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THE THIRD CULTURE: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL
GRADUATE ASSISTANTS AT A PUBLIC, FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTION IN THE
UNITED STATES

By

Stephanie M. Herzog

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Professor Rachelle L. Winkle-Wagner

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2012

THE THIRD CULTURE: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL
GRADUATE ASSISTANTS AT A PUBLIC, FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTION IN THE
UNITED STATES

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University of Nebraska, 2012

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The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of international graduate assistants at a public, four-year institution in the Southwestern U.S. This study concentrated on graduate-level (both master's and PhD) international students who were at the time the research was conducted, employed within a graduate assistantship. The study was conducted in order to identify the essence of the phenomenon of being an international graduate assistant in the U.S. Explicitly, this study addressed how international graduate assistants simultaneously balanced the threefold experience of being an international student, pursuing a graduate-level degree, and working within a professional capacity as a graduate assistant.

Twelve total participants participated in this study, and data was collected through a singular interview with each one of the participants. The participants were asked to share their experiences with personal expectations, challenges, their assistantships, their relationships with their advisors and other faculty, and also their relationships with peers and dependents. The findings revealed that although international graduate assistants viewed their overall experiences positively, there were several important areas in which the participants had indicated a desire for more support.

The majority of international graduate assistants expressed a need for more initial information and assistance, particularly upon arrival in the U.S. Some participants felt cultural differences, such as having to adjust to a new academic system and a new work environment, created transition and adjustment challenges. The students also discussed the importance of their relationships with their advisors and peers, and how negative experiences or lack of interaction led to frustration and isolation. Finally, all of the participants emphasized the significance of graduate assistantships, which alleviated the financial burden of attending graduate school in the U.S., and also provided them with their only opportunity for relevant, professional career experience. The relevance of these findings suggest a greater need to study the unique experiences of international graduate assistants and how they can be supported more effectively.

Acknowledgements

I would foremost like to thank God for filling my life with an abundance of blessings and opportunities and for guiding me steadily down many unknown forks in the road – in particular to the one that brought me to The University of Nebraska.

For always offering unwavering love and support, no matter how far apart we are, I would like to thank my parents and my sister (and best friend) Sarah. Without their encouragement and ability to build me back up every time I felt I have fallen, I would not be where I am today. I appreciate their reception of my frantic phone calls and stress-induced rants, and also for not losing faith in me every time I decide to chase a new dream.

I would like to extend a big thank you to all of my friends and relatives – those in Lincoln, Chicago, Florida, Kentucky, and all across the world – who have supported me through this journey in so many different ways. Thank you for always being positive and encouraging me in everything I do!

A special thank you to my feline companion, Riley, who has stayed by my side during countless late nights of research and writing, and has seen me through not just one but now two master's degrees.

I am extremely grateful for the eagerness, support, and interest in my research that the faculty in my department and across the entire University have bestowed upon me. In particular, a million thanks to my wonderful advisor, Dr. Winkle-Wagner (whom I believe to be Superwoman) for inspiring my confidence to pursue my goals with both my thesis research and my Fulbright application. A very enthusiastic thank you also goes out to my second reader, the wonderful professor Dr. Babchuk, who has enabled me to grow

as a qualitative researcher. Thank you also to Dr. Winkle-Wagner, Dr. Babchuk, and Dr. Hoover for their support in the Fulbright application process, and for helping me to be successful in achieving this amazing honor.

My experience as a graduate assistant with the William H. Thompson Scholars Learning Community has touched my life in wonderful ways and I cannot thank enough the incredible staff and marvelous students I have had the opportunity to work with. I would also like to thank the staff at the Office of International Affairs for embracing me and my interests, and for allowing me to gain invaluable experience working within the field. I would also like to thank all of the administrators and faculty at The University of Louisville, DePaul University, and The University of Connecticut who encouraged or inspired me in any way, big or small. Without their influence I wouldn't be the person I am today, and I would not have recognized the importance of working within higher education administration.

Finally, a gigantic thank you to the staff and students at "Southwestern State University" who took a blind chance on me and enabled me to make my thesis research a reality. In particular, to the Manager and staff at the Office of International Student Services, and especially to all of the study participants who were willing to be open and honest with me about sharing their personal experiences. Thank you for making me feel at home during my short stay there as a researcher and for inspiring me further to continue down the path of international affairs.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The presence of international students pursuing higher education in the United States (U.S.) has steadily increased for decades, with the largest population of international students pursuing degrees at the graduate level (Institute of International Education, 2011). There were nearly 300,000 international graduate students studying in the U.S. in the 2010/2011 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2011), creating a necessity for supporting this diverse student population's unique and varied needs. International graduate students, particularly those who hold graduate assistantships, can be considered to be facing a threefold challenge – as international students studying in the U.S., as graduate students working towards a master's or PhD, and as employees of their institution.

The manner in which international graduate assistants navigate the transition to a new culture, graduate-level academic work, and gaining work experience in a new professional environment, is likely to be different from that of international undergraduate students, and domestic graduate assistants, because the challenges that these student populations face are different. Additionally, depending upon an international graduate assistant's home country, their transition may be more or less difficult. Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) examined culture shock in international graduate students. Their quantitative study revealed that international graduate students from countries that were the most culturally different from the host country were less likely to interact with host peers, and those who had less interaction with host peers experienced a greater degree of culture shock. While some international graduate

assistants may need or desire more support than others, addressing what needs are specific to this student population is imperative.

Graduate-level students are frequently taking upon an independent commitment to advanced study in a particular academic region, thereby suggesting a more autonomous and isolated academic experience than that of undergraduate students. Current literature on international graduate students reflects a need to address feelings of isolation and a lack of interaction with domestic (host country) peers (Chapdelaine and Alexitch, 2004; Behrens, 2009; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Kwon, 2009; Rose-Redwood, 2010; Trice, 2004; Trice, 2007). International graduate students are pursuing professional level academics in a foreign country, thereby setting themselves up for intense individual study and research in a country where they may have no or little peers, and where they may face a huge adjustment in terms of culture and the educational structure.

Because their primary reason for being in the U.S. is to pursue a graduate degree and gain work and/or research experience through an assistantship, international graduate assistants place heavy significance on their relationships with advisors and other faculty, as well as the quality of their academic work and the work they perform within their assistantships. If higher education administrators and faculty are better able to articulate the specific experiences and desires of this student population based on the three main challenges that they face, particularly since literature reveals that this population is isolated, then they may be better inclined to support and promote the success of international graduate assistants on their campus.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of international graduate students with assistantships (both at the master's and doctoral level) and how they interpret these experiences, at a large, research intensive, public, four-year institution located in the Southwestern United States (U.S.).

Importance of Study

International students have an important presence at postsecondary institutions in the U.S. because they provide a vital source of cultural diversity and can increase the intercultural awareness and cultural competency of domestic students (Lee, 2007; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Rose-Redwood, 2010; Zhao, 2005). International graduate assistants in particular have the potential to contribute to research and teaching in various academic fields. While a substantial body of research about international students in general - and more specifically on international graduate students - exists, there is a need to examine how international graduate students who balance assistantships characterize their unique experiences, so that higher education administrators and faculty may build better systems of support for them.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this qualitative study was: What have been international graduate assistants' experiences adjusting at a large, public, four-year institution in the Southwestern U.S.? To build upon these various general experiences, the following sub-questions were also explored:

- 1. Transition Challenges:** What were some of the pre-arrival expectations held by international graduate students who are not only working towards a master's or

PhD, but also working as graduate assistants? What were / are some of the challenges international graduate assistants have faced since they began both their work and study at the institution?

2. **Support and Relationships:** How do international graduate assistants feel that their experiences may be different from their domestic counterparts and from other international graduate students who do not hold assistantships? Did or do international graduate assistants ever seek support or assistance on this campus related to their ability to adjust to their academic work and / or assistantship work, and if so, what types of support have they been utilizing? How do international graduate assistants describe their relationship with their advisors and other faculty members in their department? When applicable, for international graduate assistants who live with dependent spouses and / or children, has their dependent's presence shaped their academic and / or work experience in any way?
3. **Graduate Assistantships:** What were / are some of the positive experiences as well as challenges that international graduate assistants have had within their academic experiences as well as their employment experiences? Do international graduate assistants feel that their graduate assistantship has had any impact on their academic work?

Methodology

The nature of the primary research question, which is based on the individual experiences of international graduate assistants, lent itself to a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research studies “focus on understanding and meaning [...] based on verbal narratives and observations rather than numbers” (McMillan, 2008, p. 11).

Additionally, I, as the researcher, was the primary instrument for collecting data, another cornerstone of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). A Phenomenological qualitative approach was utilized because the study attempted to capture the shared essence of the experience of being an international graduate assistant, and identify universal meaning from the perspective of multiple participants (Creswell, 2007). The qualitative framework of the study allowed for flexible interpretation and an organic, humanistic focus on shared experiences, which allowed the voices of the participants to shape the findings.

The data were collected during twelve semi-structured, individual interviews, all conducted by me, which were recorded and later transcribed by me. Qualitative data analysis was structured on the model proposed by Creswell (2007) and utilized horizontalization to highlight key statements and identify clusters of meaning. I relied heavily on in vivo coding, which allowed the voices of the participants to be illuminated. After codes had been identified three key themes and eight subthemes emerged from the data.

I chose to study international graduate assistants at a large, public, four-year institution in the Southwestern U.S., known as Southwestern State University (SWSU). A pool of potential participants was identified by criterion sampling, which was based on their status as a graduate student (either master's or PhD level), and on their employment status as a graduate assistant within any assistantship position on campus. I did not give any preference in regards to the age, sex, home country, or field of study, in reference to potential participants. I intended to focus mainly on how each international graduate assistant explained his or her experiences balancing the transition to a new culture,

graduate-level academic work, and working within a foreign professional environment as a graduate assistant.

An e-mail was sent by the Manager of the Office of International Student Services to all of the international graduate assistants (about 450 students), and fourteen of these students indicated interest in participating through filling out a Google Document form created by me. I contacted all fourteen potential participants by e-mail to set up individual interviews, and interviews with twelve participants were scheduled.

The participants ranged in age from twenty-four to forty-four, with a total of three females and nine males. Three of the participants were working towards and master's degree, and nine of the participants were PhD candidates. Of the twelve total participants, ten declared fields of study within the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields. Ten of the participants hailed from Asian or Middle Eastern countries, one participant was from Eastern Europe, and one participant was from South America. Length of time spent as a graduate student at the institution (SWSU) ranged from one year to six years.

Delimitations

To achieve the objectives of this research study, as identified in the purpose statement and in the research questions, delimitations were made to focus on the experiences of international graduate assistants solely from their perspective.

Additionally, in the interest of time, data collection was restricted to one individual interview per participant, and there were no plans at that time to pursue longitudinal research in conjunction with this particular study.

In regards to the study participants, several delimitations were made by me in order to identify specific boundaries that correspond with the research questions. The study population was delimited to international, graduate-level (including both master's and PhD) students, who were at the time of the study, currently employed within any form of a graduate assistantship at a specific public, four-year, institution in the Southwestern U.S. (SWSU). The study participants were further delimited to twelve students based upon voluntary action on behalf of the participants, and also availability of the participants.

Limitations

Because this study was conducted at only one institution within the Southwestern U.S. the findings may not be typical of the entire international graduate assistant population as a whole within the U.S. The data cannot make a claim to all international graduate students with assistantships and therefore the findings are not generalizable (Creswell, 2007). In remaining consistent with the purpose of qualitative research, I focused on the individual experiences of each participant in order to conceptually discuss the shared phenomenon with the prospect of developing transferable ideas (Merriam, 2009).

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are provided in order to aid in the understanding of specific terminology that is used throughout this study:

Co-National: Describes a peer from the same home country.

Dependents: Refers to children (or child) and / or a spouse who is dependent on an international student because they do not have legal authorization to work or study in the U.S.

Domestic Student: Describes a host-country student (in this study, American students). Domestic students are also referred to interchangeably as American students throughout this study.

Graduate Assistantship: An apprenticeship position in which graduate students are employed through their institution and generally work for a stipend and / or some form of tuition remission. Graduate assistantship appointments may include but are not limited to research assistantships and teaching assistantships.

International Student: A student pursuing education in a country other than their own, where they are studying on a student visa.

Visa Restrictions: Refers to federally mandated restrictions on international students and scholars who are studying in the U.S. on a special visa. Except with special permission from the U.S. government, international students are not allowed to work off campus (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2011).

Summary

The purpose of this research study, to explore the experiences of international graduate assistants at a large, research intensive, public, four-year institution in the Southwestern U.S., has been introduced in this chapter. The context and significance of this research study, as well as the basic structure of the study, including participants and research questions, was also addressed. Chapter two will present a comprehensive review of literature and research related to the experiences of international students, particularly

international graduate students, in the U.S. The methodology of the study, including the data collection and analysis procedures, will be detailed in Chapter three. The study findings, with a focus on the themes and subthemes of the study will be discussed in Chapters four and five. The final section, Chapter six, will approach discussion of the findings and implications, and will highlight areas for future research.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of international graduate students with assistantships (both at the master's and doctoral level) and how they interpret these experiences, at a large, research intensive, public, four-year institution located in the Southwestern United States (U.S.).

Introduction

Current literature on the experiences of international students, particularly of international graduate students, will be examined within this chapter in order to establish a basis for research related to international graduate assistants. Literature focal points include transition experiences, challenges, adaptation and support, as well as faculty and peer interactions and perceptions. The literature reviewed within this chapter are divided into four primary categories: (1) A general overview of data on international students in the U.S., (2) a section focused on international student transition experiences and the challenges they face, (3) literature on methods of support and adaptation utilized by international students, including campus, advisor, and peer relationships, and (4) a focus on studies related to international graduate students and assistantships.

Areas of research that merited inclusion included experiences of international students with a preference given to studies conducted on international graduate students, research on transition and adjustment, cultural implications and challenges, perceptions of diversity and treatment, academic and assistantships experiences, peer interactions, particularly between international and domestic students, and international student

support. I sought research studies that were primarily from the perspective of international students themselves with the exception of administrator and or faculty viewpoints on the experiences of international students.

International Graduate Students in the U.S.

The number of international students studying at higher education institutions in the U.S. is on the rise, and the number of graduate students seeking professional degrees and experience continues to climb. “In the United States, 44.6% of international students are graduate students, such that international students comprise 13.5% of the total number of graduate students in the United States” (Adrian-Taylor, Noels, & Tischler, 2007, p. 91). Recent Institute of International Education *Open Doors* data (2011) revealed that in the 2010/2011 academic year 296,574 international students from across the world studied in the U.S. at the graduate level. Due to the substantial volume of international students pursuing master’s and PhDs in the U.S., working towards a better understanding of methods for maximizing the level of positive fulfillment for both international graduate students and the domestic associates whom they work and interact with could lead to enhanced cultural understanding and a more positive contribution of knowledge to the academic world (Trice & Yoo, 2007; Wang, 2009; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005).

Research in the field of international students studying in the U.S. appears to be growing to meet the demand of supporting this unique student population. Results from research studies on international students in the U.S. continue to purport the positive effects of an increase in intercultural awareness, sensitivity, and a greater knowledge of diversity beyond one’s own country among domestic students (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2006; Rose-Redwood, 2010; Zhao, et al., 2005). Many postsecondary education

campuses throughout the U.S. are devoting increasing amounts of funding and time to supporting internationalization efforts and adopting more of a globalized approach to education on their campuses (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2009). As increased technological ability and greater governmental commitment to higher education spreads around the globe, so too does the mobility of postsecondary students (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2009). Due to the continuous growth of international students studying in the U.S. as well as a desire to promote more initiatives for internationalization within higher education, the experiences of international students is valuable territory for research that merits further exploration.

Transition and Adjustment Challenges

Cultural adjustments that international graduate students studying in the U.S. must overcome may range from significant to small, but frequently, it is the adjustments related to the necessities of everyday life - such as securing reliable and affordable housing, and being able to get to the grocery store - that can have the biggest impact (Chen, 2009; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Perrucci & Hu, 1995). “In their adjustment, international graduate students, coming from quite different cultures and circumstances, face changes in many aspects of their lives, such as in geographical location, weather conditions, food, language, behaviors and values, social interactions, and educational systems” (Wang, 2009, p. 23). Because graduate students, whether domestic or international, are typically presumed to have a certain level of independence as well as solid working knowledge of the higher education system, resources related to the fulfillment of necessary needs such as housing, food, and transportation may not be as readily available as they are for undergraduate students.

A qualitative grounded theory study on international students' transition to life in the U.S. (McLachlan & Justice, 2009) revealed that themes including weather and food differences; financial pressure and pressure to be successful academically; homesickness, isolation, and loneliness; as well as adapting to a new academic system and struggling with the language barrier, played the most critical roles within transition and culture shock. These are themes common among research on the transitions of international students (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007; Le & Gardner, 2010; Trice, 2007; Wang, 2009) and should be kept under consideration when examining the experiences of international graduate students.

Culture shock amongst international graduate students was studied in a quantitative analysis by Chapdelaine & Alexitch (2010). The model of culture shock the authors proposed was reliant on an expansion of social skills and interactions that were dependent upon the margin of differences between home and host cultures, the volume of co-national presence on campus, family status, and the amount of previous cross-national experience. Due to the data emphasizing the importance of social interaction in combating culture shock, Chapdelaine and Alexitch recommended the promotion of programs that allow international graduate students and domestic students to interact, as well as more cross-cultural training for advisors and domestic students who work with international students.

All graduate students, whether domestic or international, face distinctive challenges that can often be starkly different from the needs of an undergraduate student (Ku, Lahman, Yeh, & Cheng, 2008; Kwon, 2009). Hosting international graduate students, who bring with them a wealth of educational backgrounds, contributes to

greater cultural understanding as well as initiatives for globalization and the sharing of knowledge at an institution (Ku, et al., 2008). “When an international student has a positive experience abroad, he or she, host country nationals (i.e., domestic students, faculty members, staff, and community members), the educational institute, and the country stand to reap the benefits” (Adrian-Taylor, et al., 2007, p. 91). Both administrators and faculty should ensure that international graduate students have positive, beneficial experiences studying abroad so that they are able to successfully contribute their own academic knowledge and professional skills.

Perceptions of diversity on campuses can impact the adjustment of international students, particularly on predominately white campuses and at institutions that are located in smaller cities that lack diversity (Ritz, 2010; Rose-Redwood, 2010). Some international graduate students even felt that there was a lack of an international perspective within classroom curriculum (Trice & Yoo, 2007). Rose-Redwood’s (2010) qualitative study of international graduate students’ perceptions of diversity at a predominately white east-coast institution revealed criticism towards the university’s efforts to host events promoting diversity and international cultures. Many international graduate students felt there was a lukewarm attitude towards international events, and that the American students at the institution did not care to attend these events. The consensus among the participants in Rose-Redwood’s study (2010) seemed to be that the office of international affairs and the institution as a whole should put more effort into promoting international events to the entire campus community, and not just international students.

Discrimination against international students studying in the U.S. has also been

studied (Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007). Threat perceptions and prejudice against international students was examined through a quantitative study by Charles-Toussaint and Crowson (2010), who surveyed almost 200 American students to determine whether domestic students held negative attitudes and perceptions of threat in relation to international students. “U.S. students in [the] study reported greater levels of prejudiced attitudes when they perceived international students as threatening their beliefs and values, while also posing threats to their social status and economic, educational, and physical well-being” (p. 423). Charles-Toussaint and Crowson noted that while certain ingrained ideologies in domestic students cannot be drastically altered, administrators can work to focus on cultural and academically competitive fears that American students hold in relation to international students in order to combat hostility and increase cultural awareness and knowledge.

Studies such as Rose-Redwood’s (2010) and Chapdelaine and Alexitch’s (2010) revealed that more can be done to promote diversity on U.S. campuses and to maximize the opportunities for domestic and international students to interact in genuine ways (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2006). Trice (2004) performed a qualitative research study with international graduate students to determine whether or not increased interaction and socializing with domestic students was beneficial for international students. Data revealed that Western European students, and other international students who came from cultures similar to the culture in the U.S., and who faced less difficulty with the language barrier, interacted with American students the most. Furthermore, the longer an international student had been in the U.S., the more cultural events they attended on campus, and the more they socialized in general (even with co-nationals), the more likely

they were to socialize and form friendships with domestic students. As the number of international students studying in the U.S. continues to increase, recognizing the diverse needs of various international student groups becomes more critical.

Copious research studies strive to examine how international students studying in the U.S. perceive their experiences and adjust to the new culture and academic setting (Dao, et al., 2007; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2010; Liao, Finn, & Lu, 2007; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Perrucci & Hu, 1995; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Ritz, 2010; Trice & Yoo, 2007; Zhao, et al., 2005). Although the range of research focused on international students can vary, with the extraordinary sum of diversity that international students embody, so too is there a continuous need for an increased breadth of research on international student perceptions. Despite the fact that international graduate students have always and still do (although the margin is narrowing as the number of international undergraduates studying in the U.S. continues to grow) make up the majority of the international student population pursuing education in the U.S. (Institute of International Education, 2011), there is still a need for more research on how the unique needs of international graduate students can be met.

International graduate students have already completed the equivalent of an undergraduate degree and are frequently seeking graduate study in the U.S. to support personal goals for research and professional experience. Making the decision to uproot one's life and study in a foreign country suggests a dedication to that particular educational pursuit. Data from Hanassab and Tidwell's (2006) quantitative research study on the needs of international graduate students in higher education reported that assistance with immigration was the participants' primary need, while academic success

and career assistance followed as their second most important need. The results of Hanassab and Tidwell's (2006) study cut to the core of international graduate student motivation, which is reflected in their need to earn their degree and be successful (which correlates with the necessity of needing sound immigration advice in order to remain in compliance with visa regulations). While international graduate students are not inexperienced in higher education, for many, the structure and standards at higher education institutions in the U.S. can vary from that of their home country (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2010; Hanassab & Tidwell, 2006; Liao et al., 2007; Ritz, 2010). Differences in the postsecondary educational system, and on an exosystemic level in relation to differences in cultural values and societal standards, can create barriers for international graduate students that do not exist for domestic graduate students.

Standard barriers that exist for international graduate students include difficulty with adjusting to some of the following significant situations: the need to assert oneself as an independent, professional adult; the desire to succeed in the social side of graduate seminars as well as in research (Chen, 1999; Le & Gardner, 2010); the expectation of gaining valuable professional experience in one's field (Trice & Yoo, 2007); and the ability to learn more about and adapt well to the culture in the U.S. (Dao, et al., 2007; Ritz, 2010; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006). Wang's (2009) quantitative study on assessing the background and resiliency characteristics of international students in relation to their ability to adjust found that resiliency characteristics contributed more to positive adjustment than background characteristics, indicating that despite a student's cultural experience, the fostering of resiliency can contribute positively to adjustment.

Because international graduate students come from a myriad of different cultures,

research suggests that some international students are able to adapt to American culture more smoothly than others (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Dao, et al., 2007; Hanassab & Tidwell, 2006; Le & Gardner, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Tatar, 2005; Wang, 2009; Zhao, et al., 2005), which makes supporting this student population as a whole a challenging task for administrators and faculty. A significant number of research studies about international graduate students focus on specific cultural groups – such as Asian students – (Le & Gardner, 2010) or even more categorically, on international graduate students from a specific country, such as Taiwan (Dao, et al., 2007).

Hanassab and Tidwell's (2006) quantitative research study found that female international students reported needing more assistance with adjusting than male international students. A qualitative case study on discrimination experienced by international students (Lee & Rice, 2007) found that international students of color (Asian, Indian, Latin American, and Middle Eastern in this particular study) reported greater discrimination and more difficulties with acclimating to the culture than white international students (study participants from Europe, Canada, and New Zealand) (p. 393). Many students in Rice and Lee's study also noted an air of discrimination simply due to what they felt was cultural indifference on behalf of domestic students. These cases of racism and discrimination exacerbate the need for administrators to develop policies and educational programming with a focus on diversity and multicultural awareness.

Research studies that focused on the experiences of particular international graduate student cultural groups tended to emphasize the implications that language

barrier has on the ability of students who are non-native English speakers to adapt to American culture (Chen, 2009; Dao, et al., 2007; Tatar, 2005; Wang, 2009). Anxiety over TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) (Chen, 1999) test scores, which measure an individual's level of English ability (Liao et al., 2007), can develop even before the international student has arrived in the U.S., not only because these scores impact their ability to pursue graduate education in the U.S., but also because they are frequently tied to graduate assistantship qualifications as well (Chen, 1999; Wang, 2009). Dao, et al.'s (2007) quantitative study of international Taiwanese students' acculturation level and perceived level of language fluency revealed that perceived level of English speaking capacity was tied to the ability to predict depression in this particular student population. Taiwanese students were more susceptible to developing depression due to a low perception of English speaking ability than they were over level of acculturation and social support. Dao, et al.'s (2007) study emphasizes the ramifications that language barrier alone can have on the international graduate student experience.

Cultural differences related to both work and academics are frustrations that can plague any international student but may flare up the most for international graduate students (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Chen, 1999; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2010; Kim, 2006; Lee, 2009; Wang, Martin, & Martin, 2002). "For example, although Western universities value problem solving and analytical or critical-thinking skills, East Asian education systems value tradition, history, and authority" (Adrian-Taylor, et al., 2007, p. 93). Kim's (2006) quantitative study on oral communication needs for East Asian international graduate students found that this particular student population was the most concerned about having to lead class discussions within their graduate seminars.

Paralleling Kim's (2006) study was a qualitative study by Lee (2009) that observed the level of oral participation in graduate seminars by six Korean international students. Lee discovered that although the students who participated in his study felt oral participation in class was important they perceived their English speaking abilities to be too poor for the fast pace and interactive nature of their classes to speak up themselves.

Although it would be impossible to study and recognize the values of every culture within the world, establishing guidelines that are inclusive and sensitive to a variety of cultural needs may aid in understanding the habits of international graduate students. "With a rapidly growing number of ESL students entering our classrooms, educators should be aware of and prepared to understand and accept the differences these students bring to the classroom. [...] Differences cannot be viewed as deficits, ignorance, or incompetence" (Wang, et al., 2002, p. 5). In Tatar's (2005) qualitative study on Turkish Graduate students' experiences in an American classroom, the study results revealed "the participants were sometimes confused about what was expected of them as graduate students. It would be very helpful if instructors made explicit what they expected of the students in terms of classroom participation" (p.351). Graduate-level students are frequently expected to have a mature handle on how to conduct themselves academically, however this assumption may not always hold true for international students, many of whom are studying in the U.S. for the first time. Transition and adjustment to the U.S. academic culture is an area fraught with a diverse range of challenges for international graduate students. As international graduate students begin to adapt more to the new culture, they rely on the systems of support, campus resources, and relationships with peers, faculty and administrators, to shape their experiences.

