Another focus group participant agreed with this idea and went on to say, “They know that their friendships are not forever. This friend is for this time period only.” In addition to this, the participants were not able to build a relationship with their domestic peers, as they believed Americans are busy in their own lives. Peter said, “We share our ideas with each other and we talk with our friends. We spend time with them. I just feel like we are coming from a warmer culture, and here people are just busy with their own business.” He went on to say, “In my country friends are very close to each other, but here I feel like friendships are just based on purpose and I’m alone here and I don't have many good friends.” Tess also agreed by saying, “Here everyone is friendly, but only to some extent. In our place, we take too much freedom. We get too deep in our relationships.” As a result, the participants attested that Americans are not interested in getting to know them or where they are from. “It’s not difficult to be sociable here, but the problem is that I can make a lot of friends from different countries, but in terms of the native speakers, some of them are not interested to [get to know us or where we are from.]” Another
focus group participant agreed and said, “I think international students are more [willing] to talk with [internationals] than the native American students.”

Time

The participant’s interviewed indicated a lack of time which resulted in their inability to socialize. Peter said, “Now I have to balance a lot... studying. But I wish I had time to go [to events on campus], but unfortunately I don’t have time.” Tess also said, “It’s always school assignments, so it leaves us with no time at all for social activity.” Kate also said, “I don’t have much social activity, I don’t have free time.” The lack of available time made it very difficult for participant’s to be social and submit their assignments on time.

Summary

This chapter describes the findings of this study along with the context of the research. The findings revealed a sense of disconnect between the participants and their domestic colleagues due to differences in communication, relationships, and time constraints. As a result, the participants did not feel they “belonged”. The next chapter includes a detailed discussion of the findings, along with recommendations for practice and future research.
CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of this study in relation to the literature review. The triangulated findings are described and recommendations for further practice and research are made.

A review of the literature showed that the concept of sense of belonging among international students enrolled in graduate level business programs had previously been largely unexplored. Accordingly, this study further explored the relationship between academic and social factors and the sense of belonging. The findings of this study help to more thoroughly describe some of the academic and social barriers that international students must overcome in pursuing a graduate level business degree at a Midwestern research intensive university.

It is apparent that a lack of a strong command of the English language makes it very difficult for international students to take part in classroom discussions, ask questions in class, or follow what the professor is saying during class. Kate, a focus group participant, speculated: “Maybe it’s the language barrier [which makes it difficult to understand the professor] in class.” As Pederson (1991) showed, international students who struggle with the English language also struggle to achieve at US universities, as they are not familiar with the classroom dynamics. In light of such language problems, international students may feel out of place and that they do not belong. The communication gap also hinders the ability of international students to participate in class as they did in their home countries. Peter stated: “I'm really having [a hard] time understanding [the professor].”

These language also difficulties made it difficult for the participants to connect with their American peers on a personal level. Lynn stated: “I don’t think it’s easy for international student’s to communicate with [American’s].” As the literature review
suggested, differences in forms of social interaction and language difficulties may prevent international students from forming close relationships with their American peers (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). International students may go through phases of depression, stress, loneliness, and be unable to meet academic expectations (Lin & Yi, 1997; Hyun et al., 2007; Poyrazli et al., 2002). The participants in this study attested to having many international friends, but only limited interaction with their American peers and attributed this to their inability to feel a social connectedness with American students. Peter stated: “I think [it is difficult] interacting with Americans. I don’t understand their culture.”

According to the literature review, numerous factors influence the ability of students to academically and socially integrate, including students’ language skills, culture and customs, social connectedness, and interpersonal skills (Lee & Robbins, 1998; Hyun et al., 2007; Mori, 2000; Poyrazli et al., 2002).

Many institutions create a social support system to assist international students in adjusting at their respective universities; however, the participants in this study indicated that they did not feel that they belonged at their respective institution. Moe stated this explicitly: “I don’t feel like I belong here.” Consequently, institutions need to find a way to integrate international students with their domestic peers. The ISS office could provide such support services; presently, the services provided by the ISS office are limited to an orientation session about culture, relationships, academia, and advice on immigration (Alfonso & Bailey, 2005).

According to the Graduate College (n.d.), the mission of the orientation program is to enable all students to acquire the necessary skills and techniques required for success in relation to research and technology. However, it appears that students are merely guided through academic procedures that promote professional success. Attempts to provide more
opportunities for students to engage in activities within the institution have not been effective (Hughes et al., 2008).

Understanding the experiences of international students has proven to be a challenge for educators, administrators, and staff. The ISS office requires all new incoming international students to take part in a mandatory ISS session upon their arrival. During this session, the ISS goes through a number of topics to help international students adjust to their new environment. Topics covered during orientation include: visa and immigration information, navigating the campus, campus safety, getting involved on campus, and social norms.

