THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE:

AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

AT BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

BY

JULIA MARINA RUIZ OSSO

ADVISOR: DR. LAURA L. SHUE O’HARA

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

MUNCIE, IN, USA

DECEMBER 2011
Foreword

It was my privilege to spend three years of my life pursuing a master’s degree at Ball State University. As a student, I enjoyed access to its superb teachers, excellent programs, and state-of-the-art resources. As a graduate assistant, I benefited from the University’s generous financial support. Most important, I was afforded the opportunity to further my education and develop as a human being. For these reasons I felt I owed a great debt of gratitude to BSU. This is why I chose to write this thesis.

I was only one of more than 500 international students enrolled at Ball State University during the 2009-2010 academic year. However, due to my training in intercultural communication and cultural anthropology, and my intensive involvement in the international student community, I was in a unique position to offer some insight into what it meant to be an international student at BSU. My hope is that this insight will be used to better the lives of international students attending this university in years to come.

This thesis is about giving back to an institution that believed in my ability to contribute to its diversity and growth. It is how I chose to contribute. In the words of the great American philosopher Henry David Thoreau, “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth.” This work is my truth.
Acknowledgements

Throughout my life, I have been truly blessed; wherever I go, whatever I do, I am always surrounded by caring and generous individuals who encourage me to shoot for the stars and help me realize my dreams. From my heart, I thank all of you who contributed, directly and indirectly, to my international student experience at Ball State University.

I would especially like to recognize the importance of the following individuals in bringing this work to fruition:

Dr. Laura O’Hara, for whom I do not even have an adequate title; the words mentor, advisor, professor, colleague, and friend are simply not enough. Laura, I guess I will just have to keep on calling you Mom.

Dr. Marcy Meyer, in whose class I learned that my personal voice is just as important as my academic voice, and that my subjectivity makes me a better scholar. Marcy, I hope you realize how many birds are nourished every day by the seeds you offer us in your teaching.

Dr. Paul Wohlt, whose wise questions, existential riddles, and field exercises taught me more than any lecture ever could. Dr. Wohlt, you were absolutely right; fieldwork does change us. I look forward to a lifetime of adventures in the field!
Dr. Carolyn Shue, who graciously stepped in for Dr. Wohlt after his retirement, bringing incredible enthusiasm and valuable scientific rigor to the project. *Carrie, your faith in me and my work came at a critical time, and I consider it a privilege to have you sign your name on this thesis.*

My family, Mamá, Papá, and Lela, for their lifelong investment in my education and their endless faith in my ability to succeed at whatever I set out to do. *La mente humana es como un flecha: donde apunta, acierta. Pero es la fuerza del corazón que, como un arco, la dispara. Ustedes son mi arco.*

Michael O’Hara (aka *Dad*), Lisa Kuriscak and Lara Zanchi Flores, who offered loving encouragement each in their own way, critically reading preliminary versions of this manuscript and cheering me on when I needed it the most. *Your support in these final stages of the writing process has meant the world to me. Thank you so much, muchas gracias, muito obrigada!*

And finally, my deepest appreciation to Aurora, Caroline, Denise, Elena, Isaita, John, Leila, Liliane, Llamarlat, Mary, Patrick, Quiro, Spiderman, Ugur, and Villa-Lobos, for sharing their personal experiences with me in such a generous and trusting manner. *I hope you feel I have done you justice, my friends. If this work is ever published, dinner is on me.*
This thesis is an auto-ethnographic study of international students at Ball State University, a medium-sized, state-supported institution in the Midwestern United States. I drew on my own personal experience, in-depth interviews with fifteen other international students, and participant observations carried out over a period of one year to understand how international students experienced life at this university. I used Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the Rejection-Identification Model (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999) to explain why international students formed such a tight-knit community, despite coming from a wide array of cultural backgrounds. Participants’ narratives illustrated international students’ experiences of rejection by American students, faculty, and
staff; their feelings of devaluation, expressed as self-doubt and a tendency to overreact to life pressures; and the existence of a strong international student minority group identity. Among other things, the international student community shared an understanding that “difference is a good thing;” this contrasted starkly with Americans’ negative construction of difference. International students’ and Americans’ opposing views on difference were one of the main reasons why the international student community was not well-integrated into the general BSU student body. In view of Ball State University’s strategic goal to substantially grow its international student population, this study includes my recommendations – based on participants’ suggestions and grounded in understandings of Intercultural Communication and Organizational Communication – on how the University can promote a more welcoming, multicultural campus environment.

Keywords: international students, ethnography, auto-ethnography, marginalization, internationalization, higher education, Social Identity Theory, Rejection-Identification Model.
Table of Contents

Foreword .................................................................................................................................................i
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................................ii
Abstract ....................................................................................................................................................iv

Chapter One – Introduction .....................................................................................................................1
  The Context: Ball State University .........................................................................................................7
  The Population: International Students ...............................................................................................9

Chapter Two – Review of the Literature ................................................................................................14
  The Internationalization of U.S. Higher Education .............................................................................14
    Economic Benefits ...............................................................................................................................15
    Educational, Social, and Civic Benefits ...............................................................................................17
  International Students’ Life in the United States .................................................................................20
    The Process of Acculturation ...............................................................................................................20
    Acculturative Stress in International Students ...................................................................................24
    Institutional Support for International Students ................................................................................29

Theoretical Framework .............................................................................................................................31
  The Concept of Identity .........................................................................................................................31
  Social Identity Theory ............................................................................................................................34
  The Rejection-Identification Model .......................................................................................................38

Purpose of This Study ...............................................................................................................................47

Research Questions ....................................................................................................................................49

Chapter Three – Methodology ...............................................................................................................52
  Participant Observation .........................................................................................................................54
  Ethnographic Interviews .......................................................................................................................57
  Reflexive Auto-Ethnography ..................................................................................................................60
    Passing as an American .......................................................................................................................62
    Journaling ............................................................................................................................................64

Data Analysis .............................................................................................................................................64
Recruiting Internationals ................................................................. 154
Recommendations for Academic Departments .................................. 155
Admitting and Employing Internationals .......................................... 155
Welcoming Contributions .................................................................. 156
Departmental Liaisons ...................................................................... 157
Internationalized Curricula .............................................................. 158
Recommendations for Individual Faculty and Staff Members .......... 159
Clarifying Expectations ................................................................... 159
Describe, Interpret, Evaluate (DIE) .................................................. 160
Chapter Six – Conclusions .............................................................. 163
Summary of Findings ...................................................................... 163
Voice and Truth ............................................................................. 165
Contributions of This Study ............................................................. 167
Limitations of This Study ................................................................. 168
Future Directions ........................................................................... 170
The Times They Are a-Changin’ ....................................................... 171
Afterword ....................................................................................... 173
References ..................................................................................... 174
Appendix A – Interview Schedule .................................................... 187
Appendix B – IRB Approval Documents ............................................ 188
Chapter One – Introduction

Do you really want us here? This was the question that prompted me to begin my research on international students at Ball State University (BSU). Despite the University's espoused commitment to diversity and internationalization, it seemed to me that international students were not exactly being “welcomed with open arms” by the BSU community. In social gatherings, in private conversations, and even in classroom discussions, fellow *internationals*¹ often shared with me narratives of how they felt rejected by their American² counterparts.

Quiro³, a young man from Asia, communicated the disappointment he and his compatriots felt about not being able to establish friendships with their American classmates:

During the classes we felt this, many of the times: American students prefer talking to only American students in the class. Though we try, we try several times to break the ice, and at least go and talk to them, but, yeah, sometimes they respond just for the sake of responding. They come to the class, they do

¹ International students at Ball State University commonly referred to themselves as internationals, for short. I use this term throughout the text when speaking specifically about international students at this particular university.
² Throughout this text, I use the term “American” to mean “relating to the United States of America or its people, language, or culture.”
³ The participants in my study were asked to choose pseudonyms for themselves; their real names have been omitted to preserve confidentiality.
the work, they talk only with the American students again in the class, and then they go. In our own country, we used to make lots of friends in the class, you know? So, sometimes we feel... sometimes we get hurt... because I feel that though we are from different countries and we came to the U.S. to study, you know, we are not worse than anybody....

While Quiro suffered a relatively silent form of rejection from his classmates, Aurora, a young woman from Europe, experienced outright attacks when she attempted to discuss U.S. politics, cultural practices, and beliefs with her American peers. Her questions, which she intended to be “intellectually provocative,” were very often met with defensiveness and verbal aggression:

“If you don’t like America, then why are you here?” If [internationals] got a dollar for every time somebody asked us this question, we would be millionaires! Of course this is a little bit of an exaggeration, but only a little bit, because this is exactly the question that American students and professors ask me. According to them, if we criticize American culture in any way, that means that we believe that this culture is not “the one,” it’s not the best, or something. So what they fail to acknowledge is that the international students are here not because they want to have a better education, but because they want to get a different perspective. [...] “If you don’t like America, then get the hell out of here!” This is exactly what the American students tell the international students very often.
Being a student of international origins\textsuperscript{4} myself, I considered my experience at BSU to have been mostly positive, so it was an unpleasant surprise to realize that many other internationals were going through an altogether different experience. I empathized with my friends and shared their frustrations. Over time, their negative experiences became a part of my experience at Ball State University.

As Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain (1998) observed, “humans’ capacity for self-objectification – and through objectification, for self-direction – plays into both their domination by social relations of power and their possibilities for (partial) liberation from these forces” (p. 5). In the process of self-objectifying as “an international student,” I became more aware (and increasingly resentful) of the various forms of rejection suffered by BSU internationals. The resulting discomfort was part of what prompted me to conduct this study, which I considered to be an exercise in academic freedom and thus one form of liberation.

As a student of organizational communication and cultural anthropology, I was in a unique position to analyze the personal and collective experiences of internationals from both an organizational and a cultural standpoint. I felt (and still feel) strongly that certain issues must be addressed by the Administration if Ball State University is to reach its strategic goal of doubling the international student population by the year 2012.

Gaining a better understanding of international students’ life on campus will be an important first step in the process of improving the BSU experience for this

\textsuperscript{4} I was born and raised mainly in Brazil. My parents are Argentinean, descendants of Spanish and Italian immigrants.
specific student population. An improved international student experience will benefit not only internationals already attending BSU; it will also facilitate the University’s recruitment of new students from abroad. As Caroline, a young woman from Africa, so aptly put it:

Whose interests are they serving? I mean, I understand it’s a business; we all want to make money, but sometimes you have to ask yourself, at whose expense? These are students, and their experience here goes a long way into making it the university what you want it to be. Because, if you are going to go [study abroad] and a friend recommends a [particular] university, you will definitely go there. It’s like the administrators don’t see that. You know, especially [considering that] they’re trying to build partnerships for future international students to come here, they should treat us well. Honestly, they should.

In pragmatic terms, providing current internationals with a positive experience is good business for the University.

Ball State University is not alone in its ambition to attract students of international origins. Rather, the internationalization of higher education is a well-documented global trend (Haigh, 2008; Healey, 2008; Huang, 2007; Parsons & Fidler, 2005), and one that often coincides with instrumentalist concerns (Harris, 2008; Stier, 2004). At a time when the economic recession is making it increasingly difficult for American universities to draw revenue from domestic sources, institutions across the nation are intensifying their efforts of internationalization
and declaring their commitment to foster more diverse campus communities. Quite clearly, international students are being targeted as a new market for the educational services offered by U.S. institutions of higher learning (Lewin, 2008).

However, along with the financial benefits of internationalization, comes the moral responsibility of welcoming and integrating into the campus community individuals who come from a variety of backgrounds (Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999). The goal of multiculturalism – creating a campus climate in which all forms of human diversity are represented and accepted – is not easily accomplished, but it is nevertheless well worth pursuing, both for economic and pedagogical reasons.

When I began this study, I believed naively that the situation of BSU internationals was largely unique; I assumed that University administrators were simply unaware of the problems being faced by this specific student population. Indeed, most of the published research I found focused on the benefits of internationalization from the point of view of universities and the larger society (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Haigh, 2008; Hurtado, 2006; Lewin, 2008; Peterson et al., 1999). Comparatively little attention was given to how international students, whose money and cultural diversity universities covet, experienced their educational pursuits in the United States.

However, I also came across a growing body of literature that discussed some of the specific needs of international students – not only in U.S. institutions, but in universities all over the world (e.g., Baker & Hawkins, 2006). It became clear to me
that, although knowledge of the international student experience was by no means
comprehensive, University administrators could already be providing BSU
internationals with more support and better services.

As Baker and Hawkins (2006) warned:

[International students] have the potential to become ‘at risk’, to fail to
achieve their educational goals and subsequently become involved in anti-
social and potentially dangerous behaviours and situations. [...] If they are
fortunate enough to have family or friends waiting for them as they arrive at the
airport to begin their studies and assist them in acculturating to their
new surroundings, then they are already ‘connected’ and the chances of them
becoming ‘at risk’ are greatly lessened. If, on the other hand, they arrive and
have no one to meet them and assist them in this process, then they are
already at risk because they have left behind their support systems: families,
friends, schools and community. (p. 21)

This begged a logical question: If research showed that international students
were at risk for a series of negative experiences, why were universities like BSU not
doing more to support these students in their educational pursuits? I suspected that
the answer might be related to a lack of effective advocacy. In the national debate
surrounding the internationalization of higher education, international students are
among the less vocal and most marginalized constituencies.

My study aimed to give international students a more active voice in this
debate, which is fraught with high political stakes – costs of higher education, access
to resources, immigration laws, and America’s competitiveness in global markets, to
name just a few. It followed that this work was not “psychology of the powerful,”
nor was it meant to be consumed only by academics. Rather, I strove to use
language and arguments that would make this study accessible to a variety of
constituencies affected by the issues being discussed.