Support, Adaption, and Campus Resources and Relationships

International graduate students are frequently not aware of the resources on campus that are available to them, how to utilize these resources to their benefit, and how to find the time to take advantage of resources (McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

Additionally, “it should be noted that services designed especially for students, the International Student Advisor’s Office and the Graduate Student Association, are not used by the majority of international graduate students.” (Adrian-Taylor, et al., 2007, p. 102). Information-seeking habits of international graduate students, in particular their ability to use the library and access academic resources, was compared to domestic students’ information seeking methods in a quantitative research study by Liao, et al. (2007). Liao et al. demonstrated that international graduate students are more likely to rely on internet search engines for seeking information while domestic students are more likely to use online library resources. International graduate students who completed their undergraduate education in a country other than the U.S. may not be familiar with utilizing library resources in research practices, making a case for more attention to orienting international graduate students to the library system in America.

Many international graduate students are hesitant to use services for a variety of reasons, whether they be cultural or related to a fear of hurting one’s immigration status (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Chen (1999) also recommended a greater focus on the part of college counselors to adapt culturally sensitive models of counseling in order to offer more effective support. Research suggests that international students are less likely than domestic students to use counseling services due to the beliefs of their cultural backgrounds and their lack of knowledge about the resources and how to use them

(Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007; McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Hyun, et al.'s (2007) quantitative study on international graduate student mental health reveals that many international students are relying upon their advisors for emotional support, instead of seeking professional counseling services on campus. If relationships between advisors or assistantship supervisors are strained, international graduate students must be made aware of the mental health services that are available to them as students.

Factors beyond the pressure of academics are emphasized in a quantitative research study by Perrucci and Hu (1995), that focuses on international student satisfaction in the area of academics, assistantship appointment, and social relations. They discussed how the strains of international graduate students with assistantships, including displeasure with work hours, stipend health insurance and other issues, can lead to dissatisfaction even if the students are happy with the educational side of their experience. Data from this study showed that overall, a higher level of English language ability, positive interaction with Americans, and positive environments free from discrimination, contributed most to satisfaction as an international graduate student, whereas gender and academic performance were the least significant.

Perrucci and Hu's (1995) results posited the importance of establishing a culture of acceptance and providing ample advantages for supportive social interactions. In particular, facilitation of social interaction between international and domestic graduate students at the departmental level is recommended by the authors. This recommendation supports the belief that both international and domestic students are isolated, even within the same academic departments, due to the academic and assistantship-oriented demands placed upon them.

A quantitative study on international graduate students' adjustment strains by Poyrazli and Kavanaugh (2006) determined that master's level international students experienced a greater level of stress in relation to academic adjustment (including more difficulty with the English language and lower GPA's) than that of international doctoral students. The authors concluded that the difference in adjustment between master's level and doctoral level international graduate students could be due to many doctoral-level international students already having earned their master's degree from an institution in the U.S., thereby allowing them to have already acquired a greater level of acculturation in relation to the higher education system in the U.S. Faculty and administrators could benefit from further research in this area when designing strategies for assisting the international graduate student population.

An obligation rests on faculty and staff to provide an inclusive and welcoming environment that embraces diversity. In Rose-Redwood's (2010) qualitative study that focused on international graduate students' perceptions of diversity initiatives at their home institution, "the international graduate students who maintained that their department hosted regular social events over the course of the semester were more inclined to socially interact with a mixture of American, co-national and other international graduate students" (p. 393). The researcher noted "on the other hand, limited efforts by departments to promote social connections among graduate students reduced opportunities to engage in cross-cultural exchanges or to develop close friendships, thereby increasing the likelihood of social segregation" (Rose-Redwood, 2010, p. 393). Because international graduate students with assistantships carry the additional responsibility of a job, they must rely on the efforts of the institutional

environment around them to provide increased opportunities for social enhancement. Additionally, according to Chen (1999), international students can enhance their self-efficacy and social skills through increased communication, particularly for those who hope to improve their English speaking abilities.

International graduate student interaction with domestic students has also been the subject of research (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Lee & Rice, 2007; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Rose-Redwood, 2010; Trice, 2004; Trice, 2007) in order to discover how much interaction is taking place, and whether or not increased or decreased interaction is beneficial for international students. Trice's (2007) qualitative study on international student isolation from domestic students examined, from the perspective of faculty members, reasons on why faculty members felt international graduate students were isolated. The faculty members in Trice's study noted that strong bonds with co-national international students affected not only international graduate students' ability to interact more with domestic students, but it also weakened their English language skills because they would spend more time speaking in their native tongue.

Additionally, because international graduate students, just like domestic graduate students, are so busy with research and work, the faculty in Trice's (2007) study noted that these students have limited time for opportunities for social interaction. Faculty members recommended attempting to diversify labs and assigning diverse groups in graduate seminars in order to facilitate more interaction, as well as constructing study rooms and other areas where social interaction can take place between international and domestic graduate students. Because faculty members spend a considerable amount of time with international graduate students, their role in decreasing international graduate

student isolation could be crucial.

International student isolation is a common theme in research (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2010; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Trice, 2007) and as Trice's (2007) study exhibited, for international graduate students, especially those with assistantships, time for socializing with domestic students is at a premium, although international students often express a desire to have more interaction with domestic graduate students (Moore & Popadiuk, 2011). Isolation for international graduate students was also the subject highlighted in a mixed-methods research study by Erichsen and Bolliger (2010). Students in this study reported feeling academically isolated due to a lack of knowledge about U.S. educational and research practices, and socially isolated due to perceptions of being invisible on campus and the community, and lacking the courage or opportunity to engage more socially. One participant in Erichsen and Bolliger's study noted that the longer the duration of study in the U.S., the more he felt that he lost his sense of identity and felt like neither an insider nor an outsider. Interestingly, data from Erichsen and Bolliger's research revealed that when initially responding to surveys and within interviews, participants reported low levels of isolation, but over the duration of the study, their reluctance to conceal academic and social isolation lessened, suggesting that international graduate students may be hesitant to reveal areas in which they are struggling.

Moore and Popadiuk's (2011) qualitative study on international student experiences captured the positive aspects of this student populations' adaptation (five of the seven student participants were graduate level) in order to explore the techniques and resources that were used and may have contributed to their success. Data revealed that

incidents including the ability to connect with peers in a meaningful way – particularly with co-nationals and other international students; maintaining a foundation of support - especially through a connection to their friends and family back home; the ability to embrace and adapt to a new culture; and finally discovering an internal strength that participants described as arising from increased independence and intensified cross-cultural experiences, all led to international student success and satisfaction with their experience. Recognizing methods that international students utilize to ultimately lead them to a successful and fulfilling experience pursuing education in the U.S. can aid faculty and administrators who are responsible for fostering techniques such as those mentioned as key outcomes from the study, in order to improve the experiences of international students.

Relationships with their advisors and other constituents within their academic department can be some of the most vital that international graduate students form during their time studying in the U.S., mainly because this ecosystem reflects their main purpose for being at a particular institution in the U.S. (Adrian-Taylor et al., 2007; Rice, Choi, Zhang, Villegas, Ye, Anderson, Nesic, & Bigler, 2009). According to Adrian-Taylor et al.'s (2007) mixed methods study, international graduate students are most likely to seek help from their supervisor first, and after that either their family back in their home country or fellow international students. The authors recommend that resources for neutral, third-party help be made available to international graduate students who are managing conflict with their advisors. If international graduate students' identities are tied closely to their academic pursuits, then the relationship between this student population and their advisors, or other key individuals within their departments, becomes

crucial to satisfaction with their experience and academic and personal success.

Conflicts between international graduate students and their advisors were addressed in the mixed-methods research study by Adrian-Taylor, et al. (2007). Their “study explore[d] the frequency of interpersonal conflict between international graduate students and faculty supervisors, their understanding and experience of conflict, and their needs for managing and preventing it” (p. 96). Types of conflict may be related to misinterpretation of cultural values, and establishing methods for identifying sources of conflict could contribute to better harmony between international graduate assistant relationships. International graduate students reported the following sources of conflict significantly more often than did faculty supervisors: lack of feedback, lack of support or guidance from supervisor, different expectations about how close/personal the student-supervisor relationship should be, and disrespect from the supervisor (Adrian-Taylor, et al., 2007).

Rice, et al.’s (2009) mixed-methods study about international students’ perspectives of their relationships with their advisors revealed some significant negative experiences between international students and their advisors. “On some occasions, prejudice and abusive behavior occurred in the advising relationship. Students felt disrespected and wanted their advisors not to ‘look down on me because I don’t speak his kind of English...’” (p. 385). Other sources of negative experiences included feelings of being overworked, subtle feelings of being mistreated due to cultural differences, and also treatment that differed from the more positive treatment received by their domestic counterparts from their mutual advisors (Adrian-Taylor, et al., 2007).

In Lee and Rice’s (2007) qualitative case study on international student

discrimination, they mentioned that within the higher education world, “some view international students as revenue sources and as cheap skilled labor (in the sciences and engineering departments especially)” (p. 384). Regulations alone cannot change discriminatory perceptions or false stereotypes, however institutions can adhere to pledges of diversity and multicultural awareness through continuous support of the rights of international graduate students. This research study also raised the point that international students typically lack the support systems that many of their domestic counterparts rely upon to deal with stress over academics and work. International graduate assistants may look to their advisors as a source of support, so if this relationship is riddled with tension, an international student may feel even more burdened.

Continuous good communication and informative orientations between departments on campus, advisors, and international graduate assistants could lead to less conflict and better experiences for all parties. “For the international graduate student, the socialization process may even be considered to be taking place on three levels, including to academia, the profession, and the American culture overall” (Le & Gardner, 2010, p. 254). The multiple dimensions that effect international graduate-level students are different and generally more complex than the socialization processes experienced by their domestic counterparts (Lee & Rice, 2007; Liao, et al., 2007). However, in order to implement best practices for support and communication services, an in-depth understanding of the specific experiences of international graduate assistants is needed.

Ku, et al.’s (2008) qualitative case study followed a support group of twelve international doctoral students who aspired to work in academia upon completion of their

degrees to explore how a support group with faculty mentors altered their experiences and their level of preparation for their future careers. Their data showed that the international doctoral students had joined the support group with the hope of “getting advice about teaching, conducting research, preparing for a job, learning about culture, and gaining support and friendship” (p. 372). These hopes reflect the importance of gaining career advice and support from faculty advisors or other professionals within their academic departments that international graduate students seek. In fact, the students in Ku et. al.’s study stated that they wished their academic advisors were more accessible, and that they displayed a higher level of caring, particularly in relation to their unique needs as international graduate students. Erichsen and Bolliger’s (2011) mixed-methods study on graduate student isolation emphasized the isolation that can be felt by international graduate students, especially when considering the expectations that many faculty and staff hold for graduate-level students. “While it is recognized that the graduate student experience can be intensely stressful and perplexing, it can be particularly so for international students,” (p. 312) which emphasizes the need for faculty advisors and other staff within academic departments to be sensitive to the unique stressors international graduate assistants combat.

A qualitative study by Stevens, Emil, & Yamashita (2010) confronted the role of mentorship within the experiences of international graduate students. Stevens et al. proposed that a mentor would move beyond the typical role of an advisor to offer more crucial support, guidance, and career direction for international graduate students. In this study, two international graduate students were tasked with writing reflectively in journals about their experiences, as well as openly sharing their reflections (including

drawings and charts that were created) with a mentor to promote discussion and awareness of needs. The results indicated that the two international graduate students felt that the reflective journaling not only assisted them with adjusting, but it also helped them to feel empowered, be successful in graduate school, and improve their academic writing. A content analysis study of various literature by Dedrick and Watson (2002) revealed the following mentoring needs for international graduate students:

Be aware they might need special sympathy and understanding; be clear in communicating your expectations about the quality of student's writing; take whatever steps are necessary to minimize cultural distance; be sensitive to a different value systems; develop competencies to use different kinds of thinking; create a cooperative ethos. (p. 283)

Stevens et al. (2010) recommended a greater awareness on the part of faculty to the distinctive challenges that international graduate students face, as well as more research on utilizing methods such as reflective journaling to assist this student population with adjusting culturally and being successful academically. The mentoring needs of international graduate students were also explored in a content analysis by Dedrick and Watson (2002), which considered the necessity of a greater wealth of information available to advisors so that they may have a better foundation of knowledge for mentoring international graduate students. This literature review brings to attention the need for more training and more information for faculty and staff regarding working with the international graduate student population.

Faculty perspectives on working with international graduate students have also been researched by Trice (2003; 2005). Trice's qualitative case study (2003) examined how faculty and academic department members identify and consider the unique needs of international graduate students. The majority of faculty members in the study enjoyed

having the students in their classes and interacting with them, but also experienced challenges with helping international students resolve their problems and establishing better communication. Trice recommended more training for faculty so that they are aware of resources for international students, and also better facilitation of communication between different departments on campus by international student representatives.

Academic departments as a whole are also an important component in the consideration of international graduate students experiences since they often provide the hub around which an international graduate assistant studies and works (Le & Gardner, 2010). Trice (2005) conducted a qualitative case study focused on the perceptions of academic departments in relation to large numbers of international graduate students, and also how these students impacted advising relationships and departmental policy making. One of the key findings from this study was the individualism and isolation that occurred within segmented research labs between international graduate students, domestic graduate students, and faculty. Additionally, the departments in this case study indicated that they had only informal and underdeveloped policies in relation to international students and that these policies centered on English language requirements and funding. Faculty at the institution in the research study felt that pressure to produce research overshadowed their teaching and advising functions. Faculty who had experience abroad were more likely to be open to adjusting advising sessions and lectures to support the unique needs of international graduate students (Trice, 2005). Due to the research and funding pressures many faculty face, administrators could play a role in providing more opportunities for faculty to gain training in working with international students, in

promoting faculty opportunities abroad, and also in planning socializing opportunities within academic departments so that international and domestic graduate students who are normally isolated due to research can be offered a chance to interact.

There is mounting evidence throughout the literature on international graduate students that the connection between this student population and their faculty advisors is a crucial one that rests heavily on the advisors' ability to relate to their international advisees. Because the importance of the relationship between and advisor and a graduate student is so strong, more studies that reveal the international student perspective of this relationship are needed. If guidelines, such as quality of writing expectations, are set ahead of time, this could minimize distortion of the expectations of international graduate assistants. According to Trice (2004), "the focus could be helping students to understand cultural norms of American higher education, including faculty expectations, the nature of relationships with professors and advisors, and classroom dynamics" (p. 685) in order to smooth the transition for international graduate students.

Because an international student is studying in the U.S. on a student visa, if his or her spouse and / or dependent children do not also hold student or work visas, they are considered a dependent of the student and are unable to work, an experience that can be confining and frustrating for those used to having greater mobility (Chen, 2009; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2010; Meyers-Walls et al., 2011). "The experiences of international students' wives have been ignored and are worthy to be included in the exploration of women's developmental theories. Because of their visa status, these women are prohibited from working in the US" (Chen, 2009, p. 211).

Due to the fact that many graduate students are of nontraditional age (over the 18-25 year old category), having spouses and / or children could be considered common, and this also holds true for international graduate students studying in the U.S. (Meyers-Walls, Frias, Kwon, Ko & Lu, 2011).

International student adjustment outcomes are, to some degree, contingent upon relationships established with domestic students [...] can make the adjustment of married international students more complicated. Married international students who likely spend a substantial portion of social time in the company of their spouses or are invested in relationship maintenance issues. (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006, p. 769)

International graduate assistants with spouses and dependents are more limited in their time to participate in or benefit from social adjustment activities (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Transitioning to a new culture and academic life in the U.S. is a complicated process that may become increasingly more strenuous for international graduate students with dependent spouses and families.

Chen's (2009) study of dependent wives of international graduate students in the U.S. explored the experiences of these dependent wives, many of whom held jobs back in their home countries, are living in a new country where they cannot work, and must struggle with overcoming cultural and language barriers as well as isolation. This research study revealed feelings of limitation and even depression, suggesting a greater need to consider the situations of international students' dependents when designing programs, policies, and other services. In particular, it is worth noting that many international graduate assistants will be busier than non-assistantship students, and may be forced to spend less time at home, thereby leaving their dependents further isolated. Such a situation could contribute to a more negative experience for International graduate assistants.

A qualitative study by Myers-Walls et al. (2011) discussed how dominant gender roles in an international student's home country could be challenged or forced to be renegotiated upon moving to the U.S. to seek education. Myers-Walls et al. focused on families of international graduate students and how both male and females characterized their experiences and how the non-student spouses felt. Some students mentioned the balancing of multiple identities – being a full-time graduate student, a spouse, and a parent – alongside handling the adjustment to a new culture was a significant stressor. Others claimed that language barriers and a loss of status (including within a career and in their community back home) for their non-student spouses created additional sources of anxiety. Overall, Myers-Walls et al.'s research raised a greater awareness of how pursuing graduate study in the U.S. can have additional sources of stress for international graduate students with spouses and families, which may not always be visible to the faculty and administrators that are working to support them.

Alternatively, Poyrazli and Kavanaugh's (2006) quantitative study on whether or not marital status, ethnicity, and level of academic achievement had any effect on the adjustment of international graduate students found that the married students experienced a lower level of stress in relation to social adjustment than single students. The authors claim that such data may prove that having one's family with them acts as a buffer to the stress of having to adjust socially. Trice's (2004) quantitative study also found that married international graduate students had less social interaction with domestic students, most likely because these students had less need to form friendships due to social support from their spouse and / or family. Regardless of whether or not an international graduate student has increased or reduced stress due to the presence of dependents, faculty and

administrators should still be alert to the presence of this factor and its potential outcomes for international graduate students. Methods of adaptation by international graduate students will vary according to the various levels of support they are receiving as well as the campus resources they seek out and relationships they form with peers and faculty. The experiences of international graduate students in particular, are also shaped by their experience within (or even without) a graduate assistantship.

International Students and Graduate Assistantships

A popular form of apprenticeship for domestic graduate students, graduate assistantships are also a desirable method for gaining practical experience and a familiarity of the professional work culture in the U.S. for international students. Assistantships are also viewed as a source of financial support and security for international students, many of whom, due to federal visa restrictions, may not pursue employment off campus. However, being successful at graduate-level academic work while also balancing an assistantship is not always an easy task for domestic students, and could be increasingly difficult for those who are working in an unfamiliar culture and especially for those who are not native English speakers. Many international graduate students are helping to fund their overseas education or gain practical experience through working as a graduate assistant (Trice & Yoo, 2007). These graduate assistant positions include graduate assistantships, research assistantships, and teaching assistantships. The needs of international graduate assistants may be different from the needs of undergraduate or non-assistantship international students, and more studies are needed to explore the phenomenon of this student populations' experience.

One of the key findings in Le and Gardner's (2010) qualitative study of

international Asian doctoral students in the STEM fields found that the participants in the study relied heavily on the internet as an “unofficial recruiting tool” (p. 257) where the students could locate institutions of choice, discover where funding was available, and ultimately hope to secure an assistantship. Communication regarding assistantship and research project opportunities was disseminated primarily by co-nationals, and not by the faculty or institutions in the U.S. This shows that international graduate students may rely heavily on co-national networking mixed with technology in order to find vital funding for their educational pursuits in the U.S.

Gorsuch’s (2011) quantitative study of international teaching assistants focused on developing English speaking fluency in order to improve the experiences of both the international graduate assistant as well as the undergraduate students that were being taught. “One challenge for many international teaching assistants (ITAs) is improving their spoken English fluency after arrival in the U.S.A.” (Gorsuch, 2011, p. 1). The researcher tested different methods of reading and speech practice that were designed to facilitate with lecturing and teaching to determine whether or not the English language skills of the international graduate assistants could be enhanced to improve their communication abilities within the classroom. Her study proved that improvements could be gained from brief, twice weekly sessions, however resources such as these do not often exist on campuses for international graduate assistants, and this student population is frequently too fearful to ask for additional support with classroom communication. If lack of confidence, especially related to language, is a primary factor of stress for international graduate assistants, a push for more resources or training could be initiated at institutions with high numbers of non-native English-speaking international graduate

assistants.

Misunderstandings about the realities of language barriers are also prevalent obstructions to clear communication and academic expectations (Gorsuch, 2011; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006), particularly within graduate assistantships where students are expected to communicate clearly and professionally.

Many of these [international graduate] students have developed profound subject knowledge before they are admitted into graduate programs in the United States. It is often assumed by their instructors that they have competence in the language as well, allowing them to perform equally with their native English-speaking peers. (Wang, et al., 2002, p. 3)

Although graduate-level students are expected to handle intense work, communication between international students and their professors must be clear from the beginning in order to maximize equity between work and grades. Trice's (2004) quantitative study also recommends "clearly written materials about academic rules and procedures, produced at both the departmental and institutional levels with the input of more senior international students, [to] allow new students to function more comfortably and productively within the organizational bureaucracy" (p. 685). In particular, international graduate assistants should be informed of the expectations for graduate assistants both on the institutional and departmental level.

Concerns over gaining relevant career experience are also prevalent among international graduate students, many of whom look to their assistantships to fulfill this void (Behrens, 2009; Shen & Herr, 2004). Additionally, Shen and Herr's (2009) qualitative study on the career aspiration and placement concerns of international graduate students studying in the U.S., revealed the majority of the students in the study relied more on career advice and assistance from professionals and resources within their

own academic departments, as opposed to using institutional career counseling services. The international graduate students in the study stated that they did not utilize university career services because they did not know such a resource was available, they figured the services were not for international students, or they felt that the resources were more for undergraduate students. Behrens (2009) considered the need for professional interview practice for international students with a focus on the U.S. style of the job application process. Such a workshop, Behrens noted, can address how cultural differences can impact interview success for international graduate students in the U.S.

Shen and Herr (2009) implied that more of a focus on adopting technological resources and utilizing tracking and accountability measures for international alumni can be ways that institutional career services may better be able to serve the international graduate student population. A quantitative study of international graduate students' perceptions of their academic experience (Trice & Yoo, 2007) found that satisfaction was based upon how well their academic and work experience in the U.S prepared them for either a job back in their home country, or for remaining in the U.S. and finding a job. The research also revealed that many international graduate students felt they only had limited assistance from faculty and many felt unprepared to return home and be successful at a job. These research studies indicate that international graduate students arrive in the U.S. not only with the expectation of pursuing graduate coursework but also of securing relevant job experience and career support.

Notable too, is the financial pressure that many international graduate students must work under, and can be a source of extra stress (Chen, 1999). Without an assistantship or another source of funding, many international students could not survive

the high costs of a graduate education in the U.S. Kwon's (2009) quantitative study on how international students view their transition to studying in the U.S. found that "the most frequently reported fear was 'financial pressures,' by 60 percent of respondents, followed by 22 percent as 'fear of failing subjects,'" (p. 1030) indicating that finances and academic success may place some of the greatest amount of pressure on international students. For international graduate students who must return to their home countries before completing either a master's or PhD, whether it be for financial, academic, or personal reasons, this early departure can sometimes be viewed as a failure and become a source of shame (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2006). A significant aspect of many international graduate students' experiences studying within the U.S. are graduate assistantships, which can offer valuable professional work experience as well as financial support. However, for international graduate students with assistantships, their experiences may vary according to their ability to balance academics and work, as well as cultural adjustments related to working within a professional capacity in a new country.

Conclusion

Literature on the experiences and challenges faced by international graduate students is plentiful, however there are not many studies that focus specifically on the multidimensional challenges faced by International graduate students in relation to their experiences of balancing graduate level work with an assistantship. A qualitative study that captures the humanized voice of international graduate students who negotiate work and study in the U.S. can add considerably to the body of research that already exists, and can contribute towards practical knowledge for administrators and faculty who work directly with this student population.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of international graduate students with assistantships (both at the master's and doctoral level) and how they interpret these experiences, at a large, research intensive, public, four-year institution located in the Southwestern United States (U.S.).

Research Questions

For international students studying in the U.S., transitioning to a new culture can be a major challenge in itself. International graduate assistants must face the transition to a new culture while also balancing demanding graduate coursework and a job. With busy schedules and a considerable amount of academic pressure on them, international graduate assistants often do not have the same opportunities as undergraduate students to participate in socialization activities. This study aimed to explore, through the voices of international graduate assistants, their unique experiences in order to identify beneficial methods for assisting them from both an international affairs and student affairs side, as well as from within their respective academic departments.

The primary research question for this qualitative study was: What have been international graduate assistants' experiences adjusting at a large, public, research-intensive, four-year institution in the Southwestern U.S.? To build upon these various general experiences, the following sub-questions were also explored:

- 1. Transition Challenges:** What were some of the pre-arrival expectations held by international graduate students who are not only working towards a master's or

PhD, but also working as graduate assistants? What were / are some of the challenges international graduate assistants have faced since they began both their work and study at the institution?

2. **Support and Relationships:** How do international graduate assistants feel that their experiences may be different from their domestic counterparts and from other international graduate students who do not hold assistantships? Did or do international graduate assistants ever seek support or assistance on this campus related to their ability to adjust to their academic work and / or assistantship work, and if so, what types of support have they been utilizing? How do international graduate assistants describe their relationship with their advisors and other faculty members in their department? When applicable, for international graduate assistants who live with dependent spouses and / or children, has their dependent's presence shaped their academic and / or work experience in any way?
3. **Graduate Assistantships:** What were / are some of the positive experiences as well as challenges that international graduate assistants have had within their academic experiences as well as their employment experiences? Do international graduate assistants feel that their graduate assistantship has had any impact on their academic work?

Research Design

I selected a qualitative design to fulfill the purpose of this research study, which was grounded in the individual voice of each participant. Qualitative research focuses on individuals' perceptions of their experiences and how they build and make sense of the meanings that are derived from these experiences (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2010). Creswell

(2007) claimed the emphasis of qualitative research depends upon utilizing a theoretical lens to capture a certain view or meaning, and the actual product of qualitative research “...includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem” (p. 37). Qualitative research focuses on constructed interpretations that are birthed from personal, individual experiences, rather than looking for technical, calculated explanations for why phenomena occurs as it does (Merriam, 2009).

The primary instrument that forms the cornerstone of qualitative research is the researcher his or herself (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). “Since understanding is the goal of this research, the human instrument, which is able to be immediately responsive and adaptive, would seem to be the ideal means of collecting and analyzing data,” (Merriam, 2009, p. 15) particularly in a study where the researcher is seeking to gather and interpret a shared experience, rather than a concrete conclusion. Additionally, Stake (2010) gathered that, “experiential research places heavy reliance on examining the personal experience of people being studied,” (p. 62) which requires a personalized and flexible manner for collecting the data so that the essence and details of the experience can be both captured and rendered without losing the intention of each individual.