To help international students understand the differences between cultures, a representative from the ISS Office also gives a PowerPoint presentation explaining differences in communication, social interactions, and customs; for example, the representative discusses hand gestures that are acceptable in different parts of the world, but considered highly offensive in the US. This presentation is conducted in an effort to help international students avoid offending other people (Baulch, 2013). However the efforts of the ISS office in helping international students adjust to campus life require further steps be undertaken to bridge the gap between international students and their domestic counterparts.

Participants revealed a sense of disappointment in relation to their American peers’ lack of interest in wanting to know more about international students. One participant stated: “Not everyone is able to talk with internationals. Some people don’t want to [socialize] with us.” To bridge this gap, non-international students also need to be interested in getting to know international students on campus. Efforts should be made to encourage the formation of long lasting relationships between all students.

The participants also indicated problems with the amount of credits they needed to take in a limited time frame (i.e., one year). One participant stated: “We have a 12-month
program and I have to take 5 subjects each semester. [I] really have no time at all, it’s always school, assignments, and then back to room to sleep.” Introducing graduate level business programs that offer more flexibility in relation to course load would be a positive step in improving the academic experiences of international students.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in light of the findings of the study and align with the existing literature. Under the *a priori* theme of academic integration, three topics were revealed: (1) academic communication; (2) relationships; and (3) time. The following topics were revealed under the *a priori* theme of social integration: (1) social communication; (2) relationships; and (3) time.

Recommendations for Practice

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of the academic and social factors that influence international students’ sense of belonging.

It is recommended that universities consider developing and implementing orientations sessions for international students that allow these students to meet with and engage in group-activities with domestic students. Universities should aim to create an environment where students can bond socially and academically upon their arrival at university. Promoting social activities for domestic and international students to attend would also help in the formation of relationships between students. It would encourage students to get to know each other and result in larger networking circles.

Introducing a mandatory diversity or globalization course in graduate programs would also create more opportunities for domestic students to interact with and learn more about international students.

International students could improve their communication skills by attending a basic English language course upon their arrival to the US. It is recommended that such a course be
integrated into university programs. This class would help international students to develop their English skills and, at the same time, adjust to the dynamics of an American classroom.

It is further recommended that graduate colleges restructure program curricula by reducing the number of credits students need to take per semester. This would provide international students with the opportunity to experience college life and engage in social activities.

Recommendations for Further Research

To gain a better understanding of the sense of belonging among international students the following recommendations need to be implemented in future research.

This study could be improved if it were expanded, and a larger number of international students enrolled in graduate level business programs were interviewed. This would provide the researcher with a larger data set and other social and academic factors may emerge.

It is essential that the experiences of international student be compared and contrasted with the experiences of domestic students. Thus, future studies should also consider the perspectives of American students. By doing so, scholars will be able to determine the specific needs of international students and their domestic counterparts.

Some of the participants in this study completed their undergraduate degrees at universities in the US. It is not apparent whether their having been in the US for a longer period of time had any impact on their responses. Future studies should set more rigorous limitations to avoid this (and other variables) confounding study results.

Further research should also be undertaken to determine the impact of participants’ demographic characteristics and whether demographics impact the findings.
Summary

The findings of this study revealed a lack of sense of belonging among international students enrolled in graduate level business programs. This chapter provided recommendations for practice and for future research in light of these findings.

Implementing these recommendations is essential, as the number of international students enrolling in US higher education institutions is increasing yearly. By implementing these recommendations, universities will be able to better understand the phenomena of the sense of belonging in relation to international students enrolled in graduate level business programs. Further, practitioners such as those working at the ISS Office to recruit international students will also have a better idea of how to cater to the needs of international students.
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Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health and Illness, 16*(1), 103–121. doi: 10.1111/1467-9566.ep11347023


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Sedgwick, M. G., & Yonge, O. (2008). We’re it, we’re a team, we’re family means a sense of belonging. *Journal of Clinical Nursing, 16,* 1543-1549.


APPENDIX A: IRB Approval

DATE: February 19, 2015

TO: Rabab Darwish, B.A.
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [693154-2] Sense of belonging among international students enrolled in graduate-level business programs: A case study

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL
DATE: February 19, 2015

EXPIRATION DATE: January 25, 2016
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.
Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 15 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on January 25, 2016. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.
APPENDIX B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Semi Structured Interview Protocol
Sense of Belonging among International Students enrolled in Graduate-Level Business Programs: A case study

**Introduction:** The purpose of this qualitative study will be to gain a better understanding of academic and social factors that influence international students’ sense of belonging. Study participants will be enrolled in a graduate-level business program at a Midwestern research-intensive university. This study is important because the extent to which students socially and academically integrate into their selected educational institution has a strong relationship to their decision to persist through degree completion. By better understanding international students’ experiences, educational practitioners and scholars may be better able to meet students’ needs. Given the nature of this study, we as the interviewers are not permitted to lead your answers, rephrase questions, or add clarity beyond the definitions given in the study. We may reread the given definitions and/or questions upon your request.

