EXAMINING THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT LANDER STATE UNIVERSITY

A Thesis

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by

Vanessa Marquez

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EXAMINING THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT LANDER STATE UNIVERSITY

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Educational Leadership & Policy Studies
Abstract

of

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by

Vanessa Marquez

Statement of Problem

It was the purpose of the study to examine international students’ transition experiences at Lander State University in order to identify to their needs. There were three essential research questions:

1. What social, psychological and academic challenges do international students face during their transition at a four-year institution?

2. How do international students overcome the social, psychological and academic challenges that they face?

3. What recommendations do international students have regarding the adjustment process?

The study researched the experiences of Lander State University international students and identified the challenges they faced. The researcher attempted to discover the various ways that international students overcame their challenges. The purpose was to identify the social, psychological, and academic needs of international students as they transitioned to Lander State University from their home countries.
Sources of Data

This study utilized a mixed methods approach. The study consisted of 45 international students. Forty-eight point nine percent of the survey participants were undergraduate students, 35.6% were graduate students, and 15.6% were alumni.

Sixty-seven point four percent were from Asia while 18.6% were from Europe. Survey respondents from the African region totaled two percent, those who came from Australia and New Zealand made up two percent of the respondents, and two percent came from North America.

Conclusions Reached

The predominant challenge that international students encountered were social challenges. The social challenges they encountered included having lack of friendships and dealing with isolation and seclusion. The majority of participants did not encounter academic difficulty during their transition experience. The small number who struggled academically felt unprepared for the academic workload and language barriers. Homesickness was the leading challenge encountered by those who struggled with psychological challenges. The findings revealed the importance of ensuring that international students have a good social experience to help them adjust to the university.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Geni Cowan, PhD

_______________________
Date
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td></td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td></td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Background</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definition of the Terms</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organization of the Remainder of the Study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theoretical Frameworks</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reasons International Students Study Abroad</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Trend of International Student Recruitment</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International Students’ Adjustment Challenges</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International Students’ Strategies for Overcoming Challenges</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Programs for International Students</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rationale for the Study</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tables</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What region are you from?</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Expectations and Challenges</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Overcoming Challenges</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Some may define success as the number of full-fee-paying international students enrolled. Paying attention to their needs “while here” and providing them with a high quality living and learning experience is the more important measure in the long run, however, if more than lip service is given to protecting core institutional missions and values. If that isn’t enough, institutional reputation will suffer in the global market place if its reputation is one of offering a shoddy experience and product. A thorough consideration of the student preparation; the academic, social, and learning supports; and the feelings of welcome and safety rarely happen accidentally but are a product of conscious institutional efforts to identify and meet student challenges and needs. (Hudzik & Briggs, 2012, p. 4)

The United States has always been a popular destination for international students to get their education (Andrade & Evans, 2009). The number of international students attending colleges and universities in the United States has steadily increased the last ten years. The number of international students in the United States in 2011-2012 was at a record high of 764,495, which is an increase of 5.7% from the previous year (Institution of International Education, 2012). The number of new international student enrollment for fall 2011 increased by 6.5% (Institution of International Education, 2012). The majority of students that study in the United States come from China, India, and South
Korea. California hosts the most international students while New York and Texas rank among the top three in hosting international students (Institution of International Education, 2012). According to Andrade and Evans (2009), while the number of international students continues to increase, the United States’ total market share of international students has declined in the past decade. The United States has a very low percentage of international students attending their colleges compared to other countries (Andrade & Evans, 2009). According to Hudzik and Briggs (2012), the international students enrolled in colleges in the United States are only about 3.5%; whereas, Australia has 22% and the United Kingdom has 17%. Despite the disparity in the market share of international students, projections indicate that the United States will continue to see rising numbers of international students (Hudzik & Briggs, 2012).

Universities are recognizing the benefits of having international students attending their campuses. In addition to the academic benefit and diversity that international students bring to campus, international students also provide an economic benefit (D’Amico, 2010). However, the global competition for these students has intensified as more and more countries are looking to recruit students to their universities (Pandit, 2007). The United States is facing competition from other countries trying to sway international students to attend their universities. Countries are also increasing the recruitment efforts of inbound students in order to help improve the quality of their own higher education system (Hudzik & Briggs, 2012). This trend is inspiring colleges across the United States to re-evaluate their international recruitment efforts. They are taking a more proactive approach to attracting international students to their colleges. This is
especially true of public universities, which have had a significant decline in their funding resources because of the economic downturn (Hudzik & Briggs, 2012). Increased recruitment efforts make it even more important for colleges and universities to make sure that they are providing the necessary services to their international students. With the rise of global competition and domestic competition, colleges in the United States cannot afford to overlook the needs of this student population. These factors make it very important for universities to make it a top priority that international students are provided with the education and experience that they are paying for.

The primary source of funding for an international student’s education comes from personal and family finances (Institution of International Education, 2012). In 2010-2011, 63.6% of students supported themselves through personal and family resources (Institution of International Education, 2012). If universities are not taking proactive steps to help meet the needs of their international students, it is possible that international students will seek other institutions to attend that will provide them with the support they need. Universities cannot afford to develop a bad reputation because international students now have many more options at their disposal (Hudzik & Briggs, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

It was the purpose of the study to examine international students’ transition experiences at Lander State University in order to identify to their needs. There were three essential research questions:
1. What social, psychological and academic challenges do international students face during their transition at a four-year institution?

2. How do international students overcome the social, psychological and academic challenges that they face?

3. What recommendations do international students have regarding the adjustment process?

The study researched the experiences of Lander State University international students and identified the challenges that they faced. The study examined factors that hindered international students’ adjustment and transition to the university, which affected their academic experience. The researcher attempted to discover the various ways that international students dealt with and overcame the challenges they encountered. The purpose was to identify the social, psychological, and academic needs of international students as they transitioned to Lander State University from their home countries. The study sought to provide insight to administrators, counselors, and staff regarding ways to address the issues found in the study in order to improve services to international students.

Significance of the Study

International students experience various adjustment problems that affect their transition to college. The international student population tends to be a small percentage of a university’s student body and is a population that has often been ignored (Andrade & Evans, 2009). Financially strapped institutions are moving towards increased recruitment
of international students because of the monetary benefit that they provide (Andrade, 2006b). Projections indicate that the number of international student in the United States will continue to increase in the coming years (Hudzik & Briggs, 2012). Colleges’ reputations are at stake if they disregard the needs of their international students and fail to provide them with adequate support services. Neglecting these issues could lead to a drop in international student attendance at their university. The researcher could not find any studies regarding the transition experiences of Lander State University international students; therefore, the study will bring awareness of the adjustment difficulties that international students face at Lander State University. The study will encourage leadership to focus on the transition problems that international students encounter and take a proactive approach to remedy the problems.

The results of this study will provide educational administrators, counselors, and staff with information necessary to develop programs or enhance current support services to help facilitate international students’ transition into the collegiate system. The study will also contribute to the literature and identify any gaps that may currently be present.

Definition of Terms

**Acculturation**: The process in which an individual learns to cope with their new unfamiliar environment (Taft, 1977).

**Domestic Students**: Those students who are United States citizens or permanent residents of the United States.

**Home Country**: The country from which an international student is from or
normally resides.

**Host Country:** The foreign country that an international student visits to attend college.

**International Students:** Students who are not United States citizens or are not permanent residents of the United States. For the purpose of the study refers to students with an F-1 or J-1 visa.

**Social Support:** For the purpose of the study refers to a network of people who provide emotional and instrumental support. A network can include family, friends, classmates, and other individuals.

**Transition:** An individual’s perception of change. It only occurs when an individual perceives their experience as a transition (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995).

**Organization of the Remainder of the Study**

The study is organized into five chapters. The next section, Chapter 2, is the review of the related literature. The chapter discusses the theoretical frameworks that make up this study and introduces five subtopics related to the research problem. Chapter 3 explains the methodology used for the study. It describes the setting, the design of the study, population and sample, data collection process, instrumentation, and the limitations of the study. Chapter 4 presents the results and interpretation of the data. Chapter 5 concludes the study with a summary of the study and recommendations.
Chapter 2
REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical frameworks that address the transitional experiences of international students and their desired needs. The theoretical framework creates the foundation for the study and establishes the importance of addressing the issues that this student population encounters. In addition, the researcher explored the reasons and motivations behind why international students choose to study abroad. This chapter also addresses the current trends regarding international student recruitment and the reasons that universities recruit this student population. The international student population is usually a small percentage of a university’s student population and one whose needs can often be overlooked and not addressed (Andrade & Evans, 2009). With the increased interest in universities recruiting international students, it is in the best interest of each university to acknowledge their students’ challenges and needs (Pandit, 2007). This chapter also provides a background of the international student experiences and discusses the adjustment challenges that international students encounter. This information offers administrators, faculty, and counselors with important insight that can inform their decisions regarding how to address students’ expectations. An analysis of the strategies that international students used to help them overcome their challenges is also reviewed. Lastly, this chapter concludes by examining the programs that universities
have implemented in order to help facilitate the successful transition of international students to their new environment.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks that make up this study are the Schlossberg et al. (1995) transition model and Maslow’s (1987) hierarchy of needs. The Schlossberg et al. (1995) transition model identifies the transition process that individuals pass through in their lives. Maslow’s (1987) hierarchy of needs identifies the basic needs that all people require and then discusses the progression of more complicated needs that develop in an individual’s life. Recognizing these needs is beneficial to understanding how one’s individual needs can be satisfied. Andrade (2009) stated that domestic and international students experience transitions when they enter college. However, research has indicated that international students encounter greater types of transitional challenges (Andrade, 2009). Understanding the needs of international students during their transition experience is also valuable knowledge needed by administrators and faculty in order to provide appropriate support.