Consideration of the primary research question of this study – which emphasizes the individual experience in relation to a particular phenomenon – provides justification for the use of a qualitative research method, especially when no clear, heuristic theory exists for that particular phenomenon. Merriam (2009) clarified that one outstanding characteristic of qualitative research is its inductive nature, which allows the researcher to construct new concepts and propositions to describe a phenomenon. International

graduate assistants encompass an extensively diverse group of students, and the supple nature of qualitative data collection lends itself well to the burrowing through of different accounts in order to identify shared experiences.

Phenomenology

The specific approach of qualitative research utilized for this study was a phenomenological method. Creswell (2007) defined phenomenological research as a method describing “the meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (pp. 57-58) in order to fashion a “universal essence” (p. 58) of that particular phenomenon. This research study concentrated on the shared experience of being an international graduate student with an assistantship studying and working at a public, four-year institution in the U.S. Despite the variety of backgrounds that this student population has come from, they all lived the experience of being international graduate assistants.

Creswell, building off of the phenomenological approaches of psychologist Clark Moustakas, posited that phenomenological research studies include identifying a shared phenomenon to be studied; the bracketing out of any subjective realities the researcher may hold in consideration of the phenomenon; collecting data from participants who have or are experiencing the phenomenon with an emphasis on “in-depth interviews,” and “broad, general, [...] open-ended questions”; analyzing the data for “significant statements” in order to identify specific “clusters of meaning”; and finally, presenting the data findings in a way that captures the “‘essence’ of the phenomenon” (pp. 60-62).

A standard of phenomenological research is the ability to interpret the data in a variety of manners that reflect the unique experiences of individual participants. A phenomenology “is also focused on understanding the participants’ voice,” (McMillan, 2008, p. 292) a tenet through which I hoped would allow a collective essence to emerge no matter how diverse the pool of participants. More specifically, all of the participants in this research study shared the following characteristics: they were either master’s or PhD students, considered to be international by classification of a home country other than the U.S., and were currently employed within any type of graduate assistantship on their home campus.

Setting

This research study was conducted at a large, public, four-year institution located in the Southwestern United States (Southwestern State University – SWSU). SWSU is classified as a predominately white institution (PWI). At the time this research study was conducted, SWSU had a total enrollment of about 24,000 students - around 5,000 of who were graduate level students. International students represented about 7% of the total student population, and international graduate students represented almost 25% of the total population of graduate students at SWSU¹. The town in which SWSU is located can be considered medium-sized, with a population of around 50,000.

Participants

There were twelve total participants in this qualitative research study. These participants were chosen via criteria sampling on the basis of their status as an international graduate student (either master’s or PhD level) who were at the time the

¹ Source of student body data is not cited in order to conceal the institutional identity of SWSU.

research was conducted, currently employed at a graduate assistantship at their institution. Graduate assistantship, for the purposes of this research study, included research assistantships, teaching assistantships, and any other general type of graduate assistantship that employs a graduate student in a professional manner and offers funding support such as tuition remission and / or a stipend. There was no restriction based on other statistics such as age, sex, and home country. An initial e-mail introduction of the research study was sent to all students meeting the above criteria (about 450 students), by the Manager of the office of International Student and Scholars (ISS) at SWSU, on behalf of me, the researcher. The Manager of ISS at SWSU acted as the gatekeeper to me for accessing potential participants for this research study. Creswell (2007) defined a gatekeeper as "...the individual the researcher must visit before entering a group or cultural site" (p. 243).

Potential participants who were interested in participating in the study were asked to fill out a Google document form, after which I would contact them by e-mail. Fourteen potential participants filled out the Google document form, indicating their interest in participating as well as their availability and e-mail by which I could contact them. After I contacted the fourteen potential participants by e-mail, twelve individual interviews were arranged. The participants ranged in age from twenty-four to forty-four, with a total of three females and nine males. Three of the participants were working towards a master's degree, and nine of the participants were PhD candidates.

Data Collection

I, the researcher, acted as the primary instrument for data collection, and was the sole conductor of the individual interviews. "The data collection mainstay of a

phenomenologist is the personal, in-depth, semistructured or unstructured interview” (McMillan, 2008, p. 292). Consistent with the qualitative, phenomenological nature of the study, the interviews were semi-structured, featuring an instrument (semistructured interview protocol) with open-ended questions (Appendix E), which allowed me to follow up on specific answers and probe for more information as the interviews progressed (McMillan, 2008). Semistructured interview methods are compatible with qualitative research due to their focus on open-ended questions, the ability to be more flexible and less rigid, and allowance of the individual being interviewed to shape the conversation (McMillan, 2008; Merriam, 2009). In this particular study, I felt that semi-structured interviews would be the most appropriate so that the participants could be guided in a specific direction without restraining their ability to interpret concepts in unique ways based off of their individual cultural values and experiences.

Aside from the individual interviews, a personal data sheet was given to each participant to complete before the interviews began. This personal data sheet (Appendix D) was used so that I could compare basic demographic statistics (including age, sex, home country, field of study, time at the institution, master’s or PhD level, and whether or not each participant had a dependent spouse and/or children). Participants were not asked to fill out this personal data sheet until they had arrived for their individual interview with me.

Following successful Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix A) from my home institution, I also forwarded a copy of this IRB approval to SWSU’s IRB, who through e-mail agreed to allow the research to take place on its campus with its students. After the research study was officially approved, my potential participant

contact verbiage (Appendix B) was e-mailed on my behalf by the Manager of the International Students and Scholars office at SWSU to all students who were international graduate students with assistantships (about 450 students). This initial e-mail explained the purpose of the research study, as well as expectations of the participants, including the careful consideration of their confidentiality. Participants who expressed interest were instructed through the e-mail to follow a web link, which took them to a Google document webpage. My name and contact information was also provided within the initial contact e-mail in the event that potential participants had questions or concerns; however, no potential participants contacted me directly.

The Google document form asked for their name, e-mail address, home country, field of study, whether or not they would prefer to participate in a focus group, individual interview, or both; and days and time segments in which they would likely be available to participate in a focus group or individual interview. The potential participants were given a deadline by which to fill out the Google document form if they were interested in participating in the research study. Eight potential participants expressed an interest in an individual interview only, six participants expressed an interest in either a focus group or individual interview, and zero participants expressed an interest in a focus group only. Due to variances in availability and a stronger preference for individual interviews as indicated by the potential participants, I ultimately chose to arrange solely individual interviews for the purpose of collecting data.

Potential participants were then contacted directly by me through e-mail in order to reintroduce the purpose of the research study and gauge whether or not the potential participant was still interested in participating, and if so, what his or her availability was

for arranging an individual interview. Twelve potential participants responded and individual interviews were arranged with these students through e-mail. The two potential participants who did not respond received one additional follow up e-mail and when they did not respond a second time I ceased to contact them any further.

Reminder e-mails were sent out, a day in advance of each interview, to participants who had agreed to and scheduled an individual interview with me to reconfirm the time and location. The individual interviews took place in a private room in a centralized location on the campus of SWSU. All twelve participants appeared at their scheduled individual interview time and all twelve interviews reached completion, as determined by discussing all questions in the semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix E) (when appropriate), and the need for no further discussion of the topics on the part of the participant and researcher. Interviews were recorded with two digital recorders, and each individual interview ranged in duration from 23 minutes to 65 minutes.

Participants were all asked to sign an informed consent form (Appendix C), which outlined the purpose of the research study, the procedures of the study, the rights of the participants, any known risks and benefits, and also the contact information of both the primary and secondary researchers, before beginning the interview. Students who were willing to participate in the study were provided with snacks and beverages and given a \$5 gift card to a coffeehouse at the conclusion of the interview. At the beginning of each individual interview, participants were provided with a copy of the informed consent form and were encouraged to contact either me, the primary researcher, or the secondary researcher with any additional thoughts or concerns. The twelve individual interviews

were transcribed exclusively by the primary researcher for the purpose of data analysis. I chose to refrain from editing any linguistic or grammatical errors from the dialogue of the study participants to preserve the integrity of organic thought and speech. The only text that has been removed from direct quotes includes transition words indicating pauses, such as “um,” and “uh.”

Data Analysis

Utilizing the phenomenological method of analysis proposed by Creswell (2007), I practiced horizontalization by identifying and pulling out key statements from each interview transcript. The act of horizontalization can be described as reviewing interview transcripts and “highlight[ing] ‘specific statements,’ sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (p. 61). Following the initial horizontalization, I then developed themes, or “meaning units” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159) based off of the essence of each key statement. These themes were then taken out of the context of each individual interview and combined so that I could identify patterns and draw conclusions regarding shared experiences. I chose to allow these themes or codes, to emerge solely from the research, rather than relying on priori codes in order to let the main points that were important to the international graduate assistant population emerge organically. Codes were combined, arranged, and rearranged until specific themes became distinctive. The themes were then checked against the meaning units that were highlighted during the horizontalization to ensure that the themes were appropriately capturing shared and reoccurring experiences. The approach to phenomenological data analysis that I utilized was more flexible than the template proposed by Creswell (2007), but still sought to sift through the data until a general essence of the phenomenon of

being an international graduate assistant at a public, four-year institution in the U.S., emerged as several succinct and bold themes.

Additionally, I relied heavily on the use of in vivo codes as part of the data analysis process, and also as a platform for the presentation of the final results. In vivo codes are “names that are the exact words used by participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 153). I felt that in several instances the raw descriptions for certain units of meaning provided a better interpretation of the shared essence of the research participants than the filtered themes. In vivo codes that were utilized within this study emerged during the horizontalization process, and upon analysis of the entire data set, were deemed to successfully capture thoughts and feelings of the participant group as a whole. The title of this study, and primary in vivo code that arose from the data, “the third culture,” is an example of how I wielded codes directly from participant data to illuminate shared participant experiences. Finally, I narrated main ideas that emerged from the data analysis through the use of illustrative figures and discussion.

Verification and Triangulation

I sought to assert the reliability of the data through utilizing several methods of verification. Progressive focusing, as proposed by Stake (2010), was one method that I employed in order to avoid approaching the data collection, analysis, and interpretation through a preconceived lens of what the outcome of the study might look like. Stake (2010) referred to progressive focusing as a “...commitment to gradualness, and effort to control presumption and invalidity,” and a triangulation method “where the meanings and data gathering and issues and prospective findings change throughout the study” (p. 132). I was aware that the natural findings from the interviews may reveal themes and data that

were not previously considered or tied to my own experiences and preconceived ideas, thereby motivating me to refrain from identifying specific codes before reaching the data analysis stage.

Finally, I worked to gain “adequate engagement in [the] data collection” (Merriam, 2009, p. 219) process in order to reach a reliable and fair level of understanding of the phenomenon being studied. I felt that saturation was reached with both the number of participants interviewed, and also with the length of the individual interviews, because I “began to [...] hear the same things over and over again” (p. 219), indicating that several strong shared experiences were already present among the research participants. McMillan (2008) described triangulation as the definition of patterns by the researcher during data collection, indicating that the data is credible. Additionally, I sought to enhance the credibility of the data through engaging in the data collection, transcription, and analysis procedures, ensuring that the integrity and emotions of the original communications were not lost. Finally, I hoped to eliminate any possible bias through reflecting on my own experience with the target population within the research findings – known as “*epoche*, or bracketing,” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59) as well as through conducting the study with a pool of participants whom I had no prior contact with and who resided at an institution different from my own.

Conclusion

The methodology applied in this research study has thus been outlined in chapter three. Due to the nature of the research question, I employed a qualitative, phenomenological framework in order to identify the essence of the experience of international graduate assistants at a public, four-year institution in the U.S. The methods

for data collection, analysis and interpretation were intended to allow organic and descriptive themes of the experience of this particular student population to emerge. While the conclusions of qualitative research studies, by nature, are not highly transferrable (McMillan, 2008), I intended to distinguish the particular experiences that international graduate assistants face, as well as how they interpret these experiences, in order to identify areas for future focus with supporting international graduate students.

Chapter Four

Findings: Emergence of a Third Culture – Facing the Challenges of Transition

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of international graduate students with assistantships (both at the master's and doctoral level) and how they interpret these experiences, at a large, research intensive, public, four-year institution located in the Southwestern United States (U.S.).

Participants

There were twelve total participants in this qualitative research study. These participants were chosen through criterion sampling, which was based on their status as an international graduate student (either master's or PhD level) who was at the time the research was conducted, currently employed at a graduate assistantship at their institution. Participants were all volunteers who contacted me on the basis of expressing interest in participating in the research study and were therefore were not selected intentionally due to personal characteristics. There were no restrictions based on other demographic information such as age, sex, and home country.

Participants ranged in age from twenty-four years old to forty-four years old, and three of the twelve participants were female, while nine of the participants were male. Three of the study participants were working on master's degrees, while the remaining nine participants were working on PhD's. Of the twelve total participants, ten declared fields of study within the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields. Ten of the participants hailed from Asian or Middle Eastern countries, one participant was from Eastern Europe, and one participant was from South America.

Length of time spent as a graduate student at SWSU ranged from one year to six years. Details of participant demographics are illustrated in Table 1, including the self-chosen pseudonyms of each participant.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Name	Age	Sex	Home Country	Education Level	Field of Study	Time at Current Institution	Dependent Spouse	Dependent Children
1	Alish	27	M	Iran	PhD	Mechanical Engineering	2.5 years	No	No
2	Ravan	24	M	India	Masters	Electrical and Computer Engineering	1 year	No	No
3	Zoey	35	F	Uzbekistan	PhD	Educational Leadership and Policy	4 years (PhD) 2 years (Masters) 6 Total	No	Yes
4	Max	36	M	Peru	PhD	Mathematics	6 years	No	No
5	Howdy	25	M	India	Masters	Electrical Engineering	2.5 years	No	No
6	Murthy	27	M	India	PhD	Chemistry	1 year	No	No
7	Pink	44	F	Mongolia	PhD	Economics	6 years	Yes	Yes
8	Jas	30	F	India	PhD	Biosystems Engineering	3 years	No	No
9	Miles	27	M	China	PhD	Electrical Engineering	1.5 years	No	No
10	Pill	32	M	India	PhD	Physics	4 years	No (spouse is also a PhD student)	No
11	Mory	24	M	Iran	Masters	Biomechanical Engineering	1.5 years	No	No
12	Alexander	40	M	Ukraine	PhD	Mathematics	4 years	No	No

Synopsis of Themes and Subthemes

From careful coding and analysis of the study data, three key themes and eight pivotal subthemes (see Table 2) emerged to capture the essence of the phenomenon of the international graduate assistant experience. The theme, “The First Six Months: Transition Challenges and Concerns,” captured the initial and continuous struggles that international graduate assistants identified as they explained their initial experiences upon arriving in the U.S. to begin their graduate school journeys, as well as how these experiences

evolved over time. Three subthemes, “Securing Basic Necessities,” “Cultural and Language Barriers,” and “Developing a Third Culture,” arose from the core of the first major theme. The second main theme, “Pillars of or Impediments to Success: Personal and Professional Relationships,” focused on the emergence of data in relation to institutional and community methods of support; advisor and departmental relationships; as well as the role of peer interactions and friendships, and also the impact of family on experience. The three subthemes within the second key theme included “Methods of Adaptation and Systems of Support,” “The Role of Advisors,” and “The Role of Peers and Family.” “Like Living on Only Air and Water: The Significance of a Graduate Assistantship,” was the third core theme, and it captured the participants’ reactions to the importance of graduate assistantships in relation to financial support and professional career experience, as well as experiences connected with their assistantships. The two subthemes within this third and final main theme were “Essential Value of an Assistantship,” and “Experiences within the Work Environment.”

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
1. The First Six Months: Transition Challenges and Concerns	a. Securing Basic Necessities b. Cultural and Language Barriers c. Developing a Third Culture
2. Pillars of or Impediments to Success: Personal and Professional Relationships	a. Methods of Adaptation and Systems of Support b. The Role of Advisors c. The Role of Peers and Family
3. Like Living on Only Air and Water: The Significance of a Graduate Assistantship	a. Essential Value of an Assistantship b. Experiences Within the Work Environment

Themes and Subthemes

The first six months: transition challenges and concerns. A sojourn to a new country to pursue graduate study could be universally considered as an experience that would be fraught with some degree of challenge. As diverse as the international student population in the U.S. is, so too are their transition experiences varied and unique – factors that are reflected in the participants’ conversations. Pink, a PhD student from Mongolia who had been at SWSU for six years, was able to characterize her early transition experiences in one word, “exploration.” “I think the first month maybe, or

maybe first semester was exploring, everything was exploring. Exploring the culture, the campus, the relationship between student and professor, the food, everything. It was exploration.” Pink’s conclusion that the transition to a new country for graduate study involves multiple layers of exploration characterized the various types of exploration all of the participants had to face throughout their first six months at SWSU. The theme, “The First Six Months: Transition Challenges and Concerns,” captured the essence of exploration, adjustment, as well as impressions and how these combined to develop a new, personal culture within each individual student. Subthemes within “The First Six Months: Transition Challenges and Concerns,” were “Securing Basic Necessities,” “Cultural and Language Barriers,” and “Developing a Third Culture.”

Securing basic necessities. Although all twelve of the participants had been at SWSU for a minimum of one year, they were able to recall challenges they struggled with upon first arriving at the institution, and many of these challenges included having their basic needs met. Several of the participants mentioned the importance of assistance from the moment they stepped off of their planes at the local airport, with both transportation and a place to stay. Alish, an Iranian doctoral student who had been at SWSU for two and a half years, stated:

I expected more help with getting from [the local airport] to here. That was a big problem for me and everyone else here. Since that, especially since there are the first things you experience, they are kind of more important. Those, I kind of expected that everything would be ready for me to come here. Considering that I don’t know much about what’s going on in this country, there was nothing like that prepared. The paperwork regarding the immigration, enrolling, those things are ok. But for starting to live here, actually live here, there was nothing prepared here. Yes, I expected that, ok, at least I there would be someone here to pick me up from the airport. There is now, but it wasn’t two years ago.

Other participants cited help from co-nationals they had met through the internet, assistance from church-affiliated persons in the Southwest City community, and pick-up service from the Office of International Student Services at SWSU, in relation to transportation from the local airport to the campus. However, as Alish stated in the quote above, several of the participants felt quite on their own to figure out how to meet their basic needs upon first arriving.

Because Southwest City, the city where the SWSU campus is located, is isolated from major cities and does not have a well-developed public transportation system, a large number of the participants cited transportation frustrations as one of the top initial challenges they faced. Alexander, a Mathematics PhD from the Ukraine, remarked in regards to transportation, “First was there really bad thing, the only bad thing actually I faced here. It’s problems with public transport. For instance, in Europe, it’s not a problem, you just leave your car and take a bus and train.” Pink also reflected on the constraints of trying to get settled without a car:

The first day when I landed in [Southwest City], my goodness... You couldn’t do anything without a car; that was the first challenge. I said, ah ok, is there any public busses, which will take me to grocery stores, the basic necessities, I needed to buy. There wasn’t any at that time. At that time, I think [SWSU], [Southwest City] had the only busses surrounding within the campus. So then we rented a car, we bought, we went to Wal-Mart, we bought everything we need for the start.

Both Alexander and Pink’s words suggested a lack of awareness of the public transportation system in Southwest City, and a subsequent dependence on others for getting to the local stores in order to purchase essential items.

Finding housing and temporary accommodations was another topic that emerged during interviews in relation to securing personal necessities. Jas, a biosystems engineer doctoral student from India, remarked of her personal experience with sorting out

accommodations, “When you come to the U.S., during the orientation, you get a housing for maybe ten days or two weeks. After that, you don’t know where to go.” Pink also commented on her lack of knowledge in regards to local housing policies, “It was shocking to know that you had to reserve your spot to live six months in advance. Otherwise, you have to go and check with all property, people to see if they have any places to live.” Max, a PhD student from Peru who had been at SWSU for six years, talked about his desire for more information related to securing housing:

They didn’t explain it that well about the housing situation. So, I could have found probably a cheaper place to live during the first semester. But I didn’t know, so, I had made a contract and it was already too late, it was very expensive. So probably providing more information, so other resources to find places to live for... It would be helpful, right?

Jas, Pink, and Max’s comments reflected a need for more information on local housing information before arriving on campus.

Several of the participants cited being alone and not having any previous contacts at SWSU as creating more difficulty for finding affordable housing. Max talked about having to sort out a suitable living arrangement for himself:

So the university has of course family housing, right? And, of course, for families but only for families, right? For single students who want a roommate, so yeah, that kind of information definitely should be available and there should be also a list, right? I mean, to request a roommate. That’s what something I couldn’t find. So I had to live by myself for the first semester and spend a lot of money, yeah. It was frustrating. And then I realized, oh wow, there is this cheap, very cheap place, sometimes off campus.

Pink recalled a similar experience involving her search for a temporary roommate:

Yeah, I had an issue, I had the difficult time to find a roommate at that time. I remember that. And then instead of looking for a place, I tried to be a roommate to somebody who already has a place. But, when I said that I’m going to stay here only for one semester because my family is coming and I need to rent myself, then that person felt that I offended her – it was a Chinese girl – and she start crying, and I didn’t understand what happened, haha. That was difficult. I just

couldn't understand why she is putting so much force on me now. I didn't say anything, I didn't sign anything, and she probably had so much hope in me that I can share with her. But when I said, ok I have to stay here and live for one semester and then move out because my family is coming. She said, no you can't do that, and she start crying. So that was frustrating moment, haha. [...] Maybe she had a hard time to find a roommate because of the financial issues, maybe. So, but, sharing the information among new students, would be great I think.

Both Max and Pink's experiences with seeking housing and possibly roommates, as well as the experiences of Pink's temporary roommate whom she mentioned in her story above, suggested a desire to have more assistance with finding off-campus housing as well as with matching up roommates.

Many of the participants recounted stories of receiving transition help from various sources, especially in relation to having their basic needs met. These sources of assistance included co-national students already on campus who the students had previously connected with online before arriving in the U.S., and members of the local community and church groups. Jas talked about how co-national contacts she had made before arriving in the U.S., at the institution where she did her master's degree, helped her with settling:

Here, they [co-nationals] help me with the housing, and because it's difficult when you come first in the U.S. Anywhere in the U.S. it could be. So when I came to [East Coast University – the U.S. institution she attended before SWSU], I didn't have any friends there. I did have some contacts, but yeah, they help a lot. Because it's, it's like, um, when they came to the U.S., somebody helped them. So, it's like, passing it on. [...] When you have local contacts, they know which ones are the good places, which have good facilities and everything. So your research is minimized. And they help you select. Yeah, I think so. It's very helpful if you have contacts here.

Howdy, a master's student from India, also received both transportation and temporary accommodations from co-nationals he had made contact with through international student forums online:

When you come from the airport, from the day one, you will have an apartment, because you can locate online, but nobody likes that, doing online, unless you see the apartment. So, um, we do provide them for the accommodation even there are students who, might let us stay couple of days before to look around to finalize apartment, so. Having such an organization, having active forums, that is a good thing to do.

Murthy, a chemistry PhD student also from India, the same home country of Jas and Howdy, had a similar experience receiving assistance from co-nationals he came in contact with online:

Yeah, because I don't have any accommodation at all, so I had asked friends over online, luckily [he] has a vacancy in his room, so I had stayed over there. He picked me up at the airport and let me use his room.

The support that some of the participants obtained from co-nationals they had met through online forums pointed towards the potential importance of encouraging and promoting such friendly pre-arrival networking activity.

Other participants discussed transportation help they received from local church volunteers upon their initial arrival. Zoey, an Educational Leadership and Policy student from Uzbekistan who had pursued both her master's and PhD at SWSU, mentioned:

I had a few people here who when I came they just offered the help. You know, kind of when you have someone coming and say well, let's go to grocery, I'll take you to grocery until you can get your car and everything. And I would accept that oh, for a few times and after that try to do everything by myself, just to get you know, independent.

Pink also commented on the help she was given towards sorting out her basic needs when she first arrived:

I didn't have a car during that first semester. But, there were so many people who helped me. And, um, now I am helping others – I'm driving whenever people need, you know, need to reach any places, so, I'm paying them back the service, which I received a long time ago. [...] And, there was a church person, he is still here, and he helped me a great deal. He helped us to know everything to our rental place. And when you rent off campus you have to sign a contract with the

electricity, with the gas, some maybe other separate things need to be done. So he helped us a lot, so, I was really, really grateful to him.

These experiences suggested a great reliance on the local community for supporting new international students upon arrival, in particular those such as Zoey, Pink, and Max, who were from countries that do not have high numbers of co-national students studying at SWSU. One aspect worthy of recognition is the common thread of “giving back,” that some of the participants expressed, demonstrating that international graduate students may be willing to assist new incoming international students with meeting their own basic needs.

Wishing they had been able to obtain more information before they arrived, as well as receiving a more thorough orientation - or extended orientation period - after being on campus, also emerged within transition discussions. Participants mentioned a need for more information on securing necessities and other primary needs, such as how to get around Southwest City, and where the pharmacies and grocery stores were located, in order to ease their initial transition. Max mentioned his desire for having more information available and also for receiving help from current international students:

I would like to see the international student office have probably their website some more clear information where you can go directly, and that's for help. They, probably you would be able to have more orientation. I know the school has some orientation sessions for the library or some other resources but, probably they should have, I mean the, international student or scholar office, a special section that continuously at least for the first few weeks, or first few months, keep giving meeting with the new students and giving some kind of regular update or all the resources available on campus, on town or the state, or in general in the country. [...] Maybe have some more volunteers to help international students – of course it would be good if they are specifically other international students. It's better if they are from the same country – I know that's not always possible, but, it should be something which the university look for. Somebody from the same country helping you definitely is a good idea.

Pink discussed both her wish for more information on where to go when first arriving as well as for more information in conjunction with the university orientation:

The first night you arrive on campus, first night, after hours, let's say. That's what happened to me. Everything was dark around. And you have to explore the campus on your own, and nobody is there because it's after hours and you have to find a place to eat. And we came on January 5, which was still winter break. So, the dorms were not operating. [...] SWSU actually has a really great orientation program. It covers everything from healthcare, from insurance, from car insurance, rent, cultural aspects, everything, they covered everything. But it's not enough, you know. We actually, I needed a longer time to go and to read that big folder they gave us, after this orientation session, because I remember, I missed many of that things, the lady was talking in front of us on the stage.

Although the collective opinion between the study participants was that the initial orientation they received was quite helpful, they felt that having more information made available to them before arriving, and also an extension of information after their initial orientation would have made their transition smoother. Participants also mentioned financial difficulties and harsh weather as challenges they had to face when first arriving in the U.S.