In this spirit, I elected to join my own personal, subjective voice⁵ with the
voices of fifteen other BSU internationals in sharing with these constituencies what
the international student experience was like for us. Collectively, our voiced
experiences form the grounds for the arguments that we would like to see taken
into account in the larger debate on internationalization.

The Context: Ball State University

Ball State University is a medium-sized, state-supported Doctoral/Research
university⁶ in the Midwestern United States. Specifically, it is located in the city of
Muncie, Indiana, which is situated approximately 60 miles from the state capital
Indianapolis. Muncie has been considered a “typical American community” since
the late 1920s, when researchers Helen Lynd and Robert Lynd used the city as an
ethnographic site for their would-be classic Middletown Studies (Lynd & Lynd,
1929; Lynd & Lynd, 1937).

---

⁵ I have used the italic font effect to indicate the portions of the text in which I (Osso) am narrating an
event or engaging in an exclusively personal reflection.

⁶ The category “Doctoral/Research University” is used by the Carnegie Foundation to describe
“institutions that award at least 20 doctoral degrees per year (excluding doctoral-level degrees that
qualify recipients for entry into professional practice, such as the JD, MD, PharmD, DPT, etc.)”
(Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2009, p. 1).
In the 2009-2010 academic year, the University’s student body comprised over 17,700 undergraduates and more than 3,600 graduate students (Ball State University [BSU], 2010a). At the time, international students totaled 507, thus accounting for just under 2.4% of the total student population (BSU, 2010b).

One of the objectives stated in the Ball State University 2007-2012 Strategic Plan was to reach “5 percent of total enrollment from international origins” by 2012 (BSU, 2007a). This would effectively entail doubling the University’s international student population over a period of two academic years (i.e., 2010-2011 and 2011-2012). The objective was quite ambitious, considering that international enrollments at BSU had fluctuated only modestly – between 1.5% and 1.9% of the total student body – between Fall 2005 and Spring 2009, a period comprising four academic years (BSU, 2010a; BSU, 2010b). Even at the close of the 2009-2010 academic year, with rolling admissions added to the count, internationals still represented slightly less than 2.6% of the total student body (F. Adams, personal communication, April 14, 2010).

In recent years, Ball State University achieved national recognition for its innovation, technology and sustainability-related initiatives, as well as for the quality of its academic programs. Although BSU is probably not a “top of mind” school for international students seeking to study in the United States, it is clear that

---

7 The BSU strategic objective was expressed in terms of a ratio (i.e., international students: all students), so if the University’s general student body expanded, the number of internationals would have to more than double.

8 This is a marketing term meaning the brand(s) that consumers first think of when considering a specific product or service. In the case of American higher education, it would be reasonable to assume that world-renowned universities such as Harvard, Stanford, Berkeley, and MIT would sooner come to international students’ minds.
the University has the potential to attract the attention of more internationals than it enrolled in 2009-2010. A better understanding of the specific needs of international students will help BSU communicate with this target audience about its educational offerings and differentiators, and thus enable the University to promote more effective international recruitment efforts.

**The Population: International Students**

The term “international student” is used by American institutions of higher education (including Ball State University) to reference any individual student who is not a citizen of the United States and is therefore subject to U.S. immigration laws. Unlike the regulations concerning permanent residents and foreign workers (which fall under the purview of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services), most legal matters surrounding international students are under the jurisdiction of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the largest investigative agency within the Department of Homeland Security.

Specifically, these matters are the responsibility of the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), a unit within ICE. According to the SEVP website:

SEVP uses the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), a web-based solution, to track and monitor schools and programs, students, exchange visitors and their dependents while approved to participate in the U.S. education system. SEVP collects, maintains and provides the information so that only legitimate foreign students or exchange visitors gain entry to the United States. ([Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE], 2010a, p. 1])
It is interesting to note that ICE is by nature an investigative agency, whose mission speaks to the need to enforce homeland security measures; it is not a cultural or educational branch of the U.S. government, intent on promoting internationalization opportunities and cross-cultural exchanges.

ICE regulations impact many aspects of an international student’s life in the United States. For example, there are strict limitations to the type, place, and number of hours that an individual on a student visa can be paid to work. These limitations have to figure into international students’ financial planning well in advance, as they cannot simply go out and get part-time jobs if they encounter unexpected expenses or have difficulty making ends meet. Additionally, these limitations sometimes make it hard for international students to fulfill certain requirements in their programs of study, such as curricular internships, for which special ICE permits must be obtained. Even purely academic matters, such as the number of credit hours in which an international student enrolls during the academic year, are affected; a student must retain full-time enrollment in order to “maintain [immigration] status” (ICE, 2010b, p. 1).

Besides the legal hurdles, international students face a myriad of challenges that are idiosyncratic to the experience of living in a foreign country. These challenges vary in complexity and time span, and range from tasks as basic as opening a bank account (which is usually resolved within the first weeks of being abroad) to an effort that can take years, such as becoming proficient in the host country’s language. The extent to which each individual is successful in negotiating
these challenges varies significantly, but in general these trials are part of what I understand as the international student collective (or shared) experience.

At Ball State University, this collective experience began to develop among internationals during the week-long mandatory International Student Orientation organized by the Rinker Center for International Programs (RCIP). RCIP was the office on campus charged with ensuring the University’s (and internationals’) compliance with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement regulations. It was ultimately responsible for recruiting, admitting and advising international students in virtually all academic and legal affairs; from the moment a student who was not a U.S. citizen initiated the process of applying to study at BSU, RCIP became responsible for guiding him/her through the pursuit of an American education.

Incoming internationals were required to formally check in with RCIP (which then reported their safe arrival on campus to SEVP) and then go through a series of bureaucratic activities and information sessions before classes began. Only after being made painfully aware of their international student status were they allowed to join American students in registering for classes and attending other Orientation events (usually hosted by their departments of study and the Graduate School).

Arriving at the airport, procuring transportation to campus, checking in with RCIP, filling out paperwork, learning the terminology of immigration, being screened for Tuberculosis, finding a place to spend the first few nights, then looking for a permanent place to live, moving in, and only then beginning to attend classes –
all this was done by internationals in groups. Together, international students at Ball State University began to negotiate their new physical and cultural environments, one challenge at a time.

Welcoming parties, hosted by “veteran internationals” were common, and served the dual purposes of reuniting with old friends (many of whom had traveled home during the academic break) and meeting the “new arrivals.” Information was discussed, tips were relayed, and stories of success and failure were shared. In effect, a great deal of bonding took place in that week commonly referred to as “Orientation,” and so, even before classes began, a sense of unity was already developing among internationals.

The social bonds created at the beginning of the semester continued to be forged throughout internationals’ time at BSU. Many internationals found themselves living near other internationals (in on-campus residence halls or apartment complexes, or in off-campus housing) and engaging in leisure activities with them (e.g., road trips to nearby cities, like Indianapolis and Chicago). RCIP-sponsored events that took place throughout the academic year (e.g., the annual President’s Dinner) also provided opportunities for further bonding among internationals. Finally, internationals’ experiences of rejection by their American peers, faculty, staff, and “the system” in general, also contributed to the formation of an international student minority group identity.

For these reasons, and others that I explore in this study, international students at Ball State University represented a distinct cultural group within the
University’s larger student body. Understanding the idiosyncratic needs of internationals will help the University take steps to provide this specific student population with a better educational experience and a more welcoming, multicultural campus environment. Furthermore, this knowledge can significantly improve the University’s chances of succeeding in its international recruitment efforts.
Chapter Two – Review of the Literature

Why are American universities like Ball State University actively recruiting international students in the first place? What do we already know about how international students experience life in the United States? The following review of the literature aims to answer these two questions and, in doing so, explains how my study is positioned to complement the current research and expand our understanding of the international student experience. At the end of this chapter, I discuss the theoretical framework I used to analyze my findings, as well as the purpose of my study and its guiding research questions.

The Internationalization of U.S. Higher Education

“The relative decline of American education is untenable for our economy, it’s unsustainable for our democracy, it’s unacceptable for our children – and we can’t afford to let it continue” (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2009, p. 2). President Obama’s words spoke to the urgency that university administrators across the United States are feeling, as they experience the challenges of maintaining high academic standards in the face of the serious economic crisis. While it is not yet clear what effects the recession will have on enrollment levels in the future (Shtrakhman, 2009), institutions across the country are seeing government funding decrease and alumni generosity wane.
At a time when American colleges and universities are seeing a decline in the funding they have traditionally received from domestic sources – namely government appropriations, private donations, and student tuition, the debate on the advantages and disadvantages of the internationalization of U.S. higher education is being revisited. Among the many benefits associated with this internationalization is the potential to “gain access to a new pool of tuition-paying students” (Lewin, 2008, p. 1). Individuals living in countries with a repressed demand for higher education services represent an opportunity for American colleges and universities to grow both their enrollments and revenues.

Economic Benefits

According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), international students enrolled in colleges and universities throughout the United States during the 2009-2010 academic year totaled 690,923 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2010a). This number represented a 2.9% increase over the previous year’s enrollment, as well as an all-time high since the IIE began conducting its annual census of international students in 1919. Individuals came from all over the world to study in the U.S., but Chinese, Indian and South Korean students combined represented nearly 44% of international enrollments in 2009-2010.

A study by the U.S. Journal of Academics (2010) found that:

More than two-thirds of non-U.S. students use funds from their own personal accounts and from their families as the primary source for financing their
education. Only about 20 percent of non-U.S. students receive most of their academic funding from a U.S. college or university. (p. 1)

This means that when foreign students pay tuition at American institutions, they are effectively bringing foreign wealth into the national economy.

In fact, the IIE’s annual Open Doors report, published with support from the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, concluded that:

Higher education is among the United States’ top service sector exports, as international students provide significant revenue not just to the host campuses but also to local economies of the host states for living expenses, including room and board, books and supplies, transportation, health insurance, support for accompanying family members, and other miscellaneous items. (IIE, 2010a, p. 2)

Specifically, a conservative estimate by the Association of International Educators (NAFSA⁹) indicated that “foreign students and their dependents contributed approximately $18.78 billion to the U.S. economy during the 2009-2010 academic year” (Association of International Educators [NAFSA], 2010a, p.1). In plain terms, international education is a lucrative industry for the United States.

In the 2009-2010 academic year, Indiana ranked 10th among the top U.S. states hosting international students (IIE, 2010b). During that time period, 18,569 students and their dependents contributed an estimated total of $513.8 million to

---

⁹ Originally called the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers, NAFSA changed its name in 1990 to reflect a broadening of its mission, and became the Association of International Educators. Despite the change in name, the organization retained the original acronym.
the economy of the Hoosier state (NAFSA, 2010b, p. 1). Ball State University’s international students and their dependents are estimated to have contributed $14,649,000 to the state economy (NAFSA, 2010b, p. 4). BSU’s own international student tuition and fee revenue for the 2009-2010 academic year was $9,265,135 (K. Burke, personal communication, September 26, 2011). International students are particularly lucrative for state-supported institutions like BSU, because they are generally charged higher “out-of-state” tuition rates than Hoosier students. It is evident that “by any measure, international education makes a significant contribution to the U.S. economy” (NAFSA, 2010a, p. 1).

*Educational, Social, and Civic Benefits*

Fortunately, recruiting students from abroad to study at American institutions of higher education is not exactly a “tough sell.” Although post-9/11 Immigration policies made it harder for foreigners to obtain student visas, “the demand from overseas [for American higher education] is huge” (Lewin, 2008, p. 1). In many parts of the world, a degree from a university in the United States is more positively regarded than an equivalent degree from a national institution.

Interestingly, internationalization also builds the academic prestige of American institutions, both nationally and internationally. By recruiting more international students to come to the U.S. and also establishing programs overseas, U.S. colleges and universities are finding that they can “raise their profile, build

---

10 According to the Office of University Marketing and Communications, the stated “tuition and fee revenue” refers strictly to revenue associated with a student’s schedule of classes. It does not, among other things, take into account the money spent by internationals on rooms in residence halls, meal plans, or on-campus apartments.
international relationships, [and] attract top research talent who, in turn, may attract grants and produce patents” (Lewin, 2008, p. 1).

Even so, from an educational point of view, international students’ most significant contribution lies in increasing the diversity of American college campuses. In this sense, Ball State University’s strategic objective to “increase diversity of student, faculty, and staff populations and enhance the climate supporting diversity” (BSU, 2007b, p. 1) reflected a trend seen across institutions of higher education in the United States. Educators and administrators at U.S. institutions are becoming increasingly aware and appreciative of the benefits of sustaining a more diverse campus community. As Neil Rudenstine, former president of Harvard University, argued over a decade ago, “We need those international students, and we need our students to be out there [studying abroad]. There is simply no substitute for direct contact with talented people from other countries and cultures” (as cited in Peterson et al., 1999, p. 67).

Recent studies show that diverse learning environments (i.e., environments that make it possible for students to engage in cross-cultural interactions) help advance the educational, social and civic goals of higher education institutions (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2006). Diversity has also been shown to positively impact a number of learning outcomes, as well as students’ openness to diversity, cognitive development, and self-confidence (Chang, Denson, Sáenz, & Misa, 2006; Smith et al., 1997). Chang et al. (2006) pointed out that, when compared to peers whose learning environments afforded them fewer opportunities for cross-cultural
interactions, students at diverse environments “tend to report significantly larger
gains made since entering college in their knowledge of and ability to accept
different races\textsuperscript{11}/cultures, growth in general knowledge, critical thinking ability, and
problem-solving skills, and intellectual and social self-confidence” (p. 449).