Overview of the Transition Model

Schlossberg et al. (1995) stated that a transition is an individual’s perception of change; therefore, a transition only occurs when an individual perceives their experience as a transition. If an international student’s relationship, routine or assumption of a particular event has not changed then no transition has taken place (Schlossberg et al., 1995). They explained that there are

*Approaching transitions.* Approaching transitions involves identifying the type of transition that an individual is experiencing. There are three types of transition events. An anticipated transition is an event that is expected, such as an international student knowing they will attend college. An unanticipated transition is a “non-scheduled event” (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 29) or events that are “not predictable,” (p. 29) for example, an international student not expecting to have difficulty making friends and experiencing loneliness could be classified as an unanticipated transition. Lastly, a “non-event” (p. 29) transition is an expected event that never occurred. According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), it is important to recognize that each transition involves relativity, context, and impact. The idea of relativity recognizes that an anticipated event for one individual may be considered an unanticipated event for another individual. Schlossberg et al. (1995) stated the context of a transition considers the circumstance in which the event or non-event took place. For example, the context of an individual’s retirement can be a good experience if it makes it possible for the individual to take a vacation but it can be considered a bad experience if retirement was brought on by an illness (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Understanding the impact of an event or non-event is a very important aspect in a transition. The more a transition impacts a person’s life then the greater likelihood that more coping resources are necessary (Schlossberg et al., 1995).
The four “S” system. Schlossberg et al. (1995) described the “4 S System” (p. 47) as the “factors that make a difference in how one copes with change” (p. 47). The “4 S system” (p. 47) coping resources includes situation, self, support, and strategies. Every person’s transition experience differs because everyone’s situation varies. Schlossberg et al. (1995) stated that the self looks at the individual characteristics of each person. Personal and demographic traits such as gender, age, and ethnicity play a vital role in coping with transition. The self identifies the characteristics of an individual that helps them cope with their situation (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The self not only examines the personal and demographic characteristics but the psychological resources that an individual possesses such as ego development, outlook, commitment, and values (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Schlossberg et al. (1995) referred to the third “S” as support. The social support that an individual has plays an important role in how they deal with a transition. According to Schlossberg et al. (1995) the types of support that individual’s have are support from people with intimate relationships, their family, network of friends, and the support within their surrounding community. Lastly, strategies refer to the coping strategies that individuals utilize to deal with transitions (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Strengthening resources. Once a transition is recognized and the coping resources are identified then the last part of the transition model looks at strengthening an individual’s resources (Schlossberg et al., 1995). It calls for counselors to “take charge” (p. 32) and help individual’s strengthen and identify
their *situation, support, self, and strategies* and form new coping resources (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 26). Once an individual identifies the coping skills to utilize, it will enable them to progress through a transition more easily (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

*Overview of Maslow’s (1987) Hierarchy of Needs*

Maslow’s (1987) Hierarchy of Needs Model is the second theoretical framework for this study. Maslow’s (1987) Hierarchy of Needs proposes the common set of needs that human beings desire. The meeting of these needs is a predictor of their overall satisfaction. Maslow (1987) stated the needs that people seek are basic needs that develop into a more complicated set of needs. The foundation of Maslow’s (1987) model begins with an individual’s psychological needs then progresses into the need for safety, love, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.

The psychological needs are the very basic needs that everyone desires (Maslow, 1987). These needs include the basic survival needs that everyone requires such as, sleep, food, water, shelter, and air. Until these basic needs are met, all other needs become secondary until an individual’s psychological needs are fulfilled (Maslow, 1987). There is not an extreme danger that International students studying in the United States will encounter sleep deprivation or hunger to the point that it endangers their lives; however, things such as financial hardship for example could cause an international student to feel as though this need is being threatened. Maslow (1987) stated this extreme is very rare and many are able to satisfy their psychological needs. Once an individual’s psychological needs are met then the need for safety emerges (Maslow, 1987).
The need for safety can be defined as the need for security, stability, and freedom from anxiety and chaos (Maslow, 1987). Safety needs can include things such as the need for employment, safe area to live, physical danger, and medical insurance just to name a few. Just as with psychological needs the threat of safety is usually, a need that can be met in the United States because it is a stable living environment compared to other parts of the world (Maslow, 1987). In addition, it is not a society that is overrun by tyranny and chaos. However, the need for safety is of particular concern to international students as they leave behind the safety of what they have known all of their lives to enter a foreign environment. The need for safety against physical harm is a possible threat especially on campuses where there have been physical assaults and where there are students living in high crime areas due to minimal living expenses.

The third hierarchal need on Maslow’s (1987) model is the need for belonging and love, which is also referred to as social needs. These needs are met through friendships, romantic relationships, and a sense of belonging that can be found through a group or family. Maslow (1987) stated that the need for belonging and love is heightened when a person is removed from their friends, family and neighbors. Maslow (1987) stated that satisfying the social need would help individuals overcome feelings of alienation and loneliness. Once an individual’s social needs are met then the next need that one must try to satisfy is their esteem need.
The esteem need has to do with the desire for a person to feel that others value and respect them (Maslow, 1987). According to Maslow (1987), esteem needs can be classified in two ways, “…first, the desire for strength, achievement, adequacy, mastery and competence, confidence in the face of the world, and independence and freedom. Second, we have what we may call the desire for reputation or prestige…” (p. 21). The inability to obtain this need can lead to feeling a lack of self-confidence and self-worth. Feelings of inferiority, weakness, and helplessness can increase if a person is unable to achieve the need for esteem (Maslow, 1987). According to Maslow, once the esteem need is met then a person desires to meet their need for self-actualization.

Self-actualization is the final and highest need in Maslow’s (1987) Hierarchy of Needs. Self-actualization refers to the desire that an individual has for becoming self-fulfilled. It is the need for an individual to achieve all that they are potentially capable of achieving (Maslow, 1987). Achieving the need of self-actualization is rare and is dependent upon an individual successfully achieving the previous needs in Maslow’s (1987) hierarchy of psychological, safety, love, and esteem. According to Maslow (1987), if any of these needs go unsatisfied then one does not progress into seeking the next level of needs on the hierarchy paradigm until the need that they are seeking is met; therefore, self-actualization is the most difficult to attain.

Reasons International Students Study Abroad

Examining the reasons behind why students decide to study internationally gives college administrators insight regarding the motivations and expectations that international students have for studying abroad. Learning these reasons will provide
administrators and faculty with knowledge that may help them provide services to international students, which will help them transition to the university. There are many reasons that students study abroad. The motivation for student’s studying abroad varies.

Qing, Schweisfurth and Day (2010) examined the reason that Chinese students choose to study abroad. In China, there are not enough universities to meet the student demand, which makes admission into Chinese universities very competitive. Many students who are unable to get into Chinese universities choose to study internationally. Qing et al. (2010) also noted that sometimes studying abroad is a Chinese student’s first choice because the quality of education they can find abroad is better than what is offered in China. Another important factor that plays a role in a student’s decision to study abroad is family (Qing et al., 2010). Some parents desire that their children learn independence as well as expand their worldview and they feel that studying abroad will provide their children these experiences. The authors stated that other reasons for studying abroad include student’s desire to have more exposure to the English language. They also believe that they will gain an edge in the international job market after they graduate which will help them move forward in their careers (Qing et al., 2010).

Sánchez, Fornerino and Zhang (2006) suggested that there are universal motivational factors between cultures as to why individuals choose to study abroad; however, some motivational factors are more common among a particular
culture than in others. This is evident in a study, which found that international students from different countries have similar motivational reasons to study abroad yet they differ in the level of priority that they list their motivations (Sánchez et al., 2006). The study revealed six motivational commonalities: (a) the desire to search for new experiences; (b) the search for liberty or pleasure; (c) desire to improve a professional situation; (d) learning another language; and (e) search for travel. Sanchez et al. (2006) stated that the desire for new experiences included: a new lifestyle and culture, learning about another culture, traveling, and personal enrichment. The study revealed students search for liberty and pleasure included the following: students chose to study abroad to have fun, to increase their enjoyment level, to have an international experience, and to find more freedom and independence. Students stated that studying abroad would improve their professional situation in the following ways: give them the opportunity to earn a prestigious degree, give them the opportunity to study at a prestigious university, and to make professional connections (Sánchez et al., 2006). Students also shared that their motivation to improve their social situation included the opportunity to earn a better living and be richer in order to provide for their families, to achieve a higher social status, and to please parents (Sánchez et al., 2006). A majority of the research found that students chose to study overseas because they wanted to learn about a new culture, learn a new language, wanting to experience a new university, the desire to travel, and wanting to seek new experiences not available in their home country (Emanoil, 1999; Schroth & McCormack, 2000; Liang-Hsuan, 2008). Pimpa (2004) found similar results compared to other studies but also revealed that family played an important role in students’
motivation to study abroad. Students are aware of the significant expense of studying abroad. Another factor that led students to study abroad was family financial support (Pimpa, 2004). According to Pimpa (2004), information provided by family members with previous experience studying abroad influenced students. Family expectations played an important role in a student choosing to study abroad. Many of the students who participated in the study mentioned that their parents and family expected them to go overseas to obtain a degree, desired that they learn another language, and to study abroad in order to experience new things (Pimpa, 2004). Lastly, the research noted that competition and persuasion were factors that influence students to study overseas. If students have family members who have or intend to study abroad, they are motivated to do the same. Additionally, competition causes parents to persuade students’ to study abroad because their children of family and friends have studied abroad (Pimpa, 2004).

The Trend of International Student Recruitment

In recent years, there has been a big push to recruit international students. This trend has not only spread across the United States but also across other countries such as Australia and United Kingdom (Pandit, 2007). This push has come from universities realizing the positive effect that international students bring to their campuses such as internationalization and diversity as well as an added source of revenue (Andrade, 2006b; National Association of Foreign
Student Advisers [NAFSA], 2003). This trend has resulted in increased numbers of international students attending American universities. Andrade and Evans (2009) suggested that universities recruit international students for the same purposes that they recruit domestic students. Universities realize that each side has something to gain from each other.

_Economic Benefits_

The current economy in the United States is affecting colleges across the nation. State colleges are facing severe budget cuts. Hu (2011) acknowledged that many colleges are being forced to admit fewer students, raise tuition, cut classes, and furlough or layoff employees. As a result of funding cuts, colleges are seeking creative ways to increase revenue (Hu, 2011). The economic downturn is causing universities to increase recruitment of international students to help bring in revenue. Sánchez et al. (2006) noted that business schools in particular have recognized the financial benefit of admitting international students to their programs, which has led to implementing international business programs. D’Amico (2010) stated that international student recruitment becomes appealing, especially to state colleges, because international student tuition is often times twice as much as resident tuition.

International students generally receive no financial aid and pay full tuition, which allows schools to offer domestic students with more financial aid (NAFSA, 2003). In addition to the monetary benefit that international students provide the university, the literature highlighted the importance of the economic benefit that international students
bring to the American economy because of their attendance (Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner & Nelson, 1999; Liang-Hsuan, 2008).

Diversity

An influencing factor that motivates universities to recruit international students is the diversity they bring to the campus and to the classroom. International students contribute to bringing a unique global perspective to the classroom (D’Amicio, 2010). Kwon (2009) asserted that international students make a significant contribution by providing different worldviews and cultures. The literature recognized that the presence of international students in the classroom help enrich the classroom environment because of the experiences and culture that they bring to the classroom (Pandit, 2007; Owens, Srivastava & Feerasta, 2011). Many American students’ first experience with foreign students is in college. The interaction with international students provides American student’s with opportunity to learn about other cultures and become effective global citizens (NAFSA, 2003). Andrade and Evans (2009) attributed recruitment of international students to the fact that they help internationalize the campus as well as the curriculum.