Cultural and language barriers. Because international students come from such a heterogeneous mix of cultures, the level at which cultural and language barriers impact transition experiences varies with each individual. However, all of the study participants cited cultural differences that they struggled with at some point during their adjustment to graduate school in the U.S. Max's memories of his fears about the cultural and language barriers he knew he would have to face when attending graduate school in the U.S. reflect the initial anxiety that other participants admitted they shared:

I started looking on the internet and I saw that it [Southwest City] was kind of a quiet place to some point I was a little bit afraid because I come from a big city, so I didn't know how, or what to live in a small town, so I was a bit concerned. It was the first time I was leaving overseas. [...] I was afraid of the language barrier and the cultural barrier too. It was kind of a combination – a bit excited but also a

bit nervous, thinking what could, what could be the new experiences. Will I be able to manage, to handle all those new experiences coming to me?

Zoey attributed the barriers that many international students face to both their physical appearance and language capabilities: “You know that international students are all so different. You have white international students and you have black international students, and you have good-speaking English and bad-speaking English.” Pink also shared similar sentiments as Zoey in regards to the wide range of experiences that international students face. “It’s not the same if you come from different country, from different culture. And especially if somebody doesn’t speak an English also. Yeah. And... I didn’t know there were many problems, but every person experiences it on a different level.” Zoey and Pink’s observations suggested that experiences may be different for each international student based upon his or her home culture and previous exposure.

Everyday cultural differences, such as dissimilar lifestyles and education structural differences were noted by a number of the participants. Ravan, a master’s student who was from India, discussed how transitioning from a culture where young adults stay at home during their studies to having to live on his own and take care of daily tasks by himself was a difficult transition at first:

Back in my country, we generally don’t have nothing else to do expect study there so, because we stay with our parents, so we didn’t have anything to do – not even cooking, wash. We don’t do worth taking care. Only the students we had to study. But after coming here after the bachelors we had to do our own food, dishes, then come for the courses, which was, I think, the coursework is tough compared to our country. I don’t say it’s tough but my country generally the courses mostly the exam is toward the end of the semester. So some of them they don’t relate towards the semester only the final exam at the end of the semester will have a hundred percent. In here it’s divided over the same stuff, the first midterm, the second midterm. So in my country [...] we generally study only last few weeks of the semester. So it has been, education system is quite different so we have, first

semester was a bit tough. First semester work was about same student work I ever did so it was at first tough balancing because the system of education, work, a new culture and stuff, it took time for me to adjust.

Mory, a master's student who was from Iran, mentioned a similar experience to that of Ravan's in relation to transitioning to a culture where young adults live at home to having to learn how to live on his own in the U.S.:

I guess some of the Americans here might be living with their families so that makes a big difference, like for me, if I don't want to spend a lot of money then I have to cook for myself then take care of everything. Like, when I was back in Iran in my home, my Mom was taking care of everything so now it's just me to be taking care of everything, and what else I had to do was the school, my research, I have to take care of everything, paying the rent, the bills, and a lot of other things you might know of. But, an American person, I think, should be more ok with that.

Earlier experiences of growing up in a culture with norms and values that are different from what is typical in the U.S., such as seen through Ravan and Mory's explanations of the familial structures back in their respective home countries, can also be viewed as a natural barrier.

Other participants also noted differences between the higher education system in the U.S. and their home countries as one of the cultural barriers they had to overcome. Ravan commented on the initial transition to a new structure of education, "The system is new for us. Because what we studied for twenty years is completely different from what we are doing so it took us time to get accustomed to this..." Murthy, a chemistry PhD student from India, discussed how relationships with faculty in his native India were much more formal:

If a professor tries to interact we don't call him by name at any time. So, we call them by the name sir. [...] Even if the professor comes into the classroom the people will be standing. So when he sits then we will sit. So that's the kind of thing we follow. So after mother and father, then comes the teacher. Teacher has the third place in India. So that's the kind of the thing, so we are not used to chit-

chatting with the professors, or in front of them. [...] And after completion of their work they will likely go home. They will not be staying here to do chatting.

Pink also expressed the surprise she felt about cultural differences within interactions with faculty in the U.S.:

In our culture, you treat your advisor, your professor, or somebody as superior. [...] It's shock me when one of my friends said, 'Dan, can you explain it again?' So, he called professor by his first name. And, I was so shocked and I was waiting that he will be mad. He said, 'yeah, of course, sure.' And students like, use professor's first name.

Even though international graduate students are knowledgeable in their subject area, some pointed out that the difference in educational focus was one more initial challenge they had to face. Pill, a doctoral student from India who had been at SWSU for four years, mentioned of his experience:

I had to handle a class, I had to handle a lab, and tutoring sessions. It was overwhelming at the beginning but not too bad. The main thing I would say is the work culture, actually in my country back, it's different the way, at least in our field, physics, the way, it's more like theory and students go bang their heads and try to figure out what's happening. It's more formal. But here, it's a little bit more practical, so that change of approach is kind of totally a new thing for me. [...] My first semester was really bad even though I knew what was happening in the class, but since the emphasis was so much um on assignments and that way... so it took a while for me to, I guess that first semester was really bad. Later on it was not bad. But yeah, definitely that first semester, adjusting to this style of education is totally different.

While all of the participants eventually warmed up to the social and structural mores of higher education in the U.S., many experienced discomfort and frustration during their first semester of study.

Other cultural barriers mentioned by participants included having to get acclimated to differences in food and weather, as well as various cultural misunderstandings. However, participants also acknowledged that over time – particularly after their first semester or first year in the U.S. – they felt significantly more

culturally adjusted. Arriving in the summer and adapting to high levels of heat was one of the first challenges Alexander mentioned:

Another kind of problems it was abnormal heat. When I went here actually, it was at the beginning of [summer] it was more than 110 degrees. No car, haha. It was terrible. But, after a couple of months, Fall again, mother nature, yeah.

Howdy discussed his struggle with the food upon arriving in the U.S., and also the cold he experienced during the winter months:

We were not that comfortable with the food that we get here because we are very used to the food that we get back in India. So, one other thing that we did with me and my roommate, that we used to cook at home and we had like, turns. Like, he would cook Monday and I on Tuesday. [...] But still you get the food to eat, which you like. Because that keeps you healthy. [...] And one of the biggest challenge I had to face is the climate, because the climate back there in India is warm. It's not that cold.

Pink talked about initially experiencing an aversion to the food in the U.S. but adapting to it quite well as time progressed. "The food was not okay to accept it, at that time. But now, we love green bean casserole, haha. So, we do roast beef, chili.... So now we are totally have adapted to everything." Every difference between a student's home country and the culture in the U.S., whether small or large, can be viewed as a form of a barrier that may present a challenge to international graduate students.

Participants were overall very positive about their ability to adjust to the culture in the U.S. after experiencing initial culture shock, and many reasoned that learning about U.S. culture from media and globalization helped. Mory mentioned, "the culture back in Iran might be more conservative, but here is more free, but that's not been a problem for me, like, I'm pretty ok with that. So, there are some differences, but not a problem." Max felt that previous exposure to media from the U.S. had helped him to avoid any severe cultural barriers. "I never had the really very this kind of cultural shock because I was

kind of familiar with through internet and TV and other stuff, so. I adapted very easily to the American culture to the American environment.” Pink also mentioned that global influences made some adjustments much more fluid:

So, also probably the development of the entire world economy makes the transition easier I guess. Yeah. Yeah, I think so, yeah. Because... So what is the difference buying coffee in China or in Mexico, or maybe in the States. The only difference would be the money you pay, right?

Pill reflected on the benefits of adapting successfully to the culture in the U.S., which he felt made his experience ultimately more rewarding. “Number one thing was again, the cultural aspect. Once I got to know the culture of this country I could easily make friends, easily move about easily understand their needs.” The participants’ initial experiences all seem to indicate that cultural barriers were present, but with time and different strategies for adaptation, these barriers could be overcome.

One final barrier of significance that arose within the data was becoming accustomed to speaking English successfully. Although not all international students face a language barrier when coming to the U.S. for graduate studies, the majority of the participants in this study mentioned struggling with their English as a second language skills within their academic and assistantship work, or even with just understanding and using colloquial English better. Max, whose first language was Spanish, admitted that the language barrier was his largest initial challenge:

Well at the beginning of course it’s language. Yeah. When I just got here, I had to study in my country several years English, but one thing is you study theoretically but another thing is to come to a place where you have to use the language only. That was one of the main challenges for me. Then, I think that was the biggest challenge actually at the beginning.

Miles, who was a PhD student from China and also spoke English as a second language, talked about his embarrassment over being misunderstood sometimes when communicating with the general public:

Sometimes, I don't know if it's my problem or they just had to do this, sometimes I just talk to some like, cashier, they just say, 'okay, what are you talking about, I don't know.' I don't know really anything. Probably that's my problem, but I keep, meeting this for several times, even after maybe two years. And still they are asking, 'oh, what do,' I say I'm sorry, they don't understand what I'm talking about. I don't know why, I probably did not say it right, or pronounce it correctly, and I think that is only the main challenge I have. Sometimes I feel a little bit of embarrassment. I think 'oh my gosh I came here for two years and they still can't understand what I am talking about, I'm so sad!' Haha. [...] And still I cannot really express my affections or some emotions very correctly. Sometimes I still have some communication barricade or something like that.

Both Max and Miles's comments suggested an overarching anxiety about the language barrier. Pink remarked that understanding some of the local colloquial terms caused some early confusion for her, despite her confidence in her English language skills:

Even though I was okay and everything, writing, maybe I was completely ok, but I wasn't able to catch what they were talking – you know, like, when I will buy some groceries, they will ask, 'do you need a sack?' I wasn't able to understand that, I wasn't able to catch that.

Many of the participants mentioned the importance of English language skills not only for having a successful score on their TOEFL exams (Test of English as a Foreign Language) but also for performing well as graduate assistants, in particular those with teaching assistantships. Howdy discussed the impact of the TOEFL exam scores on an international graduate student's ability to secure a teaching assistantship:

We have to give an exam called TOEFL, which is test of English, as a learning language. So there are four sections of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. So if you want to be, the purpose is, if you want to be hired as a TA, they do some kind of that your speaking and your writing skills should have grade above this. If you don't have the grade above this, the English department has some courses, and they have to go through those courses. If you fail you could, you don't get the chance to be a TA.

Pill also contributed his experience about having to adjust to the communication barrier he experienced when beginning his work as a teaching assistant:

The main challenge, especially when I arrived new, was that you know, I had a little difficulty understanding what these students were talking about, and you know, how they were doing themselves. Teaching a lab, how things were done, even though I was given a little interaction with how to work with it, and although I know the subject matter is, but understanding and communicating was definitely a problem. For a month, the initial month. But then, slowly after the first semester, it was not too bad. [...] I think it's just that culturally barrier, which I had. That could be one important thing and once I understood that, then it was not a problem at all.

Several of the participants, even those who came from India where they received education in English, also discussed the significance of learning how to make casual conversation within their assistantships and socially. Jas, who was from India, mentioned a connection between being able to communicate casually and solidifying relationships, and how this task made it much easier for American graduate students to adapt within their own assistantships:

Coming from India, it's like, we have been, the majority of our teaching it has been English, so there was not much problem, that's why I didn't seek any support or anything. [...] When you are working in the lab, you need to make small talks, so that you get, it's, it's like, you get a warm relationship with somebody. So that it's easy to work with them. So, as an international student initially you have to work on that. So American, they know about the labs, they have been familiar with them. So for them, it's very easy, then an international student. [...] Let's say when we go to the field or anything, you have to start from the, from zero. You need to make them understand, okay, and yeah, there is some communication gap, sometimes. And, you are not able to make small talks. You need to work on that. So, you don't get very personal with anybody. It's very soon. An American graduate student, they can.

Murthy, who was also from India, shared a similar view as Jas, where although he was confident in his English ability due to his prior educational experience, he felt learning how to use "everyday English" in order to form relationships was somewhat of a barrier:

And language barrier, official matter, I can't comment because I had education, I had education in English in India back home. But, cultural-wise, and friend wise, I can't say I had a chat with any of the U.S. people. So, that's kind of making friends and also that way, you could say that both international students, many of them, but not a group of American friends. So then, I had to adjust to the language people speak daily, so I'm not used to that. [...] Oh, I find that firstly, they [American GA's] can mingle, that's the first thing, they can crack jokes and everything like that. Well, of course I can too, but not as good as them.

Also from India was Howdy, who talked about how the language barrier caused many international graduate students to lose confidence, especially for those who worked as teaching assistants and had to lecture in front of a class:

I think this is what happens to most of the international students, they really good at technical stuff, but they don't know how to put that in front of students. Maybe because of the language barrier or sometime because of low confidence. Because, what happens, and even I observed that with many of the students, international student is, they complete the sentence in their own language in their brain, and then they try to come out with that sentence in English. So, what happens in that process, even, I used to do that in the beginning. But then I stopped doing that. What used to happen in that process is then you try to keep checking the grammar a lot. [...] Students should realize it's not about how you speak, it's more about you should be confident, you should be clear, the sound should be clear, and the technical, you have to pause, it has to be clear and these things.

The severity of different cultural barriers, in particular language barriers, varied for each international graduate student. Although each of the study participants experienced and approached these challenges in individual manners, they all had to face barriers throughout their time studying and working in the U.S.

Developing a third culture. As the participants adjusted to life as international graduate assistants at SWSU, their experiences shaped their perceptions of the transitions and challenges that many international graduate assistants in the U.S. face. The transition experience, coupled with the subsequent challenges and barriers that international graduate assistants had to work to overcome, formed shifts in individual culture, creating a cultural identity fused between one's home culture, as well as the new

culture within the U.S., which this study referred to as “The Third Culture.” Zoey described her perception of her experience as having to develop a “third culture” due to feeling in between her culture and peers back home, and adapting to the culture in the U.S.:

You’re coming from um, from a life where you have friends and everything back in Uzbekistan, right and then you come here. I also already have friends because of master here but still, you know, kind of being in the middle, like this is a different culture, you’ve entered a different culture but you’re coming from a different culture as well and now you’re developing a third culture because you are not giving up your own culture. But you’re also trying to get assimilated to new culture. So, the social aspect is really demanding. And it’s there, you wanted, it’s there. You have to go through everything. With the professional life, again you come from a different professional background, you try to identify yourself in this profession here in a different way. So these again, can, lots of adjustments and reflections if you will. And, you need to give up something but to gain something new you need to forget what you did before to start learning new things.

The push and pull of the “third culture” concept mentioned by Zoey accurately characterized the overall experiences interpreted by all of the international graduate assistants in the study.

Max summed up one of the main positive aspects of his experience when he shared, “this experience here has opened my mind completely. I was, I always was myself very open-minded, but I was open even more now, to America first, the country. American culture, in general, and the American education system.” Ravan also talked about how his experience as an international graduate assistant empowered him to have the confidence as a young professional:

I think that through the coursework I learned many more things I’m really glad that I came to [SWSU], to university to do my master’s. [...] Like electrical computer engineering department, it covers basics in most if the fields. But master’s is specialization of that, now the specialized learned had pulled everything else together. So it helped me to get a job and get the better understanding of my subject. And also, now I can work in the U.S. in America

because after studying international studies I feel I can go anywhere and adjust. Before I didn't have much confidence coming to U.S. So then work and work was quite, my research, my work was pretty helpful. And the work which I have done in the software engineering I want a same job now, mostly the same job, I've got a fulltime job, so, it help me quite a bit.

Other perceptions that the participants discussed included cultural and social interactions, diversity and discrimination, and thoughts on their academic and professional experiences. All of these new perceptions shaped the "third culture" identity of the international graduate assistants.

Interactions - both social and cultural - was one of the topics that continuously emerged throughout conversation with the participants. Many of the participants felt as though they did not have enough social interaction, especially with American graduate students, both because they felt they did not have a enough time and also that there were not enough opportunities for social interaction. Additionally, many commented on their desire to want to learn more about the U.S. culture aside from focusing on their studies and their assistantships. Pill discussed his own experience with learning to embrace social and cultural opportunities more after feeling closed off his first six months at SWSU:

One important factor I feel is I've had a very limited number of people whom I interacted with. And, if I would have had a chance or time that's one thing which I would have liked to change and that's one thing which I would like to advise every international student, to make more friends. [...] You are in a culture where you have the opportunity to learn this culture, understand this culture, or at least understand different cultures, you know? That's an exciting thing to do. [...] You know, my first six months I didn't do that [interact] enough and I suffered a little bit. Once, you know, after that I relaxed a bit, made more friends, and that's how I feel it's, it's easy for me now. [...] But I did volunteer for a few events, you know, that's how I met through the events of international student and scholars association, that's how I made a few friends, so, yeah.

Zoey talked about the challenges that accompanied the need to balance the various aspects of her life as a student, graduate assistant, and a mother:

You have your social life, you have your professional life, you have your family life, there are different circles, and they overlap and they don't overlap. You know this kind of thing, so being an international student that means, you have to establish a social life here because you're new. You have to settle your family life here, because you need to make sure that your family adjusted to what you are going through, and your new schedule, you know, those kind of thing. And new social interaction. And the professional life on top of that requires time and commitment and all of those things. So these are the layers that I'm seeing. And sometimes you need to give up one circle to make sure that you succeed in another.

Establishing their academics and assistantships as their main emphasis, most of the participants placed lower priority on socializing and cultural enrichment, but expressed a longing for not having more advantages to get to know others and the American culture better. Jas noted how graduate students specifically have limited chances for more casual interactions:

Of course, the most important thing is your research, but there should be some other things that should be going on. And for graduate students, I don't think there is a lot of opportunities at that stage. They can just meet with other graduate students and hang out. For undergrads, yes, there is a lot of things going on on campus, but not especially for the graduate students. Because maybe we don't have time, haha. [...] But, personally, what I have found, and it's not, we don't talk about it, but, I think everyone feels, even the Americans and the internationals, they are not a lot of activities going on at the university where Americans and the international people, they can come, they can with each other. So, more of those should be happening. Not on the campus level, and in the departments. Nothing happens, because, as a graduate student, according to your advisor, you are not supposed to venture out. It's, you chose graduate college because now you are looking at your professional life, not your personal or you don't want to have some fun. You had that as an undergrad student. So, it should be a lot of, because now I am at the stage where I'm, I have completed my research. And I've spent three years in my research. And it's like, more of an isolated life.

Miles echoed a similar sentiment of wishing for more social interactions with American graduate students:

Because we came here not only for our research, we have to learn, want to know some more about the culture here. Yeah. I feel I have very few chances to have this with American guys. Yeah, probably that's part of the issue.

Zoey discussed a need for promoting cultural events more throughout campus to different audiences, and not just international students themselves. She also felt that incorporating internationalization initiatives on campus should go beyond simply having the presence of international students, and that goals for globalization could be realized through academics as well:

From an international perspective, they run, we have cultural nights here, we have cultural events here, we have associations that run, like Dawali Nights, or something. So, I feel if a faculty member in his or her class, whatever classes such as political science, would emphasize, you know, how would you think if they know what the events are, let's say this week is German Week, let's say we have German culture, if they just bring it up in their classroom environment, that is one piece, one opportunity to really make students think and get them interested. [...] And sometimes people say, internationalization, one of the strategies is to bring more international students and I don't feel that's the case because internationalization really is aligning your curriculum with the global issues or something, right? So, just having us here it's not enough. [...] I think there could be suggestions from the academic standpoint is that in a curriculum in the class you teach, there could be always a course with topic that you can always connect, now everything, every topic with a global perspective. Like, I don't feel there is any type of that; there is no connection.

Many of the participants professed a desire for increased social interaction, particularly those who did not have much contact with American graduate students within their classes and assistantships, however the participants felt that creating such opportunities would be a challenge due to lack of free time for all graduate assistants. These desires to expand cultural horizons espoused the students' need for negotiating more aspects of a new culture and how these aspects played a role within the development of a "third culture."

Areas for improvement were brought up by several of the participants who articulated ideas that they feel would be helpful for new international graduate assistants.

Alish reflected on the online graduate assistant training he received and some of the information he wished had been covered:

We took an online course about how to react with, how to interact with everyone and figure out, and certain things like that. That was helpful, but I mainly need a real physical class. That would have been much more helpful. I would listen more and some of the stuff, actually I think were really useful and the, and something like plagiarism, how to interact with your advisor, but if your advisor has to do a huge workload, things like that.

Max felt as though useful information was not always presented in an accessible or clear manner, particularly on the SWSU website. He also commented on his frustration over finding support for assisting international graduate students with off-campus housing options:

One of the things I don't like about this is there is support, I don't deny that, but sometimes the information is not easily available. So I think that what the problem is that websites, that's a general problem for the university, for this particular university, I think. Is that not very user friendly. What I mean is, so there are resources and there are lots of things to help students but sometimes you have to go very deep and spend a lot of time searching for those things. It would be nice if they can improve that part. [...] They [the Office of International Student Services] referred me to the residential office, or whatever it's called. Yeah, exactly, they have more emphasis for American students, they don't care too much, or I would say they don't care, they probably care, but the information is not easily available for graduate students, right? Graduate students, they have different needs as undergraduate students. [...] When I was here, I would have loved to have that kind of thing, yeah. Some unified website that is specifically for graduate students, of course with the input from the residential life office.

Pink talked about the difficulties she faced when trying to make friends, particularly within her graduate seminars:

International student in master's program, they usually, they are not much involved with the rest of the campus I would say. Like undergraduate level, they are all mixed together, they can blend in. But, master's students, yeah, in the classroom, probably maybe twenty percent would be international, but.... It was not easy to make friends.

Wishing that there were more facilitation of social interaction also arose within Murthy's comments on his perceptions of his experiences transitioning to SWSU. "Social interactions, can be increased, but how I don't know. [...] And every department should concentrate more on how to motivate, not just interactions and all, just to improve group discussions." Mory mentioned his desire for more university-organized trips that would allow international students to explore more of the U.S.:

Because everyone who is international here in [Southwest City] wants to get out of here. That is for a reason. Like, I mean, for a vacation. Like, everyone wants to go on trips to other states to see what's going on in the United States. [Southwest City] is like a prison. So everyone wants to go around and see other states, other cities.

Many of the study participants expressed an eagerness for more social and cultural opportunities, and revealed that they felt that their status as graduate students made them more isolated. Some participants felt that many of the resources on campus were geared more towards undergraduate students and that American graduate students did not interact much with international graduate students both within and outside of class.

Finally, the participants all reflected on how they felt they were perceived on campus and in the community based on their status as international students. This perception could be seen as a significant aspect of how one defines his or her personal "third culture." Howdy felt that people would make generalizations about people from his country based on his own behavior, so he felt responsible for acting as a representative of his culture:

People are going to judge this, the quality of the way people interact, from your country, by looking at you, so you should not do anything that you could give the incorrect information on people that the students, or people from this country [...]. So you have to be more responsible when you are out, because you are representing your country. You should not be proud, you should be proud, but not

in that way that we are from this country and we should do this... You should be open to interact with the other student.

While none of the participants divulged that they had been the victims of overt discrimination, some mentioned peers who had felt discriminated against due to their status as international students. Alish mentioned a need for informing international students of their basic rights during their tenure as students in the U.S.:

And it would be nice to like, put a part in that workshop about the culture, about know your rights. That would be really good. So like, you're not citizen but you still have some rights. Know those rights so that you can protect yourself. That would be really helpful too. In many cases, like, if there... I actually remember one incident of discrimination. Well, I don't know if it's exactly discrimination or not, but I think it's worth telling. It's a conversation. There was a couple who came from Iran here to [Southwest City]. But we went together to a dealership so that they wanted to buy a car. After what we had agreed on a specific price, then they want to sign the contract, I was in the room with them helping translating and everything. The price on the contract was different from what we agreed on. As I mentioned it to the salesperson or accountant or whoever he was, he went and came with the manager and manager asked me to leave. He said that you're violating their privacy you cannot be here. And he just, he didn't throw me out but in a way, you know, you get the sense he forced me to leave the room. After a couple of my friends at [SWSU] and like [Southwest] University law school, no one know anything about this privacy law [...] Yeah, but at the moment, I didn't, I didn't know it, I thought ok, maybe there is some law regarding this. It's nice to know, to let international students know about their rights.

Howdy presented one example where he felt discrimination against international students occurred, but implied that it was not a frequent occurrence:

People go to the bars and if you are walking in the road, sometimes they will abuse you, or do something, but yes, sometimes it does happen. Even I had it happen to me a couple of times on Saturday nights. But, most of the times that's happened is people are in a group and they go out and they are not in the right frame of mind because they had a lot of liquor or something, so. There are a few things that might happen to you, you have to deal with it.

Overall, the participants felt that people at SWSU and in the community were both nice and helpful, and that they had not experienced discrimination. Miles said, "I think the people here is really friendly, so when I arrived and needed some help they just say

‘okay.’ Really willing to help you.” Zoey explained why she felt international students were not discriminated against:

I never felt that way [discriminated against], probably because, and I would say, because international students have the unique status here. You know, they are part of the culture but yet people know they are not part of the culture, they don’t compete with international students, they just appreciate them. They take them, as something to learn from, to learn about, and I think.

Max also found the SWSU campus and local city to be a welcoming environment. “Since this is a small community, people are really generous, so the people are friendly.” While each of the participants had their own unique perceptions of their experience as international graduate assistants, many of them shared common thoughts on wanting more opportunities for international and American graduate students to interact, and a desire to experience the American culture more. The participants’ perceptions and experiences gained through the transition challenges they faced combined to form their personal feeling of living within a third culture as an international graduate assistant in the U.S.

Chapter Five

Findings: Life Within The Third Culture - Support, Relationships, and The Graduate Assistantship

Themes and Subthemes

Pillars of or impediments to success: Personal and professional relationships.

The experience of international graduate students, in particular those with assistantships, is structured around their main purpose for pursuing study and research in the U.S. – their academic field of study. Therefore, most of the study participants viewed their academic departments as the core of their experience at SWSU. Furthermore, the support that they received through various relationships within their department, throughout campus, and also within the Southwest City community characterized the participants' experiences and their level of adaptation.

Generally most international graduate students' first contact is with faculty in their department, and many of the details of their transition are handled through their department, creating critical relationships between the students and constituents within their department. Jas said of her first point of contact, "when you are a new student, you are not really familiar with the system here. So, the first person to ask is your professor, your advisor." With graduate study being research focused, international graduate students typically work closely on specific projects and depend on their advisors for various levels of support. Aside from the critical relationship international graduate students had with their advisors, the interaction, or in some cases the absence of interaction, that international students had with peers also appeared to have a significant impact on the participants' experiences. For international graduate students with

dependents, having to adapt to an additional role – that as spouse or parent - in addition to juggling academics and an assistantship while transitioning to a new life in the U.S., adds an additional layer to the experience. Therefore, the subthemes within exploring how relationships can either be bolsters towards or stumbling blocks to success for international graduate assistants were “methods of adaptation and systems of support,” “the role of advisors,” and “the role of peers and family.”