This is corroborated by Terry, Pelly, Lalonde, and Smith’s (2006) explanation
that “international exchange is encouraged because benefits may accrue to those
who experience intercultural contact – cross-cultural experience is thought to
broaden one’s perspective, promote personal, academic, and professional growth,
and result in a greater mutual understanding” (p. 250). Specifically, as Peterson et
al. (1999) emphasized, American students who attend culturally diverse institutions
are likely to have opportunities to “learn about cultures, histories, and global issues
from international students; to participate in environments where differences are
acknowledged and respected, reducing stereotypical thinking; and to see beyond
city and state borders to understand U.S. interdependence with the world” (p. 71).

Finally, a policy statement authored jointly by the Alliance for International
Educational and Cultural Exchange and NAFSA (2007) argued that “international
education is more important than ever for U.S. international leadership and
security” (p. 2). David J. Skorton, the President of Cornell University, agreed, stating
that “higher education is the most important diplomatic asset we have” (Lewin,
2008, p. 2). The basic assumption here is that foreigners who have been exposed to

\textsuperscript{11} Although a number of authors continue to use the term “race” and its derivatives to signify an
objectively observable biological trait, as a student of communication and cultural anthropology, I
understand that “race” is a socially-constructed category, and that its use as an inherently biological
“demographic variable” is problematic.
American values may not only help the United States from the inside, by filling positions in high-technology industries and research institutions, but may also act as important allies to American interests abroad when they return to their countries of origin.

The effectiveness of this strategy, however, will depend greatly on the quality of each individual’s experience while studying in the United States. It is indeed possible that a young individual who receives top-notch instruction and thoroughly enjoys his/her international student experience in the U.S. will return home feeling more inclined to support American political interests. However, it is also to be expected that a young international student who suffers significantly during his/her time in the U.S. will be disinclined to act as an ally to the country that behaved like a less-than-gracious host.

**International Students’ Life in the United States**

International student populations have been studied, directly and indirectly, by scholars in several disciplines of the social sciences and humanities. As would be expected, each discipline has focused on different aspects of these individuals’ lives in the United States. In order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of what we already know about the international student experience, we must first piece these perspectives together.

*The Process of Acculturation*

Nineteenth-century European expansionism provided anthropologists with many opportunities to study the processes of cultural adjustment that we now call
acculturation. A unifying definition of the term was offered by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936): “Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups” (p. 149). Due to their colonialistic tendencies, these authors primarily viewed acculturation as a collective process, which indigenous populations were forced to undergo by their ruling colonial elites.

Three decades and many independence movements later, Graves (1967) focused on the implications of acculturation for the individual, coining the concept of psychological acculturation. In his study of a tri-ethnic community, Graves found evidence that there was significant variation in the way different individuals experienced the acculturative process. He attributed the variations in this particular community mainly to three factors: the amount of formal education received by the individual, the extent to which the individual voluntarily associated with the dominant group, and the social status and economic position afforded by the individual’s occupation.

Also focusing on psychological acculturation, Berry, Kim, Minde, and Mok (1987) pointed out that acculturation usually implies five categories of changes for the individual: Physical changes in the individual’s surrounding environment (e.g., a new living space); biological changes (e.g., a new diet); cultural changes (e.g., a new language); new sets of social relationships (e.g., new friends); and finally, psychological changes in the individual. Emphasizing the significance of what he
called *behavioral shifts*, Berry (2001) pointed out that, “virtually every behavior in a person’s repertoire is a candidate for change following one’s involvement with other cultures” (p. 621).

Berry et al.’s explanation of the acculturation phenomenon is especially interesting because it calls our attention to the dual aspect of change: Individuals in the process of acculturating psychologically are undergoing changes that can easily be perceived by others (such as physical environment and diet), as well as changes that occur internally and thus may be harder for outsiders to perceive and assess.

Berry et al. (1987) went so far as to claim that "behavioral changes and an alteration in mental health status almost always occur as individuals attempt to adapt to their new milieu" (p. 492). The level of *acculturative stress* experienced by an individual during his/her acculturation process, however, varies and is likely moderated by five groups of factors.

First, the nature of the larger society in which the individual undergoing acculturation finds him/herself: Individuals acculturating to a society that holds a pluralist, multicultural ideology may experience less acculturative stress than those adapting to a homogeneous society of assimilationist ideology. In case of the latter, the larger society's expectation that the individual forego his/her native cultural values may increase the stress associated with acculturating (Berry et al., 1987).

Second, the type of “acculturation category” to which the individual belongs: Berry et al. (1987) explained that immigrants, refugees, native peoples, ethnic
groups and sojourners generally experience different levels of stress. Specifically, sojourners (i.e., “those only temporarily in contact and who are without permanent social support,” p. 494) are likely to experience more mental health problems than the other previously cited groups.

The third factor, mode of acculturation, refers to the relationship between cultural and identity maintenance by the individual experiencing acculturation and his/her contact with and participation in the larger society (Berry et al., 1987). The combination of these two variables results in four basic modes of acculturation: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Assimilation occurs when the individual undergoing acculturation seeks constant interaction with the host culture and does not make an effort to retain his/her native cultural identity; conversely, separation takes place when the acculturating individual refrains from contact with the host culture and clings to his/her native cultural identity. If the individual maintains some degree of cultural integrity while still engaging in frequent contact with the host culture, the process is deemed integration. The fourth mode, marginalization, occurs when the acculturating individual is not intent

---

12 Ryan offered a particularly useful explanation of what constitutes an ethnic group: "As with any culture, members of an ethnic group share certain beliefs, values, habits, customs, and norms because of their common background. They define themselves as different and special because of cultural features. This distinction may arise from language, religion, historical experience, geographic isolation, kinship, or 'race'. Markers of an ethnic group may include a collective name, belief in common descent, a sense of solidarity, and an association with a specific territory, which the group may or may not hold" (as cited in Kottak & Kozaitis, 2007, p. 37).

13 This finding makes sense when we consider that a sojourner who expects to return to his/her native country in the near future is less likely to invest time, money and effort in seeking help to resolve mental health issues. Rather, he/she may think, “I’ll be home soon, so I’ll just do my best to get through these hard times.”
on preserving his/her original cultural identity, but also has little interest in interacting with the host culture.

Finally, a variety of socio-demographic and psychological characteristics influence a given individual’s level of acculturative stress. Such characteristics include age, gender, education, cognitive style, and prior intercultural experiences. As Berry et al. (1987) explained, “some individuals possess a variety of coping strategies that allow them to adapt successfully to acculturation (low acculturative stress), while others are unable to cope, leading to high acculturative stress” (p. 495).

**Acculturative Stress in International Students**

Scholars from the field of Counseling Psychology have paid special attention to the factors surrounding international students’ experiences of acculturative stress. Consistent with Berry et al.’s (1987) earlier claim, although only a relatively small portion of students experience the extreme levels of psychological and physiological discomfort known as culture shock, research indicates that most international students experience some level of acculturative stress during their studies abroad. Factors that are believed to affect levels of acculturative stress include, but are not limited to: opportunities for social interaction with members of one’s own cultural group and the host nation’s; experiences of discrimination; feelings of homesickness; availability of social support; level of language proficiency; and individuals’ gender and ethnicity.
Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) found that international students whose home countries were culturally very different from the host country were less willing to interact with host nationals, precisely because of the social difficulty associated with communicating interculturally. International students who found themselves in a sizeable cohort of students from their home country were also less willing to make the extra effort to interact with host nationals. As a result, international students in these two situations were more likely to experience high levels of acculturative stress, when compared to other international students who interacted regularly and extensively with host nationals. These findings were corroborated by a parallel study done in the United States, in which “students who primarily socialized with non-Americans reported more acculturative stress than did students who socialized with Americans” (Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker & Al-Timimi, 2004, p. 80).

International students’ perceptions of discrimination also affect the level of acculturative stress they experience. A study by Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) found that, in comparison to American peers attending the same institution, international students reported significantly higher levels of perceived discrimination. The authors explained that:

International students may perceive more discrimination because of their non-American status, because they may speak English with an accent, and because they may belong to a visible racial or ethnic minority group.

---

14 Once again, I understand that ‘race’ as a socially-constructed category may be relevant in specific contexts, but its use as an inherently biological “demographic variable” is highly questionable.
Regardless of the reason, it is important to note that a higher level of perceived discrimination could impede students’ acculturation or adjustment into their new environment and negatively affect students’ mental health (e.g., lower their self-esteem). (p. 272)

The same study found that, the older an international student was and the more time he/she had spent in the U.S., the higher the levels of discrimination he/she perceived. This may indicate that students become more sensitized to experiences of discrimination as they grow older and spend more time in the host country.

Additionally, Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) identified a correlation between students’ perceptions of discrimination and homesickness. Homesickness is a component of acculturative stress that can be defined as “a longing and desire for familiar environments and can sometimes take the form of depressive symptoms” (p. 264). Specifically, these authors found that international students who perceived that they were being discriminated against (individually or because of a group membership) reported higher levels of homesickness. The same study found that younger students and students with low English proficiency were also more likely to experience heightened levels of homesickness.

Social support is one way international students can cope with cultural adjustment problems and ameliorate the negative feelings associated with high levels of acculturative stress. Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, and Utsey (2005) found that international students who experienced prejudicial and/or discriminatory treatment while in the U.S. reported a strong tendency to rely on
friends and family for social support. Interestingly, Ye (2006) found that the more satisfied students were with their personal support networks, the less they tended to report perceiving discrimination and hatred and experiencing negative feelings caused by change. In other words, it is possible that strong social support not only aids international students in coping with already-perceived instances of discrimination, but also helps students deal less negatively with future experiences which could be perceived as discriminatory.

International students’ fluency in the host country’s language has also been tied to their experience of acculturative stress. Studies done in the U.S. found that international students with higher levels of English proficiency reported lower levels of acculturative stress (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Poyrazli et al., 2004). This seems quite logical, as a student’s ability to effectively communicate in English is likely to impact his/her level of interaction with U.S. hosts and consequently the range of social support options available to him/her.

In conjunction, these factors have a compounded effect that can result in either a vicious cycle of isolation or a virtuous cycle of integration. International students with low English skills are likely to experience more difficulty in communicating with Americans, so they may be less willing to interact with host nationals; as they do not have the chance to develop their intercultural communication and language skills, these students are more likely to perceive that they are being discriminated against; this in turn may cause them to isolate themselves even more, which may prove detrimental to improving their command
of the language and is likely to increase their feelings of homesickness and acculturative stress. On the other hand, international students who are proficient in English are likely to feel more comfortable communicating with Americans, and thus may be more willing to interact with host nationals; in these interactions, they will probably have the chance to make friends, thus increasing their social support network, which will help them cope with feelings of homesickness, lower their levels of acculturative stress, and perceive less discrimination.

A number of studies have focused on how international students' skin color, ethnicity, and cultural background have affected their acculturation experiences in the United States (Constantine et al., 2004; Constantine, Anderson, et al., 2005; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Constantine, Anderson, et al. (2005) interviewed 12 students from three African countries, Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana, and stated:

Of particular note was the fact that all of the interviewees reported prejudicial or discriminatory treatment. Some of these experiences included being called racial slurs by White Americans, being viewed as less intelligent than Americans, and perceiving Black Americans and international students from other continents as prejudging them. (p. 63)

When compared to international students from European, Asian, and Latin American countries, African students were more likely to experience discrimination, and consequently reported higher levels of depression and acculturative stress, as well as lower social self-efficacy skills (Constantine et al., 2004). On the other hand,
European students generally reported the lowest levels of perceived discrimination, a finding which Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) attributed to the fact that many of these students were fair-skinned; therefore their non-native status was physically less evident.

Lastly, gender has also been studied as a factor associated with experiences of acculturative stress; however, studies have been inconclusive about whether women or men experience the highest levels of psychological discomfort. Some researchers have suggested that women may experience greater value conflicts between the gender role socialization norms of their home countries and those of the U.S., and thus may display higher levels of acculturative stress (Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005; Poyrazli et al., 2004). However, Ye (2006) found that the men in her study reported higher levels of acculturative stress, and argued that this may be because the women in her sample generally exhibited better stress coping strategies and found it easier to develop interpersonal support networks.

**Institutional Support for International Students**

Given what we already know about the many acculturation-related challenges faced by international students, the vast majority of authors writing on this topic have called for U.S. institutions of higher education to increase and

---

15 The World Health Organization (2010) explained the distinction between the concepts of **sex** and **gender**: "'Sex' refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women. 'Gender' refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. 'Male' and 'female' are sex categories, while 'masculine' and 'feminine' are gender categories. Aspects of sex will not vary substantially between different human societies, while aspects of gender may vary greatly." (p. 1)
improve their support of this specific student population (Constantine, Kindaichi, et al., 2005; Hsieh, 2007; Peterson et al., 1999; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007, among others). These scholars argued that institutional support is key in both retaining and increasing international student enrollment in American colleges and universities. Peterson et al. (1999) stated: “Providing quality programs and services for international students is the cornerstone of any initiative to increase the numbers of international students and to retain those presently enrolled” (p. 70).

Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) explained the ways in which such programs would prove beneficial to both international students and host institutions:

Programs designed to help international students understand and cope with discrimination, homesickness, and the transition to college life would make it clear to students that the university is concerned with their well-being and wants to minimize their discomfort. Such programs may help international students to feel more comfortable, speak well of their host countries and universities, and encourage other friends from their countries to study at their host universities, which could promote friendlier international relations between all countries involved. (pp. 277-278)

As I demonstrated earlier, international students benefit American institutions and students economically, educationally, socially, and civically, due to the financial resources and cultural diversity they bring with them. In the words of Peterson et al. (1999), these are “important themes for U.S. higher education – to recruit international students for educational, cultural, and financial reasons; and
the corollary obligation, which is to welcome, serve, retain, and involve them in mutual intercultural learning with Americans” (p. 67).