**Definitions:**

- **Sense of Belonging** - the fundamental human need for individuals to belong, and to be respected and valued members of a group or community.
- **Academic Integration** – Involves the contacts related to studying and the institute itself.
- **Social Integration** – Involves successful contact with peers outside of the institute itself.

A. How is your social life at Bowling Green State University?
   a. Do you interact more with your domestic peers (American) or international peers?
   b. Are you active in any clubs or organizations on campus? If yes, which ones?
   c. Are you able to socialize with students that are not from your country?

B. Do you find English to be difficult?
   a. Are you able to participate in class discussions?
   b. Do you have a hard time understanding the professor during lectures?
   c. Do you use a translator device in class?

C. How do you perceive social relationships in America?
   a. Do you find it easy to bond with your American peers?
   b. How are relationships different here than they are back in your home country?
   c. Does anything prevent you from developing a tight knit relationship with your American peers?
D. How are you doing academically?
   a. Are you satisfied with your academic achievement at BGSU?
   b. Is your academic life different here than it was back in your home country? If yes, how?
   c. Do you need to seek outside resources (such as tutoring) for your schoolwork?
Focus Group Protocol
Sense of Belonging among International Students enrolled in Graduate-Level Business Programs: A case study

Introduction: The purpose of this qualitative study will be to gain a better understanding of academic and social factors that influence international students’ sense of belonging. Study participants will be enrolled in a graduate-level business program at a Midwestern research-intensive university. This study is important because the extent to which students socially and academically integrate into their selected educational institution has a strong relationship to their decision to persist through degree completion. By better understanding international students’ experiences, educational practitioners and scholars may be better able to meet students’ needs. Given the nature of this study, we as the interviewers are not permitted to lead your answers, rephrase questions, or add clarity beyond the definitions given in the study. We may reread the given definitions and/or questions upon your request.

Definitions:

Sense of Belonging - the fundamental human need for individuals to belong, and to be respected and valued members of a group or community.

Academic Integration– Involves the contacts related to studying and the institute itself.

Social Integration – Involves successful contact with peers outside of the institute itself.

A. How is your social life at Bowling Green State University?
   a. Do you interact more with your domestic peers (American) or international peers?
   b. Are you active in any clubs or organizations on campus? If yes, which ones?
   c. Are you able to socialize with students that are not from your country?

B. Do you find English to be difficult?
   a. Are you able to participate in class discussions?
   b. Do you have a hard time understanding the professor during lectures?
   c. Do you use a translator device in class?

C. How do you perceive social relationships in America?
   a. Do you find it easy to bond with your American peers?
b. How are relationships different here than they are back in your home country?

c. Does anything prevent you from developing a tight knit relationship with your American peers?

D. How are you doing academically?
   a. Are you satisfied with your academic achievement at BGSU?
   b. Is your academic life different here than it was back in your home country? If yes, how?
   c. Do you need to seek outside resources (such as tutoring) for your schoolwork?
APPENDIX D: Email Recruitment Script

Dear <First Name> <Last Name>

I am Rabab Darwish a graduate student in the School Of Teaching and Learning in the College of Education and Human Development at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. I am investigating the sense of belonging among international students enrolled in graduate level business programs at a Midwestern University.

You are invited to participate in a research study to better understand the academic and social sense of belonging on international graduate students enrolled in graduate level business courses at Bowling Green State University.

You must be 18 years of age to participate. If you decide to participate, you will have a choice of participating in a one on one interview, which will last approximately 45 minutes or a focus group, which will last approximately 60 minutes. The informed consent documents, which provides specific details of these activities is attached.

Should you decide not to participate you should know that your relationship with Bowling Green State University would not be adversely affected.

Prior to your participation, you will be asked to thoroughly review the informed consent documents and ask any questions before you provide a signed hard copy of the informed consent document to Rabab Darwish.

If you should have any questions about the research or your participation in the study you should contact Rabab Darwish via email at rhdarwi@bgsu.edu or phone at (561) 801-4900. You may also contact Dr. Frederick Polkinghorne, thesis project advisor via email at fpolkin@bgsu.edu or via phone at (419) 372- 7334 or contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research. Thank you for your time.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please email Rabab Darwish at rhdarwi@bgsu.edu by **Friday, March 6, 2015**.

Sincerely,

Rabab H. Darwish
APPENDIX E: Informed Consent (Semi-Structured Interview)

Informed Consent for participation in a Semi Structured Interview, for the research titled: Sense of Belonging among International Students enrolled in Graduate-Level Business Programs: A case study

I am Rabab Darwish, a graduate student in the School Of Teaching and Learning. I am studying the sense of belonging among international graduate students enrolled in business programs at Bowling Green State University.