Methods of adaptation and systems of support. All of the participants acknowledged to some extent the frustrations and hardship they had to endure during their adjustment period. Alexander even admitted to considering returning to his home country because his initial experiences had been so trying. “The first say, five weeks living, were just terrible. Just terrible. And, I even was going to come back. And so, you know, the only thing that there really responded to me was this university.” Murthy also remarked on the challenges he experienced adapting to balancing both academic and assistantship work. “Study, work, and you will have to do your TA job, and your coursework, so that, to me, three jobs, three hand to hand. So that’s the kind of very difficult thing.” Many of the participants reflected on the methods they used for adaptation, and while some pursued support for adjusting, this assistance was sought mainly from their individual academic departments and sometimes from the Office of International Student Services at SWSU.

The general feeling amongst the participants’ comments represented an air of independence and a desire to solve one’s own problems by oneself; a sense of purpose that emerged from their desire to succeed in their graduate studies and in their assistantships was a general thread that kept the participants motivated during arduous

periods of adaptation. Additionally, many of the study participants contributed ideas for resources they would have appreciated or liked to see expanded for new international graduate students. Ravan discussed the helpfulness of being able to gain more information about cultural and social norms upon arriving in the U.S. as well as more structured assistance with finding a graduate assistantship position, and advice about balancing responsibilities:

Apart from the concerns at the beginning of the semester if they could explain to us how to manage time, how to stay here, how to make friends with American students, what's good, what's not good, what is ok in this country and what is not ok when dealing with people. So some, maybe, as a culture it's always the first of some cultures are big on program and some cultures it would be offensive, some things would be offensive. This may be small things but this would help when making friends. These small things would have helped. And after that, and especially I feel like I need to be something regarding the graduate assistant positions. Career services needs to provide something. [...] Actually, the assistantships, actually there is not much resources so people are able to find work to find the career services is not so good. We need to go to every department and check whether there is a position available or not. So it's, and it's sometimes, the other professors of the departments get irritated or angry when we go and approach them because we don't generally, we don't give you assistantship while you are coming to our place. Because we can not find an assistantship in the same way, some departments are hiring so we can take a chance, so we generally go to every department and some places we have to face some bad, something, some bad experiences. [...] I think it [time management workshops for international GA's] would be a lot more helpful because in my country students never work, at least ninety-nine percent students never work while studying. [...] So no one has experience of studying and balancing working. So it's, it would be quite helpful for the international students.

Howdy, who was from a different country than Ravan, felt that international graduate students should learn how to manage time on their own, but he also thought that a assistance focused on cultural and social adjustment would be useful:

One of the biggest challenge that I had is to come out of the comfort zone. Because when you come over here you have to take care of everything, and so... That was one of the biggest struggles then. Doing everything on your own – you have to maintain the balance between your personal life as well as your research life. [...] Workshop is one really good way of telling people different ways in

which you can do it. But, sometimes I think you are the best of managing your time, and if you know how to do that, I don't really think that you need somebody else to let you know that. [...] So, I think, yes it will work for most of them, but some I felt that time management is something I should do it on my own. [...] More active participation of American students helping the international graduate student get used to the few things. [...] Other thing is to interact with people. That's the best way to acclimatize yourself to the environment.

Many of the same sentiments expressed by Howdy also arose in the conversation with Alexander, who likewise felt that he should solve his own problems, but that support services for new international graduate assistants would be beneficial for some students:

It's difficult to move to another country, it's difficult to move to another culture. And, it is difficult to really live without your parents, for instance, for so long. So, such kind of services are important. But I suspect I prefer to solve my problems by myself. But that's for me. But I suspect that too many people might have the situation that is uncomfortable and uncontrolled, and you experience typical problems as might expect. So, this services should be important.

Alish remarked that he felt his adjustment to life at SWSU was "rough," and that workshops on local culture might help international graduate students with adjusting better:

I was wondering about [Southwest state] before I got here. I have a couple of friends in [West Coast state]. They said that 'it's not gonna be easy for you, you cannot adapt, you cannot integrate to the community.' It was nothing like that. But, I know many students have problems but I didn't. Well, it, it was rough, I don't think it was easy but it was possible. [...] I think it would be nice to have some, something else, some workshop about the culture. Especially like, I think it would be much better it's um, if there are specific culture, like, [Southwestern U.S.] culture. It's a different culture here then, I dunno, like in [West Coast city]. So they are different. Not just some very broad ideas, those are not helpful, something about how people here are actually. Yeah, that might be helpful.

A majority of the participants recalled facing struggles with adjusting – in particular during their first six months. However, many did not attempt to seek support and in hindsight reflection were able to indentify services that may have been useful during their first semester.

Handling the responsibilities of being a graduate student and graduate assistant was described by Murthy as, “Study, work, uh, and you will have to do your TA job, and your coursework, so that, to me, three jobs, three hand to hand. So that’s the kind of very difficult thing.” Howdy also seemed to feel that balancing multiple responsibilities was not easy. “That was one of the biggest struggles then. Doing everything on your own – you have to maintain the balance between your personal life as well as your research life.” Pill felt as though people were not very open when it came to discussing problems, in particular individuals within his academic department:

First thing with study, the main challenge I found was approach. People are not very approachable, a few of them. If you have to discuss your problems, I feel they don’t care. The attitude is, it’s your life, it’s your PhD, I don’t care if you have a problem, you have to deal with it. But, I don’t think I find a lot of people to go and talk to and you know, who are willing to listen to our problems, we have. Especially at the advisor level, the department, there are not many people who want to help that way.

Zoey also felt that her experience could have been enriched by more opportunities for discussion with others concerning professional development and sharing experiences:

My first year frustrations were more about professional and the finding myself in this new role. So, if, had we had more assistance in our program, and having gathering with them, and sharing those experiences and had more people from, you know, American background who were assistants here, just talking to them how do they handle this professional so they know this thing. Just talking to each other, you know. That would be helpful. We don’t have this enough program. We don’t have much of get-togethers.

A number of the participants expressed a desire for more opportunities to engage with their graduate school peers and have trusted others with whom they could discuss problems.

Many of the study participants cited the Office of International Student Support at SWSU as a helpful and supportive resource for getting practical help, and also for

providing social activities for international students. Jas said of the support she received from the Office of International Student Services, “International student services, yeah, that’s a very good place for any international student, for any question, any question that pops up and you don’t know where to go. You always go there and they help you.” Miles also mentioned his appreciation for the help with his taxes that he received from the Office of International Student Services. “I think they are really doing a good job. Every year we have like, in summer we have something with all that. For example, every year we have to fill out the tax return forms.” Max talked about international student groups that were organized and promoted through the office, giving international students a chance to meet co-nationals or other students from the same geographic region:

The resources were the local resources here at the international students and scholars office, because they usually organize activities for international students. They have of course groups representing different countries. Since I come from a Latin American country there is, there are very few students from my country, but there is a larger group from, coming from Latin America, of people who speak Spanish in general.

Howdy also discussed cultural opportunities available through international student groups on campus:

There are actually plenty of opportunities available. The ISO, which is International Student Organization, they do have, uh they do celebrate the festivals across the world, from every country. Um, like, our community, the Indian community has the Dwali night, like that, each has, uh, the uh, organization has the festivals so they make sure that internationals coming together.

Pink talked about a club at SWSU for bringing international and American students together, but many participants noted that they did not have time to participate in opportunities like that, and that American graduate students did not participate much:

A friend, friend is a really important issue. I had many other friends at that time. And they helped me a lot to know, to understand, to explore, you know, just to

help with everything. So, friend is important. So, I know [SWSU] has also this club sessions which put together American students with international students so they can talk, they can improve their language, they can learn the culture. But, probably I was uh very involved at that time so I never attended any of those thing.

The majority of the participants commented on the helpfulness of the Office of International Student Services and mentioned the support they offered as well as international cultural organizations that they were aware of at SWSU. All of the participants also discussed the importance of having social contact as a component of adapting successfully.

Despite the participants' satisfaction with the Office of International Student Service's help with immigration advice and other technical matters, many felt that there were others ways in which support services could be improved in order to help them adapt better. Max talked about wanting information presented more clearly, in particular on the SWSU website:

Have a special office, maybe for students to come and ask questions – how do I fill out this form? Where should I go now? There is, the information is there, but it is still, you need more. I would say you need more. Yeah, and also, another thing is, you, I would like to see the, universities, as I said before, improving their websites. I think website is the best way to communicate with the outside world. And, it's better to communicate with their own students. So, there should be maybe ways to make it more accessible, and put all the information up front. So, it would be easier to use.

Alexander thought that having small group sessions about adjusting to the local culture would have helped him within his first month at SWSU:

Some instruction in small groups, in small groups. It's important. About the local customs, about the local facilities. About possible problems and what ways to deal with this. And, it should be very positive person they should. And very informative. And in small groups. [...] Because of my first month was just terrible.

Howdy also made recommendations about how to make a workshop for new international graduate students successful:

Workshop should be interactive, and other than having some professor telling them you should do this and that, there should be involvement of American students in that workshop, telling them, this is the way how we behave, this is the way how we deal with the stuff.

Of the participants who discussed improvement or addition of orientations and workshops, many mentioned the involvement of both international and American graduate assistants to help, as well as ongoing workshops and smaller group sessions. The quality of support international graduate assistants received from various systems on campus impacted their ability to adapt successfully or struggle through their experience. One of the key systems of support that impacted success or became a source of stress for participants were the crucial relationships they held with their advisors.

The role of advisors. If international graduate assistants viewed their academic department as their home base within the U.S., then it is conceivable to expect that considerable weight is placed on the relationship that an international graduate assistant has with his or her advisor. The participants in this study shared their expectations, as well as their satisfaction and disappointment that they felt over the relationships that each held with their advisor. One common theme that all of the participants articulated through consideration of their relationships with their advisors was the significant role that their advisor held in relation to their overall experience as students and employees.

Expectations, both of a symbiotic and of an individual nature, were something that many of the participants sought in regards to their academic advisor and themselves. Jas wished that her advisor had made an attempt to define his or her expectations for Jas before she had begun her degree program so that she had a clearer sense of direction:

What do you expect out of this degree and me, what do you want me to help you with and everything? Those are the things that should be taught, before you start a degree, so that you are comfortable, and you know that – in these two or three years, this is what I'm going to accomplish.

Most of the participants expressed a sense of general satisfaction in relation to their relationship with their advisor, however many felt isolated and out of contact with their advisors. Alish mentioned that his advisor traveled often, which left Alish without the direction that he sometimes craved:

I wish I could talk to him more often. Yeah, that's another thing. We don't, well, not that he doesn't want to, he travels a lot and sometimes for long periods, like ten days or fourteen days. But there are related to what we are doing here, he goes for presenting the results to get fundings. I know that, but sometimes we need direction or permission or you need a signature, or you need to discuss something. Yeah, that, that is also a big problem for me. I don't get to talk to my advisor much.

Max also discussed a desire for more interaction with his own advisor, and explained how some of his peers in other departments complained of the frequent absences of their advisors:

With my advisor, it's [the relationship] very close. Sometimes I feel he doesn't give me enough attention, haha. Because he is too busy sometimes. A few semesters we had these each, he was way too busy and we had time to meet only half an hour a week, which was not enough for me. [...] Sometimes yeah I have heard from some other departments, of my friends, I have roommates also. That they were looking for their advisor or some professor and they cannot find for days, sometimes even weeks. They are not available. Sometimes they don't come to campus because not everybody has an office. Yes, that's another thing - some people, we have offices, there, in our department, right. But these people don't have offices. The other graduate students from other programs usually sometimes they don't have offices. So, they don't spend too much time in the department, so that's the reason why they don't interact much with other students, right.

Providing basic, general support was one aspect that the participants talked about in relation to their advisors, but some also communicated a longing for further support. Pill mentioned a lack of assistance from his advisor in regards to his professional future:

It's [my relationship with my advisor] pretty friendly – relaxed but I don't see my advisor often. I'd say maybe once or twice a semester probably but not more than that. But I'm pretty friendly with the faculty, that's all good, even with him. The interaction is pretty healthy and pretty good. [...] Regarding academic, my advisor is not very helpful that way, but then if I really do have a problem and go to him, he does think about a little bit, [...] it's not that my advisor has not been positive, he has been, but more like, you know, in the long run. The bigger picture, there's not much of help, no direction, you know, where I'm going, that way. But other than that, he's been helpful that way. And also, research providing. If I have any problem with a particular resource, you know, the computer is not working, or the network is down, [...] just ask him, he would, whatever he is doing, he would make sure that that particular resource is provided [...]. Even though he left me on my own, he made sure that he provided everything. So that way, that was a very positive experience I have had working with my advisor.

Although the majority of participants felt their relationship with their advisors was helpful, they also expressed a need for greater clarification of the role that their advisor should play in their experience and also what their advisor's expectations were for their academics, assistantships, and the dynamics of the relationship itself.

Some participants experienced dissatisfaction with their advisor or discussed situations in which their international graduate assistant peers had negative advisor perceptions. Alish shared that he would never feel comfortable discussing having to work too many hours for his assistantship with his advisor. He also recounted that some of his friends had unfavorable occurrences with their own advisors as well:

I never talked to him [my advisor] about anything like that [working too many hours], but I think he would react negatively. [...] I know that they are in electrical engineering and I have a couple of friends here. They had many issues in contacts with their advisor. Like the working hours. [...] Actually one of them actually found job, found a very good job at Cisco in California. I think it should be a dream job for an electrical engineer, but then they had problem to let him, to let him graduate. So, he was still here. Yeah. Others I hear have lots of problems with the advisor.

Mory did not have any negative anecdotes to share of his own personal experiences with his advisor, but pointed out that advisor relationship experiences were likely tied to the personalities of each individual professor:

Their [peers'] professor were so demanding. So it was not about a specific university, it's not about a specific major, it's just about some professors who themselves are working so hard, like, his professor was there in his office during the whole day. So, he was expecting his student to be there as well. So it's just something related to the professors.

Negative or positive experiences being tied to the individual advisor was also mentioned by Pill, who himself had a satisfying relationship with his advisor but also shared the other side of the spectrum when he discussed some of the unpleasant advisor experiences of some of his international peers:

You know, when you are doing research, there are different professors who have different opinions of how to guide their students. Some would be behind your back saying that 'I need this by this time, you've got to finish this, it has to be done this way.' And some are like you, know, it's best that the students have to work on their own, grow on their own, do what they like. You know. So it's more of an individual thing rather than a department thing so I cannot generalize it that way. [...] I have friends who have their advisors, as I told, who are behind their backs and they have to be at the lab eight to seven, or you know, something like that. So it's the extreme opposite of what I have undergone. So that's what I found, a few of them are like me who have had the same problems. A few international students who I talked to, they have the same problems as me. Like, their advisors don't interact as much, or even if they interact as much they don't really advise anything much.

Pink experienced visible discomfort as she related the story of her distressing relationship with her own advisor, whom she claimed to have a volatile relationship with due to a clash of cultural values:

International professors, they demand their own cultural aspect, in terms of relationship with students. We have to treat them as our bosses. Oh my goodness, my advisor is international. He is giving me hard time. [...] He, his name is like, nightmarish thing for me, haha. He has given me such a hard time, oh my goodness. And then I learned that in his culture it's supposed to be like that. So then, why he has to apply that on me? And here? First of all, I am not from his

culture, and second of all, we are in the United States. But, since he is my advisor and my whole life depends on him, I'm just obeying. But it's a pity. It's a pity. Oh my goodness. I just don't like to talk about it, you know? [...] And he always thinks that I'm not working hard, and he works like twenty-four / seven. He is there in his office every day, every single night, every single day. No game time. So, he is demanding the same thing from me, but I can't. I can't, not because I'm lazy, because I'm a human, because I'm a mother of two, and because I have other duties like teaching. So, why he can't understand that? If I will say okay, you know what, I was busy and I was sick, he said, 'why, why your work start to bringing alive your personal life, I don't care about your personal life. You don't have any rights to complain.' And I said, uh, I'm not complaining I'm just giving you the reason why I am kind of slow. Oh, he doesn't want to understand, never ever. [...] Yeah, it, it's not in my culture. And, I'm not a little girl to be treated like that. It's also very offensive, insulting. And I didn't know, I just, I'm extremely unhappy with him.

Like Pill, Zoey also had positive comments in regards to her own personal relationship with her advisor but suggested that positive versus negative advisor relationships may also vary according to one's academic field. "Because I know when I interviewed at other places where they have like STEM fields and engineering, relationship were different. It's, you may see more subordinate relationships there, rather than in our field."

Despite some participants' frustrations over difficult relationships with their advisors, other participants expressed favorable support from their advisors. Participant data revealed that international graduate assistants from smaller departments or academic realms outside of the STEM fields recalled less negative instances in relation to interactions with their advisors. Max felt that he had a close relationship with his advisor, and the fact that his department provided daily coffee and tea breaks for everyone contributed to an overall friendly atmosphere amongst graduate students and faculty:

Other than that our relationship is very close or is very friendly, so. And with most of the faculty in our program, yeah, we have a very close relationships. Since it's a small department and we have the possibilities of social interaction are very, very common. So for example every day at 3:30 we have coffee time or tea time, so everybody goes and gets tea and cookies. There are a few faculty members who are there and they usually don't talk to other people, especially

graduate students. But most of them are, the interactions are very friendly generally. I have very few instances that one or two professors there that sometimes they, they lose control of their emotions and the start yelling. But that was in front of our class. But that happened with one particular professor once. Other than that, no. I mean, as I said there is some faculty that don't talk too much and a couple of them, three of them, some don't even respond when you greet them, haha. But in general, yeah, it's very friendly.

Zoey also felt that communications between graduate students and faculty in her department were friendly and encouraging:

In our program they [the advisors] were always open and we had free debates and during the classroom and in our meetings and everything, so. And my relationship with my particular advisor she learned, I learned, we learned together, as a step that was her first year, that was my second semester when we started working together and it's been four years already. I believe that, and she would say that many times that, she actually had to learn more about herself again you know, her reflection and everything. So it's all about we tried to have reflections what we've done, why have we done this. And we have meetings and we have discussions. This week I had coffee with her in [a nearby city] and we talked about how well what worked, what didn't work. It's really now all talking in a positive way.

Zoey's experience with her advisor as well as some of the other participants' experiences with their advisors supported an unspoken consensus that advisor relationships are dependent on the personalities of individual advisors, even despite department size or area of academic study. Ravan felt the faculty in his department were all generally very helpful when it came to offering academic and assistantship support:

The professors really help you to understand, to my advisor, which he helped me to balance my courses, not take too tough courses, all the tough courses in one semester. He helped me to balance the courses so that two years of my master's, so the semesters, but the professors helped me to quickly adapt. [...] My advisor gave me solution to be patient, you may find an assistantship soon. So don't go because it gave you other subjects you get bad grades and you graduate and you can't find a job, you might face a problem, [...] He helped me a lot with my choices with the courses and also careers, so. Everyone was pretty helpful here.

Jas was particularly satisfied with her advisors' sensitivity to her status as an international graduate student:

It [my relationship with my advisor] is good, and, it's not on a very personal level, because both my advisors, they don't like to get very personal level. Like, you just hanging around... and like. But, in my case, yes, they have been, very sensitive to me as an international student. And, they have been very patient, because there are some questions as an international student, that I asked them, and they could be very bashful for an American but, yeah they are very patients when I ask them, they are very helpful. And very supportive

Murthy was happy that his advisor had invited him over for Thanksgiving dinner, and felt that even though his advisor had been labeled as "tough," such a quality was a good one to possess within the research arena:

He [my advisor] asked me over for the Thanksgiving and I went, and so we had a good dinner. And he is very good in that... And the faculty also has welcomed us. And we had a very nice chat and a very nice dinner and. So, it's a very good experience, so, I heard that he is a very tough guy, but you have to be tough, so it is good for the research.

Having a mutual understanding or clearer expectations both within their assistantship and academic roles also seemed to contribute to a more positive advisor relationship. Mory mentioned that he and his advisor had established a harmonious understanding in relation to his assistantship work:

We never had a problem with the advisor, I know what she wants me to do, and she know how to do that. Like, she knows that I'm not gonna be in my office during the morning, I just work at night so I'm going to be study during the morning so she doesn't expect me to be there. She never goes there to find me in the morning. And then she knows me and I know her and then that works really well.

Howdy and Miles revealed the most positive relationships with their mutual advisors out of any of the other participants in the study. Howdy was the only one to express his relationship with his advisor as that of a "friend," in particular after his first six months of sorting out professor and researcher roles:

He [advisor] is not like other relationships, it's not like a professor and his researcher, it's more like a friend. So, we do this, a lot of things like from the football to the studies. Ah, we also go out to, for the lunch together, but not just

me and him, me and the group, so. Initially, it was more like a professor and his researcher, I believe for the first six months, but later on, it's more.

Miles felt that his positive relationship with his advisor stemmed from the fact that his advisor was a co-national and could identify with what Miles was experiencing as an international graduate assistant in the U.S.:

I think I have a very good relationship, otherwise since he is also a Chinese guy. But most of the time we are talking, we use English. So, in English, so. He is, is very concerned about our work. Discussing research and also our personal lives. [...] Because he used to be through all these things I go through currently. So.... I feel like I'm the younger version of him, haha.

Whether their relationships with their advisors were positive or negative, all of the participants conveyed that there was a great amount of weight placed on the roles the advisors held in their experiences as international graduate assistants. While the majority of participants in this study had experienced favorable interactions with their advisors, they were also able to cite instances of peers who had negative advisor experiences. In many instances, participants wished for more transparency in regards to role expectations, as well as greater availability and more guidance from their advisors.

The role of peers and family. Just as international graduate assistants viewed their relationship with their advisors as one of the most critical dynamics during their time studying in the U.S., so too were the participants concerned with the role of peer relationships and their general overall social interactions. The majority of the participants felt that despite their primary focus being on their academic work and assistantships, that making connections with peers - especially with American graduate students - was an advantageous component of their time in the U.S., for both social support and a greater understanding of the culture in the U.S., both of which could ultimately lead to a more fulfilling experience as an international graduate assistant. Pill even mentioned that he

was much more successful after widening his circle of friends. “Once I had a lot of friends, especially my peers, I, more than the department level, at the peer level I had very good interaction and that’s what helped me be successful here.” Additionally, the participants who had dependent family members with them expressed the pervasiveness of their families’ needs within every aspect of their sojourn.

Many of the participants discussed struggles they had within their first semester or their first year with making friends. Because all of their initial interactions stemmed from their academic departments, and also because the majority of their time was devoted to studying and research, the international graduate assistants in the study felt that being able to meet fellow graduate students through their classes and assistantships was important. Max talked about how it was difficult to meet people outside of his department for some time, not only because he was busy but also because he relied so much on his department for support until he had better settled himself:

Other thing is I came by myself so I was single when I came here. So, making friends, making connections with people was a bit difficult outside of the department. [...] Adapting to a social life here, or finding a group for yourself is a bit difficult, yeah. That was especially true for the first couple of years maybe, until you start meeting more people in some other environment, outside the professional environment, the graduate college or my department. [...] At first, I didn’t know too many people, little by little I started meeting a few more people over time. Then, since I was spending most of my time studying, especially at the beginning when you are taking classes, so you basically have to start spending time studying, doing homework, doing assignments. So, that time I just had uh the support of the department.

Opening himself up to meeting new peers took some time for Pill, and he also discovered that once he had a wider circle of friends he felt he was able to adjust more easily:

The important thing was stick with friends, make good friends, with whom you can discuss all your homework, all your coursework. Not at least in class, but even outside. But that way, by involving and interacting with people, that’s how I could get out of this. But the first six months, I did not have any friends or any

partners to discuss my homework or with or anything, or any problem I was to have was to keep it to myself and I think that's what affected me. But once I slowly opened myself up, is when I found things going easily. [...] I think I would have to say I was not open... enough the first semester. But then, as I opened up, I really could make good friends.

The majority of participants wished their departments had facilitated more social interaction between graduate students, both for the cultural value and also to give international graduate assistants a better platform for casual social interaction with other international graduate students and American graduate students. Jas had several suggestions for how academic departments could organize more social outings for graduate students, not only to increase communication but also to promote greater cultural understanding:

There are some people who are very extrovert, and they find time for everything. But people like me, 'okay, I need to spend my time in the lab if I have free time,' that's what I think. But when you have an opportunity, like, okay people from the department they are going for a game, or they are gonna place this game this weekend, and this time, or this place You think, 'okay, if I have time I can go.' So, it's, it's just like that. It's not just like dinners or something, you can just have events. 'Oh, let's go shopping together,' or 'let's go to the downtown,' and 'let's just play this game this weekend.' And, if this, these things could be posted on your department website or anything, or maybe share an e-mail. And people meeting up. So.... That would increase the communication between them. And, yeah, and that would, I mean it's like, widening your horizons. And, obviously if you are a graduate student you are already an accomplished person, if you are gaining more knowledge. But, that's not what everyone wants exactly. When you would be doing this same thing for all your life. But, if you meet those people and you talk about them and their cultures, and their lives, I think that, that's more important also.

Zoey also felt as though faculty within academic departments should take more initiative to get graduate students to interact with each other and share ideas:

I think, negative, you may call it negative, is that we [graduate students] don't interact a lot. We don't share what we are doing. It's like everyone is their own... Like, that's because we all work for different advisors. And sometimes people feel hesitant to talk what they are doing, because I feel, well, I feel that needs to be initiated by a faculty.

As Mory discussed the difficulties he experienced trying to make more friends, he felt at a loss for a solution on how to meet more peers for social relationships, especially within the work environment where he felt it was difficult to form friendships:

It is boring doing the same thing every day. So they don't have enough time to go and make friends. And, I don't know. Maybe you can solve it? Just finding a way out of it. Because I couldn't. I'll be leaving here this May, but this all the year and a half I've been here, I've not been hanging out with friends that want, like, maybe just a few times, but not that much. So, that's the thing that has been annoying and I've always wondering about it. [...] Just imagine if you don't have much time you cannot make friends randomly. Like, you're working and there are other guys coming around but you cannot just make friends with someone.

The international graduate assistants felt that because they were all so busy, and that getting to know others within their departments was challenging outside of the workplace, faculty and administrators within the department could do more to encourage casual social interactions outside of their assistantships.