**Theoretical Framework**

As evidenced by the literature review above, most of the research conducted to date has attempted to describe international students’ experiences through concepts such as “acculturative stress” and “homesickness.” Rarely have studies managed to simultaneously address the individual and collective aspects of these experiences; rather, they focused on one of these dimensions and downplayed the importance of the other. My firsthand knowledge of international student life leads me to believe that the experiences of individual international students cannot be fully understood without the context of the collective experience of their cohort, and vice-versa. In fact, I posit that exploring this individual-collective dialectic tension is key to comprehending the international student experience.

*The Concept of Identity*

A particularly useful concept for looking at the intersections between the individual and the collective is the construct of *identity*. As Holland et al. (1998) explained, “identity is a concept that figuratively combines the intimate or personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations” (p.5). In other words, identities help us position ourselves within a social context, making sense of who we are and who we want to be; additionally, they allow us to make sense of who others are.
Identities are, in fact, a very particular type of *self-understanding*. Whereas an individual in isolation may (through processes of intrapersonal communication) develop self-understandings, his/her identities will only emerge through the social interaction with other individuals. This is because identities “are improvised – in the flow of activity within specific social situations – from the cultural resources at hand” (Holland et al., 1998, p.4). Given the many social contexts in which we operate daily, a single individual is likely to have multiple identities, which will shift over time and across social contexts.

For example, a woman may identify herself as “professor” within the context of the university where she works; this identity helps her define her purpose within the organization and provides her with a social script that facilitates her interaction with others. Furthermore, this designation allows other individuals within the same social context (i.e., students, administrators, staff, and other faculty members) to understand who she is and what she does. However, within the context of her personal life, this same woman may identify herself as “mother,” an altogether different identity. Both identities are important, but each is relevant only within a specific social context: It is highly unlikely, for example, that this woman would expect (or appreciate) to come home and have her children address her as “professor.” Moreover, it is possible that this same woman once defined herself as “cheerleader,” an identity which was highly relevant during her teenage years, but is largely unimportant now that she is in her forties.
Interestingly, as Holland et al. (1998) pointed out, not every socially-contextualized self-understanding is an identity: Only those which hold a strong emotional resonance for the individual can be considered his/her identities. In the previous example, aside from being “professor” and “mother,” the woman may occasionally serve as “worship associate” in the context of her church. However, if she views this role as a nuisance social obligation (instead of an important contribution to the church’s activities), it is unlikely that the self-understanding “worship associate” will constitute one of her identities.

Finally, as Holland et al. (1998) analyzed, “People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are” (p. 3). In other words, identities are an important component of an individual’s projected image (i.e., how he/she would like to be perceived by others) and perceived self-image (i.e., how he/she views him/herself). It follows then that an individual’s self-esteem is closely linked to his/her identities and the attributions that accompany them.

Not all identities carry positive attributions, and being assigned a negatively-charged identity can harm a person’s self-esteem. Consider, for example, the case of a teenage boy who is constantly called a “geek” and harassed by his less studious classmates. In many middle and high schools in the United States being labeled with this negatively-charged identity (and suffering the unpleasant treatment associated with it) would likely cause the boy to become more self-conscious and less confident in his appearance and/or social skills.
Whether positively or negatively-charged, identities can be ascribed to individuals on the basis of personal characteristics or group memberships. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the Rejection-Identification Model (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999) are useful perspectives for understanding how group-derived identities emerge and affect individuals’ thoughts and actions.

**Social Identity Theory**

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a theoretical perspective developed by British social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner in the 1970s to explain how an individual’s group memberships influence his/her self-understandings and social behavior. As Tajfel and Turner (1986) themselves explained, human relationships can figuratively be arranged along a continuum:

At one extreme (which most probably is found in its pure form only rarely in real life) is the interaction between two or more individuals that is fully determined by their interpersonal relationships and individual characteristics, and not at all affected by the various social groups or categories to which they respectively belong. The other extreme consists of interactions between two or more individuals (or groups of individuals) that are fully determined by their respective memberships in various social groups or categories, and not at all affected by the interindividual personal relationships between the people involved. (p. 8)

In other words, the dynamics of almost any given interaction are influenced (albeit to varying extents) by the social groups to which the interacting individuals belong.
The authors of SIT posited that the very reason why individuals seek to belong to social groups is because such groups “provide their members with an identification of themselves in social terms” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 16). This leads to the development of the concept of social identity, defined as consisting of “those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 16). In other words, whereas an identity can emerge from either personal characteristics or group memberships, a social identity can only originate from the individual’s participation in a social category.

Tajfel and Turner’s research drew extensively on two psychological concepts, categorization and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979). Categorization is the basic human cognitive process by which objects (as well as people and ideas) are intellectually arranged into categories or groups; this mechanism helps us “break down” complex realities into units which we can more easily understand. For example, individuals are often classified according to their approximate age as belonging to the categories infant, child, teenager, adult, or elder; membership in each of these categories will result in a different set of societal expectations. Social comparison is the psychological process by which individuals compare themselves to others in order to arrive at self-understandings (and later identities). This comparison usually involves an evaluation of attitudes, abilities, and beliefs, but may also include physical characteristics, etc. For example, a child who discovers that she can run faster than her peers in gym class may feel pleased
with her performance and begin to think of herself as a “fast runner” or “good athlete.”

The three general principles of Social Identity Theory emerged as the authors observed the application of categorization and social comparison to group dynamics (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1979). First, the authors argued that, just as social groups and categories are associated with positive or negative value connotations (based on how they compare to other relevant groups), the social identities that result from one’s membership in these groups are also positively or negatively charged. For example, belonging to a positively regarded social category such as “corporate executive” is likely to be associated with a positive social identity and thus enhance an individual’s self-esteem.

Second, because individuals strive for a positive self-concept, they also strive to achieve and maintain positive social identities. To continue the previous example, in middle-class U.S. culture, the self-concept associated with being a “corporate executive” is a positively-charged social identity to which many individuals are likely to aspire and work hard to achieve. On the other hand, “college drop-out,” a negatively-charged social category, is an identity many individuals would prefer to avoid. It is interesting to note that the same individual can belong simultaneously to both social categories, but he/she is likely to strive for and emphasize the first, while downplaying the latter.

Third, when possessing a social identity that is unsatisfactory (i.e., charged negatively or less positively than desired), individuals tend to behave in one of two
ways: they either attempt to disassociate themselves from their existing social group and join a more positively distinct group (*passing*), or they strive to make their current group more positively regarded in the eyes of others (*social creativity*). Both behaviors function as coping strategies against the threat to the individual’s identity and self-esteem, but passing is an inherently individualistic response, whereas social creativity is group-based and strengthens the individual’s identification with those who share the stigma (Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001). In the previous example, the individual might conceal the fact that he/she dropped out of college before completing a degree, or accompany the admission of being a “college drop-out” with examples of very successful businesspeople who (like him/her) did not earn a college degree.

In sum, membership in a positively-regarded social group (i.e., the “right” group) may provide an individual with a positive social identity, which in turn is likely to produce a positive effect on the individual’s self-esteem; such a membership is thus worthy of being sought and maintained. On the other hand, membership in a negatively-regarded social category can be expected to negatively affect an individual’s self-understanding and should consequently (in the interest of psychological well-being) be avoided.

It is important to note that *communication*, as a process of human social interaction, is the principal means through which the processes of categorization and social comparison take place. Group membership is obtained, maintained and
expressed largely through language; group labels and communicative practices help distinguish between in-group and out-group members.

Since it was first published, Social Identity Theory has been widely applied by researchers in a variety of fields, including Social Psychology, Business Administration, and Organizational Communication. In fact, Brown's (1999) critical review of SIT found that this theory’s “influence is as apparent in the field from which SIT originally sprang, intergroup relations, as it is in such diverse areas as attitudes and behavior, deindividuation, group cohesion, performance and decision making, leadership, social influence, and stereotyping” (p. 746). Social Identity Theory has proven especially apropos in the study of minorities, as evidenced by the work of North American social psychologists Nyla R. Branscombe, Michael T. Schmitt, and Richard D. Harvey.

*The Rejection-Identification Model*

The Rejection-Identification Model (RIM) was developed by Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey to describe the effects of perceiving discrimination on members of low-status groups. This Model is grounded in Social Identity Theory and its assumptions that social inclusion is important for an individual’s psychological well-being and that rejection from meaningful social groups causes suffering (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). RIM extends SIT in the sense that it focuses on the group-based response to identity threat (i.e., social creativity), and more fully explains the relationship between feelings of personal rejection and increased identification with the minority group.
In essence, the Rejection-Identification Model posits that an individual who belongs to a low-status minority group is likely to suffer psychologically when he/she experiences personal rejection from the mainstream. If social mobility is not an option for this individual (i.e., he/she cannot change group membership, or pass as a member of the dominant group), then he/she may attempt to satisfy the innate psychological need of belonging by turning to the devalued minority group. When minority group members realize that their experiences of rejection are shared (i.e., prejudice is indeed pervasive), they may find comfort in the fact that they are not alone in their opposition to the mainstream. Collectively suffering and responding to prejudice allows minority group members to experience a sense of belonging, which in turn strengthens the minority group identity. As this new social identity (the minority identity) becomes increasingly relevant to its members, it may also become a source of psychological well-being.

The authors of RIM distinguished between the ways individuals cope with isolated instances of prejudice (i.e., unstable attributions of prejudice) and prejudice that is perceived to be pervasive, (i.e., stable attributions of prejudice, reflecting widespread bias against a given social group). Specifically with regards to situations of pervasive prejudice, they observed that:

When devalued group members believe that acceptance and fair treatment by a more powerful group is improbable, identifying with the lower status in-group may be the best possible strategy for feeling accepted and enhancing psychological well-being. In other words, if one cannot gain acceptance in
the group with much of society's power and prestige, the most adaptive response might be to increase one's investment in one's own group, or to "love the one you're with." (Branscombe, Schmitt & Harvey, 1999, p. 137)

Branscombe, Schmitt and Harvey initially developed RIM while working with African Americans, a historically devalued minority group in the United States. The authors explained that African Americans “are likely to encounter many attributionally ambiguous situations in which they are unable to determine whether a negative outcome is due to their own personal attributes or to others' prejudice against their group” (Branscombe et al., 1999, p. 138). Thus, their 1999 study focused on the willingness of African American individuals to attribute negative outcomes in a series of daily life scenarios to prejudice. Statistical analyses of self-report data provided by a sample of 139 African American men and women indicated that individuals who interpreted the negative outcomes as stemming from pervasive prejudice experienced lower levels of psychological well-being and higher levels of hostility against the dominant group (White Americans). However, those individuals who also reported high levels of identification with the minority group exhibited somewhat higher levels of psychological well-being, leading the authors to conclude that “perceiving prejudice as likely to occur across situations has simultaneously both positive and negative effects on well-being, with minority group identification mediating the positive effects” (p. 146).

Since the Rejection-Identification Model was first proposed in 1999, its hypothesized relationships between perceptions of discrimination, minority group
identification, and psychological well-being have been empirically supported by a series of studies. These studies focused on different factors affecting minority group members, including the pervasiveness of prejudice, the permeability of social boundaries, effects on self-esteem, and prior group history.

Foster, Jackson, Hartmann and Woulfe's (2004) investigation of gender discrimination examined the reasons why women classify the prejudice they face as either isolated or pervasive. The authors designed two studies involving written scenarios and laboratory simulations with a total of 250 women. Foster et al. (2004) found that when women envisioned another woman's experience of discrimination, they defined the discrimination as more pervasive than when they experienced it themselves. Although the women in this study recognized that they were personally experiencing discrimination, they chose to frame their experiences as isolated events, unlikely to repeat themselves across time and contexts. Foster et al. (2004) suggested that these women might be minimizing the extent to which they faced gender discrimination so as to avoid the negative psychological implications of admitting pervasive prejudice (Branscombe et al., 1999). The authors concluded that “minimizing appears to have a purpose, namely to enhance positive feelings after anticipating discrimination” (Foster et al., 2004, p. 227).

Foster et al.’s (2004) conclusions echoed the findings of Kobrynowicz and Branscombe’s 1997 study on perceptions of gender discrimination. Kobrynowicz and Branscombe found that the women in their study (i.e., the members of the socially disadvantaged group) were reluctant to admit personally having suffered
prejudicial treatment, although they did believe that women as a group faced
discrimination in society. The authors hypothesized that it may be painful to admit
that one has been the victim of discrimination, as this implies a loss of control. “In
an attempt to maintain control over one's life, some individuals may prefer to
believe they have not suffered from discrimination” (Kobrynowicz & Branscombe,

Foster et al.'s (2004) and Kobrynowicz and Branscombe's (1997)
observations reflect what is known in RIM as the coping paradox. Women (like
other devalued group members) may be able to avoid a certain measure of
psychological discomfort by reframing their individual experiences of
discrimination as isolated events. But in doing so, they may also be suppressing the
conditions necessary to seeking a greater collective well-being. As Branscombe et
al. (1999) reminded us, “while recognizing discrimination as a pervasive
phenomenon has some negative consequences, attributions to prejudice and group
identification are also catalysts for collective efforts that are needed to create
important social change” (p. 146).

Garstka, Schmitt, Branscombe and Hummerts (2004) tested the Rejection-
Identification Model's assumptions regarding the permeability of social boundaries.
Focusing on age as a meaningful social category, the authors investigated the
experiences of young adults (17–25 years of age) and older adults (over 64 years of
age), two groups that (in the United States) share similarly low-status positions
when compared to middle-aged adults. Garstka et al. (2004) surveyed 59 young
adults and 60 older adults with respects to their perceptions of age-based discrimination, age group identification, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Consistent with RIM-based predictions, their results indicated “a direct negative link between perceived age discrimination and well-being among older adults, with increased age group identification partially attenuating this effect” (p. 326). The young adults in the study also reported perceiving age discrimination, but did not exhibit comparable levels of group identification. The authors suggested that this may be because young adults can reasonably expect to make the “organic natural transition” (p. 331) into the high-status group of middle-aged adults within a few years, whereas, for older adults, upward social mobility is not an option. Garstka et al.’s (2004) study thus concluded that “permeability of group boundaries (i.e., opportunities for individual upward mobility) affects how low status groups respond to discrimination against their group” (p. 331).

