

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

Lesley University Community of Scholars Day

Community of Scholars Day 2018

Mar 28th, 1:10 PM - 2:00 PM

International Students' Perceptions of Challenges at Universities in the United States

Yiran Li

Lesley University, yli6@lesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/community_of_scholars



Part of the [International and Comparative Education Commons](#)

Li, Yiran, "International Students' Perceptions of Challenges at Universities in the United States" (2018).
Lesley University Community of Scholars Day. 10.

https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/community_of_scholars/2018/session_e/10

This Panel is brought to you for free and open access by the Symposia and Conferences at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Lesley University Community of Scholars Day by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.

International Students' Experiences and Perceptions of Challenges in

The United States Universities

Yiran Li

Lesley University

Abstract

International students in the U.S. face many changes and challenges. Existing research explores the challenges for international students while they arrive in the U.S. In this paper I explore the question, “What are the perceptions of challenges that students confront in the US in comparison to their past educational experiences? How do the perceptions affect international students’ schooling?”

International Students' Experiences and Perceptions of Challenges in
The United States Universities

This research focused on exploring the unique factors that that undergraduate international students perceive in their educational experiences in the United States. This paper reviews relevant research and qualitative interviews of two international students who are currently studying in the United States.

Literature Review

Impression of the Universities in the United States

The U.S. News (Hopkins & Writer, 2012) interviewed four international students, in their first year of college in the U.S., about three things that most surprised them when they arrived. The four students provided examples based on their own experiences and provided the reason why it was different than their home country.

The first difference was the lessons, classroom environment, and professors. A student from Indonesia said that the content of the U.S. lessons was not much harder than the ones back home, but that students were expected to be more active and independent. The lessons generally covered deeper knowledge than what she expected. A Danish student said that she was surprised by the interactions with professors in and out the class. The students had opportunities to discuss with the professors. The students were expected to own their learning, to be active and competitive.

The second difference for the international students was the student lifestyle. The lifestyles of rural and urban areas were not similar. Many international students who did not research the city or town that the school located could receive a huge shock. While they arrived at the school, they could be put in an unfamiliar situation of living. Sometimes even the physical

climate could be a challenge. It would be tough for international students to adjust their living styles without knowing the geography and climate before they arrive the school (Hopkins & Writer, 2012).

Finally, the third surprise was the cultural barriers. One of the international students indicated that she was surprised by how much less she thought the local U.S. students knew about the world. Many of her classmates did not know about Guatemala, where she came from, and it was hard to explain her culture to others because many students showed that they were not interested. However, one student from Denmark thought the U.S. had a warm culture. The cultural barrier could affect the students varyingly (Hopkins & Writer, 2012).

Impression of the High School in the United States

Brown Center Chalkboard (Serion, 2017) is an organization which focuses on researching education in the United States. Their findings were based on a survey of foreign exchange students who have attended high school in the U.S. in 2001 and again in 2016. The results captured the students' perspectives of differences between the U.S. school and their home country school.

In 2001, 55.9% of the students thought that their home country had much harder classes, and in 2016 66.4% students thought the classes in the U.S. were much easier (Serion, 2017). Only 3.1% and 4.7% students thought that the classes in the U.S were more challenging (Serion, 2017). In addition, the international students thought that the students in the U.S. spent less time on their school work and more time on other extracurricular activities. In both surveys, most of the international students reported that they spend more time on their school work than other activities after school (Serion, 2017).

Another interesting question from the survey was when it asked students: “Compared with the students in your home country, how important do your U.S. peers think it is to do well in sports or math?” (Serion, p.1, 2017). More than half, which was 64.1% of the participants, thought their U.S. peers believed doing well in sports was much more important than doing well in math (Serion, 2017).

Summarily, compared with their home countries, many international students believed education in the United States is focused on more than academic skills. Most international students think there are less challenging classes, more outside school activities, and their U.S. peer put more efforts in extracurricular activities. The different focus of education would be one of the biggest changes. How to adjust and balance the time between school works and other activities appears to be a challenge for the students as well.

The Differences and Influences

Language

The challenges that the students faced were related to the differences between the U.S. and their home country. Carola Suarez-Orozco, Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco, and Irina Todorova (2008) covered their five-years studies of immigrant students in the book *Learning A New Land* which involved many case studies of different students, the challenge they faced and how they overcame or fail to overcome the challenges, and the effects the differences and challenges brought to their lives.