Interacting with and forming friendships with American peers was one of the commonly cited frustrations amongst the study participants. Some felt American graduate students were not very friendly while others simply did not have many American graduate students within their departments. Ravan pointed out that some graduate programs at SWSU had very few American students in them. "But coming to master's, more master student, international master's students and way less American students. So we don't get any opportunity to work with [American students]." Miles echoed Ravan's sentiments claiming that most of the graduate students in his department were co-nationals, leaving him with few opportunities to socialize with American graduate students:

Most of the international students, they have a great program, but sometimes it is really hard to make friends with some native guys. And the reasons to interact, we

don't have like, much more chance to have a relationship with them. I mean, play with them, have take classes with them. Because you know, it seems like when I came here, all the grads in this department, they are from abroad. Yeah, that's a problem. I feel like almost in another, still Chinese, Asian guys.

Ravan also discussed an organization at SWSU for international students, which he felt was helpful but was disappointed in the lack of events intended to bring international and American students together. Furthermore, he felt that friendships with Americans could also help international students adjust culturally, particularly in reference to seeking career advice:

Especially there is an organization called international students association, but that is only international students, no Americans. There is no events combining international and American student. So I think there need to be some events not only with international students but with combining American student. They are making friends with American students, they learn the culture, they studies with the careers, which company is better, how to apply. There is many, when you are applying for a job there is a lot of difference between my country and here. So coming to the resume, curriculum vitae, the format, everything [...]. So if you have American friends then we can discuss much more things and lean much more from them rather than professors. So because I find that less American people are friends with international students.

Murthy felt that "three out of four [American graduate students] will be not friendly," and he stated that "my friends are ninety percent of international students, and I have little American friends. As I told you, because I'm not that much interacting with them." Mory admitted that he heard of some groups on campus for facilitating social interactions, but felt as an international graduate assistant, he did not have time to participate:

I think, even now there were a lot of things I could have used, but the problem with the international graduate students who are working as a research assistant or as a teacher assistant or whatever is that you are so busy, that they cannot be involved in any of these, like, communities, which are for helping.

The study participants all expressed that there could be more opportunities, particularly events tailored towards the busy graduate assistant population, that could promote interactions between all graduate students, and in particular international and American.

Not all of the participants communicated difficulty with meeting American friends, however. Max explained that over time he had developed friendships with numerous domestic peers, and as he adjusted more to campus he had less international peers:

I have good interaction with American friends here. I have met several friends. Actually, to be honest, I, at this time, at this point in my life, I don't interact with many international students anymore. All of them, they are my friends at the math department. [...] I don't have too much time to participate in the groups here because I'm doing research right now, so. Yeah, right now I'm, I think I'm interacting mostly with domestic students.

Zoey felt as though international students may experience more or less difficulty making friends, particularly American friends, based on their cultural background and English language skills. Furthermore, she suggested that international graduate students have to take more initiative to communicate with the other graduate students:

There is always just the facial appearance and the language. If she or he speaks good language then there is more chance that they will get integrated and accepted to this place. And then, and but, I know we had a classmate and she is from Taiwan, and she was saying that it's also interesting that it's also on the international student or exchange students to initiate contact. The talking. But once you are in the classroom if you don't do first steps, you will be sitting the entire classroom and no one will be talking to you. [...] They do realize then nobody's talking to them but what they don't probably realize is that it's only, they need to initiate it.

Language barrier was a reason suggested by Howdy as well for why it was difficult for international graduate students to meet more American graduate students. He also cautioned international graduate students about the importance of refraining from

communicating in one's native tongue with co-nationals in front of other students, particularly American students, as it could isolate them:

I do interact with other international students, also with American students. It varies. From, again, from, it's very subjective – some of them only comfortable with speaking person from their countries because that is, there is no language barrier and you can speak in the language. This kind of my suggestion to international students – that there is nothing wrong with talking in your own language but you should not do that in front of other international students or American students because, it's a common human thing that, like. There is another person sitting with us and we are talking in English and he doesn't know English, he will constantly feel that, they are chatting about me. And, that necessarily could not be, it's kind of, a negative thing that he kind of tries to isolate himself, [...] even I like talking in my language and I do that, but I make sure that there is nobody, I'm not doing that in public, because nobody like that. So, the best thing to do or to think about is to imagine yourself in the same, that there are two American students are working with you and if they are talking in their own language, and you have no idea how you will feel about it. The same thing is what they think when you do that, so. That's one suggestion I have for international students.

While some international graduate students may have had more natural interactions with American peers, others, whether it is because of their cultural background, English-language skills, or lack of action to strike up conversations, experienced more difficulty.

Co-national peer relationships were another element that was important to the majority of participants, who viewed co-nationals as a source of support and information. Howdy brought up the usefulness of online forums where co-national students could find each other to exchange information before even arriving on campus in the U.S. “There are many international students and each international, each country has their own organization and it's there, their website, they have their information. [...] Each organization has their website, their forums for people who are already from that country, helps.” Jas also talked about the advice she received from a co-national peer who had academic contacts with faculty about funding opportunities:

When I came here I already had some friends here in the U.S., not in the same institute. But, yeah, according to them, everything is gonna be fine, haha. No, I had a friend here. And, she told me that because usually it's, when the professors have funding, the students know it. And usually professors ask the students if you have somebody you know. I have funding and I have a project so if you can recommend somebody.

Several of the participants mentioned a co-national friend or acquaintance playing a role in their decision to attend a certain institution or apply for a specific program. Miles said that a co-national friend who was in the U.S. before him helped him connect with professors in his academic field:

Before I came here, I had a friend, yeah. She was here, maybe half a year before I came here. So, it was just kind of like following my friend. She gave me some connections with the professors, and it really helps.

Zoey mentioned that just having peers who were from a similar culture, who could understand better the specific challenges that international graduate students from certain cultures faced, was helpful:

What was also very helpful is to have someone from a similar culture help – I have a colleague here who is from Ukraine so, very close in terms of culture. To have that bond, to have someone who would understand all of the transitions and frustrations. So, that was a very helpful source, to have someone from the similar culture, understanding.

However, Mory felt that he did not receive the support he had anticipated from co-nationals on campus:

When you're someone from Iran here in the United States, all of the people you know, or all of the community with who is supposed to be supporting you is the Iranian students. Other Iranian students who might be here from years ago and they are more experienced here. But, this is not kind of happening. This is, you might be expecting them to be of help and you need it, but they are not. So, when you come here it is all yourself.

Co-national peer relationships seemed to be of significant to most of the participants who relied on such connections to help them with adjusting to life as a student in the U.S. and

with finding sources of research funding on campus. Those who came from countries without any or many co-nationals on campus sought out students from similar cultures or found themselves with a greater number of American peers.

Family was another form of relationships that for some international graduate assistants was more pronounced. The participants who had dependents with them while in the U.S. had different experiences from the international graduate assistants who came to SWSU alone. Zoey, who had her dependent children with her, viewed her decision to pursue graduate level studies in the U.S. as a move that she thought was not only beneficial for herself, but also to her kids' future:

Very often I say, this is not my PhD, this is *our* PhD, because one of the reasons why I am here is that there was the idea to spend four or five years here, so those four and five years here are for my boys. They are now thirteen and eleven but when they came they were seven and five, right. So these are the years that I really want to expose to them a different culture. And it's an academic town, it's a small town, you have specific culture. We have schools that are very much academic oriented schools. [...] It's not just my career, my purpose here, but it's also to get them exposed to this culture.

Although Pink, who also had dependent children with her, felt like adding the role of parent was one more difficult task to juggle during her time as an international graduate assistant, she also reaped numerous social benefits from the community contacts she made outside of her department with other families:

And you will have full plate, so it's more than enough. No time to think about anything else. You teach, you study, you work, you do your research, feed the kids, drive them, still be a mother. [...] Having children and being a mother makes me feel much, much better. You know why, because I just don't talk with my family or friends, other students, about my classworks, about the exams, I talk with his [her son's] friends' mom about scouts, about camping. [...] I usually I know more people than somebody else outside my department. They will ask, 'how do you know, you know so many people.' Because I am a mom; because I interact with so many other people around the town, it's not only you, and it's not only the department, our professors.

Whereas Pink was able to expand her social circle of peers in a positive way due to interactions with other families in the community, international graduate assistants who arrived at SWSU alone, particularly those without many co-national peers, reported feeling more isolated. Pill arrived at SWSU with his wife who was initially his dependent but later became a PhD student in the same department as him. Pill felt that having his wife with him, especially because they shared many of the same experiences as international graduate assistants, provided them with a mutually beneficial system of support:

Ok, even though I said she [my wife] was a dependant here she is independent right now. She graduated from the same department and I. She was a research graduate assistant as well. So that experience was not too different. And, our advisors too were the same, so we had very similar experiences of how things were. [...] Being in the same office, same advisor, same line of work, you know, everything was pretty much the same so, we either enjoyed or suffered the same. [...] That has to be one of the positives for me, you know that my wife was here next to me. If there was an assignment or if there was any other problem, which I faced, she was always there and she was in the same problem too.

Other participants, even those without dependents, mentioned missing their familial relationships and support. Howdy felt like he had to adjust to no longer having his parents nearby for assistance:

Back there, you're that much dependent on your parents, but still, you know that your parents are just a short distance, just three or four, at the max, two hundred miles away from you. But that is not the case over here.

Mory also discussed having to acclimate himself to less communication with his parents, whom he was close to. "My parents are like, very far from here, and then I don't have a talk from them every time. But maybe we talk once a week. So, that might become a problem for me." Zoey also felt that not having her family nearby to help her with her

children, something she had back in her home country, meant she had to change her own patterns of peer interaction:

New ways of interaction with people, you know, just forget what you did there if you have your girls' night on Friday every week that's something that's not happening here because of the different town. You know the babysitting issue is different here, everything you don't have your grandparents.

Having dependents or a spouse with them shaped their transitions in unique ways, but in the case of these particular study participants, they felt the presence of dependents was very positive. Having to adjust to the absence of family members, whom many international graduate students relied on back in their home country, was another aspect that shaped their experiences and peer interactions.

Because many international graduate assistants' first experiences were shaped so heavily by their initial contact and dependency on their academic departments, the importance of their academic department as a sort of surrogate home was apparent throughout the data. With the academic department having such an essential influence on international graduate assistants, the role of their advisor in their lives was also a relationship of great significance. Some participants felt they had positive, friendly experiences with their advisors, and others expressed a lack of interaction or negative experience. Advisor relationships seemed to be contingent on the advisor as an individual, on the size of the department, or whether or not the academic discipline was in a STEM field. The role of peers was another imperative element in international graduate assistant's experiences. Many of the participants expressed a desire for greater opportunities for social interaction both with international and American graduate students. Common problems that arose from the data included lack of social communication within departments and busy study and work schedules, which left this

student population with little time for socializing. Some participants felt academic departments should take more initiative to get graduate students to socialize both inside and outside of classes and labs. Other important peer relationships included the advice and support students received from co-nationals, and finally the experiences of those with dependents and the shifting role of family life.

Like living on only air and water: The significance of a graduate assistantship. While international graduate students in the U.S. have made the journey overseas in order to pursue study in a particular academic field, their assistantship, or the professional experience they could receive during their time of study, was viewed as consequentially as their academic acquisitions. Pink eloquently explained the underlying vital need that a graduate assistantship filled for many international students:

In our program we have a couple of American students with the same teaching assistantship. But, they don't have this pressure, like, if you don't finish within the given time frame, then you are out of country, and you will not complete your degree, or something. Because we have visa issues. And we also have financial issues. Since, if department will not provide assistantship, then I have to just survive without money, without income. It's like similar, okay you have to stay alive just drinking water and breathing the air. You know?

The subthemes within the general theme of “Like Living on Only Air and Water: The Significance of a Graduate Assistantship,” were “Value” and “Experience.” The value of the assistantship, both in terms of financial benefit and professional career gain, was reiterated numerous times throughout the participant data. Participants cited not only the benefits but also the relief that came along with obtaining an assistantship, particularly one that corresponded with their academic field of study. Aside from the value of graduate assistantships, the participants also shared a variety of accounts of their experiences as graduate assistants. Many of the participants discussed long working

hours, having to transition to the work culture in America, translating their assistantship experience to a professional career, and dealing with supervisor and work peer communications. Because many of the participants dedicated the majority of their time to their assistantship work, their experiences as graduate assistants played a definitive role in shaping their overall experiences.

Essential value of an assistantship. All of the participants could not emphasize enough both the personal and financial value that they felt graduate assistantships held for international graduate students. Howdy explained that obtaining an assistantship was almost an expectation for international graduate students:

When you come from your country to here you want a big expectation that you have that you get an assistantship. There are two good reasons for that, one is the financial aid and to get along with that, and second is to get a good education.

While the participants felt that any assistantship was better than no assistantship at all, in terms of financial support, having a graduate assistantship directly related to one's field of study was seen as the most desirable situation because it offered the most relevant professional experience and could also possibly contribute research towards one thesis or dissertation. Alish discussed the value of "real world experience" that came along with having a graduate assistantship, and he also felt as though international graduate students with assistantships were looked upon more favorably by faculty:

Even if you can afford it yourself it still matters a lot. And, plus it's specially for both PhD and Master it's like your job experience. You're not in the real world working, so you need to build up a resume. If you don't have a teaching or research assistantship, then that's a big negative. But you cannot build up enough experience for yourself. [...] I think that professors treat students differently if they have an advisor and assistantship. [...] I had many courses that like, at the first, at the first session, especially the graduate courses and there are only six or seven students. Like, the lecturer ask everyone like, who is your advisor, what's your research? If you don't have an assistantship, or you don't have an advisor yet. I feel that they look differently at, like other professor look at student

differently if they don't have an advisor. So like those that have an advisor they look more interested, not.. Yeah, I don't know if it's true or not that's just how I felt.

Jas felt that a graduate assistantship was most beneficial for her own experience in terms of providing her with valuable research opportunities:

I was expecting that I would get a very good research experience, which I thought I wouldn't get in my country. Because we don't have the facilities there, and yeah, what I heard was the difficulty here was very sincere. And it was very good for the students to accomplish their goals. So that was what I was looking for.

Improving his curriculum vitae was one of the key aspects Mory noted about the value of his assistantship, and how it has prepared him for applying to PhD programs:

Now I am applying for my PhD and then I'm just comparing my CV to what I have and now what I had before and it is a lot difference. I mean, so yeah, it [the assistantship] made more of a difference.

Murthy, who was already established in a professional career back in his home country, felt that moving to the U.S. to pursue a PhD would not have been a worthy trade-off for him unless he did have an assistantship lined up, a precaution he made sure to take:

I was very particular with that [securing a GA before arriving], because, back home I had a job and each and everything. So, the why take risk and go with everything, so I had, I studied them and I consulted the students.

Being able to secure a graduate assistantship before arriving in the U.S. to pursue a degree was not always an easy task though, and several of the participants noted that they had struggled with securing an assistantship at first. It took Ravan one year to find an assistantship, and even after he had found one it was not a research assistantship and still outside of his department, which made it less valuable in terms of providing relevant career experience:

And then after starting for one year in my second semester I got a GA in the department of mailing services, so, from that I went on working as a GA. But, when we generally apply as master's students we look for a research assistantship

department which provides. If generally the department doesn't have then we look in other departments matching our skills where we can work. [...] It took almost one year for me to find an assistantship.

All of the study participants were able to share examples of the various layers of value that they attributed to being employed within a graduate assistantship, and they were also able to articulate the drawbacks that they associated with being an international graduate student without an assistantship.

Being an international graduate student without an assistantship was viewed as an undesirable position due to the financial strain, the visa restrictions that limit international students to part-time jobs on campus, and also the lack of professional career experience. Pink explained why graduate assistantships were particularly vital to international graduate students, who unlike American graduate students, could not gain professional employment off-campus, creating even more pressure to secure an assistantship position:

My colleague's friends, one of them, his assistantship, teaching assistantship, he is American guy, was stopped, was summer. So he is not teaching now, but he is still in the program. And, he said, he helps with his church, and like he works in some other possible places, he does tutoring, so he doesn't have this restriction because of Visa to work somewhere else, other than campus. And, he doesn't face this tight pressure of financial issues. So, if department would not provide the assistantship for us, then you adapt basically. So, but, that be difficult to pursue your PhD and to return home without PhD, just because of monetary issue, would be stupid, right? But American students, they don't have any issues like that. If department doesn't provide it, okay, it's okay, then we can still work somewhere else. But then that's the difference. So because of that they probably, they did not have that pressure from the department to finish. But, we do have, and it's very, like, life or death issue.

Jas discussed the expenses that international graduate students without assistantships faced, as well as the increased stress a couple of her co-national friends who did not have assistantships had to deal with:

The conversion rate is a lot. So, if somebody doesn't have an assistantship, that means they have to pay a lot here. And if you don't have an assistantship you

don't get tuition waiver. That would mean paying 13,000 per semester, and that's a lot, a lot of Indian Rupees. And, to save some, they have to do part times, for work, and they are in another department or maybe cafes or something. So, every student, because they don't have assistantship, they try to, cover as many credit hours in a semester as they can so they can graduate earlier. And that way they would be taking maybe four or five courses. And, plus, they are doing part time, it's very difficult. And as a graduate student, it gets more difficult then when you are an undergrad. Because, as a graduate student your advisors expect that you will get all A's, and that, and I have, have friends that don't sleep, maybe two or three days, and they get only weekends to sleep because they have to complete their homeworks and they also have jobs. So that makes it difficult.

Miles suggested the need for securing a part time job on campus as well as financial support from back home for international graduate students who were unable to find assistantships:

I do know some of my friend they do not have an assistantship. They just came here and take some courses. But they are trying to find some assistantship from any professors. So sometimes they work at a coffee shop, or some restaurant. Earn some money for their daily lives. But, I think you need to some finance or support from the home, of course. The parents...

Pill felt that international graduate students without assistantships often had to take upon more physically demanding work, while his own teaching assistantship was less strenuous and less distracting simply because it was an extension of knowledge that he was already familiar with:

People whom I know who do not have assistantships, there is definitely pressure. Especially to pay the tuition, and you know, there is no regular salary, they have to work on campus, and you know, that's a lot of work. The best experience I have had being a teaching assistant is that I don't have to spend extra time preparing, or mentally thinking about my work, because it comes as a natural extension to me. It's easy to teach what you know, rather than go somewhere, do some work that is totally new to you. Probably work in a cafeteria somewhere – it's totally different mentally. Physically you still have to spend that much time but it's totally different. So that's an experience, which I have had, which I felt rewarding even when I was a research assistant or a teaching assistant. I didn't have to do anything new or different, which would, you know, take my attention off my main goal or make me tired, or something like that. So that's a positive experience, or different experience I have had compared to people who didn't have an assistantship.

Several other participants' opinions on the physical stress of part time on-campus jobs that international graduate students without assistantships had to take, were parallel to both Jas and Pill's comments. In addition to being exhausting, part time jobs on campus, as Howdy pointed out, were also less flexible in term of working hours, and made it more difficult to balance academic responsibilities:

If you don't have an assistantship, your life, becomes a little harder than having an assistantship. Because, one of the goals of coming here, like totally at the beginning, is getting a good education and the financial aid. If you don't get that financial aid, then you have to work on campus - like working in the bakery or some pizza shop. If you get good jobs, like in library where you just have to sit it's ok. But, I've seen one of my roommates and he was in the first semester, and I had just arrived so I was working many hours in the pizza shop. And that work is very physical, and it's kind of tiring too. And it becomes a little difficult to manage things because in the research, if you have a research assistantship, even if you have something assigned for the week, you can adjust your timing, but when you have to do a job, you cannot adjust your timing. If they want you to be there at twenty to four, you have to be there at twenty to four. And, it's a physical work so it's kind tiring so, yes, life becomes difficult and experiences could be different for international students who unfortunately don't get an assistantship.

Ravan, who revealed earlier that it had taken him one year after arriving at SWSU to find a graduate assistantship, was able to provide a primary account of his experiences working at a physically demanding part time job on campus:

Actually for the first three semester, almost ten months of work as a student employed in dining services. So it kind of tough. And the work in the union dining services didn't help much to my career, so. Because my career is in software engineering, electrical computer engineering, so, so it took a lot of physical work. So I used to work twenty hours a week which we can only work, international students could only work twenty hours a week. [...] It's so physical so I felt that managing studies was more difficult. Compared to the graduate assistant position in software engineers who go and sit in the room and work, so. It's, it will also help my career too. So the graduate assistantship was quite good for my career and studies too.

Not only did Ravan feel as though he was not gaining valuable work experience related to his future career, but he thought that it was more difficult to balance work and academics with the part time job than with the graduate assistantship.

Other participants observed that international graduate students within their departments who did not hold assistantship positions were frequently more isolated and cut off from professional and career advancement opportunities. Zoey talked about the international graduate students in her own department who were not interested in research and seemed to be much less involved in academic and social activities, thereby resulting in what she thought was a less “holistic” experience:

Well, first of all, they [the international graduate students without assistantships] are not fully integrated into the field. They are not living the field. But, it's totally understandable because they are here to get the degree and they emphasize they're not here to do just research, to work, to become professionals. They are here, like in people from Thailand or Vietnam, I know that what they want is just to get closer, to get a PhD and they want to go home and to become administrators of higher education there you know, that is how it is different. And, they are less there in our program activities. For example, during orientations and they would be involved in just making sure we know what kind of information new students know, how much they need to know. So, we really know the system and how the program works more than anyone else who were just students. [...] And other international students, well because they don't because they are not aware of the system in general so, they are kind of, they are only exposed to coursework, only to the programmatic aspects. I'm getting busy, I'm getting my grades, I'm writing these papers... it's less holistic, it's one kind of, you know, it depends on how well coursework is connected. If it is well connected then it will have kind of a general view, but it is not as very skilled experience, I feel.

Max explained that the international graduate students within his department who did not receive assistantship funding did not interact frequently with the students who did have assistantships:

There were a couple of people who were not supported by the department. But, we usually never interact with them. You know. The people who are supported by the department, uh usually in the department are studying and doing homework

and teaching or doing whatever, anything like that. But the people who are not in the department usually don't socialize with us too much.

Graduate assistantships held great intrinsic value for international graduate students due to the financial support as well as the ideal method for gaining valuable career and research experience. Furthermore, the participants in this study felt as though the experiences of international graduate students without assistantships were more challenging due to greater financial pressure, more physically demanding jobs, less flexibility in balancing academics and work, and a greater sense of isolation from students with assistantships.

Experiences within the work environment. While the participants lauded the benefits of having a graduate assistantship, their various experiences working within their assistantships ranged from positive to negative. Participants discussed the level of preparation they received, how they adjusted to work culture in the U.S., the long hours that they frequently had to work, what they gained out of their research or other assistantship tasks, interactions with faculty and peers on the job, and their general opinions over their experiences as international graduate assistants.

Some of the participants who did not automatically receive assistantship offers from their departments voiced frustrations over the graduate assistantship search process. Ravan suggested that if departments had one particular area where available assistantships could be posted, that it would streamline the search process for graduate students:

If there is any job open for the university jobs, any department if they had anything, any job comes up, they post on the job board for that official job board for the university. Then that would be an easy solutions for the whole university.

International graduate students without assistantships who had not yet arrived in the U.S. had to rely on online resources for contacting professors and seeking funding, as Jas discussed. She also noted that online resources played a prominent role in her decision about which graduate schools in America to apply for:

I think now, it is that if there is maybe a graduate opportunity meant for a graduate project or graduate students, if there was this need, they have start putting it on the website. And there are some specialty websites for that. But when we came here, when I came here, it was around 2007, in the U.S., at that time we didn't have that. So what we used to do was, let's say, in India, when I applied for the universities, when I got admission in [East Coast University], we just look at the U.S. news, and they have all the listings of the universities – top universities. So, we pick universities according to our, requirement. Because I am an electrical engineer, so, in that field, what are the top universities? And we go to the website, we look for the professors, the researchers, and if they interest you, we contact them. And that's how. If they have the funding, they talk about the projects and then we apply.

A couple of other study participants noted that having more centralized resources, particularly online resources, for finding information about funding and assistantships within departments, would help international graduate students.

Getting adjusted to their assistantships was one area addressed by the participants, some of whom received formal training, and others who wished they had received more assistance with adjusting. Howdy talked about his personal experiences adjusting to work in a new culture, while also comparing his transition with that of American graduate assistants who he felt were automatically able to adjust better, and possibly were not as excited about the research component as he was because they were already familiar with the available technology in the U.S.:

The experiences feel a bit different. Not just from the technical point of view, but also getting used to the new conditions, getting to know a new culture. It's not going to be different for them [American graduate students], it's just going to be transition from the school to the graduate college, from the master's to the PhD level. The amount of exposure they get is going to be equal, and because it may

be small transition for them because they have been in this system for a while now. So, sometimes they might not be that excited as an international student is. Because he hasn't seen that amount ah, for example, I've seen research, there are some about ah, a few stuff, and coming here and being, just getting to know about that subject, getting a hands-on technology. This is kind of a big difference that I think most of the American graduate students must have known this. And the second thing is the new culture, new atmosphere.

Max, who had a teaching assistantship within his own department, mentioned a comprehensive preparation class he had to take his first semester before he could begin teaching:

When I came here, we don't start teaching right away, at least in my department. The first semester we don't teach basically, so we take a class, which is called, um, I don't remember the name except, right now, but it's kind of teaching seminar. Yeah, they prepared us for teaching right. They give how to prepare a before also, so I knew some of the things because I was already an instructor in my country, but, they also teach all of these right, and they also prepare, they help you to prepare for the English test you have to pass before being able to teach. Yeah, there was specific course for that, prepare us to teach. That was the first semester so we start teaching our second semester. [...] They [the class] just focus on the way the American way of teaching at college level. So, which was useful, right. They directly asked how do we deal with students, because some of the things are very different, some of them are kind of similar. The books we use in my country are very similar. We use the same translations for the same books basically we are using here. But yeah the cultural things, how a student respond here, they are supposed to participate more. Raise their hand and ask questions and things like that. Sometimes in some of our countries, those things don't happen, right. The course prepares us specifically for teaching, basically at [SWSU].

Alexander talked about having previous experience teaching back in his home country, but felt that teaching in the U.S. was different. He also brought up the teaching assistant orientation he had, but felt that it was not very helpful in the format in which it was conducted:

Actually, I have teaching experience, several teaching experience in my country, in Ukraine. But, here it's quite different. [...] So, actually, we had orientation, but during the orientation, a couple of hundred of graduate assistants in the large hall as somebody talks about a lot. It's almost un-useful.

The faculty who ran the lab where Pill worked as a teaching assistant was one of the positive aspects of his assistantship, and he claimed they provided helpful guidance whenever he had questions:

And a matter of fact we did have a training conducted by the department. But it was not a separate international teaching training, but it was a general training for all new TA's and they did go over a few points, which, you know, assisted us with class with our sections. But it was not that big of a help but definitely a guidance. And also I would have to add that all these teachers are in charge of the lab, they were also helpful. If you had a problem you could feel free to go and to discuss things with them and they would sort things out for you or they would guide you. So that way was a positive experience in the department.