Academic Impact

The literature reviewed emphasized the importance that international students bring to a university’s academic environment. Peterson et al. (1999) suggested that if it were not for international student teaching assistants that universities would not be able to offer an adequate amount of classes. American
students opt to enter their field and make more money rather than choose to be teaching assistants (Peterson et al., 1999). The contributions that international students make to research in the field of science are monumental (NAFSA, 2003). Pandit (2007) concurred with the literature and stated that international students are vital to the advancement of research in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics field. Sometimes international students are viewed as an asset when a college is trying to build a new program in language or cultural studies (Andrade & Evans, 2009). Andrade and Evans (2009) highlighted the fact that international students are also recruited as a result of universities attempting to increase their enrollment in subjects such as accounting and the sciences.

Recruiting international students has proven to provide many benefits to a university. The positive financial impact can help financially struggling universities maintain their programs and provides the opportunity to add new programs (D’Amico, 2010). In the long run, these programs are beneficial to the domestic students that attend the university. The impact that international students have to the academic environment influences the classroom environment. Exposing domestic students to international culture and perspectives broadens their awareness on a global level and also allows them to experience diversity (Kwon, 2009).

**International Students’ Adjustment Challenges**

International students come from many different backgrounds, cultures, and value systems. When students study abroad, they leave behind their family, friends, and
cultural familiarity. Students enter American universities and are thrust into a foreign environment and forced to acculturate. Acculturation is the process in which an individual learns to cope with their new unfamiliar environment (Taft, 1977). These adjustments do not come easily for many international students. The acculturation process is often accompanied by culture shock or acculturative stress (Taft, 1977). Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping and Todman (2008) indicated that culture shock is a prevalent symptom that international students struggle with upon arrival to their host country. Oberg (1960) defined culture shock as anxiety that is brought upon by the loss of familiar signs and symbols. When an individual enters a new environment such as an unfamiliar culture they experience culture shock which causes feelings of frustration and anxiety (Oberg, 1960). These feelings can affect a students’ academic experience and hinder their transition into their new environment.

A review of the literature identified psychological, social, and academic challenges as common barriers that international students face as they transition into their new environment. Psychological challenges include, stress, depression, and homesickness (Lacina, 2002; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Selvadurai, 1998). Social challenges that international students struggle with involve lack of support network, isolation and loneliness (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Lastly, the academic challenges they deal with include language barriers and adjustment to the American classroom environment (Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010; McLachlan & Justice, 2009).
Psychological Adjustments

The research identified stress, culture shock, and homesickness among the types of psychological adjustments that international students faced while they studied abroad. According to the literature, these challenges are common factors that lead to some international students into depression and anxiety (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011).

Stress. International students often experience higher levels of stress than domestic students (Russell, Rosenthal & Thomson, 2010). Yan and Berliner (2011) found that students who had unrealistic expectations about going to America to study suffered with a greater amount of stress. An Asian student stated that most Chinese students envision America as a paradise with much entertainment and partying with friends. When they arrived they realized that what they imagined is not reality (Yan & Berliner, 2011). There are different variables that bring on stress in the lives of international students. Students who do not experience academic or social success can end up feeling overwhelmed and stressed. International students are often unprepared for the actual hardships and adjustment issues that they go through (Yan & Berliner, 2011). These feelings are heightened by the fact that these students never realized the amount of difficulty they would encounter in transitioning (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). Most often stress can be attributed to family pressure, immigration issues, and financial hardship (Russell et al., 2010).

Academic Pressure. The literature reviewed indicated that international students experience a great deal of academic stress. Khawaja and Stallman (2011) found that the pressure that students feel regarding meeting deadlines to submit homework assignments
create extra stress as some international students were not used to having outside class work in their home countries. The unexpected homework is usually more difficult for students struggling with English. The homework creates an extra burden for them as they struggle to find the balance between academics and their social lives (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). Academics usually are the priority for international students because maintaining good grades is very important to them culturally and a requirement for those with a scholarship. McLachlan and Justice’s (2009) study revealed that students who were required to maintain a minimum GPA to keep their scholarships were under a tremendous amount of pressure to do well academically. International students often had high expectations to maintain good grades not realizing the academic difficulties that they would encounter (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Students who were high academic achievers in their home country experienced a great deal of stress when they did not obtain the grades they had expected (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011).

Contrary to most of the studies regarding academic stress Hwang, Ming-Kuen and Saing (2011) found that academic stress did not have a considerable impact on international students’ adjustment to the university.

*Family pressure.* Family pressure is a significant factor that causes an international student stress. Often, international students are pressured to do well academically by their families (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). The literature found that international students from Asian cultures carried a tremendous burden on their shoulders when studying abroad. The parents of Chinese international
students expect that young men be the breadwinners and pillars of their households. This burdens students with extra pressure to do well for the purpose of ensuring that they go on and excel in their careers in order to meet their families’ expectations (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Similarly, Brislin (2000) stated that Asian students are more likely to experience stress because their success or failure reflects on their family. In Asian cultures, sons and daughters represent their families as they study abroad; therefore, failing to do well brings shame upon their whole family. This sentiment was shared by a Korean international student who stated, “It would be the biggest shame for me if I fail in school” (Lee, Koeske & Sales, 2004, p. 406).

Immigration Issues. Tidwell and Hanassab (2007) found that the issue of immigration was very important to students. The events of September 11 have initiated stricter immigration laws in which international students must abide (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007).

Students who study in the United States from overseas are required to have a student visa also known as an F-1 Visa. It is very important for international students to maintain their visa status. If an international student becomes out of status, it could lead to the student losing immigration benefits and/or lead to deportation, which in turn could cause the student from being allowed to re-enter the United States for a period of up to ten years (Baker, 2009). Immigration issues are another reason that it is stressful for students to maintain a good grade point average. Should a student be disqualified from attending their university and become disenrolled because of academic deficiencies they...
would be required to return to their home country unless they were able to find another college to attend (personal communication, J. Jacobs, September 30, 2011).

**Financial Issues.** International students pay a premium to study at foreign universities. A majority of students carry the financial burden without the help of financial aid. Kwon’s (2009) research found that a majority of students feared the financial pressures associated with studying abroad. The financial pressure makes obtaining a job very important yet there are strict regulations prohibiting international students from working off campus (Lee et al., 2004). In the United States, international students are only legally allowed to work on-campus. On-campus positions are scarce and international students are usually competing for these jobs with domestic students. In addition, on-campus jobs usually only pay minimum wage (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). The literature showed that students often had difficulty obtaining part-time jobs, which led to financial hardship and stress (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Lee et al., 2004). When international students are fortunate enough to obtain a job they often find it difficult to live off of the income of an on-campus job because the pay is usually very low (Yan & Berliner, 2011). International students usually do not have the same access to financial resources as domestic students. They are not able to rely on the use of scholarships and loans (Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000). International students must often rely on help of family to help financially support their educational endeavors. Students who major in something other than science and
technology may find it especially difficult to obtain a job as a teaching or research assistant (Yan & Berliner, 2011).

Social Adjustment Issues

International students face social challenges during their study abroad experience. Social barriers include difficulty making new friends and having problems creating a network of social support. Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) stated that international students had trouble connecting with students from the host country. Sherry et al. (2010) found that students admitted to feeling unaccepted and ignored by American students. Social challenges have led students to feel lonely and isolated from their peers.

Isolation and Loneliness. Much of the literature stated that international students faced issues of isolation because of difficulty they had making friends and establishing social networks (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). The literature revealed that a majority of international students struggle with high levels of isolation and loneliness during their transition period (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2008). In particular, McLachlan and Justice (2009) highlighted that the academic stress that international students struggle with is also a contributing factor that leads to students feeling lonely and isolated. Other studies suggested that isolation leads to students having a difficult time establishing a social support system (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Sawir et al., 2008).

Language barriers were identified as a common problem that leads to isolation. The feelings of isolation and loneliness are a result of international students with a low grasp of the English language feeling self-conscious about speaking to peers (McLachlan
Additionally, students who did well on English language tests still lacked confidence in their English speaking skills because they recognized the importance of needing to practice the language with native speakers (Sovic, 2009). International students who lack confidence in their English skills withdraw from social situations in order to avoid any perceived embarrassment. A student’s accent can also hinder communication between peers and result in international students feeling self-conscious about speaking to others (Lee & Rice, 2007). As a result of English language deficiency, international students must put forth extra time and effort towards their academics which contributes to their loneliness and isolation because the extra study time keeps them from interacting in social settings (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Poyrazli and Lopez’ (2007) study confirmed that the lower a student’s English skills are the higher the probability of an international student finding it difficult to develop relationships and friendships with peers and others from their host country.

The research highlighted the consequences of students struggling with isolation and loneliness. International students who battled with feelings of loneliness and isolation often considered quitting college and returning to their home country. The research noted that many of the students were not aware that they would struggle with feeling lonely (Sawir et al., 2008). McLachlan and Justice (2009) found that some students had never experienced loneliness until they studied abroad. Many international students come from cultures with large families so when they arrive abroad they are not used being alone. They come
from cultures that incorporate extended family into their daily lives and often times live in shared housing so it is a challenge for them when they enter the United States and begin trying to establish a social network (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). In addition, first year international students are the most prone to feelings of homesickness and loneliness because they are so young and away from their families and familiar surroundings (Yan & Berliner, 2011). The research showed that loneliness and isolation was found to be something that many international students had to contend with even if they maintained good relationships with American friends. Students could not help missing their family and friends back home (Yan & Berliner, 2011).

Lacina (2002) stated that discrimination hinders students’ social development in their new environment. International students who perceive that they are being discriminated against may isolate themselves (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Lee and Rice (2007) found many cases where students had perceived being discriminated against by faculty, advisors, and students. This type of perceived discrimination that international students feel could lead to lacking self-confidence (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). As a result, it affects many areas of an individual’s social life and inevitably leads to isolation. In some cases, the perceived discrimination led to students feeling of excluded and lonely (Lee & Rice, 2007).

*Academic Adjustment Problems*

*Classroom environment.* Academic adjustment problems are prevalent among international students. The literature specified that a common issue that students had to adjust to was a new American classroom dynamic (Selvadurai, 1998). The American
classroom exposed international students to a very different environment.

Selvadurai (1998) noted that many international students have to learn to adjust to the informal classroom atmosphere that they encounter in the United States. The literature revealed that international students often come from cultures that hold professors in very high regard. They are very well respected and are never questioned by students on the material that they teach. The American classroom has a completely different type of classroom dynamic then the one that international students are accustomed to and find that they have difficulty adjusting and interacting in this type of environment (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998; Godwin, 2009). In addition, international students are not used to the academic rigors of American universities. McLachlan and Justice (2009) discovered that students found it difficult to adjust to the heavy academic workload that was expected of them. Students found that they were unprepared for essay writing which was especially a challenge for students who struggled with English (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). In contrast, there were international students who were not familiar with taking multiple-choice examinations (Selvadurai, 1998). In addition, some students were not used to having to complete homework assignments because they never had to do such assignments in their home country (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). Godwin (2009) emphasized that international students are normally used to lecture based classes and are not familiar with having to speak and participate in class discussions. Group work is another unfamiliar activity that in which international students have difficulty being
accustomed. Another academic challenge is that international students must contend with is realizing that cheating and plagiarism is unacceptable in the American classroom (Godwin, 2009). The academic environment in some countries would not consider certain things cheating; therefore, students must quickly learn the difference of what is acceptable in their new academic setting (Godwin, 2009). These challenges are made more difficult when international students struggle to grasp the English Language.