First of all, language differences were the biggest difference from their home country and challenge for students from the non-English speaking countries. Low English proficiency would influence students' success of the academic career. For example, one student, Henry, saw his

performance decline after he transferred from the bilingual school to the mainstream school. When he was in bilingual school with many lingual supports, Henry put in more effort into school work and showed high performance via testing. After he transferred to a mainstream high school, he revealed his weakness of reading. Henry stopped putting the effort into his school work, and his GPA dropped. His language barriers caused academic difficulties while he lost the language supports. The second student, Andres, who came from Mexico, had a similar situation. His English proficiency also impeded his success. He spent most of the time with the students who speak the same language, and he failed to adjust when he was moved to an English as primary language environment. Both Henry and Andres had high verbal skills and low academic English abilities (C. Suarez-Orozco & M. M. Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008). With lingual supports in school, the students were more motivated, engaged, and high-performed. Unfortunately, while the students lost the supports their performance decreased due to their low English proficiency.

Moreover, the language barriers did not only impact students' school life but also their social life. Lotus was a girl who had many friends while she studied in a bilingual middle school and home country, but she made no friends when she got into a regular U.S. high school. She was shy and felt uncomfortable connecting with other students. Even though her verbal skills were improved after she arrived the U.S., she barely talked in class. She had a hard time to fit in and her only friend in high school was a friend from middle school. Furthermore, after she moved to the U.S. with her family, they also lost connection in their home country. At the end of the five years' study, Lotus lost motivation and passion for learning, and her academic performances started to decline (C. Suarez-Orozco & M. M. Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008). Unlike Lotus, some students made connection and friends in school, but only with the people

who spoke their first language. This way the students would have trouble becoming involved in the English society. Andres and Marieli generally spent time with other students who spoke the same first language as they did and communicated with no English. Both students said that they felt more connected with their “homebodies”. However, to study or live in the U.S. it was necessary to have skills to socialize in English. Toward the end of the study, Andres felt that he did not fit in the U.S. and he tried to get the sense of belonging by spending more time with his compatriots. His social connections pulled him farther from the society that he needed to be part of and gave him less motivation to work hard in school to be able to stay in the country. Another student, Marieli, was more attached to the U.S. by getting help from her soccer coach and her bilingual counselor, and she got much support to develop her English skills. Unfortunately, she decided to spend more time with her home friends and to let go of her dream (C. Suarez-Orozco & M. M. Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008).

In conclusion, language was one of the most important skills that international students need to be able to catch up on both social and academic life in the U.S. The students with poor academic English proficiency tend to have more difficulties in school, even sometimes when they have good social language skills with English. And the students who also have poor speaking skills may have a hard time making friends, and their social connections and experiences seem to influence their academic performance.

Culture

The survey from Brown Center Chalkboard (Serino, 2017) and the interviews from U.S. News (Hopink, 2012) show there are always some cultural differences that international students will experience while they are in the U.S. The international students need to face the cultural

variances that occur in classrooms and general life. How the students adopt the differences can give them different results.

In general, knowing how to socialize with the local students was one of the biggest challenges that international students faced. The dissimilar cultural backgrounds could create unintentional conflict. For example, Andres, who was deeply connected with his Mexico identity, felt responsible to define his race and culture. The “racial conflict leads to his determination to stand up for Latino rights, maintain a "fierce" attachment to a Mexican identity, and fight with Latinos who have "given up the cause" (C. Suarez-Orozco & M. M. Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008). Many students have a sense of protection toward their original culture, and the misunderstanding from the local students in the U.S. could be offensive.

The cultural difference could also limit the conversation topics. Some of the students expressed their feelings during the social events as unnatural, embarrassing, disconnected, and wasting time. The interviewees mentioned that it was difficult to find a common topic to start or continue the conversation, and the conversation was filled up with questions. In addition, when the language barriers come to play, it would create difficulties for international students in understanding the concepts of the conversation. Beyond the language barriers, the lack of cultural knowledge or influences of U.S. pop culture impacts understanding, such that the international students would not understand some jokes, even when the sentences were constructed with basic words. The interviewees also expressed their feeling of unable to keep the continuity and strong relationship with the students in the U.S. (Li & Heath & Jackson & Allen & Fischer & Chan, 2017). Therefore, the students would feel unable to participate in the conversation and social reactions and find it difficult to socialize via talking.