In general, some of the participants felt more prepared for their assistantships than others based off of personal previous experiences, the level of orientation to their assistantships that they received upon arrival, and also their ability to adjust to the work culture.

International graduate assistants' experiences within their assistantships were commonly tied to their advisor's or supervisor's direction as bosses. Some participants recounted harmonious working relationships with their assistantship supervisors, while others felt frustrated by strenuous expectations, especially related to work hours, and lack of communication. Alish recalled his first encounter with his advisor who candidly revealed his expectations for the amount of hours that were expected of graduate research assistants he worked with:

The very first day that I got here I went to meet my advisor. He told me story, that's how we like, put the rule about the working hours. He told me a story, he said that I am here getting my PhD, I can [arrive in] the morning and I left the lab by 6PM. And he said that I don't expect you to come and work like that but you need to work hard. So, I never, I never get a chance to say something. I think I work a lot right now, like compared to many other students, especially the week, nine to five, sometimes more. [...] Ah, but, I'm not that unhappy with it, so it's not that I have a problem with that. I never discussed it with him so, the hours. I wish I could work less, but, well, I don't know, it's not that bad. [...]

Alish's reaction to the work hours that were expected of him was not uncommon among study participants, particularly those who held graduate research assistantships. While many of the participants suggested that working less hours would be desirable, they overall felt that for the valuable experience and financial support they were receiving, that the pressure to work long hours was a worthy concession. Howdy felt that he should not complain about working extra hours for his assistantship because of the valuable contribution his work was making for both himself and his department:

I think it's up to you how you take that, because, I think an assistantship is something that is the best job you can have, because you are working on something that you are studying. So, no, but you shouldn't mind putting in extra and getting to learn things, because you are not only helping your organization, your professor, you are helping yourself to grow, so. There were times when we thought that we were kind of, working more than expected, even the professor expecting a lot from me, according to the kind of stipend he is giving to us. But it's kind of a trade off. You don't want to start, kind of, complaining about it.

Jas recalled her graduate assistant handbook, which stated that they were limited to working twenty hours per week, a rule that she claimed was not always followed:

So when I joined, you get, as a graduate student, you get a booklet. You need to go through it, and they especially mention that you are supposed to work twenty hours, because, halftime. So, you need to work twenty hours and obviously it's not the same, haha. Some weeks, it's maybe more than forty, and some weeks, it's less.

Expectations that one would have to work extended hours as an international graduate assistant seemed to exist even before some of the students began their assistantship appointments. Miles talked about how this expectation was prevalent amongst co-national and other Asian international students:

I think, you know, for most of the Chinese or Asian students I know, they work more hours than what they are paid. But, it's like, regular rule for the Asian people, because back home we all used to it. Some usually you have to work really hard to get something done. Probably some week we work thirty hours or forty hours instead of just twenty hours. But I think for young guys, sometimes

you have to work hard. And maybe after that you get something down, you have so much experience, that's really good to find the jobs.

Mory was cautioned by co-nationals who were already studying in the U.S. about the expectations that international graduate assistants should work long hours. However, despite his friends claiming that they frequently had ten hour work days, Mory found that his own professor did not hold such strict expectations:

It was not explained to me through the university or my professor or someone else, but I already knew it's gonna be like because before me some other, some of my friends came over here, they were working some other universities, so I knew how it was gonna go. Even I was looking for something harder because some of them were working from seven in the morning from five in the afternoon. Or, even more, they had to work ten hours per day, but I'm not working, I'm just working maybe four hours a day, I'm just doing everything so, my professor doesn't care about the office hours. Like, she doesn't tell me you have to be here since eight in the morning until five in the afternoon. So, it is good.

Alish articulated that he did not mind working extra hours, but when his work at the lab was slow he wished his advisor would be less strict about allowing him to go home and have some free time. Furthermore, Alish felt that having guidelines for international graduate assistants about what advisors are allowed to require would have been advantageous:

Well, we are supposed to be in lab, even when it is slow. And they have on occasion my advisor has come to the lab and I wasn't there or someone else wasn't there. It's not a big deal but it's like an unwritten law that we are supposed to be there nine to five. [...] It [the GA contract] says twenty hours. It was much more than that. Yeah, but, I mean, part of it is ok because PhD is tough, you have to work hard. But, everyone was, what, what specifically bothers me is that there are some weeks where I don't have much to do, I'm just sitting in the lab. If I can just go home for a few days, take a few days off, I think I would be more productive in the next week or the following weeks when you suddenly have lots of stuff to do. [...] But when you have a research assistantship, you could just do anything, you know? Your professor can ask you to do anything. Just anything. He might ask you to go wash his car. Haha. He never asked but he can this so, basically just work for your advisor. It would be really nice if the rules and like, the details about what you going to do would be very more specific. So that he, he's not asking you to go wash his car, but he might ask you to work on two

project at the same time. That's lots of workload and sometimes you don't work on your dissertation for like, four months, five months, six months, because you're working on some other project and then you need to go back on your first project. It would be really nice if there are more clarification regarding what are you supposed to do for research assistantship.

Mory felt that his advisor was not sensitive to the fact that he was also a student in addition to being a graduate assistant. Mory claimed, "my professor is always expecting me to hand in results every week, or maybe every two weeks, but I have to still work even before I have an exam or something. So, that's kind of challenging."

The study participants were also eager to share the positive experiences and knowledge they gained from their graduate assistantships. Zoey felt that her assistantship and the publications and conferences she was able to participate in, coupled with her academic studies, created a well-rounded and satisfying experience:

The positive part of that, being an assistant and taking coursework is that, I feel it was very, it was cohesive and it was very comprehensive and it was a listening experience to me. Everything was intertwined because whatever issues we discussed over the course of our study, we do research, then I can go and be an assistant to someone. I can apply it to my vocation. [...] I was involved in publications and conferences, you know. It was all, and I know that not many students in our program who are commuting students have this experience or they feel a need for that, but to me it was really important to establish myself as a scholar. But they call us now emerging scholars, because we really do research together now with them. You know, you learn something plus work and your advisor will listen to you. You choose knowledge and new skills and you apply it. It's kind of becoming more into the colleague relationship now. From the first year until now because the program was very holistic. Very tied together.

Pill shared how his teaching assistantship allowed him to strengthen his own knowledge in his field:

You know, especially looking back at the course, you know, first semester when I said I was not very successful when we go back a little bit, I used to struggle to find an answer to the question what students used to ask me because I was not trained that way. You know? To think very critically. And I thought I had a good command of physics but when I came here I don't have it enough. Teaching the first semester when I remembered back and reviewed the subject again, that's

what has improved. That's what has helped me make my, you know, the fundamentals pretty strong. So that's the positive that has come out of teaching.

Pill also mentioned having a supportive supervisor who was open to communicating with

Him:

I was blessed with a very good instructor. I mean the person who handled the labs, the professor who handled the labs and the classes I used to teach, I could go and approach them and discuss and he would give us tips on how to work things out.

Howdy had a good working relationship with his advisor, and despite feeling stress over balancing his assistantship duties, he felt fulfilled by his work as a teaching assistant:

I was fortunate to get a good advisor. Thankfully I got that, and got to work on the interest, the areas, I wanted to work. Yeah, the advisor there were lots of times he wanted me to work on something else because of, the professor has to deliver something within this specified time to get new grants. But, I think that's a lot in my field, the research life, that you do working on what you want to do but sometimes you have to go out of context. Like, nobody likes doing the daily stuff or taking an exam, lectures for the students, but you have to do that because you are giving something back to the students. It is always good to share your knowledge and giving and conducting exams is kind of mechanical work, but still it is a part of the process. Even if you don't like it you have to do it.

Professional opportunities, such as attending conferences, publishing, and having the chance to network, were other positive aspects of an assistantship that were mentioned by participants. Max was pleased with all of the opportunities that he was able to partake in as a graduate assistant within his department:

One of the things I liked the most was, at least for any person who likes mathematics, some of the areas of research we have a lot of opportunities to travel to attend conferences, to give presentations. And that's one of the parts I enjoyed the most because making contacts in your area of research is fantastic.

Ravan was satisfied with the professional work experience that he gained from his graduate assistantship:

Actually there is a difference between research assistantship and graduate knowing like... research assistantship generally will involve your study to

complete a thesis. [...] But the graduate assistantships are only made for working. So, it was like I have learned a bit from that to the job I find was based on what I experienced which was quite helpful when getting a job, fulltime job, so, it was good.

Pink felt like American and international graduate assistants were treated equally, and in her department specifically, she felt that faculty were acutely aware of how valuable assistantships were to international graduate students:

We are treated in the same way. It's just how different our cases. We are given this same, actually the department, giving more assistantship to international you, know? They are nice because they understand. And, but the point is, what I see is, department, university, treats us equal, and I think maybe they give more priority to international student, considering the visa issue, I guess.

Graduate assistantships formed a crucial core component of the experiences of international graduate students. So vital was an assistantship to international graduate students that having to get by without one could be likened to living on only air and water. Participants placed value on graduate assistantships for the financial relief they provided, and for the invaluable professional and research experience. The general consensus was that international graduate students without assistantships faced more pressure and greater isolation. The experiences that study participants had within their assistantships were both positive and negative, particularly when it came to the pressure they experienced to work long hours, but overall participants were satisfied with the knowledge and experience they gained.

Conclusion

Within this chapter, I presented the findings from this study in order to contribute to knowledge about the experiences of international graduate assistants in the U.S. The three main themes that emerged from the research data were, “The First Six Months: Transition Challenges and Concerns,” “Pillars of or Impediments to Success: Personal

and Professional Relationships,” and “Like Living on Only Air and Water: The Significance of a Graduate Assistantship.” While each participant’s contributions enhanced the uniqueness of his or her individual experiences, many parallels amongst their experiences surfaced and captured a general snapshot of both positive and negative components associated with the international graduate assistant experience. Chapter six will address with greater depth how the findings from this study connect to research related to the international graduate student experience, and what implications exist for future research in the area of international graduate student support.

Chapter Six

Discussion

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of international graduate students with assistantships (both at the master's and doctoral level) and how they interpret these experiences, at a large, research intensive, public, four-year institution located in the Southwestern United States (U.S.).

Summary of Findings

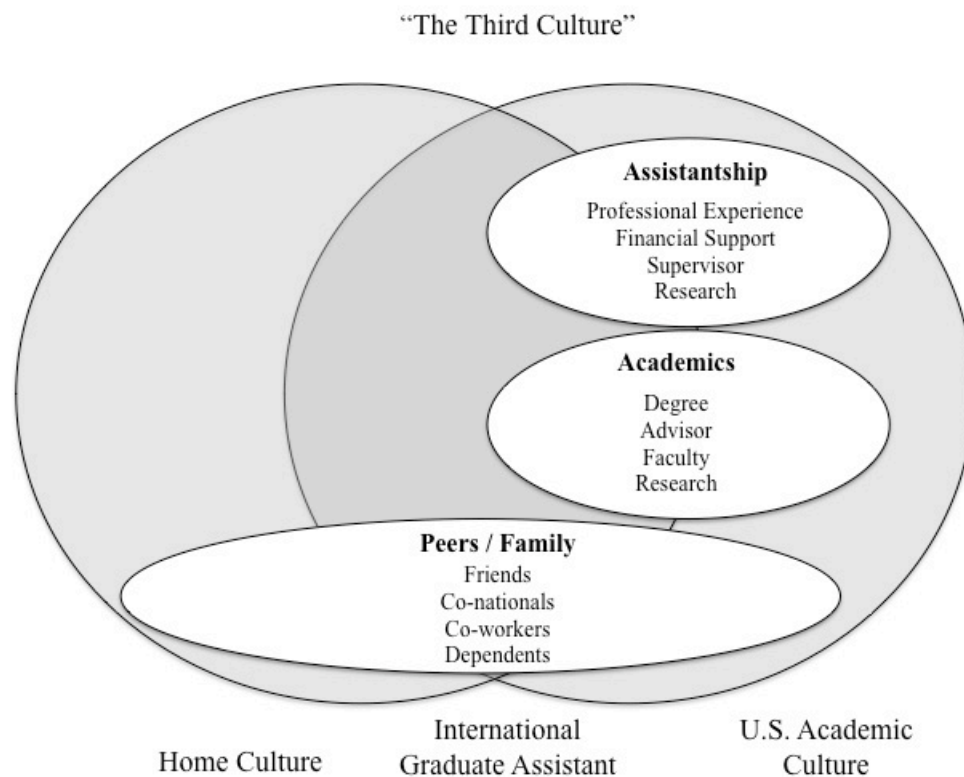
The findings of this qualitative, phenomenological study revealed that although international graduate assistants viewed their overall experiences positively, there were several significant areas in which the participants had indicated a desire for more support, and from these areas emerged the three main themes of transition challenges and concerns, the importance of professional and personal relationships, and the significance of graduate assistantships.

Participants discussed what had been the most significant challenges they faced when first arriving within the U.S., and many recalled securing necessities such as transportation and suitable housing, as areas in which they felt unprepared. A variety of cultural barriers were recalled by participants, who talked about having to adjust to academic and social life in the U.S., the particular campus and regional culture at SWSU and the Southwestern U.S., and also, for many of the participants, to combating the language barrier. Over time the participants had formed many different perceptions about their experiences as international graduate assistants in the U.S., as well as how those around them perceived the international graduate assistants themselves. Their perceptions

of adaptation could be described as the formation of a third culture (figure 1), where elements of their home culture and of their new culture as international graduate assistants in the U.S., intersect but do not merge, creating an exclusive, internal segment where a personal “third culture” forms.

Figure 1

Third Culture Visual Representation



Professional and personal relationships, whether they were positive or negative, had the power to either support or hinder the experiences of international graduate assistants. Relationships, within the context of this study, referenced the various support mechanisms that participants utilized or desired, whether these systems were specific people, or departments, such as the Office of International Student Services. The role of

their relationships with their advisors was a crucial element of the experiences of the international graduate assistants, who attributed success to healthy, positive advisor relationships, and a lack of support to negative or disengaged advisor relationships. Additionally, participants cited the presence or lack of presence of peer relationships as an impactful element on their overall experiences.

Finally, a cornerstone of the study findings was the weight given to graduate assistantships by international graduate students. The participants attributed a wealth of value to graduate assistantships due to the financial support they provided as well as the crucial professional career experience they offered. Experiences within the environment of their assistantships ranged from fulfilling and holistic to stressful and frustrating, and were dependent upon supervisor and co-worker relationships, type of assistantship, pressure related to work hours and content, and also levels of isolation.

Discussion of Findings

The first six months: Transition challenges and concerns. The study participants all shared their transition experiences, including the factors that were the greatest challenges for them, and also how their expectations evolved within their first semester studying in the U.S. One common theme that arose from the data related to the students' needs was the desire for assistance with fulfilling basic necessities, such as finding transportation from the airport or to the grocery store, or being able to locate reasonable housing. Participants, such as those from India, who had a high number of co-national peers already studying at SWSU, were able to leverage online forums to make contacts who could assist them with fulfilling basic needs. However, participants like Max, who remarked that he had no peers in Southwest City prior to arriving in the U.S.,

and who came from a country with little co-national students at SWSU, felt frustrated by the overwhelming task of having to secure affordable housing on his own. Other participants had expressed frustration over settling basic needs upon arrival, and many talked about wanting extended orientations, orientation sessions in smaller groups with assistance from both international and American students, and more information online related to what to expect when first arriving. These findings reveal that more extensive communication, particularly for international students who are coming from countries with lower numbers of co-nationals on a particular campus, may need to be implemented to ensure that basic needs are being met, a key component in easing initial transition stress.

While each international graduate assistant's experience was uniquely tied to his or her own cultural background and past experiences, similarities in cultural and language barriers arose within the findings. One of the most commonly cited cultural barriers was having to adjust to a new academic system, which on a graduate level can become increasingly complicated. McLachlan and Justice's (2009) qualitative study on international student well-being found that academic and social differences were one of the main sources of stress for international students. A few of the students, such as Pink and Murthy, talked about how interacting with professors in the U.S. was much less formal than back in their home countries, something that initially surprised them. Participants mentioned a heavy degree of frustration throughout their first semesters, and sometimes throughout their first year, as they had to familiarize themselves not only with more technical academic matters, but also with how to conduct themselves in an American classroom. These data reveal that more may need to be done to provide

international graduate students with information on social norms and academic expectations within the American higher education system, especially specific to their particular institution. Some of the participants discussed the difficulty of transitioning to a different cultural way of life. For example, a few of the single graduate students mentioned having to learn how to live on their own and take care of themselves after coming from an environment where they were used to living at home with their families. Other commonly mentioned cultural barriers were having to adjust to the food and extreme temperatures in Southwest City.

The participants' perceptions focused on how their experiences shaped their ability or inability to adjust to life as an international graduate assistant in the U.S. The transition the participants experienced within the move from their home culture to a new culture appeared to create an additional, individual layer of culture that Zoey characterized as "the third culture." This "third culture" space was the region where the international graduate assistants felt they resided because they were no longer fully within their home cultures nor within the new culture in the U.S. This idea of a third culture space implies a need to address how each individual international graduate assistants' third culture impacts his or her experiences studying in the U.S. Most of the participants expressed a longing for more cultural immersion, particularly through social opportunities with American and other international students, but they felt that they did not have the time and that there were not enough outlets for such activities. Some of the students felt pressured to place social and cultural needs behind having to balance their academics and assistantships, especially since graduate school was their main reason for being there. The majority of the participants did not feel discriminated against, however a

couple of the participants noted some subtle discriminatory situations. Other participants felt as though SWSU should offer more comprehensive support to international students and focus more on internationalization, especially within academics.

Pillars of or impediments to success: Professional and personal relationships.

Support was one key aspect of the participants' ability to adapt successfully and lack of support was associated with a slower and more cumbersome adjustment. Many of the students communicated a sense of independence and expected that they should be capable of solving their own problems. This is consistent with research on the use of counseling by international students, which suggests that many international students do not pursue outside support - in particular counseling - due to cultural beliefs or stigmas (Chen, 1999; Hyun, et al., 2007). However, those who did seek support with adjusting did so mainly from their academic departments, a finding that further emphasized the importance of the academic department within the experiences of international graduate assistants. The findings indicated that some students were receiving adequate support from constituents within their departments and others felt unguided and isolated.

Some of the students wished they had more cultural adjustment support as well as more information related to balancing academics with their assistantships. Participants also commented on the helpfulness of the Office of International Student Services in relation to immigration and other technical issues, as well as the organizing of international student cultural groups. In terms of opportunities to interact with American graduate students, most of the participants felt there were not many, and that both the university and individual academic departments should be responsible for fostering such interaction. Zhao et al.'s (2005) quantitative study on international student engagement

found that in order to enhance the presence of international students on campus, resources have to be devoted to engaging them further, particularly with American students.

Furthermore, a few of the international graduate assistants had expressed dissatisfaction with the clarity and helpfulness of the SWSU website, a tool that they relied upon to find support on their own.

Because international graduate assistants were in the U.S. to pursue a particular Master's or PhD degree, their dominant foci were their academic departments and the relationships intertwined within these spheres. Primary relationships within the experiences of the international graduate assistants were their relationships with their advisors as well as their connections with peers and family. Many of the students talked about wanting to rely on their academic advisors, especially upon first arriving, but being unaware of advising relationship expectations. While participants admitted that advisor relationships varied according to each individual professor, some felt well supported and guided, and others felt disconnected and unfulfilled. Literature on faculty perspectives of advising and working with international graduate students (Adrian-Taylor, et al., 2007; Ku, et al., 2008; Rice, 2009; 2007; Trice, 2003; Trice, 2005; Trice, 2007) addressed both positive and negative relationships, reflecting the findings expressed by study participants. Adrian-Taylor, et al.'s (2007) quantitative study on conflict between international graduate students and their advisors revealed that international graduate students listed "a lack of openness, lack of time, and different expectations regarding responsibilities" (p. 108) as the main sources of conflict, making these findings consistent with this study's findings on advisor relationships.

Some international graduate assistants revealed that their advisors were frequently not around or that they rarely met with their advisors, and that they wished they have more contact and spend more time together. Pink described a very negative relationship with her own advisor, who was international, which she attributed to cultural differences. Pink felt that having an American advisor who would observe U.S. higher education cultural norms, would lead to a much more positive experience than working with an international advisor in the U.S. Other trends within the findings indicated that advisor relationships varied according to academic department, with STEM field advisor relationships appearing to be overall more negative, and also department size, with smaller departments being attributed to more positive advising relationships. These findings are consistent with Trice's (2007) quantitative study on international graduate students' perceptions of their educational experiences, as well as Rice, et al.'s (2009) mixed methods study about international graduate student perspectives on advising relationships.

Trice's (2007) findings showed satisfaction with faculty relationships varied across academic departments, although overall the participants were generally satisfied with their advisors. Rice, et al.'s (2009) research revealed a similar general sense of satisfaction with advising relationships, and showed that poor guidance, little or no feedback, and extreme demands were all experiences that led to problematic advising relationships. Max and Zoey, who were both within smaller academic departments, cited positive relationships with their advisors and an overall greater sense of community. Participants whose advisors used more open communication and exhibited friendly behavior contributed to an overall more satisfactory experience. This suggested that the

manner in which advisors communicated and supported their international graduate assistant advisees had a powerful impact on this student population's perceptions.

While advisor relationships carried notable weight in the experiences of international graduate assistants, so too did peer dynamics, in terms of social and cultural reinforcement. Participants who were able to widen their peer circles, particularly to include American graduate students, felt they were overall more successful due to the extra support and cultural adaptation that came as a result. This finding is supported by Moores & Popadiuk's (2011) qualitative research on positive aspects of international student transitions, which found that social support is vital for the successful transition of international students. The international graduate assistants spent so much time within their academic departments and assistantships that many of them claimed they had little time to make friends outside of these two spheres. Trice's (2007) qualitative study on faculty perspectives of international students' isolation from host national students revealed that international graduate students had few opportunities to work alongside host national students, and that they also felt they did not have enough time to pursue relationships with domestic students. However, many of the participants shared their frustrations with feeling isolated from their peers within their departments, or feeling as though other graduate students, particularly domestic ones, were not very friendly or open.

Once again, peer social relationships within academic departments appeared to be tied to academic field (the students in STEM fields reported less interaction with peers), and also to department size (it was reported that smaller departments tended to be more conscious of providing platforms for peer socializing such as the daily department

coffee/tea breaks within the Mathematics department that Max and Alexander mentioned had played a crucial role in helping them to adjust). Several of the study participants felt that administrators and faculty within the academic departments should take some of the responsibility for encouraging graduate students to socialize more both inside and outside of class. Furthermore, some of the students discussed the need for forming friendships with more American peers, whom they felt could help them to adjust better, but wished that the university provided more opportunities for international and American graduate students to mix. Rose-Redwood's (2010) qualitative research study on international students' perspectives of diversity initiatives, as well as Trice's (2004) quantitative study on international graduate students' interactions with American students, support findings on international students desiring more opportunities to mix with American students. Implications from the findings also suggested that the graduate students with more co-national peers on campus were less likely to socialize with domestic students. Howdy even explained that co-national international students could be isolating American students through conversing in their native tongue in front of the American students.

Some of the participants suggested that international graduate students who had more difficulty with their English-speaking skills, or who were of a particularly ethnicity – typically non-European students – tended to be more isolated and have the least amount of contact with domestic peers. These findings suggest that some international graduate assistants may need greater support in terms of adjusting culturally. There is ample amount of research that supports this finding, which focus on the adjustment of particular ethnic groups of international students, or students from particular countries (Dao, et al., 2007; Kim, 2006; Lee, 2009; Le & Gardner, 2010; Soonhyang, 2006; Tatar, 2005).

However, because the cultural backgrounds of international students are so diverse, more literature is always needed that focuses on particular international student groups.

Co-national peer relationships were one of the main sources of support for most of the participants, particularly for the participants who were from India – a heavily represented international student country at SWSU. Students reported the usefulness of online message boards where they could connect with co-national peers who were studying at SWSU even before arriving in the U.S. Co-national peers were portrayed as a significant source of information related to adjusting to life as an international graduate assistant, and also provided help with finding assistantships. A few of the participants talked about missing support from their family, something they had relied considerably upon back in their home countries.

The three participants who had dependent children and / or a spouse revealed many positive aspects of being an international graduate assistant with dependents, such as increased involvement within the Southwest City community, better personal support, and a wider circle of peers. The main negative aspect of having dependents as an international graduate assistant was the pressure these students felt with juggling an additional responsibility. Literature on the experiences of international students' dependents has become more common, although other studies tend to reveal a more negative experience for dependents (Chen, 2009; Myers-Walls, et al., 2011) than the experiences that were shared by participants in this study.

Like living on only air and water: The significance of a graduate assistantship. The value that a graduate assistantship held for the international graduate students who participated in this study was one of the outstanding priorities of their

whole experience. The two main aspects of value that participants attributed to graduate assistantships were financial support and professional work experience. While more research is needed related directly to graduate assistantships for international graduate students, Kwon's (2009) quantitative study on international students' transition found that financial pressures were the highest ranked fear amongst international students. This supports the study findings of why assistantships are fiscally valuable for international graduate students. However, Perrucci and Hu's (1995) quantitative study on social and educational satisfaction of international graduate students found that the students' financial situation had no relation to their satisfaction, a finding that refutes how participants in this study felt their experience was more positive if their financial needs were being met. Students felt that assistantships provided them with more opportunities, such as greater outlets for research, and that faculty also looked more favorably upon graduate students with assistantships.

Findings suggested that one of the greatest challenges that participants discussed in relation to their assistantships was having to secure the assistantships themselves. Although the participants preferred any assistantship to no assistantship at all, they also talked about how finding an assistantship that linked well to and supported their academic pursuits was the ideal situation. Some of the international graduate assistants had received assistantships through their departments, while others arrived in the U.S. with hope that they could locate a suitable assistantship. One of the common complaints that arose during discussions on assistantships was the frustrating lack of organization in regards to locating assistantships openings. A couple of the participants recalled having to go from department to department asking about assistantships, and felt that they were

often received negatively. Several of the students suggested a singular place, such as an online message board, where all departments could post available assistantships, would be a useful solution for graduate students, and in particular, international graduate students who could then search from overseas before arriving.

Because U.S. student visa stipulations dictate that barring special circumstances and permission international students may not work off campus (USCIS, 2011), international students are faced with limited job opportunities. International graduate students who have to relieve the financial burden of attending graduate school in the U.S. must choose on-campus part-time jobs if they are not able to find an assistantship. Participants' overall view of the experiences of international graduate students without assistantships is that they were under much more pressure to finish school quickly due to tuition expenses, that the part time jobs they had to work were generally more physically tiring than assistantship positions, and that these students would miss out on valuable professional experience.