**Language.** The English language is a prevalent area of difficulty among international students. In addition to students trying to grasp the complex English language much of the literature showed that international students had difficulty understanding the spoken English of American students (Lacina, 2002).

There is a difference between academic English and the way Americans speak English. International students had trouble understanding the slangs and idioms that their peers used (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Lacina, 2002). Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) also found that international students had difficulty understanding their American peers because of the speed at which they speak. The language barrier makes it difficult for international students in the classroom. Khawaja and Stallman (2011) found that international students’ who lack confidence with their English proficiency skills did not participate in class even when they knew the answer to a question or wanted to contribute in the discussion. Their reading and writing is also affected by their English deficiency. Additionally, it forces them to spend a much longer time doing their homework and taking exams (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011).
International Students’ Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

International students go through many adjustment barriers as they transition into a new cultural environment. They go through much difficulty in dealing with culture shock, homesickness, loneliness, depression, and stress yet many do find ways of coping to get through these challenges. There are various ways students cope with their struggles. Not all international students equally access the support services available to them or easily find help for their problems.

An important element that helps students with their transition challenges is maintaining a social support network. International students with a social support network were more connected to their environment and experienced less acculturative stress (Yeh & Inose, 2003). This is consistent with the study done by Ramsay, Jones and Barker (2007), which also concluded that international students who were satisfied with their support system were likely to experience higher levels of adjustment. The literature found that students managed to create ways to develop their social support network in various ways (Yan & Berliner, 2011; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

International students’ most important social support came from their families. Chinese students were more likely to first call upon their family for support when they encountered a crisis (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Moores and Popadiuk (2011) found that family was the “touchstone” (p. 299) that helped students when they faced struggles. Their families were the people who helped...
keep them grounded and reminded them of their roots and culture. The connectedness with their families helped provide structure and a sense of safety when they faced challenges. However, some student’s are sometimes hesitant to fully divulge all of their struggles with their families because they do not want to burden them or make them worried (Sherry et al., 2010). Therefore, it is of the utmost importance for international students to have more than just family as a social support. Friends play an important role in helping an international student’s adjustment (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011).

One of the easiest ways for students to make friends was by establishing friendships with international students especially those from their home country (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). These friendships were often created by attending international student orientations that are sponsored by the university (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Chinese international students found co-national friendships helpful by providing emotional support. Many were able to relate to one another because they came from the same type of background and culture. Moreover, co-national friends are a good source of information and advice regarding challenges encountered since many of them struggled with the same types of issues (Yan & Berliner, 2011). An essential aspect of friendships with other international students is that they were able to serve as cultural guides, which helped new international students navigate the new culture and helped with the cultural adjustment process (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). In contrast, McLachlan and Justice (2009) stated that international students found it much harder to create friendships with American students compared to international students.
Making friends with individuals from the host country is important to helping international students with adjustment (Yan & Berliner, 2011). However, international students usually have less American friends because of the difficulty they have establishing friendships with Americans (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Khawaja and Stallman’s (2011) research was consistent with McLachlan and Justice’s (2009) findings regarding international students having difficulty making friendships with domestic students. Some students attempted to create friendships with domestic students by participating in extracurricular activities such as clubs and other events held on-campus (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). International students found that participating in clubs provided relaxation, helped them avoid feelings of loneliness and was also a helpful way for students to improve their English proficiency (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). Students who managed to create friendships with American students stated they felt that they were able to experience more American traditions and values which helped them make stronger social connections. In addition, to making friends with on-campus peers some international students developed friendships outside of school (McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

Some international students chose to attend church in order to form new friendships and a sense of community (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). McLachlan and Justice (2009) discovered that students used church as a way to help create new friends and a type of “surrogate family” (p. 30). The purpose of attending church had nothing to do with religious reasons. Church involvement satisfied
the international students’ needs for socialization and friendships (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Church also helped students practice English with their new circle of friends and also increased their knowledge of local community information (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Yan & Berliner, 2011). International students found church members helpful with such things as getting advice on buying a car and how to find a job. Some students were also given temporary housing as well as given rides to the grocery store (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Churches helped give students’ a sense of belonging and a feeling of community.

A majority of international students established their social support networks by creating relationships with faculty and staff. McLachlan and Justice (2009) discovered that many students sought their professor’s guidance on issues or problems that they were having. Students appreciated the meaningful relationships they had developed with faculty and staff. These relationships helped ease their transition especially in the beginning of their university experience (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Some faculty made such an impact on student’s lives that students maintained some relationships with faculty long after they had taken a class with instructors and continued to refer to them for help (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Counselors were another source of support. McLachlan and Justice (2009) described that a student who had become depressed and withdrawn realized that she needed help. She took it upon herself to seek help with her depression. The student stated that after receiving help from the counseling center her grades had improved and her personal life was better. Students also sought help from the counseling services on campus when they encountered stress, which resulted in students becoming happier and receiving better grades (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). However, counseling
services were often the last resource that students would utilize. Yan and Berliner (2011) found that a very small percentage of the Chinese students they surveyed sought help from counseling services. Most international students were reluctant to seek help from mental health counselors and psychologists due to the stigma associated with counseling. The literature consistently found that international students underutilized counseling services (Lacina, 2002; Pyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Yan & Berliner, 2011).

Students utilized technology in order to help combat their homesickness. International students frequently called home to keep connected with their family and friends. They also exchanged emails and used Skype and Facebook to keep in touch and help lessen their feelings of homesickness (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). In addition, students utilized the internet to keep up with the news in their home country to help keep them connected with the current events that are happening in their country (McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

Moores and Popadiuk (2011) found that students changed their goals, which resulted in lowering their stress. Students who had high expectations reassessed their situation and made more realistic goals. This was especially true regarding international students’ expectations of their English skills. International student noted that once they realized that they would never speak English as well as a native speaker and realized that they should not expect to speak English perfectly they were able to feel more relaxed and interact with peers more easily (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Yan and Berliner (2011) referred to this shift in expectations as “emotion-focused coping” (p. 543). International
students realized that they could not change a culture or change their external environment; therefore, instead of trying to change their surroundings they recognized that changing their perceptions of their situation helped reduce stress (Yan & Berliner, 2011; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). International students also employed self-determination when they encountered challenges. When students faced obstacles, they recognized that they needed to look at their situation positively in order to move forward and overcome their difficulties (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Some students recognized their feelings would take time to cope with and that feelings such as homesickness, would eventually lessen. McLachlan and Justice (2009) found that students helped get themselves through their challenges by focusing on the reasons they decided to study abroad in the first place. Thinking about the reasons they studied abroad and recognizing the opportunities that a degree from an American university would provide helped keep some students going (McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

Programs for International Students

Universities are realizing the need to help students with the transition process to college. Colleges across the country have started programs specifically targeted to help international students have an easier transition process (Lacina, 2002). Universities are recognizing the importance of getting international students socially connected and involved with campus activities. Colleges are using orientation programs, seminar courses, social programs, and peer mentorships to help facilitate the transition process for international students.
Orientation Programs

Universities offer orientations specifically designed for international students (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). The types of activities and topics covered vary widely between universities. However, common subjects covered include immigration regulations, academic information, registration information, and overview of services available to students (Fischer, 2011; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). Some campuses have current international students speaking at orientation to give incoming international students insight on what others have gone through. They give advice on how to get acclimated to campus life (Fischer, 2011). The University of California at Davis holds a three-day orientation for their international students (Easley, n.d). The orientation provides students with the opportunity for them to familiarize themselves with the campus and meet fellow classmates (Easley, n.d).

Seminar Courses

First year seminar courses are another resource that universities implement to help facilitate international student adjustment (Andrade, 2006a). Many universities offer first year programs for their students; however, universities are realizing that international students have unique adjustment needs that may not be addressed by the traditional first year seminar programs. Some universities have started offering a seminar course specifically targeted to international students (Andrade, 2009). The University of California at Davis offers a seminar series for international students. The seminars are designed to teach international students
about American culture as well as the university experience. The seminar series includes courses on American culture and values, opportunities in which international students can become involved, and American life (Easley, n.d.). The College of Southern Nevada offers a foundations course that international students are required to take their first semester (Silver, 2009). The purpose of the course is to assist students with feeling connected to the campus by teaching them how to navigate the educational system, help them cope with cultural adjustment, and explains immigration regulations (Silver, 2009). Andrade (2006a) found that students who participated in a first year seminar course at a private university expressed that the course was beneficial in helping them adjust. The first year seminar also played a role in helping students develop the confidence and skills to interact with their peers (Andrade, 2009).

Social Programs

Universities have started programs that promote international students social involvement. The University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) invites their new international students to attend a welcome dance (Lacina, 2002; UCLA, n.d.a.). UCLA invites international students to a private club where they provide free entrance, free food, and free drinks. They also provide them with transportation to and from UCLA. This event provides international students the opportunity to have fun and meet new friends (UCLA, n.d.b.). Some universities have international movie clubs, which encourages friendship building. The movies shown are usually films from around the world (Lacina, 2002). Some universities have set up conversational group meetings with
other students. The meetings center on particular themes such as practicing academic conversations or practicing social conversations (Lacina, 2002).

Peer Mentorship Programs

Mentoring programs are another support program that universities have implemented to help with international student adjustment. The purpose of the peer mentor programs is to help ease international students’ transition by helping them establish friendships, assist with finding housing, and to help them with enrolling in classes (Audas, 2009). The University of Oklahoma offers the OU Cousins program for their international students (Audas, 2009). The program was designed to help international students establish friendships with American students. The program gives students a questionnaire in order to match up students with similar interests (Audas, 2009). The OU Cousins program also offers activities for the students to participate in such as an International Bazaar, Thanksgiving meal, and they provide tickets to sporting events. International students who participated in the OU Cousins program enjoyed the program and agreed that the program provided the opportunity to experience American culture in many different ways (Audas, 2009).

UCLA offers a similar program called the Global Siblings program (UCLA, n.d.b.). It pairs an international student with a domestic student. The domestic student is there to help their international student sibling with their transition to UCLA. The Global Siblings program promotes the building of friendships, resources, and culture sharing (UCLA, n.d.b.). International students
often struggle with homesickness and loneliness and the friendships that the Global siblings program creates gives international students support from their domestic sibling. Domestic siblings help international students with questions they may have about the university or with general questions about the surrounding community. Since international students come from different backgrounds and value systems domestic siblings are also there to help international students understand the cultural differences that they encounter. The program encourages the domestic siblings to introduce international students to their friends, attend UCLA sporting events and activities, go to the movies or shopping, and invite their sibling home for the holidays (UCLA, n.d.b.).