The school culture surprised the international students as well. Especially for students who came from eastern cultures, the western learning styles could be totally different. The students could receive assignments that they never saw back home, such as “skimming” the reading materials. One of the participants of one interview indicated that it was difficult to know when would be a good time to respond or ask questions during class sessions or to know what ideas would be good to share and when to share it. Additionally, the expectations from teachers would be a change for the international students (Li & Heath & Jackson & Allen & Fischer & Chan, 2017). The students in the U.S were expected to learn more independently, and it could be a challenge for international students to adjust how they would act in the new atmosphere (Hopkins & Writer, 2012).

The cultural differences were permeated into every perspective of international students’ lives. Those variations could create conflicts, difficulties in socializing, and trouble learning. How the students accept and adjust for the differences might change their experience in the U.S.

Lifestyles

Moving from one place to another always brought changes in lifestyles. Weather, food, transportation, responsibilities, life routines, and needs of life skills were the common living challenges for international students.

The lifestyle in the U.S. can be totally different than home countries. The students need to learn how to adopt the new life independently. Compare with home, the class schedule is different, and students need to know how to manage their time to accomplish things and have time for socializing. In order to adjust the new life, there would be many new skills needed. The students could also be involved in activities that they never saw back home, so they need to learn

it from the beginning. Thus, the daily lives could be challenging for the international students since everything around them would be new (Li & Heath & Jackson & Allen & Fischer & Chan, 2017).

Interviews and Results

To understand the international student experiences in the United States, I interviewed two students who were currently studying at a college in the United States. Xue Chao came from China. She has been studying in the United States for three years, and she was about to graduate from a community college when interviewed. Another student named Seongeun, an exchange student from Korea, had been in the U.S. for three months and five days in the United States when I interviewed her. Xue was interviewed via Facetime, and Seongeun had a face-to-face interview.

Through the interviews, I wanted to learn how the experiences of these two students compared and contrasted to those in the literature above, and how they compared and contrasted to each other. What unique challenges did they face as international students in the US? What kinds of things were similar or different from their experiences in their home countries?

Language and Communication

Language and communication struggles were frequently mentioned in both interviews, especially for Seongeun, who said: “language decides everything”. From three years experiences living in an English environment, Xue seemed to be more comfortable with using English and communicating in English. Contrasted with Xue, Seongeun had more problems that led by language barriers.

Learning and developing English abilities was one of the reasons why Seongeun decided to study abroad in the United States. She knew that English would broaden her work opportunities when she goes back to Korea. In addition, Seongeun's major required research, and many relevant resources were written in English. Thus, she hoped her experiences studying in the U.S. could help her to be more efficient when it comes to reading in English. After three months of study, Seongeun felt she was more confident in communicating with other people in English. But using English to communicate was still not comfortable for Seongeun. She thought, in general, that the native English speaker speaks so fast, which made it very difficult for her to understand. But she did not want to interrupt people and ask them to slow down during a conversation. She said, "when I communicate with international students who do not speak good Korean back home, I would feel stuffy when they cannot understand what I said no matter how hard I try. I don't want the people to feel the same way. And I think it is rude to interrupt them when they speak. So I don't like to ask them to slow down or explain things to me, and I don't want them to think that I am dumb. When they speak so fast, it also makes me fear." Therefore, Seongeun had limited experiences of talking with native language speaker, even though sometimes they were friendly and willing to explain to her. "A lot of people are really nice to me. Especially the professors, they put in extra efforts to make me feel comfortable. But many people just don't understand foreigners' problems."

She dropped one class at the beginning of the year due to communication difficulties. The class required students to work in a group, and Seongeun's groupmates were two American students. While there were group discussions, Seongeun felt excluded because the other two students spoke too fast. She said, "they speak really fast, and I don't understand. Since they can understand each other, I don't feel I can stop them." Then the language barriers also come to

play a role, “(during the group discussion) I don’t know how to describe my opinions (in English) either.” Because of that, Seongeun decided to drop the class.

The language barrier might lessen when the students gain more experiences in the English-speaking environment, but the barriers do not disappear. During Xue’s first year, she had the same problem as Seongeun. At the beginning, it was challenging to understand the native language speech or participate in an English-based conversation led by native English speakers. It took Xue a long time to improve her English skills and feel included. After studying in the U.S. for more than three years, occasionally Xue still faced similar problems. Contrasted with her first year in the U.S., she said she felt it was more natural to talk with native English speakers now, and she had less trouble understanding the contents of the conversation. However, during classes, there were still situations in which she could not understand a statement or question from her peer or the teachers’ answers. Xue said she either not understand the words in the sentences, or she understood every vocabulary word, but the sentences still did not make sense.

