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An Exploration of International Students' Institutional Experiences at Cedarville University

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Introduction

- International students adjust to American culture in a few stages called intercultural adjustment. These stages are essential to adapting to a new culture and the level of success differ with each individual student (Nicolescu & Galalae, 2013).
- International students identified obstacles with a language gap in mistranslation between various dialects. International students who encounter conflict with language barriers tend not to perform well in other areas such as social interaction and cultural adaptation. (Perry, Lausch, Weatherford, Goeken, & Aemendares, 2017)
- International students have expressed that factors such as friendship, academic support from the University, supportive and kind faculty, strong family structure, and a willingness to participate in University related activities play strong roles in their academic success and in their adjustment to American culture within the institution. (Rabla, 2017)

Research Focus

- **Academic Challenges**
 - How are classes at Cedarville University different from what you expected?
 - Please describe challenges you experience in your classes at Cedarville University that you feel like a traditional student wouldn't have to worry about.
- **Changes that can be made**
 - What programs/structures have and have not been helpful while attending Cedarville University?
 - What changes would you make on campus to benefit International Students?

Participants

- The criteria for inclusion in the study are those who hold a non-US citizenship or permanent residency and who self identify with another culture. All have had educational experiences at Cedarville University.
- Our participants represent fifteen various majors, all four years of Bachelor-level study, ten languages, and fourteen nations.
- With IRB approval, a list of contacts for 51 international students were provided by the International Student Services at Cedarville University. Using "SurveyMonkey" to screen and to determine demographic fit, 18 students (35.3%) participated in the survey and consented to participate in personal interviews for our study.

Method

- A semi-structured interviewing format was used, and participants responded to 16 questions over the five constructs: overall adaption to the U.S, social influence, academic experiences, perceived political climate, cedarville programs.
- Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. Within each construct, we drew out repeating themes and unique individual observations or experiences. Through repeated analyses and inter-member reviews of themes, the findings were drawn and presented in this study.

Results

Perception of Academic Challenges

- **Language skills such as reading, writing, comprehension, and speaking are perceived as a challenge in their academic experiences.**
 - "Yeah, a lot more effort (in comprehension) because they're studying in a language that's not theirs, but sometimes, some professors don't put that in mind that they have students that are slower learners. This is not their first language so they need to slow down a bit with certain things."
 - "A lot of people don't understand because I am bilingual - your mind shifts from language to language daily. And sometimes people don't understand how exhausting that can be for my brain. And so, a lot of times, I think I am physically or mentally more drained than others because of that, which I guess in a way disables me to at times to perform to my best in class, which is something that I'm sure many othe the students here don't experience, because this is their language."
- **American culture, politics, and history are difficult to comprehend when used in classroom settings.**
 - "I think whenever we have to do things that involve political situations or current events, it was a little bit difficult to adapt to because I just didn't know too much of the politics here when I first came. So, it was kind of a matter of I had to do more work than the average, traditional student might have had to, to kind of figure out what was going on and be able to keep up."
 - "I'm taking Politics and American Culture. It's been a really hard class for me. Especially not knowing the general terms in general, not having that background. Because in [my home country], the political system is different and I haven't been following the American politics so it's been difficult for me to know what's happened in the past and also keeping up with what's going on."

Helpful Programs for Adaptation

- **Organizations on campus geared towards international/missionary kids/third culture kids were perceived as helpful in adjustment.**
 - "International Student Organization being more of the family org., the org where we all hang out, and MISO being us Internationals trying to reach out to the Americans and all of us kind of explore each others cultures basically (were helpful)."
 - "I really, really enjoy going to the International Student Organizations. It's helped me to meet other international students and other people who've not lived in America or who grew up in a third-culture household like I have. So that I don't feel quite as alone and separate from others as this whole campus might make you feel."
 - "Anything that's been able to – that I can express my culture freely has been a great program."
- **International/missionary kid/third culture kid student orientation provided by International Student Services is beneficial in adjusting to American culture in the institution.**
 - "Definitely the International Orientation was a very big help. Not just for adaptation to American community but for introducing me to the international community as well, because it helped to form a friend group that I was able to kind of share my international experience with which is always helpful."
 - "I think coming in and having the international orientation at the beginning of the school year really helped because it was a new environment, new people, different culture, food, and just knowing what's going on and where I need to be and what I need to do and what's expected."
- **Interactions with internationally inclined and trained staff/professors are a positive contribution to international student's adjustment.**
 - "Having the Academic Enrichment Center and [International Student Services Coordinator]'s office is huge. That has been a great help."
 - "I think having [Director of Intercultural Leadership] here is like a huge deal. He has been a great help for us."
 - "I was in women's choir and I absolutely loved it. It was a stress relief. The director, I felt like, was like a second mother to me."

Changes that would be Helpful with Adaptation

- **International students desire events, programs, or structure that help bridge the gap between traditional students and American students.**
 - "...we usually have a lot of, we have a lot of international events, but they tend to be centered on the international aspect of it, rather than both the international and the American aspects of it. So I think if we could find different ways to kind of unify both communities it would be very helpful."
 - "I feel like things that will make people more aware that there are international students around here on campus and it would be helpful if we put more effort in trying to integrate American culture and the international culture."
- **International students wish to see awareness of international student's experience and culture on campus.**
 - "I don't remember us having a cultural festival or cultural experience. I feel like Americans are so uneducated about different countries. It's crazy."
 - "I would do anything I could to heighten awareness of internationals' presence. Whether that is through having like chapels that are like international themes, international subjects. Whether that's having a missionary come in every so often in chapel and speak. Anything that would raise awareness of international students."
- **International students recognize the institution's lack of support for international orgs and faculty and staff directly working with international students.**
 - "...our international student advisor, is sometimes very busy and would need an assistant and also the international admissions counselor..."
 - "I think one big thing, and I think a lot of people mentioned this, is our international student advisor needs more help. If you want something to grow in a school, you have to set up an office for it."

Conclusion

- The study reported the following themes: difficulties present in academic adjustment, helpful structure/programs in adjusting, international student's desire for change for improved adaptation experience.
- Present results acknowledge the language difficulties present in academic experience and the positive effect of social support system in adjusting to American culture within the institution.
- Results are applicable to prospective international students, traditional students, professors, and administration of the university in gaining a broader knowledge-base on the what is beneficiary of international students in adjusting to an American university.

Limitations and Future Studies

- Cedarville University is a small, private, Christian college in Cedarville, Ohio. It is likely that the worldview of Cedarville University affects how its international students think and how the university runs its programs and academics. Experience at other universities may be different.
- Our pool of possible participants was relatively small (51).
- Adapt the interview questions to fit other universities and repeat the study at other schools in order to gain a broader understanding of the international student experience.
- Conduct a study to gain an understanding of the relationship between American students and international students from the perspective of the American students.
- Compare international student and American student experiences in adjustment.