Some universities have created e-mail exchange programs (Fischer, 2011). San Diego State University’s E-mail Partner’s Program connects international students with student volunteers from the university. The e-mail mentors are there to answer any questions that an international student may have. They answer questions and give advice on classes, housing, and transportation. Colorado State University has a similar program. They utilize peer advisors to reach out to international students by e-mail. The peer advisors are available to answer questions before the semester begins (Fischer, 2011). This is beneficial in helping international students before they arrive and easing any anxiety’s they may have.

The literature has shown that universities are recognizing the importance of addressing international students’ transition challenges. Universities have come up with a variety of different ways to help students feel welcomed and adjusted to campus, which include creating orientation programs, seminar courses, social programs, and peer
mentorships. The development of these programs demonstrate that international students are an important student population to university campuses and their transition challenges need to be addressed in order to assist them properly.

Rationale for the Study

The international student population offers universities many benefits. International students provide institutions with diversity, economic and academic benefits. They contribute a significant amount of financial revenue to the universities they attend. As universities across the country face economic difficulty, many are turning to increasing their recruitment of international students (D’Amico, 2010). International students will be sought after for enrollment in schools across the country (Pandit, 2007). The responsibility of the university is to ensure that as they actively recruit and enroll these students that they also provide them with the tools needed to transition to their new environment.

The research of this study will help effectively serve the international students at Lander State University. The researcher’s goal is to identify gaps and offer recommendations to higher education leaders. This study will provide Lander State University with valuable information about students’ perceptions, opinions that will be beneficial to determining students’ needs, and making certain that these students’ are being provided with adequate services. The study will also give insight into ways that Lander State University administrators can
enhance or create programs to help transitioning international students through the adjustment process. Proactively taking the steps necessary to improve programs that will help facilitate the transition for international students will show that administrators are serious about taking responsibility for ensuring students’ needs are being adequately met.

Summary

The review of the literature provides an understanding of the unique challenges and needs that international students experience as they study abroad. Schlossberg et al.’s (1995) transition theory as well as Maslow’s (1987) hierarchy of needs model established the foundation for this study. Schlossberg et al.’s (1995) transition theory provided an overview of the transition process that individuals go through. Maslow (1987) emphasized the importance of each individual’s desired needs.

The purpose and motivation concerning a student’s desire to study abroad was also analyzed. Some students are unable to get into a well-regarded college in their home country. Students from China must contend with much competition into these colleges and often choose to study abroad in order to study at a higher quality university abroad (Qing et al., 2010). Students are also persuaded to study abroad by friends and family because it is desired that their children experience a different culture and perspective of the world, to improve their English proficiency, and to gain a competitive edge in the job market. For some, it is desired for the mere prestige of studying abroad (Qing et al., 2010; Sánchez et al., 2006). The motivation around the recruitment of international students was also examined. In the wake of the declining economy, universities in the
United States as well as abroad have attempted to increase their international student enrollment (Pandit, 2007). This trend has contributed to an increased revenue stream for universities (D’Amico, 2010). Colleges and universities have also realized the contribution that international students provide culturally and academically to a college campus and thus desire to recruit these students in greater number (Kwon, 2009; Peterson et al., 1999).

There are many common and unique challenges that international students encounter when they study abroad. Students are forced to acculturate to their new environment, which is frequently coupled with culture shock and acculturative stress (Zhou et al., 2008). A review of the literature found that international students often struggled with psychological, social, and academic challenges (Lacina, 2002; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Selvadurai, 1998; Sherry et al., 2010. These challenges included stress, depression, homesickness, a lack of social support, language barriers, and loneliness (McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

Although students encounter many challenges, some have found ways to help them overcome these challenges. International students struggle with maintaining a social support network when they arrive to their host country. Yeh and Inose (2003) found that students who were able to establish a support network experienced less acculturative stress. International students created a social support system by maintaining their connection with their friends and families back home (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). International students also developed a social support system by creating friendships with other international students through participation in orientations and getting involved in
extracurricular activities to establish friendships with domestic students. Furthermore, they developed relationships with professors for support (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). International students also created connections with the local community through church attendance (Yan & Berliner, 2011). These connections helped their transition process by providing emotional support as well as social support and guidance.

Some universities have also found ways to address the issues facing international students. Universities are recognizing the importance of helping students access social support networks. UCLA offers newly arrived international students the opportunity to attend a welcome dance in order for them to meet others (Lacina, 2002). Other colleges offer movie clubs and conversational groups (Lacina, 2002). Peer mentorship programs are another resource that universities offer their international students (Audas, 2009). International student orientations are a common program that universities offer their students (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998).

The importance for administrators in higher education to take notice of the unique needs and problems of this student population is critical in supporting international students. Competition for these students will increase as universities across the country and abroad strive to attract these students to increase revenue and globalize their campuses. It is the duty of university administrators to make certain that the international students they serve are offered services that will help them with their difficult transition process. This will help ensure that students have the opportunity to address the issues they struggle with in the transition process. Addressing the transition needs of these
students and providing them with help through their transition process will give confidence to those considering attending the university. This could help contribute to increased enrollment as prospective students see that they are provided with support services to help them through the transition process.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to examine international students’ transition experiences at Lander State University. The researcher sought to gain insight into the challenges that international students encountered during their transition to the university in order to identify their needs and to develop recommendations on how to better assist international students with the transition process. The study explored the expectations and experiences of international students.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What social, psychological and academic challenges do international students face during their transition at a four-year institution?

2. How do international students overcome the social, psychological and academic challenges that they face?

3. What recommendations do international students have regarding the adjustment process?

This chapter discusses the methodology the researcher utilized for the study. It describes the setting of the study, population and sample, design of the study, data collection, instrumentation, and the limitations of the study.
Research Design

The mixed methods study intended to discover the needs of international students attending a public four-year university. The research was designed to learn about the experiences of international students and to discover the challenges they encountered as they transitioned to university life abroad. The data collected pertained to students’ expectations and reasons for studying abroad. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with issues regarding academic, social, and psychological challenges that they faced as well as how they overcame their challenges. The researcher also examined international students’ transition experiences through open-ended interview questions.

Setting

The setting of the study took place at Lander State University. Lander State University is a public four-year university located in Northern California. The university was founded in 1947, and is located on 300 acres of land. The campus is located in an area known for its mild weather and is surrounded by agriculture, rivers, and lakes (“International student information”, n. d., “Facts & stats,” 2012). Lander State University is part of a campus system of 23 universities. It is one of the largest universities in the campus system with a student body of 28,000 (“International student information,” n. d.). The campus is diverse and represents over 100 countries and has approximately 500 international students enrolled (“International student information,” n. d.). Lander State University is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (“Facts & stats,” 2012). The university has seven colleges and offers 58 undergraduate majors and 41 master’s degrees (“Facts & stats,” 2012).
Population and Sample

The population for this study consisted of international students enrolled at Lander State University. The study also included international students who had previously attended the university. The student sample was comprised of international students who attended the university on a J or F-1 Visa. The total number of students enrolled at Lander State University for fall 2012 was 28,539. Female students represented 58% of Lander State University’s student population while the male students represented 42% of the student population. The total number of international undergraduate students enrolled at Lander State University was 369 and the total number of graduate students was 150 for a total number of 519 enrolled international students in the fall 2012 semester (“University fact book,” 2012).

Design of the Study

A mixed methods approach was utilized for this study, which entailed the use of quantitative and qualitative methods of research. The goal of the mixed methods study was to ascertain the needs of international students attending a public four-year university. The research was designed to learn about the experiences of international students and to discover the challenges they encountered. A quantitative survey was sent during the 2012/2013 school year and was distributed to international undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at Lander State University during the spring semester. The survey was also sent to international students who previously attended Lander State University. The participants voluntarily chose to take the survey and completed the
survey anonymously. The questions on the survey were a mix of close-ended questions, multiple choice, and open-ended questions. The first five questions were demographic questions and the two open-ended questions at the end of the survey were asked to obtain information on students’ opinions of the adjustment process. The researcher also conducted individual qualitative interviews using a structured set of open-ended questions in order to gain further insight on international students’ experiences and needs.

Data Collection

The researcher began the data collection process by requesting assistance from the Office of Global Education. The Office of Global Education assisted by contacting international students on the researcher’s behalf. A representative from the office sent an email to all of the international students on their listserve. The listserve included undergraduate students, graduate students, and alumni. The email introduced the researcher and gave a brief explanation of the survey. The email concluded by providing students with a link to the survey. The survey was administered through SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool. The survey link directed participants to the consent to participate page, which explained the survey and made it clear that participation was voluntary and that all answers would be kept anonymous. The researcher’s contact information was provided to participants and they were encouraged to contact the researcher if they had any questions or concerns regarding the survey. Consent was obtained from the consent form page, which allowed students to choose whether they agreed to participate in the
survey by selecting “yes, I agree” or “no, I do not agree.” Those who agreed were directed to continue the survey.

The survey was available for approximately two weeks and closed on February 28, 2013. Forty-two international students completed the survey after one week. In the first week, 20 students agreed to participate in the qualitative interview but only eight international students contacted the researcher with their contact information. During the second week that the survey was open three students completed the survey and two students agreed to participate in the follow-up interview. A total of 45 students completed the online survey, which resulted in a 10% response rate. By the end of the second week, ten students had taken part in the one-on-one interviews.

Instrumentation

The researcher submitted the Human Subjects Approval Review Forms to the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department before collecting the data. A consent letter, survey questions, and interview questions were submitted for review. The review form consisted of explaining the purpose of the study, the researcher’s methodology, and the steps the researcher would use to safeguard participants’ safety and privacy. Once the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects approved the research design, the researcher proceeded with recruiting participants and collecting data.

During the Spring 2013 semester, surveys were electronically distributed to 455 current and former international students. Students were asked to complete an online survey through SurveyMonkey. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study
and provided with a link to the consent form and the survey. They were not compensated for their participation in the online survey; however, they were informed that their voluntary participation in the research could be beneficial to future international students. Students had two weeks to complete the survey. Participants did not have a time limit to complete the survey but the researcher informed them that the online survey could take up to ten minutes of their time. The research questions were designed to give the researcher insight into the challenges and needs of international students. Participants who had questions about the survey could contact the researcher directly with the contact information provided. The survey questionnaire (Appendix A) consisted of approximately 28 questions. Survey respondents were asked to answer a series of statements using a Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree). The end of the survey posed two open-ended questions where survey respondents could comment. Participants were not required to answer any of the questions and could skip questions if they chose to. Surveys that were started but completely skipped answering any of the questions in the survey were removed from data analysis.