Putting a spin on the issue of social mobility, Jetten et al. (2001) researched a devalued social group in which membership is entirely optional: the group of people with body piercings. The authors conducted two complementary surveys with a total of 176 men and women who were customers of a body piercing shop in The Netherlands. In the first survey, Jetten et al. simply measured the devalued group members’ perceptions of discrimination; in the second, they manipulated these perceptions. In both cases, the authors observed that perceiving discrimination against their social group increased the members’ identification with the stigmatized group. Jetten et al. (2001) thus concluded that “group identification is
not only a result of the potentially positive rewards that can be provided by a group membership, but can develop from negative intergroup experiences such as prejudice or discrimination” (p. 1211). Jetten et al.’s (2001) results also suggest that some minority group identities may be based on members’ desire to communicate a common opposition to mainstream norms (i.e., who we are not), with less emphasis placed on expressing the similarities between members (i.e., who we are).

Bourguignon, Seron, Yzerbyt and Herman (2006) explored the distinction between personal and group levels of discrimination within RIM. The authors analyzed the results from surveys in two parallel studies: the first involving 269 men and women from 16 different African countries, who were at the time living in Belgium; the second involving 178 Belgian women. (The authors considered African immigrants and women to be stigmatized groups within the Belgian social structure.) Bourguignon et al. (2006) found that (not surprisingly) perceiving personal discrimination negatively affected stigmatized group members’ self-esteem. However, the authors also found that “perceptions of group discrimination seem to buffer the negative effects of personal discrimination on self-esteem in a manner that is very similar to identification” (p. 785). In differentiating between the two constructs, Bourguignon et al. (2006) explained that, as operationalized in their studies, “while identification means inclusion, group discrimination has more to do with issues of common fate and common goals” (p. 785). The authors thus recommended that future studies carefully distinguish between measurements of perceived personal and group-level discrimination.
In a study of Black Americans in the United States, Outten, Schmitt, Garcia and Branscombe (2009) further investigated the relationship between minority group identification and psychological well-being. The authors analyzed self-report data from 120 self-identified Black American men and women with regards to their perceived coping options when facing discrimination. Results indicated that individuals who more closely identified with their minority group saw a greater variety of coping options as viable responses to racism. Essentially, these individuals were better equipped to first, manage the problem that resulted from the discrimination (i.e. problem-focused coping) and second, deal with the emotions or distress caused by the discrimination (i.e. emotion-focused coping). The authors concluded that “believing that one has viable options for coping with group-based disadvantage seems, at least in part, to account for the relationship between minority group identification and well-being” (Outten, Schmitt, Garcia & Branscombe, 2009, p. 165).

In 2003, Schmitt, Spears and Branscombe tested the Rejection-Identification Model’s ability to explain identification among members of a devalued minority group without pre-existing history. The authors chose international students as their natural social group. Schmitt et al. (2003) surveyed 99 international students from 32 non-European and non-English-speaking countries who were, at the time, enrolled at the University of Kansas. Consistent with RIM-based predictions, the authors found that “identification with international students increased in response to perceiving prejudice and suppressed the costs of perceiving oneself as excluded
from the host community” (Schmitt et al., 2003, p. 1). It is interesting to note that, whereas the students in this study did identify strongly with the social group ‘international students,’ their individual national identities were far less salient. This may be because, although students' national identities were pre-existing and chronic, the social identity ‘international student’ had become more contextually relevant. Schmitt et al. (2003) thus concluded that “common treatment from the majority alone may be enough to create a sense of identification with a newly created category” (p. 9), a conclusion which supports Jetten et al.’s (2001) earlier findings that “intergroup hostility often galvanizes in-group solidarity” (p. 1211).

In a more recent study of international students, Meegan and Kashima (2010) surveyed 74 young men and women from 15 different countries in Asia, who were at the time enrolled in an Australian university. The authors experimentally manipulated perceptions of discrimination and group identification, assessing their effects on two measures of students’ psychological well-being: depressed affect and self-esteem. Meegan and Kashima (2010) found that perceptions of discrimination and group identification affected these two measures differently. International students who viewed the group identity as irrelevant were less prone to experiencing depressed emotions (because the discrimination was aimed at a group with which they did not identify strongly), but felt less positive about the self (because they lacked the sense of belonging that comes from group identification). In contrast, students who viewed the group identity as highly self-relevant experienced significant negative emotions (because their beloved social group was
being discriminated against), but this was compensated by a positive sense of the self (strengthened by the feeling of belonging to a social group). Although Meegan and Kashima (2010) themselves pointed out that their study “involved experimental manipulations of sensitive variables and, as such, the artificiality of these manipulations and potential demand characteristics might have contaminated the data” (p. 201), their findings draw our attention to the complex interplay between individual and group/social identities.

In summary, the Rejection-Identification Model views the formation of a minority group identity essentially as a coping mechanism used by members of low-status groups in response to situations of pervasive discrimination where social mobility is not an option. Individual members of the group subjectively experience discrimination as rejection. This rejection is hurtful, and members interiorize feelings of inferiority (i.e., devaluation). Identification with others members of the minority group, who have also suffered rejection, provides some measure of psychological comfort and, to a degree, counteracts the feelings of devaluation.

Purpose of This Study

International students have been the object of attention by researchers in many disciplines. Most of the research published to date has attempted to describe international students’ reality in quantitative terms16, using self-report data and statistical analyses to measure variables such as acculturative stress and homesickness. Rarely have the individual and collective aspects of the international

---

16 Noteworthy exceptions include qualitative/narrative studies like those conducted by Constantine, Anderson, et al. (2005); Constantine, Kindaichi, et al. (2005); Hsieh (2006, 2007); Urban and Orbe (2007).
student experience been explored in conjunction. Seldom have international students been afforded the opportunity to actively participate in the description and interpretation of their own lived experiences. In an attempt to fill these gaps, my study is original in three respects.

First, this study combines a theoretical framework developed in the discipline of Social Psychology with a methodological approach indigenous to the fields of Cultural Anthropology. As an international student, I feel it is paramount to integrate the individual and collective dimensions of the international student experience; Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the Rejection-Identification Model (Branscombe et al., 1999) are useful perspectives for articulating the dialectic tension between these two dimensions. At the same time, as a researcher, I believe that the complexities and nuances of the human experience are more richly explored through the use of qualitative methods of inquiry; ethnographic methods are thus the most appropriate for this endeavor\textsuperscript{17}.

Second, my study is original for including an important component of reflexive auto-ethnography. In lieu of “detached observer,” I positioned myself as “passionate participant” and joined fifteen of my fellow internationals in sharing our individual and collective experiences as international students at Ball State University. As such, my role as a researcher was to facilitate the multi-voice reconstruction (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) of what it meant to be a BSU

\textsuperscript{17} Please see Chapter Three for a complete discussion of the methodology I employed in this study.
international. The emic insider perspective provided in this study allows for valuable insight into the cultural context of the international student community.

Third, this study is applied in nature; it aims to see the recruitment goals of Ball State University and the needs of its international student population converge. There is a potential here to create a virtuous cycle, in which the University actively improves internationals’ on-campus experience, and internationals contribute with the University’s recruitment efforts. This is why my study includes practical recommendations as to how Ball State University can improve the experience of its international student population. My recommendations are largely grounded in understandings of Intercultural Communication and Organizational Communication. At a personal level, Intercultural Communication facilitates the development of multicultural competence, which University students, faculty, and staff can use to communicate more effectively with internationals in day-to-day situations. At the university level, Organizational Communication informs policy and best practices that hold the potential to help BSU achieve its international recruitment goals. Together, these approaches can be used to create a more welcoming and supportive campus environment – at Ball State University, as well as at other institutions of higher education.

Research Questions

The growing body of literature on international students in general, albeit significant, is not sufficient to inform Ball State University’s international recruitment efforts. A deeper understanding of the BSU international student
community is necessary. Thus, the research questions that guided my auto-
ethnographic study of international students at Ball State University are:

1. What is the international student experience like for BSU internationals?
2. Why do BSU internationals form such a tight-knit community, and why is the
   international student community not more fully integrated into the general
   BSU student body?
3. How do BSU internationals communicate about their experiences of
   rejection, devaluation and minority group identification?
4. How can BSU create a more welcoming and supportive campus environment,
   so as to simultaneously improve the experience of current internationals and
   facilitate the recruitment of more internationals?

Whereas some aspects of this study may apply across contexts, I do not
presume to describe here the experience of international students enrolled in
universities across the United States; my explorations were limited to the context of
Ball State University and its international student population. Nor does this study
intend to cover the experiences of BSU internationals over an indefinite period of
time; I was an international student on the Ball State University campus between
August 2007 and May 2010, and the bulk of my fieldwork took place over a period
of twelve months, extending between February 2009 and January 2010. Therefore,
this study is an ethnographic snapshot, illustrating in color and detail the lived

---

18 Although I left the United States in early June 2010, my enrollment at Ball State University
continued through December 2011, when I completed this thesis manuscript and earned my master’s
degree from BSU.
experiences of a specific cultural group, within specific boundaries of space and time.
In Fall 2008, I conducted a small-scale ethnographic study of international students at Ball State University, focusing on their places of residence. My preliminary findings indicated that internationals’ choice of where to live – residence halls, university apartments, or off-campus housing – significantly influenced their social lives and consequently their experiences as university students in the United States. This initial study also provided me with valuable insight into some of the frustrations that internationals experienced when interacting with the University’s administrative structure. Their accounts of such interactions communicated clearly that BSU administrators possessed a very limited understanding of international students’ needs.

For my master’s thesis, I set out to expand my previous study, extend its findings, and generate a body of knowledge that the University could potentially use to improve the services offered to international students. By sharing my own lived experience and those of other internationals, I hoped to provide Ball State University with information that would help it improve its institutional support of international students. In this sense, my work constituted what Hayano (1979)...

\[19\] I conducted this study, titled "The International Student Housing Experience", as part of a course requirement for Dr. Paul Wohlt’s ANTH 559 – Ethnographic Methods class.
deemed “applied, action, or radical anthropology emphasizing the practical uses of anthropology in support of one’s own people and, therefore, of oneself” (p. 101). Formally speaking, this study was conducted within the interpretivist/social constructionist research paradigm, but also included an important critical theory/advocacy component (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

I posited that, in order to better understand the particular needs of the international student population, the Administration would require insight into international students’ “way of life.” Considering BSU internationals as a cultural group within the larger University community, I once again chose ethnographic methods as my “researcher’s toolkit.”

As Wagner (1990) explained, ethnographic methods:

Include those perspectives and methods associated with anthropology and sociology through which researchers try to develop an understanding of how a group of people live and work together, the meanings those people either construct or perceive in the activities they share, and the practices through which they affirm, refine, or give life to such meaning. (p. 196)

Thus, ethnography is not a single research method, but rather a research tradition (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008), an approach to understanding in which “[t]he ethnographer seeks a deeper immersion in others’ worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 2).

The specific ethnographic research methods I employed in this study included participant observation, ethnographic interviewing, and reflexive auto-
ethnography. By combining all three methods, I was able to approach the research problem from several different angles. Participant observation provided me with the opportunity to “privilege the body as a site of knowing” (Conquergood, 1991) and acknowledge important aspects of international student life which my participants and I experienced sensorially and emotionally, as well as intellectually. In-depth interviews brought forth the personal narratives of fifteen other internationals, thus allowing insight into the shared experiences of international students at Ball State University. Finally, reflexive auto-ethnography enabled me to add my personal voice to a larger, more compelling chorus of voices and “connect the autobiographical and personal with the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix) contexts in which this study took place.

**Participant Observation**

A “strategic” method of cultural anthropology, participant observation involves spending time in the company and personally experiencing the lives of the studied people (Bernard, 2006; Bohannan & van der Elst, 1998). The researcher’s continued presence alongside informants in everyday situations makes it possible to collect more and higher-quality data, as it reduces the “problem of reactivity – of people changing their behavior when they know they are being studied” (Bernard, 2006, p. 354).

From August 2007 to May 2010, I was an international student on the Ball State University campus, and as such, I had numerous opportunities to engage, formally and informally, in participant observation of other BSU internationals. As a
member of the international student community, I was routinely invited to attend meetings and social gatherings where other internationals were present. Such gatherings included, but were not limited to: the annual President’s Dinner\(^\text{20}\) (also called the International Student Dinner); a number of house parties hosted by internationals and attended largely by the international student community; official University recognition ceremonies (i.e. commencement ceremonies, the Dean’s List Reception, and various departmental honors awards programs); information sessions and cultural events sponsored by campus organizations (e.g.: the Social Justice League, the International Studies Association, the Indian Student Association, the University International Ambassadors Club, and the Christian Campus House); and even the Graduate Student Development Conference, a two-day Orientation event for incoming graduate students (both domestic and international).

Besides the opportunities to observe live interactions involving international students, I was also privy to a number of email messages that were sent by Ball State University administrators specifically to the international student population. Most of these messages came from staff members at the Rinker Center for International Programs and dealt with matters relating to U.S. Immigration regulations. Others originated from master’s and doctoral students in the Counseling Psychology Department, who were developing programs to provide emotional support for

\(^{20}\)The President’s Dinner is an annual event honoring the international student body. The event consists of a formal, sit-down dinner for approximately 200 guests (mostly international students, but also some university staff members), and is typically proceeded by an International Dance, when disco music from different countries is played. The dinner is officially sponsored by the President of Ball State University and the BSU Women’s Club International Women’s Interest Group, so tickets are offered free of charge, on a first-come, first-served basis.
internationals through the BSU Counseling Center. These written messages served as evidence of how the University (as an organization) communicated with internationals (one of its constituencies).