Ravan, the participant who stated it had taken him one year to find an assistantship, reinforced the viewpoints of the other participants when he revealed that the part time work he did in university dining services made it much more difficult for him to balance his studies. Ravan, as well as most of the other students, agreed that a graduate assistantship was the best possible professional experience they could get during their time as international graduate students, and that the assistantships gave them something valuable to put on their resumes. Furthermore, participants noted that international graduate students who did not have assistantships were generally more isolated from the academic department and peers, and did not participate in as many

career or social opportunities. These findings suggest a need for greater inclusion of graduate students without assistantships so that they remain engaged within their departments and on campus.

Though the participants were able to concretely articulate the reasons why assistantships held great value, the data on actual experiences within assistantships revealed both positive and negative viewpoints. Adjusting to the work culture in the U.S. was once experience that was mentioned by some of the participants as a difficult part of their assistantship experience. While some of the international graduate assistants had received a thorough orientation in regards to their assistantships, others felt they were at a disadvantage, particularly in comparison to domestic graduate students, who were already comfortable with American work culture. Several participants felt more thorough or extended orientations for their assistantships and the professional environment in the U.S. in general, would have been helpful.

Work conditions and supervisor relationships were some of the most discussed topics related to the participants' graduate assistantships. Some of the international graduate assistants felt isolated within their assistantships and wished that peer interaction, particularly sharing of research, was more encouraged. Many of the students knew that graduate assistants were limited to working twenty hours per week, but claimed that they worked much more, with some of them admitting to working over forty hours per week. Pressure to work so many hours was tied to expectations established by supervisor and / or peers, and a need to put more effort into research. The findings revealed that international graduate students within the STEM fields tended to be more likely to work more than twenty hours per week. However, while some of the participants

expressed frustration with always having to work extra hours, even when they had no immediate tasks to perform, others felt that they did not mind working so many hours because the work they were doing was either contributing to their own area of research, or they wanted to gain the extra professional experience.

Participants from certain cultures, such as Miles, who was from China, felt that Asian international graduate assistants in particular were expected to work long hours within their research assistantships. Such preconceived ideas about students from certain cultures working extra hours at their graduate assistantships in the U.S. was an idea that appeared to be passed on by co-nationals. Other participants felt that because they were receiving tuition assistance and a stipend, that working extra hours within their assistantships was not something they should complain about. None of the participants stated that they would feel comfortable approaching their advisors or supervisors about working too many hours. This finding parallels Trice's (2005) qualitative study on academic departments' responses to the presence of international graduate students, which found that international graduate students felt they lacked power due to their financial and legal dependence on their advisors and assistantships, causing them to refrain from voicing any concerns. Some of the students expressed a desire for being able to establish clear expectations or have more communication with their assistantship supervisors. These findings suggest that more information may need to be provided to international graduate assistants so they are aware of what their rights as graduate assistants are, as well as resources they can utilize when they need support related to problems with their assistantships.

Positive experiences within participants' graduate assistantships were also numerous, and mainly involved feeling empowered by the professional experience and opportunities that some of the students enjoyed, as well as supportive and encouraging supervisors. In particular, the participants who had teaching assistantships appeared to have the most fulfilling experiences and within most occasions, expressed having good relationships with their students, and felt that over time they adapted well to teaching in an American classroom. Furthermore, the participants were pleased with the skills and experiences they gained within their assistantships and felt that their assistantships significantly improved their resumes and helped them find jobs or get accepted into PhD programs.

A qualitative study on career placement concerns of international graduate students (Shen & Herr, 2004) showed that international graduate students were able to gain valuable career skills from assistantships, attend conferences, and get published, which supported the findings of the study participants who declared that an assistantship was crucial professional experience for them. More research on the career concerns of international graduate students needs to be conducted so that resources that are the most helpful to this student population, and the best manner in which to utilize them, can be better identified. This data shows that academic departments should be aware of how crucial having opportunities for gaining valuable professional experience are to international graduate assistants.

Implications for Practice

The shared experiences of international graduate assistants that have been identified through the findings of this study imply several areas in which practices of

supporting this student population may be altered or improved. While the participants in this study only represent a small fraction of the whole international graduate assistant population within the U.S., and at only one particular institution, the emergence of shared experiences and themes from the study provide validity for suggesting changes. Overall consideration of the findings point to a need for better communication and collaboration between academic affairs, international affairs, and student affairs. Furthermore, data showed that in general, international graduate assistants from particular countries, or within particular academic fields might need more support.

Wanting more assistance or being able to access more information about fulfilling one's basic needs upon arrival in the U.S., and specifically within Southwest City, was one area that international graduate assistants had emphasized. Detailed pre-arrival information could be posted online in a clear and easily accessible manner for the students. Additionally, many of the students talked about how helpful online co-national forums were when finding contacts at SWSU before arriving, and also how they were able to arrange housing and transportation or housing through these forums. Links to such forums could be promoted by international affairs, or even a similar online method for international students to exchange information before arriving could be set up through the university in order to allow international graduate students a safe platform for making connections before arriving.

Housing was another area where many of the participants felt international graduate students were not receiving enough support. Several participants mentioned how helpful it would have been if the university focused more efforts on gathering local housing and apartment rental information and providing it through the university website.

Institutions could also establish some of the participants' suggestions for orientation programming such as smaller-size groups, extended orientations that lasted throughout an entire semester or longer, and the inclusion of both international student and domestic student volunteers.

Aside from orientation programming, it was clear from the findings that the participants craved more workshops and social programming as well. Workshops that would be useful, according to the data, include cultural workshops, as well as time management workshops and also workshops focused on working within the American professional environment. In regards to more social opportunities, participants were referring in most situations to wanting to have the ability to interact more with American graduate students. Academic departments themselves could work with student affairs administrators to devise social programming that would be aimed at both international and American graduate students but that would also be sensitive to the limited time that is inherent within this student population. Max and Alexander's example of the daily coffee and tea breaks within their department, Mathematics, is an excellent example of how a small scale social activity can be fit into the daily flow of departmental activity without too much interruption. Both Max and Alexander claimed that this daily break was a key component of their eventual successful adjustment.

Larger scale socializing opportunities created for international and American graduate students could be devised to bring students from various academic fields together. If such activities were also promoted through academic departments, with graduate students being encouraged to attend, this could help with allowing graduate assistants to feel as though it was okay to take the time away from their busy schedule to

socialize with peers, a factor that kept many of the study participants from enjoying activities outside of their academics and assistantships.

Specifically regarding assistantships and advising relationships, international affairs representatives could provide workshops or information for faculty and supervisors related to working with the international graduate students. Given limited time and varying degrees of concern expressed by faculty, such information would have to be simultaneously succinct and informative. Administrators either from international affairs of specific academic departments could build a system of checking in with international students who have assistantships, so that if problems arise, they can be taken care of sooner, and so that international graduate assistants have a point of contact, other than their advisor, whom they can approach with questions or concerns. Such a system may be particularly helpful for students within STEM fields, where the data revealed that negative experiences with assistantships, as well as pressure to work long hours were more common. Furthermore, the findings show that more attention may need to be given to international graduate students without assistantships as well, in order to ensure that they are able to achieve a healthy balance and also find extra opportunities that will give them professional experience and keep them engaged if they are not able to secure an assistantship.

Some of the study participants had suggested more help from university career services in posting graduate assistantships online and in one common place, so that graduate students did not have to travel around to individual departments on campus, something that an international student can not do prior to arriving in the U.S. The institution could also support more peer networking amongst more experienced and

incoming international graduate assistants so that the new students could learn directly from others who had already faced similar challenges. Keeping up with international graduate assistant alumni is another way that the institution can encourage those who have already passed successfully through the institution to stay connected to the university and support new incoming international graduate students.

Future Research

The findings of this study show that research on the experiences of international students, in particular international graduate assistants, is an area ripe with possibilities for fruitful future research. There are gaps in the current literature focusing specifically on how assistantships impact the experiences of graduate assistants. Further research needs to be completed on specific cultural student groups as well as students within certain academic areas, specifically those in STEM fields. Longitudinal studies on how assistantship experiences impacted international graduate assistants in their future careers may also help assess specifically which skills and experiences are the most valuable for this particular student population.

Future research focused on working relationships between academic affairs, international affairs, and student affairs may shed more light on how these different networks intersect and what can be done collaboratively to improve the experiences of international graduate assistants. Research into online communication habits of international graduate students, as well as methods for enhancing peer connections between international and American graduate students are also areas that may illuminate the experiences of the international graduate student population better. Because international graduate assistants have the potential to offer a lot to an institution in terms

of culture sharing and research contribution, seeking methods for better integrating them into the campus environment has far reaching benefits.

Conclusion

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the experiences of international graduate assistants in order to better understand how they balance transitioning to a new culture, graduate-level academics, as well as assistantship work. The findings from this study revealed that although international graduate assistants characterized their general overall experiences as positive, they desired more support in the areas of transitioning, peer and advisor relationships, as well as assistantship experiences. Current literature on international graduate students exists but does not thoroughly explore the impact of graduate assistantships on this student population. The intention of this study was to provide higher education administrators and faculty with a better understanding of the essence of the experience of international graduate assistants in the U.S.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter



November 10, 2011

Stephanie Herzog
Department of Educational Administration
1400 Old Farm Road #17 Lincoln, NE 68512

Rachelle Winkle Wagner
Department of Educational Administration
117 TEAC, UNL, 68588-0360

IRB Number: 2011112124 EX
Project ID: 12124
Project Title: Exploring the Experiences of International Graduate Assistants and International Graduate Teaching Assistants at a Large, Public, Four-Year Institution

Dear Stephanie:

This letter is to officially notify you of the approval of your project by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. It is the Board's opinion that you have provided adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of the participants in this study based on the information provided. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) and has been classified as Exempt Category 2.

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Final Approval: 11/10/11.

1. The approved informed consent form has been uploaded to NUgrant (file with -Approved.pdf in the file name). Please use this form to distribute to participants. If you need to make changes to the informed consent form, please submit the revised form to the IRB for review and approval prior to using it.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- * Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- * Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- * Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- * Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- * Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 472-6965.

Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman

Becky R. Freeman, CIP
for the IRB



Appendix B

E-mail Sent to Potential Participants from the International Student Services Office

Initial Communication to be sent to potential research participants.

Dear International Graduate Students and Scholars,

My name is Stephanie Herzog and I am a graduate student at The University of Nebraska-Lincoln studying higher education administration. My focus is on international student affairs, which is the subject of my master's thesis. You are being contacted today because you are an international graduate student at [Southwestern State University] who holds either a graduate assistantship or a graduate teaching assistantship.

I am requesting your participation in a focus group or individual interview to discuss your experiences as an international graduate student and employee. You are in no way obligated to participate in this research, and if you choose to respond you may drop out at any time.

The focus groups and interviews will take place on the [Southwestern State University Southwest campus] in convenient and private locations. You will receive a free meal or snack as a participant, as well as the chance to contribute your experiences to enhance knowledge and understanding about the international graduate student experience.

Interviews will be conducted within November or early December of 2011. If you are interested in participating please follow the Google documents link below to provide me with your contact information and availability:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=>

I ask that if you are interested in participating, that you please respond no later than (insert date here).

I appreciate you taking the time to read this message and consider contributing to my research. Please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail at any time with questions you may have.

Sincere regards,
Stephanie Herzog
sherzog@huskers.unl.edu

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES
Department of Educational Administration

**Informed Consent – Focus Group Participant
(and Individual Interview Participant when applicable)**

Identification of Project:

Exploring the Experiences of International Graduate Assistants and International Graduate Teaching Assistants at a Large, Public, Four-Year Institution

Purpose of Research:

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological-based study is to explore the experiences of international graduate assistants and international graduate teaching assistants (both at the masters and doctoral level) at a public, four-year institution located in the United States (U.S.). For international students studying in the U.S., transitioning to a new culture – both inside and outside - can be challenging itself. International graduate assistants (IGA's) and international graduate teaching assistants (IGTA's), must face the transition to a new culture while also balancing demanding graduate coursework and a job.

Procedures:

You were invited to be involved in this study because of your status as an international graduate assistant or international graduate teaching assistantship. If you choose to become involved, you will be asked to be involved in a focus group discussion lasting approximately 60 to 120 minutes in a private location on campus. This discussion will be taped through the use of digital audio recorders. You will also be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire to learn more about your background.

If you agree to an individual interview it will take place in a private location on campus and will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study.

Benefits:

This study will yield valuable information about the unique experiences of International Graduate Assistants and International Graduate Teaching Assistants. This is an opportunity to share your experiences.

Confidentiality:

All personal information will be kept confidential. Any materials with your name or personal information or audio-taped data will be stored in a secured cabinet and or password protected computer. You will be asked to choose or be assigned a pseudonym that will be utilized in the reporting of the study. Identifying information for participants will not be available in any reporting of the data as the report will be from aggregated data, and the identity of the institution where the study was conducted will not be named.

Opportunity to ask questions:

You have the right to ask any questions pertaining to this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate or continuing participation in the study. You may e-mail the researcher at sherzog@huskers.unl.edu with questions.

Sometimes study participants have questions or concerns about their rights. In that case, you should call the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at 402-472-6965.

Freedom to withdraw:

You have the right to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time during the study without affecting your relationship with the researcher, your relationships in relation to any department on campus, or with your own institution.



Consent to receive a copy:

You are voluntarily making a decision to participate or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate, having read and understood the information presented. You will receive a copy of this consent form to keep.

Check if you agree to be audio-taped during the interview _____

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

Name and Contact Information of the Primary Investigator:

Stephanie Herzog, Principal Researcher

Email: sherzog@huskers.unl.edu

Phone: 502-649-2213

Name and Contact Information of the Secondary Investigator:

Rachelle Winkle-Wagner, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Higher Education

Department of Educational Administration

Email: rwinkle-wagner2@unlnotes.unl.edu

Phone: 402-472-2380

117 Teachers College Hall/ PO Box 880360/ Lincoln, NE/ 68588-0360/ Phone: 402-472-2380/ Fax: 402-472-4300

Appendix D

Participant Data Form

Participant Data Sheet*Dear Student:*

Please note that your personal information will be handled with the strictest manner of confidentiality, and that your identity will be known solely to the researcher. The purpose of this data form is to assist the researcher with identifying characteristics of the participants in the study. You are asked to provide your name and a valid e-mail address so that the researcher may send you a copy of the transcribed focus group discussion for your review. Your identity will be protected through the use of a self-selected or researcher assigned pseudonym (a "false" name). At the completion of this study, or if you choose to drop out at anytime during the study, this data sheet will be confidentially destroyed. Thank you for your participation, and please print clearly.

NAME: _____

AGE: _____

SEX: _____

HOME COUNTRY: _____

MASTERS LEVEL or PhD (please circle one)

FIELD OF STUDY: _____

GRADUATE ASSISTANT or GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT

(please circle one)

NUMBER OF MONTHS STUDYING AT THIS INSTITUTION WHILE WORKING

AS A GRADUATE ASSISTANT OR GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT:

DO YOU CURRENTLY LIVE WITH A DEPENDENT SPOUSE?

Yes or No (please circle one)

DO YOU CURRENTLY LIVE WITH A DEPENDENT CHILD OR DEPENDENT
CHILDREN (under the age of 18)?

Yes or No (please circle one)

E-MAIL ADDRESS: _____

CHOSEN PSEUDONYM: _____

Appendix E

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

**Exploring the Experiences of International Graduate Assistants and International
Graduate Teaching Assistants at a Large, Public, Four-Year Institution**
Student Interview Format Semi-Structured Focus Group Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me today about your experiences as international graduate assistants and international graduate teaching assistants here at (name of university). My name is (researcher name) and I am a graduate student at a different institution, and I am currently working on my master's degree in higher education administration with a focus in student affairs. This focus group is part of my thesis research. I want you to know that all information that we discuss today is confidential and will be used solely for research purposes. I will be recording our conversation for later transcription, and the data from this recording will additionally be confidential. If at anytime you feel uncomfortable, or wish to withdraw as a participant, please notify me immediately and I will assist you. Also, please remember that because this is a focus group, I ask you to be polite towards your fellow participants, but do not be afraid to hold back from expressing yourself truthfully and completely. If at any time you are confused by a certain question or term, do not hesitate to ask me to repeat it or clarify through definition. Before we begin, do you have any questions?

1. Before you arrived at this institution, what were your expectations as international students who are not only working towards a masters or PhD, but also working as graduate assistants or graduate teaching assistants?
 - a. PROBE: If those expectations have changed, in what ways have they changed and why do you think they have changed?

2. What are some of the challenges you have faced since you began your study and work at this institution?
 - a. PROBE: What would you say was the cause of those challenges?
 - b. PROBE: What particular resources (if any) did you seek out to help yourselves during those challenges?
3. What are some positive experiences you have had within your job here as well as within your coursework?
4. How do you feel that your experiences may be different from that of your domestic counterparts (meaning, U.S. students who are also graduate assistants and graduate teaching assistants)?
 - a. PROBE: Are there any examples in which you feel you were treated different from your domestic counterparts, and if so, please explain.
5. How do you feel that your experiences may be different from international graduate students without graduate assistantships or graduate teaching assistantships?
6. Please describe your relationship with your advisor and other faculty members within your department.
 - a. PROBE: How do you feel about your interactions with your advisor?
 - b. PROBE: Explain specific situations in which your advisor has either helped you or not helped you with your academics or with your job?
7. What are some specific experiences you have had with your job as a graduate assistant or graduate teaching assistant?
 - a. PROBE: Have you encountered any negative experiences on your job, and if so, please describe the circumstances.

- b. PROBE: What are some experiences you have had with your co-workers and with your supervisors? Would you characterize them as positive or negative, and why?
- 8. Please discuss ways in which your assistantship or teaching assistantship has or has not had an impact on your academic work.
- 9. During your time as a student and graduate assistant or graduate teaching assistant at this institution, did you ever seek support or assistance related to your ability to adjust to the campus, in reference to your academic work, or due to your work experiences, and if so, what types of support did you seek out and utilize?
 - a. PROBE: Do you feel that international graduate assistants and international graduate teaching assistants on this campus have enough support from administrators and faculty on the campus, and why or why not?
 - b. PROBE: What are some suggestions you have, if any, for improving the experiences of international graduate assistants and international graduate teaching assistants studying the U.S.?
- 10. (If applicable to any of the participants) For those of you who live here with dependent spouses and or dependent children, please explain how their presence has shaped your experience here as a graduate assistant or graduate teaching assistant and scholar.
 - a. PROBE: Please share your spouse and or dependent child's experiences, and how your position as both a scholar and an employee have affected them.
- 11. Are there any other topics related your experience as a graduate student and or employee at this institution that you would like to share with me today?

Appendix F

Codes

THEMES and SUBTHEMES

1. The First Six Months: Transition Challenges and Concerns

1. Necessities

Codes:

Rides to the store
 Offered help
 Need a car (3)
 Textbooks expensive
 Need small group orientations
 Need focus on adaptation to local life
 Expected more help upon arrival
 First experiences most important
 No help adjusting to living
 Independent
 Desire to eat healthy
 Find housing in-person
 Co-nationals help with housing
 Need longer orientations
 More comprehensive orientation
 More information
 Improve SWSU website
 Airport pick-up
 Temporary housing
 Overwhelming at first
 1st month most difficult
 Need basics from store
 Church volunteer helped
 Had nothing when arriving
 Need better welcome package
 More help with local living

2. Barriers

Cultural

Codes:

New methods of social interaction
 Can't completely adjust
 Social aspect demanding
 Different professional background
 International students all so different
 Facial appearance impacts ability to adjust
 Education system different (2)
 Academic integrity different
 Grading different
 Expected U.S. to be like Western Europe
 Technology different

Need info. On plagiarism
 Need training on American work culture
 On your own
 Food (2)
 More conservative
 Conversion rate
 Fear small city
 First time overseas
 Prior exposure through TV and internet (2)
 Want to learn more
 Differences not a problem
 American etiquette
 How to communicate with professors
 Understanding culture is #1 thing
 Educational emphasis
 Confusion
 Learning culture valuable
 Acceptable cultural behavior

Language

Codes:
 Different levels of English ability
 Language impacts ability to adjust
 Fit in better if speak English better
 Should not be embarrassed by accent
 Interact with more people
 Bridge communication gap (2)
 Small talk
 Biggest challenge
 TOEFL test
 Problems with ordering
 Communication barricade
 Adjust to daily English
 Chit-chatting
 Colloquial languages and phrases

3. Adaptation and Support

Codes:
 Did master's at SWSU first
 Must establish social life
 New schedule
 Giving up one area to succeed in another
 Develop a third culture
 Reflection
 Not used to asking for help
 First year frustrating

Always on campus
 Handle problems myself (2)
 Cultural nights
 Activities for international students (3)
 Dawali Night
 Almost considered going home
 Adjusted after a few months
 Extreme heat
 Climate
 Did not seek support (6)
 Difficult
 Support services for international students (2)
 Office of International Students and Scholars (3)
 Worried about confidentiality
 Visa restrictions
 Institution good fit
 Leaving comfort zone
 Cook food from home country
 Balance difficult
 International student online forums
 Co-nationals help each other
 Tax help
 Department helped with adjusting
 Did not seek support outside of department (2)
 Get accustomed to whole new system

4. Perceptions

Codes:
 Changing identity
 Balancing multiple identities
 Being new
 Middle of two cultures
 Treated different in good way
 American grad school competitive
 Already felt comfortable
 Internationalization more than international students on campus
 Academic Affairs and Student Affairs need to collaborate more
 First 5 weeks terrible
 Balance is challenging (3)
 Rough, not easy, but possible
 Frustrated
 Large population of international students helpful
 Heard discriminatory remarks
 Positive experiences (2)
 No time for socializing (2)
 Isolated

No personal discrimination (6)
 Not enough opportunities to meet American grads
 Academics more challenging
 Not enough social support
 Bored with monotony
 No time to make friends
 People are friendly
 People don't want to discuss your problems
 More difficult when not involved
 Consuming and challenging
 Took time to adjust
 Gained more confidence

2. Academic Department as Home Base: Professional and Personal Relationships

1. Advisor Roles

Codes:
 Academic structure hierarchical
 Recognition
 Mentor
 Understand transition and frustrations
 Recognition of struggles
 Thanksgiving dinner (2)
 Friendly and open (2)
 Positive discussions
 Reflections
 Subordinate relationship in STEM fields (2)
 Should encourage more
 Faculty should encourage interaction
 Normal working relationship
 Supportive
 Wish for more opportunities to talk
 Travels frequently for long periods of time
 Relationship positive, but not very positive
 Not very available
 Helpful
 Don't discuss work hours
 Not let some GA's graduate
 How to interact with advisor?
 At mercy of advisor
 Good advisor is key
 Expect a lot (3)
 Not very personal
 Sensitive to needs
 Smaller departments more friendly
 Not enough attention

Co-national advisor sympathetic
 Discuss personal lives
 Difficulty with causal interaction
 More formal relationship back home
 Tough advisor
 Not open to personal development
 Healthy and good interaction
 International advisors more difficult
 Cultural differences
 Extremely unhappy
 Helped select classes

2. Peers and Family

Codes:
 Friends back home (2)
 Very independent (2)
 Discuss and share experiences
 Talk to Americans for advice
 Not enough get-togethers
 American GA's not involved
 Bond with someone from similar culture
 GA's don't interact
 Hesitant to share
 Only friend in department international GA
 Share cultural bond
 Doesn't want to feel obligated
 Co-national friends (2)
 International student has to initiate contact
 Don't talk in native language
 Don't fear approaching others
 Pass help along
 Need department socials
 Get to know co-workers
 Finding group of friends difficult
 Social connections outside department difficult
 Need more events mixing Americans and internationals (2)
 No community support here
 How to make more friends?
 Only international friends
 American grad students not friendly
 90% of friends international
 Americans already have social group
 Easier to talk to international grads
 No friends first 6 months
 Getting involved helps
 You have to open yourself up

People not very approachable
 Volunteering at cultural events
 Easier for undergraduates
 American grad students less personal
 Must settle family
 No relatives to help
 University family housing
 Call Mom back home for advice
 Family resource center
 Helpful programs
 Good place to raise kids
 Cultural events and services
 Becoming more American
 Exposure to different culture
 Parents far away (2)
 Less time for social involvement when married
 Children adapted well over time
 Being a mother helped with social adjustment
 Lived with family back home

3. Like Living on Only Air and Water: The Significance of a Graduate Assistantship

1. Value

Codes:
 Financial relief (6)
 Apply what you learn in class
 Apply to vocation
 Research with faculty
 Establish oneself as scholar
 Professional life
 Work experience in U.S. (2)
 Without GA not as integrated
 Without GA less involved (2)
 Skilled experience
 Learn to do research
 Help to find job (4)
 Employment restrictions
 Need summer jobs
 Way too pay for studies
 Opportunity (2)
 Work with top professors (2)
 Matters a lot
 Build up resume (2)
 No GA is big negative
 Faculty favor students with GA's
 Desire to improve education
 Research in area (2)

Good technology
 Best job for international student
 Need better access to find GA's
 Finding GA done informally
 Different experience without GA
 If no GA, must work physical job (2)
 Need tuition waiver
 Academic goals
 American grads can work anywhere
 Non-GA work not helpful experience
 Career services should help
 Need GA job board

2. Experience

Codes:
 Sometimes clerical
 Time and commitment
 Frustrating transition to role
 Comprehensive and cohesive
 Feel like emerging scholar
 Publications and conferences (3)
 Holistic
 Not much interaction
 Inspired to be teacher
 Teaching in the U.S. different
 Undergraduates have knowledge gap
 Orientation almost un-helpful
 Facilitators should be more positive
 Pleased with education in U.S.
 Works everyday, even weekends
 Delays in salary cause pressure
 Should not complain about hours
 Would like to work less
 Demanding expectations
 American and International GA's same treatment (4)
 Online GA training
 Physical training would help more
 Working 9-5 in lab unwritten rule
 GA and academic work interfere
 Competition in labs negative
 American GA's more familiar
 Others take advantage of you
 Sometimes work over 40 hours per week
 Obligated to be in lab
 Work independently
 No real negatives

More isolated in larger department
TA preparation class
Daily department coffee break
Advantages in smaller departments
Generally positive
Not enough office space
Some international TA's disrespected
More academic freedom
No American GA's in department
Probably work 30-40 hours per week
Work more hours than paid
Should work hard
Don't care about extra hours
TA position enjoyable (3)
It's like having 3 jobs
Feedback helps
Rewarding
Quality of education good
Took 1 year to find GA