The survey questions focused on the following:

1. Expectations and reasons regarding studying abroad.
2. Transition challenges encountered studying abroad.
3. Methods international students used to overcome their challenges.
4. Recommendations regarding the transition process.

Question 1 asked for students consent to participate in the online survey. Questions 2 through 6 were related to student demographics. Questions 7 through 10
were designed to determine the expectations students had about studying abroad and the reasons they chose to study abroad. Questions 11 through 15 asked students to rate their experiences with specific academic challenges. Questions 16 and 17 focused on the psychological challenges that students may have encountered. Questions 18 through 20 asked participants to contemplate and rate the social challenges they experienced. Questions 21 through 25 were asked to identify the types of things that international students used to help them overcome their transition challenges. The final two questions were open-ended and asked for students’ recommendations regarding the transition process.

The researcher also utilized qualitative interviews to gather data for the study. The request for interviews was requested through the online survey that was sent out to students. The request for the interview was posed as a question at the end of the survey. Survey respondents were able to choose “yes” or “no” as to whether they wanted to participate in the interview portion of the study. They were offered a $10 gift card for their participation in the interview. The students who chose to participate were given the researcher’s email address and were prompted to email the researcher with their contact information so they could be contacted. The researcher contacted students via email to schedule a 20-minute one-on-one confidential interview. The researcher obtained consent from participants by having them sign the consent to participate form. The researcher transcribed the individual interviews. The interviews were conducted at Lander State University in the library and one interview took place in the student union. The interviews took place in an area where the interviewee was comfortable. The
purpose of the interviews was to gather qualitative information pertaining to international student transition experiences. The interview questionnaire (Appendix B) consisted of ten open-ended questions. The questionnaire was designed to gather specific details into international students’ transition experiences. Questions 1 through 3 focused on students’ reasons and expectations for studying abroad. Questions 4 through 7 asked participants to reflect on the social, academic, and psychological challenges they experienced. Questions 8 asked how international students overcame their challenges. Questions 9 and 10 asked for students recommendations about the transition process.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. This research study focused on international students who were enrolled or were previously enrolled at Lander State University. Therefore, the results of the data gathered from this study may not be appropriate for generalization of all international students enrolled at other universities.

The researcher’s objective was to reach a greater number of international students to participate in the survey and qualitative interview. The researcher had a response rate of 10% for the survey portion of the study which is a relatively small sample of the population studied. The researcher may have gained greater insight from a larger number of participants. The researcher had a 22% response rate for the qualitative interviews. Although 22% is an adequate response rate, the researcher could have obtained further insight from more participants. Sending out a second email request for participation in
the survey may have gleaned a higher response rate for the online survey and qualitative interviews.

The participants in the study were international students from various countries with different levels of English language proficiency. Moreover, the language barrier could have affected the participants’ interpretation of the questions asked. Additionally, the researcher could have misinterpreted the responses of interviewees due to the wide variation in English language skills among participants.

Data Analysis

SurveyMonkey collected, recorded, and summarized the data, which allowed the researcher to track and review the results while the survey was open. Once the survey respondents completed the survey, the researcher created a summary report of the responses using SurveyMonkey in order to analyze the data. The results were categorized into themes according to the research questions. The researcher downloaded the open-ended responses from SurveyMonkey and arranged them into themes. When the qualitative interviews were completed the researcher reviewed the responses, identified, and categorized them into common patterns and themes. After the responses were organized and the themes were identified the researcher analyzed the data and presented the findings in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to examine international students’ transition experiences at Lander State University. The researcher sought to gain insight into the challenges that international students encountered during their transition to the university in order to identify their needs and to develop recommendations on how to better assist international students with the transition process. The study explored the expectations and experiences of international students.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What social, psychological and academic challenges do international students face during their transition at a four-year institution?
2. How do international students overcome the social, psychological and academic challenges that they face?
3. What recommendations do international students have regarding the adjustment process?

A mixed methods approach was utilized for this study in order to answer the research questions. This chapter begins by describing the demographics of those who participated in the study. Then the data from the quantitative survey and the themes from the qualitative interviews will be presented.
Presentation of the Data

Demographics

The first six questions of the online survey were asked to gather demographic information from the participants. Four hundred fifty-five emails were sent out requesting participation in the online survey. There were a total of 45 survey respondents for an approximate response rate of 10%. Sixty percent of respondents were male and 40% of the respondents were female. Survey respondents were asked to identify the age range that they fell into. There were three ranges that students were able to choose from. There were 24.4% who were between the ages of 18 through 20, 57.8% who were between the ages of 21 through 26, and 17.8% were 27 or older. The majority of survey respondents were undergraduate students, which made up 48.9% of those who responded. The percentage of graduate students who completed the survey totaled 35.6. Alumni who completed the survey totaled 15.6%. Table 1 displays the regions from which the survey respondents are from. The results indicate that more than half of the survey respondents are from the Asian region. Sixty-seven point four percent were from Asia while 18.6% were from Europe. Survey respondents from the African region totaled 2%, those who came from Australia and New Zealand made up 2% of the respondents, and 2% came from North America.
Table 1

What region are you from?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percent of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>67.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia/New Zealand</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central America</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania (Excluding Australia/New Zealand)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South America</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many of the survey respondents identified themselves as belonging to the college of math and sciences. A total of 34.9% of the participants were engineering majors, 20.9% were computer science majors, and 2.3% of the respondents were biological science majors. The percent of social sciences majors was 4.7. Business administration was another popular major among respondents with a total of 16.3% of respondents identifying themselves as business majors. Communications studies majors made up 2.3% of the participants. A total of 18.6% were enrolled in other majors. The majority of participants (75.6%) indicated that it was their first experience studying abroad. Twenty-four point four percent of participants said they had previously studied abroad.
There were ten international students participating in the qualitative interview. Seven of the international students were female and three of the participants were male. Six of the international students were from Asia, one student was from North America, one student was from Australia, and two students were from Europe. Seven of the international students were undergraduates and three of the international students were graduate students.

*Online Student Survey Data*

Survey respondents were asked to answer a series of statements using a Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree). The end of the survey posed two open-ended questions where survey respondents could comment.

Questions eight through ten were designed to determine international students’ expectations and reasons for studying abroad. Survey participants were asked questions regarding parental expectations, future career opportunities, and improvement of English skills. Questions 11 through 15 were asked to gauge the participants’ experiences with specific academic challenges. Questions pertained to students’ lack of preparation and language barriers. Questions 16 and 17 asked students to reflect on the psychological challenges that they may have encountered during their transition experience. Participants responded to questions regarding perceived discrimination and feelings of homesickness. Questions 18 through 20 asked participants about the social challenges they experienced. Survey respondents were asked questions pertaining to their friendships and experience with isolation and seclusion.
Table 2

Expectations and Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectations and Reasons for Studying Abroad</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations and Reasons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for Studying Abroad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Expectations</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Career Opportunities</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve English skills</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Challenges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Preparation</td>
<td>78.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Barrier</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Challenges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Discrimination</td>
<td>86.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of Homesickness</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Challenges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Friendships</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation and Seclusion</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Expectations and reasons for studying abroad. The results of the survey found that the overwhelming majority (93.3%) agreed they chose to study abroad because of the career opportunities they expected from studying abroad. Only 6.7% disagreed that studying abroad would benefit their career. These participants did not expect their study abroad experience to affect their careers. Parental expectations were the second most common reason that participants chose to study abroad. Exactly 68.2% agreed that parental expectations influenced their decision to study abroad. However, 31.8% disagreed that that parental expectation were the reason they chose to study abroad. Approximately 55.6% of the participants agreed they chose to study abroad to improve their English skills. Forty-four point four percent of participants disagreed that the reason they chose to study abroad was to improve their English skills.

Academic challenges. The survey results indicated that the majority of students did not experience academic challenges. Many (78.2%) disagreed that they lacked the preparation they needed to study abroad. However, 21.8% of the survey participants agreed that they lacked preparation for studying abroad. They felt they were unprepared for the informal classroom atmosphere, essay writing, and the homework they were expected to complete. The majority (72.2%) of participants disagreed that language barriers challenged them during their study abroad experience. In contrast, 27.8% agreed that language barriers were a reason they experienced academic challenges. The language barriers included participants’ having difficulty communicating with others as well as difficulty understanding instructors.
Psychological challenges. A slightly higher percentage of students did not suffer with feelings of homesickness. Over 56% disagreed that one of the psychological challenges they struggled with was feelings of homesickness while 43.1% agreed that they were challenged by feelings of homesickness. The majority of the respondents (86.7%) disagreed that they perceived discrimination. Only a small percentage (13.3%) agreed that they perceived discrimination during their study abroad experience.

Social challenges. A slightly higher number of students did not encounter social challenges. The participants almost equally struggled with lack of friendships and isolation. Sixty percent of the survey participants disagreed that they struggled with lack of friendships. Forty percent of participants agreed that lack of friendships was a social challenged they encountered. The common problem was the difficulty of creating friendships with American students. Approximately 64% of participants disagreed that they dealt with isolation and seclusion while 35.6% agreed that they experienced isolation and seclusion. These students agreed they felt lonely and alienated.

Overcoming challenges. Questions 21 through 25 were asked in order to identify the ways that international students overcame their transition challenges. Participants were asked to specify the types of services they utilized to help them overcome their challenges.
Table 3

Overcoming Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of on-campus support services</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in clubs and on-campus activities</td>
<td>51.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilized support network</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilized on-campus counseling services</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilized tutoring services</td>
<td>75.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most common factor that helped international students overcome their challenges was by using a support network. The majority (80%) of survey respondents indicated they agreed they used a support network. A small percentage (20%) disagreed that they utilized a support network during their experience studying abroad. Exactly 37.8% of survey respondents disagreed they were aware of the campus services available to them. The majority (62.2%) agreed they were aware of the campus services available to them. Approximately half (51.1%) of the survey respondents disagreed with the statement that they had participated in club or campus activities. However, 48.9% of the survey respondents agreed they participated in clubs or campus activities. The majority (71.1%) of the respondents disagreed that they utilized campus-counseling services.
There were 28.9% who agreed they utilized campus counseling services. Most (75.6%) respondents disagreed with the statement that they used tutoring services. A small percentage (24.4%) of respondents agreed with the statement that they used tutoring services.

*Open-ended questions.* Questions 26 and 27 were open-ended questions which were asked to gather further data from the participants regarding the transition process. Question 26 asked, “What recommendations do you have for international students regarding the adjustment process?” Several common themes emerged from the open-ended questions; however, the majority of the recommendations had to do with the social aspect of the transition experience. The following are some common responses regarding social recommendations for international students.