The interview did not yield evidence of the students’ academic performances, but it did reveal how key themes in the literature reviewed above, language and social experiences, affected the quality of their experiences as international students. When the students first arrived the country, the language barriers posed difficulties in communication with native English speakers. It was not only caused by the students’ verbal skills but also because of the speech and social habits. For some students, Native English speakers’ speed, choice of vocabulary, the construction of the sentences, etc., caused challenges in communicating in English.

Culture

The language was not the only fence for international students to stride over, the variances between cultures usually challenging as well. Those differences stood out everywhere, while the students were in the classroom, at home, on the street, and so on. Especially when the students come from a cultural background that was dissimilar to the western culture, the cultural challenges were everywhere. Xue and Seonguen faced various dissimilarities and challenges in the U.S. Some of their experiences were alike but some were different.

Such as Li et al. mentioned in their research, international students generally have limited topic for conversations due to the cultural differences (Li, et al., 2017). They experienced trouble finding topics during a conversation: this was the first challenge that Xue and Seoguen both mentioned in the interview. They indicated that it was difficult because they do not have the same knowledge of “popular things”. They do not know as many celebrities, television shows, movies, recent events both on or off campus, holidays, have minimum similar experiences, etc. Xue said, “I just don’t know what they were talking about, I have no idea about the topic. It was hard to break into the conversation.” Soenguen also mentioned that “I don’t have the similar experiences as many people here. Like I don’t know the clubs or events in school when they talk about that I don’t know what to say.”

Furthermore, Soeguen brought up that people in the U.S. have a different sense of beauty. How to compliment a person as being pretty was so different, she had a hard time to know what to say. “I tried to tell a girl that she has a small face and it is pretty. In my culture, girls always want small faces. We think small faces are beautiful. But when I told the girl that her face is small and pretty, she did not take it was a compliment.” As Soenguen’s relays, her kindness was

not understood the way she wanted it to be, “I don’t know how to be polite. I don’t know what words to use.” Both students felt hard to involved in an American peer group.

Then the interviewees pointed out that cultural differences also play out in a classroom. First, the classroom environment felt very relaxing for Soenguen. She felt there was less computation in the classroom and less pressure in academics. For Xue, the class work was not the hardest part either. However, the way that students and professors interact made their school life not as easy. On one side, Xue said, “In China, we listen during the class. In the school here, students ask and answer questions, share their opinions, and sometimes even argue with the professor.” Seonguen also felt the challenges in interacting in a classroom, “The students here call the professor by their first names, which would be considered rude in my culture.” Xue and Seonguen were not accustomed to the interaction between students and professors in American classrooms, next they also felt the impediments of interacting with other students.

When it came to the question: “What makes your school life harder?”, both answered: group project. “It was different education style because back home we generally worked individually. Then I always find it was hard to cooperate with other and work in a group”, Xue said. Seonguen saw the challenges of socializing in a classroom. She mentioned that she was in higher level classes, in which most of the students were juniors or seniors, and it felt like all the students knew each other well. She said, “it was lonely when we need to do a group project. I have no friend in the class, but everyone else knows each other. I feel excluded, I felt there is no way to break into their formed groups and it was not comfortable for me to join their group too.” The sense of outsider also made Seonguen felt helpless, “I am not confident about my English. When I have questions about homework, there is no one I can ask from my class. Sure, I can ask

my professor, but I still want friends in class.” For Seonguen the classroom was not a happy place.

Lifestyle

The lifestyle also bothered Xue and Seongeun. The food, mode of transportation, fashion, living habits, and speaking habits could be the factors of different lifestyles. According to the students’ experiences, the type of area that students stayed and the area where the students came from also affects the differences in experiences.

Xue’s first year was in a town which was located in suburban Arkansas. There was not much international population, and there were limited public transportation options. There were different school norms, different weather, different foods, and so on. It was more difficult to adapt the new environment. The second year, she moved to Seattle, where there was more public transportation, more food choices, and more international population, specifically Chinese students. Xue indicated that having more food choices and being surrounded by more people from the same home country made it feel easier to adjust her lifestyle. She felt that having people have similar experience made the situation more comfortable. “Seattle was more diverse and convenient, it made the process of adapting easier. But, I feel I still can’t totally adopt the lifestyles.” However, there were more problems remaining, such as the fact that the public transportation brought her a lot of troubles. The public transportation in Seattle ran on a system that differed from China. Knowing the system was very important for Xue because she needed to use buses or subway every day to commute to school. “The schedule of the public transportation was so different, sometimes I have no idea when they leave and where they go. The busses were different too. I don’t know how to let it stop when I need to get off. There were

also many places where you could not go by public transportations, which was so different from the city I live in China. It was so hard when there was nobody teach you how to use those transportations.” The tiniest things that are normal for local students could be a challenge for international students.