This study aims to better understand international students. Participants will be enrolled in a graduate level business program. This study is important because social and academic factors affect international students’ decision to complete their studies.

You can volunteer to participate, but you must be at least 18 years of age. You are free to stop this interview at any time. The interview will be 45 minutes. You can skip questions at any time. Participating will not affect your relationship with BGSU.

Procedures for participation in the semi-structured interview are as follows:

1. Report to the scheduled location.
2. Review informed consent documents.
3. Ask any questions pertaining to the study.
4. If you agree to participate, sign the consent documents.
5. Participate in the interview, in which the interviewer will ask you to respond to approximately 16 questions.
6. You will be thanked for your participation and the interview will end.

The information you provide will be recorded. These files will be kept in a password-protected file on a password-protected computer. The researcher will be the only one that has access to this data.
This risk of participating is not greater than any risks met in daily life. All efforts will be taken to keep data confidential. However, should a breach of confidentiality occur, you risk that your perceptions of your academic and social sense of belonging on Bowling Green States’ campus might become known. By signing below, you indicate that you are providing your consent to participate in this study.

If you are interested in participating in this study or have any questions, please send an email to Rabab Darwish at rhdarwi@bgsu.edu or contact me via phone at (561) 801 – 4900 to schedule a time to meet and review the informed consent to participate.

You may also contact Dr. Frederick Polkinghorne, project advisor via email at fpolkin@bgsu.edu or call 419- 372- 7334 or contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board via email at hsr@bgsu.edu or phone at (419)-372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu.

Sincerely,

Rabab H. Darwish Graduate Student
Bowling Green State University

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits of this study. All of my questions were answered. I know that my participation is voluntary.

By signing this document, I accept that I reviewed this informed consent document and that I agree to participate in this study:

__________________________________________
Signature Date
APPENDIX F: Informed Consent (Focus Group)

Informed Consent for participation in a Focus Group, for the research titled:

*Sense of Belonging among International Students enrolled in Graduate-Level Business Programs: A case study*

I am Rabab Darwish, a graduate student in the School Of Teaching and Learning. I am studying the sense of belonging among international graduate students enrolled in business programs at Bowling Green State University.

This study aims to better understand international students. Participants will be enrolled in a graduate level business program. This study is important because social and academic factors affect international students’ decision to complete their studies.

You can volunteer to participate, but you must be at least 18 years of age. You are free to stop any time. The focus group will be 60 minutes. You can skip questions at any time. Participating will not affect your relationship with BGSU.

Procedures for participation in the focus group are as follows:

1. Report to the scheduled location.
2. Review informed consent documents.
3. Ask any questions pertaining to the study.
4. If you agree to participate, sign the consent documents.
5. Participate in the focus group, in which the interviewer will ask you to respond to approximately 16 questions.
6. You will be thanked for your participation and the focus group will end.

The information you provide will be recorded. These files will be kept in a password-protected file on a password-protected computer. The researcher will be the only one that has access to this data.

This risk of participating is not greater than any risks met in daily life. All efforts will be taken to keep data confidential. However, should a breach of confidentiality occur, you risk that your perceptions of your academic and social sense of belonging on Bowling Green States’ campus might become known. By signing below, you indicate that you are
providing your consent to participate in this study.

If you are interested in participating in this study or have any questions, please send an email to Rabab Darwish at rhdarwi@bgsu.edu or contact me via phone at (561) 801 – 4900 to schedule a time to meet and review the informed consent to participate.

You may also contact Dr. Frederick Polkinghorne, project advisor via email at fpolkin@bgsu.edu or call 419- 372- 7334 or contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board via email at hsrb@bgsu.edu or phone at (419)-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu.

Sincerely,

Rabab H. Darwish Graduate Student
Bowling Green State University

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits of this study. All of my questions were answered. I know that my participation is voluntary.

By signing this document, I accept that I reviewed this informed consent document and that I agree to participate in this study:

________________________________________
Signature Date

BGSU HSRB - APPROVED FOR USE
IRBNet ID # _693154
EFFECTIVE 02/19/2015
1. Gender:
   - Male
   - Female

2. Age:
   - 18 – 21
   - 22 – 24
   - 25-27
   - 28+

3. Country of Origin:

4. Prior to attending this institution, what was your main activity?
   - Studying at university level
   - Full time employment
   - Other

5. Which college/department in this institution are you enrolled in?

6. How long have you been at this institution?
   - Less than 1 year
   - 1 year
   - 2 years
   - More than 2 years
APPENDIX H: Data Codes and Themes

**Qualitative Themes, Codes and Frequency**

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