- Students should step out of their comfort zone to try to make new friends.
- Talk with classmates and become friends with American students.
- Join clubs and participate in campus activities.
- Try to make friends as soon as possible. The more quickly friendships are established; the easier it will be for international students to feel comfortable in their new environment.

There were several other recommendations that participants had for international students regarding academics:

- Be prepared for the different teaching and assessment style.
- Interact with professors more closely.
- Ask questions when you need help.
• Do not waste time in school.

Question 27 asked, “What recommendations do you have for administration, counselors, faculty, and staff regarding the adjustment process and how they can better help international students?” Many respondents believed that Lander State University was doing a good job, others did give recommendations on how to help international students transition. The following are some of the recommendations that the participants offered to the administration, counselors, faculty, and staff regarding helping international students with the social challenges that they encountered.

• There should be a seminar for international students to help them with their transition.

• There needs to be an event where exchange students can meet one another.

• Students would like to be formally introduced to professors when they arrive.

• The majority of participants would like more activities for international students to get together in order to get to know each other.

• Arrange cultural events to enhance understanding among local students and foreign students.

Participants also had other recommendations for administration, counselors, faculty, and staff regarding helping international students:

• Be friendlier with the students from a different culture.

• Do not assume that international students will behave like Americans.

• Be helpful when international students come ask for guidance.
- Give more information to international students so they understand what to expect.
- Administrators and faculty members should be patient and understanding toward students who are having difficulty.

**Interview Data**

The researcher asked participants ten open-ended interview questions to obtain further data on the international student transition experience. The data was organized in the following manner: Reasons and expectations for studying abroad, social challenges, academic challenges, psychological challenges, and recommendations.

*Reasons and expectations for studying abroad*. Some common themes that emerged among participants regarding the reasons they chose to study abroad was to learn English, to experience a new culture, to enhance career opportunities, and for the quality of education.

The qualitative interviews shed light on the reasons interview participants chose to study abroad. International students chose to study abroad to help improve their English. Many thought it would be more effective to learn English by living and studying in the United States. The data indicated that participants chose to study abroad because they believed that studying in America would be beneficial to their career. Participants were under the impression that a degree from America would make it easier for them to find jobs once they graduated. A common belief among participants was that American colleges offer a better quality education, which was another reason they chose
to study abroad. One participant mentioned that their parents expected them to study abroad. Others were motivated to study abroad for the research opportunities.

Many themes emerged regarding participants’ expectations about studying abroad. Some expected to have a better social experience. Participants believed they would have more friends during their study abroad experience. One student expected to speak English on a more regular basis; however, lack of friendships makes it difficult to speak English more frequently. Many of the participants compared their study abroad experience with their friends’ experiences at different universities. Participants expected that there would be more programs and activities where they could meet more students. Many were under the impression that the campus’ international office would be hosting such events. One participant expected studying to be easy but quickly realized academics were harder than expected. The majority of the participants did not experience homesickness. A common theme that emerged was that students built their expectations of the culture on American movies and television that they watched.

The participants reflected on things they thought would have been helpful to know before they studied abroad. Two of the participants would have liked to know more of the details involved with studying abroad. They were not aware of hidden costs and were unprepared for the unexpected expenses. One participant had not realized that textbooks would be required and another participant did not know how costly textbooks were going to be.

**Social challenges.** Participants were asked to reflect on the social challenges that they encountered. Some themes that emerged included: No social challenges, difficulty
making friends, and isolation. Over half of the participants stated they did not encounter social challenges. However, several participants found it very difficult to establish friendships. Participants perceived domestic students to be closed off and hard to talk too. Some felt that American students did not want to become friends with them. Participants acknowledged that the majority of friendships they made were more of an acquaintances type of relationship. One participant mentioned that it was also difficult to make friends with other international students because of the cultural differences between them. Some participants were embarrassed to speak English and did not have the confidence to talk to others, which hindered their ability to establish friendships. Those who struggled to establish friendships admitted to feeling lonely and isolated.

Academic challenges. There were two specific academic challenges that participants encountered. Some found the classroom environment difficult and others had difficulty adjusting to the amount of coursework required. Some students were not used to participating in classroom or small group discussions. A few of the participants had a difficult time understanding their professors. About half of the participants were not used to the academic workload. Many of the participants stated they had to adjust to the constant testing and quizzes. Several participants found the homework challenging because their lack of English proficiency. Participants commented that a lot of time was spent writing essays for class and that the homework took a long time to complete. Another student recounted having difficulty meeting the instructors’ expectations. Some of the participants did not have any academic challenges.
Psychological challenges. The majority of the participants expressed that they did not experience any psychological challenges. Two of the students mentioned feeling homesick and isolated. The students who experienced homesickness acknowledged they intentionally tried to avoid people, which led to their isolation. Another student said that financial issues along with the amount of homework and tests caused stress, which intensified the feelings of homesickness and isolation.

Interpretation of the Data

Question 1. What social, psychological and academic challenges do international students face during their transition at a four-year institution?

It was evident from the survey responses that the most common challenge among survey participants was their experience with social challenges during their transition experience. The social challenges they encountered included having lack of friendships and dealing with isolation and seclusion. The results from the open-ended interviews supported these findings. The results were expected because the majority of survey respondents were from Asian countries where the language and culture are significantly different from the United States. Studies have found that cultural differences and language barriers play a factor in international students’ social adjustment (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Interview participants added they found it easier to make friends with other international students rather than American students. These findings were consistent with the literature. Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) stated that international students had difficulty connecting with students from the host country;
therefore, the finding that participants struggled with lack of friendships was not surprising. The literature found that international students experienced isolation because of difficulty they had making friends and establishing social networks (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Furthermore, the literature supported this study’s finding that international students encountered difficulty with isolation and seclusion. The literature emphasized that international student who struggled with a lack of English proficiency felt self-conscious about speaking to peers, which caused them to withdraw and contributed to feelings of isolation (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). These students could benefit from participating in activities that connect them with other international students. One of the easiest ways for students to make friends was by establishing friendships with international students from their home country (McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

International students could also benefit from participating in programs that help them establish friendships with American students. The literature emphasized that building friendships with individuals from the host country is important to helping international students with adjustment (Yan & Berliner, 2011). This would contribute to helping students with their social challenges.

The results of the study indicated the majority of international students at Lander State University did not encounter academic difficulty during their transition experience. The percentage of those who struggled academically was significantly lower than those who did not struggle academically. Over 21% of participants’ felt unprepared with the academic workload. The interview participants agreed that they did not expect to have so much homework, quizzes, and tests. This was consistent with the literature. Previous
studies indicated that international students often struggle with the language barriers and with lack of preparation with things such as essay writing, the amount of homework, and the American classroom environment (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Selvadurai, 1998). These students struggled with adjusting to the American classroom environment because of the different educational systems between countries, which make it difficult for international students to adjust (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Previous studies indicated that international students lack preparation for the academic workload they encounter because many other countries do not put an emphasis on homework, quizzes, and tests (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). Universities could assist international students by informing them prior to their studies abroad about the academic requirements they will be expected to meet. This information could be relayed through brochures and university websites. Additionally, 27.8% felt that language barriers caused them to struggle academically. These results were consistent with the literature. Previous studies found that international student struggle with language barriers because they have difficulty understanding American slang and find it difficult to understand English at the speed with which Americans speak (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Lacina, 2002). These language barriers cause difficulty in the classroom for international students because they lack confidence to speak and ask questions, which causes them to withdraw from participating in class (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). The researcher expected a higher number of international students would struggle academically because many of the survey respondents were non-native English speakers. However, the majority of survey respondents had majors in the math and sciences, which require
relatively less English proficiency. This could be a reason that the sample did not have as much difficulty academically as expected. International students may find it beneficial to participate in English language immersion courses prior to starting at their university. This includes students who do well on English language placement tests because a previous study found that international students still lacked confidence in their English speaking skills even after doing well on these tests (Sovic, 2009). Additionally, once enrolled, international students may find it beneficial to participate in mixers that promote English speaking with native speakers. The literature found that international students recognized with the importance of needing to practice the language with native speakers (Sovic, 2009).

The findings indicated the majority of participants did not have difficulty with psychological challenges. Psychological challenges include, stress, depression, and homesickness (Lacina, 2002; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Selvadurai, 1998). Yan and Berliner (2011) found that young international students are the most prone to feelings of homesickness and loneliness because they are so young and away from their families and familiar surroundings. This study’s finding on homesickness is consistent with the literature. The survey participants (43.1%) agreed that they suffered from feelings of homesickness. Over half (57.8%) of the survey participants were ages 18 to 20. When the researcher probed into whether interview participants encountered psychological challenges there were a small number of respondents that stated that they felt homesick. Furthermore, no participants stated that they felt depressed or stressed because of their homesickness and isolation. This was inconsistent with the literature. According to the
literature, homesickness is a factor that can lead to some international students into depression and anxiety (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). Lee and Rice (2007) found that perceived discrimination could lead to isolation. However, the majority (86.7%) of survey participants disagreed that they perceived discrimination during their experience. Furthermore, the literature revealed that international students experienced high levels of stress, culture shock, anxiety, and depression (Lacina, 2002; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Selvadurai, 1998). These discrepancies with the literature can be attributed to the fact that 80% of the participants utilized a social support network. Additionally, 60% of survey participants stated they did not struggle with lack of friendships. Yeh and Inose (2003) found that those who utilized a social support network were more connected to their environment and experienced less psychological challenges. International students that experience homesickness could benefit from getting involved in campus activities and clubs in order to meet new people and establish a social network in order to feel connected and experience less psychological challenges (Yeh & Inose, 2003).

This study did not find that participants experienced high levels of stress, culture shock, anxiety or depression. The literature indicated that those with unrealistic expectations about studying abroad led to international students feeling stressed (Yan & Berliner, 2011). This study found that participants’ expectations for studying abroad were typical. The majority (93.3%) of survey participants expected that they would have greater career opportunities upon graduating and 55.6% expected to improve their English skills. Additionally, the majority of interview participants based their expectations of American cultural from movies and TV shows. The participants’
expectations were consistent with their experience they were able to avoid the added stress and psychological challenges found in previous studies.

Question 2. How do international students overcome the social, psychological and academic challenges that they face?

The majority (62.3%) of the survey respondents were aware of the campus support services available to them. However, many of them did not utilize the services offered by the university, which was not surprising since most of the participants stated they did not struggle with many of the expected transition challenges. A common theme among students was having a social support network. Eighty percent utilized a social support network. Interview participants also agreed they used a support network. Participants emphasized that staying in touch with family and friends helped avoid homesickness. These findings were consistent with the literature. A social support system helped by sustaining their connection with their friends and families back home (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). These connections helped their transition process by providing emotional support as well as social support (Yan & Berliner, 2011). The survey results showed that approximately 48.9% participated in clubs and other campus activities. Interview participants expressed that getting involved in such activities helped them meet people and develop friendships. This is consistent with the literature, which found that participating in clubs provided relaxation and helped international students avoid feelings of loneliness (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). It is critical that international students make friends with their peers at the university in order to help them have a positive transition experience (Ramsay et al., 2007). This type
of engagement in the campus community contributed to participants stating they did not have trouble making friends. This feeling was validated by a student who said, “I would have been more depressed if I didn’t have friends. They are like a mini family” (Participant 6, 2013). Establishing friendships played an essential role in helping an international student’s adjustment (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Interview participants who struggled with academics said they asked their friends or classmates for help. International students would benefit from programs that will promote helping the build their social support network (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011).