Seonguen also commuted to school, and she also saw the variances between the public transportation in Boston and in Korea. “The subway here is so dirty. The ones we have in Korea were really neat and comfortable.” Since she commuted, safety was one thing that she worried a lot about as well. Seonguen said, “I don’t feel safe a lot of times, I can’t walk around during the night. People here do drugs. I am not strong; the people here are bigger than me. And my English is not that good. I am afraid if something happens I can’t explain the situation clearly.” The sense of safety limited her participation in some events that happened late in the evening. “Some daily life issues can struggle”, Seonguen said. During the interview, she mentioned the different food style and fashion also make the lifestyle felt so different. Seoguen cooked food for herself most of the time, and she found it can be difficult to get ingredients from general grocery stores, and she needed to take the subway to get what she wants at a Korean grocery store. Another factor that bothered her was the fashion and the way people dress. “In Korean, almost every girl put on makeup and dress up nicely for class. But a lot of people here just put on sweatpants and sweatshirt, and many people wear no makeup. I felt overdressed sometimes. So now if I’m just going to class, I won’t put on makeup sometimes.”

One thing that both Xue and Seonguen brought up during the interview was that it was more comfortable and amiable to socialize with other international students, people from Asia or who come from the same home countries. Xue said that she does not know the reason behind this comfort of socializing but talk with other international students just easier. Moreover, Seonguen

gave more detailed reasons. First, international students talk slower than local students which make the conversation easier. Second, there are more common interests and more choices for conversation topics. Also, the people from the similar cultures seem easier to communicate with, and their reactions are more natural to Seonguen. She said, “the American people always have huge reactions to everything. Communicating with them make me tired because I need to try to talk in their way. But sometimes it is good to have a positive energy around, it makes me more positive.” Third, Seongeun said, “Most of my friends are Asian, I don’t know why. I think they just seem friendly, and at least we have one common that we look the same.” In sum, socializing with people from outside of the U.S., especially with the people from the same region or country provide the international students with needed comfort.

Conclusion and Further Study

My literature review and interview findings revealed challenges that international students face when they study abroad in the U.S. Each student’s experiences will vary, but based on the research we see there were common differences that generally lead the challenges for students. Additionally, the region that the students come from and the region that students settle down in the U.S. also affect their experiences. The factors include language, communication, culture, and lifestyle. In detail, it involved: language difficulties, communication styles, topics for conversation, classroom or school environment, group project, public transportations, and food.

This research did not address student’s academic performances nor details on the support systems that students had. Spuriously, none of the two participates of the interview mentioned academic differences that cause difficulties or a decline in their academic performances. Instead,

they discussed their perceptions of the challenges and what seemed to be more salient to their experiences: experiences involving language and social interactions. In future research, I will investigate efficient methods that will support students when they needed. For this future question, I will interview more diverse students, such as students with different age, cultural backgrounds, home countries, etc. Furthermore, I will research additional studies on the topic. I will also follow up with Xue and Seongeun for further relevant research.

References

- Hopink, K. *3 Surprises for International Students at U.S. Universities: Four Fulbright scholars share lessons learned from studying in the United States*. (2012, April 18) U.S. News and World Report. Retrieved from: <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2012/04/18/3-surprises-for-international-students-at-us-universities>
- Li, Z., Heath, M. A., Jackson, A. P., Allen, G. K., Fischer, L., & Chan, P. (2017). Acculturation experiences of Chinese international students who attend American universities. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 48(1), 11-21. doi:10.1037/pro0000117
- Serino, L. *What do international students think of American schools?* (2017, March 29). Brookings. Retrieved from: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2017/03/29/what-do-international-students-think-of-american-schools/>
- Suárez-Orozco, C., Suárez-Orozco, M. M., & Todorova, I. (2008), [Kindle Edition]. *Learning a New Land*. Chapter 5 to Chapter 8. Retrieved from: <https://www.amazon.com/Learning-New-Land-CarolaSu%C3%A1rez-Orozco-ebook/dp/B002P3KAUK/ref=mtkindle?encoding=UTF8&me=>