As a legitimate member of the cultural group I was studying, I enjoyed several practical advantages in carrying out my fieldwork, including gaining access to key informants and benefiting from previously established trust and rapport with group members. This may very well have been one of the cases in which it is “easier, socially and politically, to do fieldwork among a group in which one is or was a member” (Hayano, 1979, p. 101).

To minimize the problem of reactivity, I mostly refrained from taking extensive fieldnotes in the presence of other internationals. Instead, I limited myself to recording jottings and headnotes (also called mental notes), which I typed out and expanded on when I was in a private setting. (Noteworthy exceptions include the occasions when I attended formal meetings or information sessions, in which case I was able to take copious notes in loco without drawing attention to myself.) Bernard (2006) strongly suggested that ethnographers avoid “sleeping on” their notes, so as to not forget thoughts and impressions of events that may be relevant to the interpretation of the events observed. Unfortunately, I was not always able to set aside time to work on my notes immediately following the observation period, as my other commitments as a master’s student and a graduate assistant often competed for my attention.
Between February 2009 and January 2010, when the bulk of my fieldwork took place formally, I was able to devote an estimated five to ten hours a week to activities that fell under the scope of participant observation. To keep track of how I spent my time, I maintained a log of events I attended, interviews I conducted, and the observation opportunities I encountered. I found Bernard’s (2006) advice that ethnographers also use such logs to plan their future activities to be very useful, as “the process of building a log forces you to think hard about the questions you really want to answer in your research and the data you really need” (p. 394).

**Ethnographic Interviews**

Ethnographic interviewing (also called semi-structured interviewing) is a method in which the researcher has minimum control over the interviewee’s responses; “The idea is to get people to open up and let them express themselves in their own terms, and at their own pace” (Bernard, 2006, p. 211). In unstructured interviews, there are no rigid scripts regarding the questions the researcher will ask the informant. Rather, the informant is presented with broad, general questions or topics, and is free to talk about what he/she feels is more important or relevant. In other words, the informant takes on a more active role in determining the content of the narrative he/she presents to the researcher. As Bernard (2006) pointed out: “When you want to know about the lived experience of fellow human beings [...] you just can’t beat unstructured interviewing” (p. 213).

From February to June 2009, I conducted ethnographic interviews with fifteen international students enrolled at Ball State University. These internationals
were selected from a pool of personal and professional acquaintances, and represented fourteen different national origins, from five different continents of the world. Nine of them were women, six were men; their ages ranged from 21 to 32 years. All the internationals I interviewed had, at the time of their respective interviews, been at BSU longer than six months, and thus could reasonably be expected to have cleared the initial adjustment phase in which culture shock typically occurs. In academic terms, four participants were undergraduate students, nine were enrolled in master’s programs, and two were pursuing doctorates. To maintain confidentiality, I have identified participants throughout the text only by pseudonym, gender, and continent of origin.

I contacted each potential interviewee individually, explaining that I was working on a project that I hoped would help increase University administrators’ awareness of what it meant to be an international student on the BSU campus. Every single international I asked readily agreed to be interviewed, and many commented that they felt it was a good thing that someone was carrying out this important study. Several of the participants even suggested I speak to other internationals, naming specific persons who they knew would have particularly relevant information to share with me.

As is customary in semi-structured interviewing, after providing informed consent (as per University institutional review board guidelines\(^\text{21}\)), every participant I interviewed was presented with a basic set of nine topics for

\(^{21}\) For copies of all IRB approval documents, please see Appendix B.
discussion, asked in the form of open-ended questions. These questions explored the process by which the interviewee had chosen to come to Ball State University, his/her experience here as an international student, his/her willingness to recommend BSU to a compatriot friend, and his/her suggestions as to what the University could do to improve the experience of international students in general.

As each interview progressed, I asked follow-up questions and prompted each participant to elaborate on different aspects of his/her experience. The flexibility inherent to this interviewing method allowed me to optimally explore the variability of each individual’s narrative.

The shortest interview lasted fifty-six minutes; the longest took three hours and thirty-seven minutes to complete. Several participants invited me over to their homes to interview them, while others agreed to talk to me in a study room at the University’s Bracken Library or in a nearby coffee shop. In one case, the participant came over to my apartment to be interviewed. All conversations were carried out in English and were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy; I took only minimal jottings (instead of full notes) during the interviews, in order to give participants my undivided attention. Interviews were conducted one-on-one, except in the case of two roommates of the same national origin, whom I interviewed simultaneously.

Best practices in qualitative research suggest that audio-recordings should be transcribed immediately (or very shortly) after the interviews take place, and this is what I attempted to do. However, once again my other obligations as a

---

22 For the complete Interview Schedule, please see Appendix A.
master’s student and a graduate assistant took precedence, and much of the transcribing took place over the summer months of 2009. Each transcript was thoroughly reviewed and “sanitized” to protect participants’ privacy; the names of departments, professors, staff members, and students were omitted, and each participant’s name was substituted for the pseudonym he/she had chosen at the time of the interview. In the end, 283 pages of single-spaced transcripts were included in my data set.

As I started interviewing select internationals, word about my study began to spread among the international student community. I realized that participants were telling their friends that they had been interviewed by someone who was conducting a study on international students at Ball State University; my participants were publicizing my work! Over time even internationals who did not personally know me came to know of my research project. When I encountered participants in the library or at a social gathering, they often asked me how my research was progressing. They wanted to know what I was finding and when I was planning to present my recommendations to the University. Some even expressed an interest in attending the thesis defense meeting. It was clear that my participants were personally invested in the outcomes of my study and had become stakeholders in my research endeavor.

**Reflexive Auto-Ethnography**

As defined by Ellis and Bochner (2000), “auto-ethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of
consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). To me, everything about this study was personal: The context, the population, the questions, the data, the possible solutions, and especially the desired outcomes. I had no way of detaching myself from what had been my lived experiences of three years, so instead of attempting objectivity, I chose to embrace subjectivity and use my personal voice to speak to the reader.

It was never my intention to make my personal experience the primary focus of my research (as other authors of auto-ethnography have done). Instead, I chose to engage in reflexive auto-ethnography, a subgenre in which “the researcher’s experience is actually studied along with other participants” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740). I added my voice to the voices of the fifteen internationals whom I interviewed and cast myself in the role of “facilitator of multi-voice reconstruction” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 9), so that we could move beyond individual truths and arrive at a more inclusive, collective truth.

Conquergood (1991) reminded us that “ethnography is an embodied practice,” of which “the embodied researcher is the instrument” (p. 180). In this sense, it is important to recognize that, in many ways, I had been collecting data informally for this project ever since I stepped off the plane that brought me to the United States; I just wasn’t aware of it at the time.

From August 2007 to May 2010, I experienced firsthand what it meant to be an international student at Ball State University. My subjectivity as a BSU international and as a student of organizational communication and cultural
anthropology placed me in a privileged position to carry out this research. As argued by Hayano (1979), “subjectivism and personal involvement [...] can be assets to deepen ethnographic understanding” (p. 101).

Passing as an American

I have lost count of how many times an American student, professor or staff member has been surprised to learn that I am Brazilian and told me “I would never have guessed you are not American.” Normally, I would take their reaction as a compliment to my command of the English language and joke with them that “I’m here undercover;” unlike many internationals, I do not have a foreign-sounding accent. But, through the course of my research, I have become sensitized to this aspect and others that probably play into Americans’ assumption that I am “one of them.” In addition to the “undetectable” Midwestern American accent, I am fair-skinned and blue-eyed. This may not make a big difference in metropolitan areas such as Chicago, Illinois, but in Muncie, Indiana (and particularly on the BSU campus) this places me in the mainstream category of “White.” I am neither taller nor shorter than the average American woman, nor am I slimmer or heavier. My clothes do not stand out significantly (although I have been told on occasion that I tend to dress more formally and wear more leather items than most Americans my age). The reality is that, unless I make a point of disclosing my international identity, I can easily pass for an American.

Whether I liked it or not, this put me in a position of privilege when compared to other internationals on campus. Most of the participants in my study
could not hide the fact that they had been born outside the United States; certain aspects of their physical appearance, behavior or lifestyle clearly marked them as “foreign.” Indian students had darker skin; South Koreans spoke English with a foreign-sounding accent; Muslims scheduled their classes so as to observe daily prayers; and so forth.

Sadly, the Ball State University community chose to see these differences as relevant and constructed privilege (or, in this case, an absence thereof) around them (Johnson, 2006). In this context, I enjoyed what Johnson referred to as “white privilege,” the luxury of being in a dominant position within the community, due to certain personal characteristics over which I had very little control (e.g., my skin color).

For the purpose of this project, I chose to take advantage of this privilege, and use my dual “insider position” as both an international student and a presumably-American student, depending on the context in which I found myself. When I attended meetings in which international students were discussed as a rather unimportant minority group on campus, I did not volunteer the information that I was an international; instead, I listened carefully and allowed the individuals present to assume whatever they wished about my national origin. However, when I approached an international student about his/her experience, I made a point of introducing myself as a fellow international, and therefore one of “us.”
Journaling

Originally, I had planned to journal periodically throughout the duration of my fieldwork, as a means of recording auto-ethnographic reflections. In my journal, I would write mainly about my personal experiences as an international student at Ball State University, but also about my reactions to the narratives shared by the participants in my study. Additionally, I had planned on collecting old journal entries and e-mails to friends, which I had written prior to beginning this study, and incorporating them into my data set.

In practice, however, I found that my most compelling journal entries were not written “independently,” but rather in response to something I saw or heard that triggered a memory. On several occasions, I was in the process of transcribing an interview, when a participant’s comment reminded me of an especially significant experience of my own. In this sense, participants’ narratives prompted me to reflect and re-process what I had heard, seen, or felt, and thus helped me write my own personal narrative.

Data Analysis

As I transcribed the interview audio-recordings and typed my fieldnotes and journal entries, I analyzed the data using what Bernard (2006) called “the ocular scan method,” or “eyeballing”:

In this low-tech method, you quite literally lay out your notes in piles on the floor. You live with them, handle them, read them over and over again, tack
bunches of them to a bulletin board, and eventually get a feel for what’s in them. (p. 406)

Bernard explained that while eyeballing may not seem scientific, it is a proven method for ethnographers to become familiar with the content of their notes.

As I familiarized myself with the contents of my data set, I applied Owen’s (1984) thematic interpretation method solely to the interview transcripts, searching for themes that fulfilled this author’s three basic criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. According to Owen, these “themes allow sense-making at different rates and in various forms fitting the specific current concerns of the participants” (p. 276). The themes that emerged in this initial, inductive stage of analysis were then used as codes for the entire dataset (interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and journal entries), in a process akin to a grounded theory approach.

A second, deductive stage of analysis included the search for a theoretical framework that explicated my findings. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the Rejection-Identification Model (Branscombe et al., 1999) proved highly effective in describing the social dynamics involving international students on the BSU campus. I then proceeded to frame the themes that had emerged in the first stage of analysis, using the language of these two theoretical models. The validity of these models as applied to BSU internationals was confirmed through informal member checks with participants and conversations with other members of the international student community.
Finally, I compiled participants’ suggestions of things the University could do (or do better) to improve the on-campus experience of international students, and further developed and/or combined them to facilitate the reader’s understanding of what was being proposed. Based on participants’ suggestions, as well as my perspective as a student of organizational communication and cultural anthropology, I structured a set of recommendations that I urge the University to consider implementing. These recommendations will not only improve the quality of internationals’ experience on campus, they will also aid the University in achieving its strategic goal of doubling the international student population by 2012.
The entire process of applying and being admitted to Ball State University took nearly six months – it would probably have taken longer had it not been for the help of personal connections in my department of study – and I can remember feeling very anxious as I prepared myself to come to the United States. Even after the University’s official offer of admission arrived, there were so many other things to worry about: How to pay for tuition and living expenses, whether or not the assistantship would be enough to make ends meet, paying all the necessary immigration taxes, scheduling a visa interview at the nearest U.S. consulate, making travel arrangements, securing an on-campus apartment, arranging for a friend to pick me up at the airport, etc.

Then there were emotional concerns. As is common among young adults in Brazil, I was still living with my parents, so in many respects this would really be my first time away from home. I wondered, will I be okay living 5,000 miles away from my family and friends? What if I am terribly homesick and hate it there? What if something horrible happens to a loved one while I’m gone, and I am too far away to help or be there for them? Will I find nice, caring people to call friends where I’m going? Will I lose touch with my old friends from back home?

As I reflect back on my thoughts and emotions of three years ago, I realize that while I did find myself facing some of the challenges I had initially anticipated, I also
encountered others that truly took me by surprise. Specifically, I am now aware that, before leaving home, I had no idea how deeply my experience as an international student in the U.S. would affect me and to what extent it would change how I view the world and myself.

When an individual applies to and enrolls as a student in a foreign institution of higher education, he/she rarely considers the consequences that this decision will have on his/her identity. Perhaps this individual anticipates that leading a student life in a foreign country, away from family and friends, will present a number of challenges, some of which are psychological in nature. However, as my own experience illustrated, seldom does the question of “Who will I become when I am abroad?” come into focus. Yet this is one of the foremost issues in international students’ accounts of their experiences abroad; for better or worse, these individuals’ self-perceptions change.