**Question 3.** What recommendations do international students have regarding the adjustment process?

The researcher asked participants for their recommendations about the transition process and the advice they would give to future international students. They were also asked to provide recommendations to leadership of the university. The central theme that emerged among the participants was the emphasis of the social aspect of the transition process. Participants shared their recommendations to future international students that would help them during their adjustment process. The common theme that emerged was the importance of building friendships. The majority of participants emphasized the importance that international students stepping out of their comfort zone in order to meet people and make friends as soon as possible. This was consistent with previous studies, which found that isolation leads to students having a difficult time establishing a social support system (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Sawir et al., 2008). Those who struggled with English advised other international students to practice their English before studying
abroad. This suggestion was not surprising because as previous studies found, when international students felt comfortable speaking English they had more confidence talking with others (Sovic, 2009). Interview participants recommended students learn about the cultural differences before they study abroad. Lastly, another recommendation was for international students to get all of the details before studying abroad. Participants suggested that international students be proactive about finding out financial information, housing information, and class requirements. The recommendations line up with the literature because being aware of requirements and being prepared for what they may encounter will help international students avoid stress (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011).

Participants recommended that counselors, faculty, and staff should assist in the process of helping students socially adjust. The majority of the participants felt the university should arrange more events to help international students and domestic students to mingle. Another student suggested that orientation extends to include events and activities that would help develop social interactions with other international students. These findings were consistent with other studies regarding the needs of students who study abroad. The majority of students expressed the value that making friends had on their experience. It would be advantageous for these students to participate in social activities and programs upon initial arrival to the university in order to help establish friends as soon as possible. McLachlan and Justice (2009) pointed out that attending international student orientations sponsored by the university played a role in helping students develop friendships.
Summary

Participants in this study did not struggle with many of the typical transition issues specified in the literature. The predominant challenge that international students encountered were social challenges. The social challenges they encountered included having lack of friendships and dealing with isolation and seclusion. The majority of participants did not encounter academic difficulty during their transition experience. The small number who struggled academically felt unprepared for the academic workload and language barriers. The majority of participants did not have difficulty with psychological challenges. Homesickness was the leading challenge encountered by those who struggled with psychological challenges; however, homesickness did not result into depression or stress. Participants overcame these challenges was by getting involved in activities where they could meet people and make friends. Their social involvement gave them a sense of belonging and helped them avoid feelings of loneliness. Additionally, a good social life helped students overcome their feelings of homesickness. The common recommendations from students suggested providing better social activities. Many thought there should be more programs that help encourage friendships with American students as well as other international students. The findings revealed the importance of ensuring that international students have a good social experience to help them adjust to the university.
Chapter 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The study explored the expectations and experiences of international students. The goal of the study was to gain insight into the challenges that international students encountered during their transition to the university in order to identify their needs and to develop recommendations on how to better assist them with the transition process. These recommendations will be discussed later in this chapter.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What social, psychological and academic challenges do international students face during their transition at a four-year institution?
2. How do international students overcome the social, psychological and academic challenges that they face?
3. What recommendations do international students have regarding the adjustment process?

A mixed methods approach was used for this study which involved the use of quantitative and qualitative methods of research. The research was designed to learn about the experiences of international students and to discover the challenges they encountered. A quantitative survey was distributed to international undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at Lander State University. The survey was also sent to international students who previously attended Lander State University. There were 455
emails distributed requesting participation in the research. Forty-five international students completed the survey. The participants voluntarily chose to take the survey and completed the survey anonymously. Participants had two weeks to complete the survey before it closed. The researcher also conducted individual qualitative interviews using a structured set of open-ended questions in order to gain further insight on international students’ experiences and needs. Ten international students voluntarily participated in the interviews.

Conclusions

The primary challenge that international students encountered were social challenges. In contrast, the academic and psychological challenges found to be issues for international students in previous studies were not as prevalent among Lander State University students.

The social challenges participants encountered included lack of friendships and experiencing isolation and seclusion. The majority of participants did not experience academic difficulty during their attendance at Lander State University. Those who struggled academically felt unprepared for the academic workload and language barriers. The majority of participants did not have struggle with psychological challenges. Homesickness was the leading challenge encountered by those who struggled with psychological challenges; however, homesickness did not result into depression or stress.

It was evident that international students overcame their challenges by developing a social support network of friends. The participants in the study were able to avoid
feelings of isolation and seclusion by establishing a social support network of friends. This study revealed that international students joined clubs and attended campus activities for the social atmosphere and for the opportunity to make friends. International students’ social support networks also contributed to helping them overcome their academic challenges by asking their friends for assistance. This study found that participants who established friendships were able to avoid or reduce feelings of homesickness.

Participants in this study expressed their desire to have a social life and emphasized the importance of friendships. Social needs are one of the needs described in Maslow’s (1987) hierarchy of needs. The results of this study recommended that international students initiate friendships with others. A common theme was for international students to step out of their comfort zone and participate in any type of activity that would help them meet people and establish friendships. The majority felt that leadership should create more programs that would help international students befriend other students, especially American students.

This study revealed that the international students from Lander State University were most challenged by social barriers they encountered. It was clear from the results of this study that making friends with others was crucial to the transition process. This finding was consistent with the literature and a common theme throughout the data collection process. Those who were not satisfied with their experience were lonely and admitted to their continual struggle with establishing friendships. This study validates the fact that international students enter their new university with little if any connections.
They arrive with anxieties and the desire to connect to other students and their communities. These study’s findings were consistent with previous research studies. Satisfying the need for belonging and love is a need that may go unmet for some time until an international student is able to connect with fellow students and create a social network of friends (Maslow, 1987). This study showed that friendships helped mitigate international students’ feelings of homesickness and loneliness.

Recommendations

Leadership must look at strengthening resources as Schlossberg et al. (1995) described. Based on the findings of this study and the presented literature, the researcher suggests the following recommendations:

- Create a peer mentor program that pairs a domestic student with an international student for a semester. The Global Siblings program from UCLA could be used as a model to develop a similar program at Lander State University. This program would help international students establish friendships with domestic students and also give them the opportunity to delve deeper into American culture.

- This study found that international student orientation was effective in providing relevant information to international students. It is recommended that orientation be extended by a day to include group activities. These activities would help facilitate communication between international students and provide them with the opportunity to befriend others.
The university should host an event for international students during the first week of classes. An example would be spaghetti dinner or an ice cream social. This type of social event would provide international students the opportunity to meet other international students early in the semester and help them cultivate friendships.

Host an event for domestic and international students with the specific purpose to help them mingle with each other and learn about each other’s cultures. This study found that international students have greatest difficulty developing friendships with domestic students. This would allow international students to meet a variety of people and provide international students with the opportunity for interaction with domestic students.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study can serve as the foundation for future studies regarding the social adjustment of international students. If a peer mentor program is implemented as this study suggests, an evaluation can be done to determine its effectiveness. Further research could measure the difference between international students who were involved in the peer mentor program versus international students who did not participate in the program. The goal would be to determine whether such a program improves an international students’ social adjustment.
Appendices
Appendix A

Online Survey Questionnaire
Online Survey Questionnaire

1. Do you agree to participate in this survey?*
   - Yes, I agree to participate.
   - No, I do not agree.

2. What region are you from?
   - Africa
   - Asia
   - Australia/New Zealand
   - Caribbean
   - Central America
   - Europe
   - Latin America
   - North America
   - Oceania (Excluding Australia/New Zealand)
   - South America

3. What is your major?
   - Biological Sciences
   - Business Administration
   - Communication Studies
   - Computer Science
   - Engineering
   - Mathematics
   - Social Sciences
   - Other

4. I am currently a(n) ________ student.
   - Undergraduate
   - Graduate
• Alumni

5. How old are you?
   • 18-20
   • 21-26
   • 27+

6. What is your gender?
   • Male
   • Female

7. Attending this university was my first experience studying abroad.
   • Yes
   • No

8. My parents expected me to study abroad.
   • Strongly disagree
   • Disagree
   • Agree
   • Strongly agree

9. Did you feel that studying abroad would give you greater career opportunities upon graduating?
   • Strongly disagree
   • Disagree
   • Agree
   • Strongly agree

10. I chose to study abroad to improve my English skills.
    • Strongly disagree
    • Disagree
11. My English language proficiency hindered my transition to the university.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

12. I had difficulty adjusting to the informal classroom atmosphere.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

13. I had difficulty understanding native English speaking instructors.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

14. I had difficulty meeting deadlines to submit homework.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

15. I was unprepared for essay writing.

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

17. I suffered from homesickness.
   - Strongly disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree

18. I had trouble making friends with American students.
   - Strongly disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree

19. I suffered from homesickness.
   - Strongly disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree

20. I experienced loneliness.
   - Strongly disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree
21. I have felt alienated during my university experience.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

22. I was aware of the campus' support services available to me.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

23. I have participated in clubs or other on-campus activities.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

24. I utilized a support network.

Support Network definition: Friends, family, coworkers, and others who provide emotional and moral support.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

25. I utilized on-campus counseling services.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree
26. I utilized tutoring services.
   - Strongly disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree

27. What recommendations do you have for international students regarding the adjustment process?

28. What recommendations do you have for administration, counselors, faculty, and staff regarding the adjustment process and how they can better help international students?

29. Your voluntary participation in a 20 minute interview is requested to gather further information on your experiences as an international student at Sacramento State. If you participate you will be given a $10 gift card. Your feedback is valuable and will be greatly appreciated. If interested please email the researcher with your contact information to van_marquez@hotmail.com. Would you like to participate in the interview? *
   - Yes
   - No
Appendix B

Interview Questionnaire
Interview Questionnaire

1. What made you decide to study abroad?
2. What expectations did you have about studying abroad?
3. How was your transition experience different from your expectations?
4. Is there anything that you wish you would have known that you believe would have helped your transition to CSUS?
5. Describe the social challenges that you faced at CSUS?
6. Describe the academic challenges that you faced at CSUS?
7. Describe the psychological challenges that you faced at CSUS?
8. How did you overcome the challenges you faced? Were there any services on campus that helped?
9. What recommendations would you give to students planning to study abroad?
10. What recommendations do you have for counselors, faculty, and staff regarding how they can help you adjust to CSUS?
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