As Jorge Cham’s comic “The F-1 Student Visa Process Explained” (on p. 69) illustrates, the very process of securing a student visa to study in the United States can be psychologically strenuous. The typical international student (in this case, represented by Cham’s character Tajel) is likely to experience moments of extreme anxiety, uncertainty, joy, and sadness in this process, as well as undergo a number of small indignities (e.g., having one’s emails ignored by American professors, who often do not understand the international student application process, and

---

23 A very special thank-you to Dr. Jorge Cham, talented cartoonist and speaker, for generously allowing me to include his brilliant depiction of the international student experience in this thesis. Dr. Cham’s comic strip “Piled Higher and Deeper” can be accessed online at www.phdcomics.com.
Figure 1 - "Piled Higher and Deeper: The F-1 Student Visa Process Explained" by Jorge Cham
subjecting oneself to the expensive and time-consuming visa interview process at the nearest U.S. consulate).

Scenes 6, 11, 17, and 18 especially, depict the circumstances surrounding some of the identity-related change processes experienced by the participants in my study. Being accepted into Ball State University and being granted a student visa to come to the United States, for example, were the sources of great pride and happiness; these events affected internationals’ self-perceptions positively. On the other hand, many participants suffered a crisis of confidence when they found themselves unable to define “home” anymore and facing the prospect of being forced to return to their native countries, despite wanting to remain in the U.S.

Considering Holland et al.’s (1998) contention that “identities [...] are unfinished and in process” and that “they happen in social practice” (p. vii), it should not come as a surprise that such changes occur in international students’ self-perceptions. After all, international students are in many ways immigrants (albeit a temporary type), and when individuals migrate, they leave behind not just national borders and their loved ones, but also many aspects of social practice that define who they are. Without these familiar social practices in which to anchor themselves, international students are forced to question and re-define their identities.

In some individuals, this questioning is quite subtle and can be discreetly hidden from outside view, conveniently remaining a private, intrapersonal process. In others, however, the change is so dramatic that it cannot be contained within the private sphere, thus “spilling over” and affecting the student’s relationship with the
outside world in very concrete, visible ways (including, under extreme circumstances, physical illnesses).

As someone who experienced this change firsthand, even as I worked on this manuscript, I ask kindly that readers bear one thing in mind as they read through the following international students’ accounts. It is true that we deliberately chose to leave our homes to study abroad. However, in doing so, we did not consciously opt into the social category of “international student,” with all its entailments. As the following accounts illustrate, this category was imposed upon us, for most students of international origins do not arrive on U.S. soil and immediately proclaim themselves to be “international students.” Rather, it was through a process of socialization and acculturation that we began to perceive ourselves as different from American students, and thus identify ourselves as internationals.

**The Negative Construction of Difference**

Although we may think of some human characteristics as “objective differences,” in reality we have grown accustomed to perceiving certain differences and ignoring others. Johnson (2006) explained that many of the *dimensions of difference* which our society uses to describe (and socially rank) people (e.g., “race” and “gender”) are culturally constructed phenomena, rather than objectively verifiable traits. Obviously, skin pigmentation and biological composition vary (to some extent) across individuals; however, the degree to which we choose to acknowledge these variations, emphasize them, and allow them to affect people’s lives is very much the product of social construction.
Johnson (2006) also pointed out that "the trouble that surrounds difference is really about privilege and power – the existence of privilege and the lopsided distribution of power that keeps it going" (p. 12). In other words, difference can be perceived in a positive, neutral, or negative light; something different and good is regarded as unique, fascinating, and exotic, whereas something different and bad is viewed as scary, unpleasant, and should be kept at a distance. In the first case, the members of the different-and-good group are likely to be assigned a status of privilege; in the latter, the members of the different-and-bad group are likely to be rejected.

In the specific case of BSU internationals, participants’ narratives clearly communicated that their particular type of difference – international origin, or lack of U.S. citizenship – was negatively regarded by the American majority. Internationals had varying perceptions of why Americans constructed difference negatively, but they generally agreed that being an international student meant “being different,” and that in the eyes of many American professors, students and staff members, this was not a good thing.

Quiro explained what he perceived to be Americans’ feelings towards difference:

[Americans] are a little bit afraid of accepting anything that is different; they are not very comfortable with that. ... For example, the normal kind of food they are having, just watch, if you provide them some food which is different, might they will not accept it. Might they will like it, but they will not accept it
because it is different. So this word “different” has a very strong meaning for Americans.

Quiro then went on to explain how Americans’ general attitude towards difference affected how they viewed internationals:

[Americans do not accepts us] because we are from a different culture, we are from a different language, we are of a different color. Accepting outside-Americans is one thing, and another point is accepting any different thing which they are not used to.

Quiro attributed the rejection he and other internationals were experiencing to a larger, systematic reluctance by Americans to accept “different things.” Specifically, he pointed to three “dimensions of difference” that he believed24 accounted for the distinction between Americans and internationals: Culture, language, and skin tone. In doing so, Quiro implicitly agreed that these were legitimate differentiators; somewhere in his sense-making process, he “bought into” the idea that internationals were indeed significantly different from Americans.

Denise, a young woman from the Middle East, expressed a similar belief when she explained how her work communicated the many ways in which she is not-American:

It’s, like, your work is different. Well, of course it’s different! I come from the other part of the globe. I can’t do something that matches the American taste.

My concept is different, my culture is different, my education is different,

24 It is important to note that these three dimensions are the characteristics on which Quiro assumed that Americans based their rejection. However, it is entirely possible that there were other dimensions that triggered Americans’ perception that internationals were a different group.
everything is different. I can’t do work that some White American professor who lived his whole life, or her whole life, in Indiana would like. Of course not! And this is what we’re talking about, like, our field needs diversity.

Once again, the idea that internationals were significantly different from Americans was not under dispute; rather, Denise questioned the negative connotation associated with the perception of difference. She acknowledged that her “non-Americanness” showed in her work, but she communicated about it in a positive light, framing it as a contribution to the diversity of her field.

Both Quiro and Denise’s comments reflected an interesting cultural phenomenon that spoke to the relative cohesiveness of the international student community at Ball State University. Whereas Americans had a tendency to construct difference negatively, internationals shared an understanding that difference was a good thing. These opposing views on difference underlay many of the issues that arose between these two groups of students; they also help explain why internationals turned to the international student community for support and began self-identifying as “internationals.”

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the Rejection-Identification Model (Branscombe et al., 1999) are helpful in understanding the process through which the social identity “international student” emerged and became a socially relevant category on the BSU campus. In my personal experience,

---

25 In my first year at BSU, two senior internationals in my department took me aside and flat out told me, “Julia, don’t ever forget: Difference is good.” Blerim and Emira Limani must have realized that I was feeling pressured to conform to the American way of doing things and decided I needed to be reminded of this “international canon.” Their words struck a chord with me then, and they took on even greater significance as I developed this study.
my conversations with participants, and my observations of internationals at Ball State University, I found clear support for both of these theoretical models. I identified three major themes in the ways internationals communicated about this identification process – rejection, devaluation, and minority group identification, each one corresponding to a relationship hypothesized in RIM.

**Theme One: Rejection**

My observations of and conversations with international students at Ball State University clearly substantiated the first hypothesized relationship of the Rejection-Identification Model (Branscombe et al., 1999). Individual internationals subjectively experienced pervasive discrimination as *rejection by the mainstream* campus population (i.e., American students, faculty and staff). By attributing the rejection they experienced to their membership in the social category “international students,” internationals deflected some of the psychological costs of the rejection. This, in turn, increased the significance of the international student minority group identity within the social context of Ball State University. Participants’ accounts centered around four different subthemes: rejection by “the system,” rejection by students, rejection by faculty, and rejection by staff.

*Rejection by “The System”*

*When I first came to the United States, I did not think of myself as “an international student.” Of course, I was aware that I was not a U.S. citizen, but I did not think that this detail would have a significant impact on my life within the University. During the week of Orientation, this label was repeatedly used to describe*
me, but still this was not a self-understanding that held strong emotional resonance for me; it was not part of my identity. As far as I was concerned, I was not substantially different from my American peers.

But a few weeks into the semester, an incident changed this. I had applied for an internal grant which the University was offering to instructors who were willing to incorporate diversity-related issues into their curricula. As a newly-appointed teaching assistant for the basic Public Speaking course, I was brimming with ideas about how to work this topic into class discussions and speech assignments. My proposal had been approved by the director of the office responsible for the grant, and I was very excited about both the project and the prospect of a little extra income.

Then I received an email from the Rinker Center for International Programs, stating that I was ineligible for this grant, because, as an international student, I was subject to immigration laws that made it illegal for me to benefit from such funding.

I was crestfallen. I thought to myself, “Why does the U.S. government not consider teaching grants like this one to be a rightful part of my graduate education experience here in America? Besides, from the University’s perspective, who better than an international student to engage other students in a conversation about diversity?” It seemed very unfair to me that I be prevented from taking advantage of this academic opportunity. But I had no one to appeal to, and so I declined the grant. This disappointment taught me a lesson: From that day forth, every time I contacted someone within the University for the first time, I clearly identified myself as “an
international student.” I had come to understand that my lack of American citizenship was a significant part of who I was within the social context of Ball State University.

Having grown up in Brazil (a country whose immigration laws are significantly more flexible than those of the United States) and being the daughter of Argentinean immigrants, I had never regarded a person’s citizenship as a relevant “dimension of difference” (Johnson, 2006). Of course, when it came time to vote or obtain a passport and travel internationally, then this was a factor to consider, but in everyday life, it didn’t really matter whether an individual was Brazilian or foreign-born. Thus, it was quite shocking for me to realize the extent to which American society constructed privilege (and lack thereof) around the issue of citizenship.

When I was denied the teaching grant, I felt rejected; I had applied for a merit-based award and deemed unworthy of it. This was hurtful and disappointing, especially considering that, just a few days earlier, I had been told I would receive the grant. What frustrated me the most about this incident was that there was nothing I could do to make myself worthy. It was not a matter of studying harder, getting better grades, or coming up with a stronger grant proposal; the rejection was based solely on the fact that I was not American26.

On one hand, knowing the arbitrary basis for the rejection made it very hard for me to process the incident. On the other hand, however, it helped me deflect some of the negative psychological effects of the rejection. The University had

---

26 Although the email I received from RCIP framed the matter simply as compliance with U.S. Immigration laws, I often wondered if the immigration specialist was not being “overly conservative” in interpreting these laws. In my experience, RCIP’s first priority was not to advocate in internationals’ best interests, but rather to protect the University from exposure to liability.
unequivocally informed me that I was being denied the grant because I belonged to the social category “international student,” so I felt confident in attributing the reason for the rejection to a group membership, instead of a personal shortcoming (Branscombe et al., 1999). I still felt badly about what had happened, but I realized that I was not alone in my experience of rejection; other international students were likely being discriminated against just like I was.

According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), I could have dealt psychologically with this realization in two ways: I could have chosen to disassociate myself from the negatively-charged social category (international student) and sought to join a more positively distinct group (perhaps by passing as an American student), or I could have tried to improve the social status of my current category, by emphasizing the positive aspects associated with being an international student. As it was not feasible to deceive the University about my lack of U.S. citizenship, the only thing left for me to do was come to terms with my status as an international student and embrace it as an important social identity. In doing so, I grew emotionally closer to other internationals, who were also experiencing rejection by the American majority, and began to espouse the belief that “difference is a good thing.”

Another meaningful instance of the system’s treatment of BSU internationals related to the English placement exam that was administered by the University’s Intensive English Institute (IEI) during the week of Orientation. Internationals who had been conditionally admitted to Ball State University were required to take this
exam in lieu of the TOEFL\textsuperscript{27}; their scores on the placement test determined whether they would immediately be allowed to take regular academic classes, or be required to enroll in remedial English as a Foreign Language (EFL, also called ESL, English as a Second Language) classes at the IEI\textsuperscript{28}.

John, a past instructor\textsuperscript{29} at the IEI, shared firsthand knowledge of the problems inherent to this system:

A lot of [internationals] don’t know or don’t quite understand that they have to take these ESL classes here at Ball State, so they often feel they have been misled. [This is especially true for] the students who come here for academic programs, not just for an exchange program. For those who actually come here to study and get a degree from Ball State, it means they [will] have to pay an extra semester or year of tuition, of costs of living, and this is expensive. So they’re trying to finish [their IEI classes] as quickly as possible, which is of course not the concern of the teachers in the IEI, because they want [students] to learn English and to be at a level that is at least sufficient to take academic classes, to kinda get along. So, the IEI, I always say, is kinda always in between the students’ interests and the interests of the University, which is not only educating well, but also getting the money from those international students.

\textsuperscript{27}The Educational Testing Service’s (ETS) Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is one of the most widely accepted standardized tests for measuring a non-native speaker’s command of the English language.

\textsuperscript{28}Ball State University’s International Admission Requirements web page stated that, for students seeking Conditional Admission to the University, “no TOEFL required for undergrads, IEI applicants, or government-sponsored applicants. these applicants will be tested at orientation and placed in the appropriate IEI classes” (BSU, 2010c, p. 1).

\textsuperscript{29}To preserve confidentiality, I will refrain from revealing any personal information about John.
As I listened to what John had to say, I tried to put myself in the shoes of these internationals. I was 24 years old and already fluent in English when I came to BSU, and even so the week of Orientation left me dazed. I could only imagine what it would have felt like to go through this process at age 18, having left my home country for the first time and being expected to quickly absorb great quantities of information (regarding U.S. Immigration laws, no less!) in English. How well would I have performed on that placement test, had I been required to take it after spending 24 hours in international airports and flights? It would not have surprised me if the sheer mental exhaustion and stress associated with overcoming jetlag and adapting to a new environment had negatively impacted my score on the exam....

John went on to describe what ensued from this initial “placement” process: [Students] come here, find out that they have to take these classes, and of course are disappointed, because they think they can start with academic classes straight away. And so a lot of the anger is coming towards us, as teachers of the institution. And we’re kinda caught in the situation of being the bad guys who keep [students] there. ... The situation is [gradually] getting better... which is needed because the situation is not satisfactory, to call it that. Students were disappointed because they had to take the classes, and didn’t really know about it, and it was taking them too long – if it takes a whole semester for them, then that’s a semester they lose, and that’s money they lose, and teachers are disappointed, because students are not interested in learning English, they just want to get out of the classes as soon as
possible, they lack the attitude, they lack motivation... A lot of them are bright students, but they don’t want to learn English because they’re here to take academic classes, they think their English is good enough, so they don’t think they should be taking these classes. So, we have had a lot of problems.

At this point, one might ask, “Why didn’t the students just return home to study English for a semester or two and then come to the University when their command of the language was good enough to take regular academic classes?” Although this may seem like a logical (and economical) solution to the problem, in reality it was highly unrealistic. By the time a conditionally-admitted international had taken the English placement exam, he/she had probably already invested a great deal of money in the endeavor of coming to BSU: Consulate fees, visa application fees, University application fees, international airplane ticket, and housing contracts tended to be non-refundable (or carry hefty penalties for cancellations).

Additionally, students and families invested a great deal emotionally in the dream of pursuing an education in America, so there were significant psychological deterrents to returning home prematurely. *How shameful would it have been for me to have to call my parents and confess to them that my score on the English exam was substandard, insufficient for the purpose of enrolling in “real” classes? And that, as a consequence, my U.S. education would cost at least 10% more than we had originally planned? Still, this would have been preferable to the humiliation of facing all my friends and relatives and being forced to publicly admit that I had failed as a student*
in America. Perhaps these “barriers to exit” are the reason why the University speaks so often about “recruitment,” but very seldom about the “retention” of international students.

John further observed:

The University never really showed any interest in this issue, from what I’ve seen. The IEI is getting more support now from the University, and things are changing, but very slowly, and I think that both teachers and students at the IEI have felt kind of, like, a little bit, yeah, neglected, because there was a problem there, in that situation, and we tried to yeah, always negotiate and try to find a fair solution, but it certainly wasn’t an ideal teaching situation, or educational situation.

Whereas, in the previous episode, the rejection of international students by the system could be justified as being based on U.S. Immigration law, in this case Ball State University was directly responsible for the way internationals were treated. In John’s own words, both teachers and students at the IEI felt neglected by the Administration’s lack of attention to what they perceived to be a serious problem.³⁰

International students who arrived at BSU under the impression that they would immediately enroll in their programs of study likely experienced the negative psychological effects associated with rejection when they were told that their

---

³⁰ Whether or not the Administration also saw this situation as a “problem” was unclear. IEI enrollments counted towards the overall recruitment goal of increasing the percentage of international students to 5% of the student body and represented an additional stream of revenue for the University.
English was substandard. Besides having to make financial arrangements to accommodate at least one semester of ESL classes, these students had to adjust emotionally to a routine that revolved around what was very clearly "not an ideal educational situation." Ironically, because only internationals attended IEl classes, the very process of spending so much time in this negatively-charged learning setting likely contributed to the emergence of a minority group identity. As internationals talked amongst themselves and shared their personal experiences of rejection, they realized that the treatment they experienced was not unique, but rather systematic to many internationals of relatively low English proficiency.

Again, this realization worked to deflect some of the individual’s responsibility for the rejection (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Internationals’ perception of the situation evolved from “They rejected me because I’m not good enough” to “They rejected me because they reject all internationals like me.” Although each individual processed the experience of being placed in ESL classes differently (and some may not even have seen this as rejection by the system), much of the negative climate described by John can be explained through the cycle of the Rejection-Identification Model (Branscombe et al., 1999).

_I am sitting in a meeting between the Graduate School and the Rinker Center for International Programs, about Orientation. The goal of our small taskforce is to ensure that students who are both international and graduate can benefit from attending the Orientation sessions organized by both parties before the beginning of the academic year. Historically, the two orientations have taken place at the same_
time, and incoming students have been forced to choose which one to attend, causing them considerable distress and confusion. The seven people in the room clearly have students’ best interest at heart, and I am truly proud to be part of a concerted effort to improve such an important part of the international student experience.

At the same time, my eyes are brimming with angry tears. A member of the RCIP staff has just asked that the Graduate School issue a special warning to international students during the session that will promote the University’s Student Volunteer Services program. He warns us that U.S. Immigration laws do not allow international students to volunteer if they are offered a meal or snack after they have finished volunteering. This, the immigration specialist explains, is considered “working,” because the student is being “paid” for his/her efforts, albeit not with money. The unfairness of it all hits me like a wave, and I am reminded of all the times I was told that I could not do something, simply because there are rules in the system that apply differently to international students.

This specific prohibition seems particularly unfair to me, because I think of one of my dear friends from India, who volunteers regularly at a soup kitchen in downtown Muncie. This young man chooses to spend his time, which is scarce – he is a graduate student, after all – helping those in need; although he is literally thousands of miles away from home, he has chosen to make this community his home, and so he cares about those less fortunate than he. But if he is offered a bowl of soup at the end of his shift, he must turn it down, because to accept it would be against the law, and could ultimately mean deportation from the United States.
Suddenly, I am incredibly happy that I will be pursuing my doctorate in Canada, where I will be eligible to apply for a permit to work off-campus after just six months of studying in the country.

Chances are that I would not have reacted as strongly to the immigration specialist’s comment if I had heard his words during my first year as an international student at Ball State University. However, by the time this meeting took place, I had been an international for nearly three years and I had formally been researching the international student experience for over eighteen months. Thus, I had become highly sensitized (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007) to the many ways internationals are discriminated by the system.

As is the case with many internationals, my level of identification with the international student community increased over time. As a “new arrival,” I was more likely to brush off instances of discrimination as “isolated incidents;” three years later, as I prepared to graduate from Ball State University, I often found myself getting “riled up” about episodes of rejection, even those like the rules about volunteering, which did not affect me personally. This phenomenon is also consistent with Branscombe et al.’s (1999) Rejection-Identification Model, which describes a type of vicious cycle; an individual’s experiences of rejection encourage the minority group identification, which in turn makes the individual more aware of the forms of rejection suffered by him/her and other members of the minority group.
Rejection by Students

One could argue that a certain degree of frustration is to be expected when dealing with a large bureaucratic structure, such as the U.S. Government or even the university system. Unfortunately, BSU internationals also reported feeling rejected by their American classmates and co-workers. For example, Quiro remembered his early experiences working alongside American graduate assistants:

[T]he helping others and working with people together, that feeling is very much lacking here. Because many of the systems here were so new to me, I didn’t know many things, so I just openly asked them, used to ask them frequently, what is this, what is that, how we can work with this? And sometimes they just openly answered that, “look, it is your job, so you have to find it out.” … So [there was no] consideration that, “okay, I’m from a different country, okay, I’m just fifteen days or twenty days old into a new country.” … An international student needs help for just one or two months maximum; after that he is fine.

Before coming to the U.S., Quiro was used to operating in what Hofstede (2008) would consider a collectivist cultural environment. In the workplace, this often translates into workmates forming close friendships and routinely collaborating to complete tasks for which an entire team is responsible. Thus, the markedly individualistic behavior of a co-worker saying, “This is your job (and therefore not mine)” came as a shock to Quiro. Nevertheless, Quiro made it clear that he did not expect to receive special treatment indefinitely. He would simply
have appreciated some support in the beginning, while he was still adjusting to his new work environment.

Unfortunately, Quiro’s experience taught him that his American colleagues were unwilling to extend a “helping hand.” The American co-workers refused Quiro’s requests for help and subtly questioned his ability to perform his duties as a graduate assistant (GA). Considering that, for many internationals, retaining employment as a GA was the primary means of funding a graduate education in the U.S., the rejection experienced by Quiro was particularly hurtful: Not only did he perceive that his professional and academic skills were being tested, but also that his livelihood was at stake.

It is interesting to note that Quiro ended his account by generalizing his personal experience of rejection to include other internationals. This generalization supports Branscombe et al.’s (1999) argument that there is psychological comfort to be found in knowing that the rejection experienced by the individual is based on a group membership issue, as opposed to a personal characteristic. In other words, Quiro probably felt somewhat less hurt knowing that he had required assistance from his co-workers not because he was in any way deficient, but because he was undergoing an adjustment period in which most individuals would have performed at less-than-optimal levels.

Furthermore, by saying that “an international student needs help for just one or two months maximum; after that he is fine,” Quiro implied (correctly, in my opinion) that most internationals required special support in the beginning of their
international student experience in the United States. Although he was clearly arguing for increased awareness and support of internationals’ special needs, Quiro emphasized the notion that such support was needed only temporarily. He communicated his belief that internationals were perfectly capable of adapting to their new surroundings and responsibilities; after a couple months and with a little support from their American peers, internationals would be just fine.

The “every person for themselves” feeling experienced by Quiro in the workplace was also felt among classmates. Spiderman, a young man from the Middle East, spoke of how he came to terms with the way his American peers behaved towards him:

That was dumbfounding to me when I came here first. You take a class with a person, you talk during class, you talk after class, and you know him or her, and she knows you, or he knows you. And then, after the break, spring break or summer break, he or she stares at you, doesn’t recognize you anymore. Even doesn’t say “hi” to you, doesn’t care. It was dumbfounding at first, but now I do the same thing, back to them. ... Action, reaction. But we are not that way. You shake hands with one person, once in your lifetime, [and after that] every time you see him/her, you at least show respect for that person. ... So this is the first gesture of reminding you that this is not your home.

Spiderman expressed a type of homesickness that is not related to the actual, physical space of “home,” but rather to the quality of relationships between friends or acquaintances. Like Quiro, he was originally from a collectivist culture (Hofstede,
2008), where friendships were regarded as meaningful, lifelong bonds between
individuals. So, having a classmate act friendly for a while, then ignore him after a
few months, was confusing, disrespectful, and clearly hurtful.

Spiderman claimed to have adjusted to the rejection; he had begun to behave
the same way towards his American acquaintances, in what he called a process of
“action, reaction.” However, Spiderman’s account communicated a mixture of
disappointment and pride; it hurt him to be reminded constantly that he “this was
not his home”, but at the same time it was comforting that internationals “showed
respect” for one another. Reverse-rejection was a coping mechanism that
Spiderman (like other internationals) had developed to mitigate the harmful effects
of feeling rejected by their American classmates.

*Rejection by Faculty*

For some participants, the most hurtful type of rejection came from their
American professors. In graded assignments, classroom discussions, and day-to-day
interactions, internationals perceived that BSU faculty exhibited what Hsieh (2006)
referred to as the:

American ideology of cultural homogeneity, [which] implies an American
mindset that because the English language and Eurocentric culture are
superior to others, people with different cultures and languages should
conform to the dominant monocultural canon and norms. This ideology
essentially reveals that because Eurocentric culture is representative of the
dominant culture in American society, American society values the
knowledge and cultures of the dominant group as the model for other
cultures and languages and attributes to those who are unable or unwilling to
fit the dominant culture a deficient identity. (p. 870-871)

It is important to note that, whereas the rejection by a peer was certainly
hurtful, the psychological cost of feeling rejected by one’s professor may have been
significantly higher. In a university setting, where human development and learning
are the highest goals, educators are awarded special authority and therefore hold a
great deal of power and influence over students’ self-perceptions. Considering the
sacrifices that most international students make to attend universities in the United
States, away from traditional support systems such as family and friends, a
professor’s say is likely to carry considerable weight in how an international feels
about himself/herself.

At the close of her first semester at Ball State University, Denise’s program
required her to undergo a standard review, in which her work from the entire
semester was appraised by a departmental committee. The professors evaluated
her work negatively, but offered only vague feedback on how she could improve.
Denise recalled:

They were, like, “you need to make it more… hmm, like, more broad…. Some
work that everybody can connect to.” Why would I need to make it this way?
[The professors told me,] “There are symbols in your work…. Don’t use a
symbol from your home country. Don’t have your country’s president in
your work.” It’s like you can’t do what you like, because it conflicts, you
know, with their political point of view\textsuperscript{31}. So I honestly had to stop working on the stuff I like, for school…

Denise’s account exemplified what Patton (2004) referred to as hegemonic civility, a “normalized or naturalized behavior – appropriate behavior – even as the action can be uncivil or even silencing in order to uphold the hegemonic order” (p. 65). The professors on the departmental committee behaved with civility in the sense that they evaluated a student’s work and provided feedback on how it could be improved. However, asking Denise to refrain from using symbols that pertain to her home country – and with whose political message the professors disagree – constituted use of the professors’ power (as figures of authority within the university structure) to maintain the status quo.

As Hall (1997) reminded us,

Power, it seems, has to be understood here, not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion, but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way – within a certain “regime of representation.” (p. 259)

By assigning Denise a low grade and instructing her to alter the content of her work, the professors were effectively denying Denise the power to represent herself and her cultural identity through her work. If she wished to receive a high mark, she

\textsuperscript{31} I would like to point out the irony in this episode: Considering how much is said about American efforts to promote freedom of expression in the Middle East and to “empower” and “give a voice” to Middle Eastern women in particular, it seems especially unfair that this student be prevented from using her academic work to make a political statement while in the U.S.
would have to produce work that was well within the boundaries of the hegemonic regime of representation.

Particularly troublesome in this account was the professors’ implication that it was preferable to produce work to which “everybody” could relate. This, quite clearly, was an instance of what Fiske (1996) called recoded racism; the professors communicated their disapproval of Denise’s use of her country’s symbols by framing their demands (ironically) in terms of a larger argument for inclusiveness. The message appeared to be, “When you use these obscure symbols, you are shutting people out, and this is not nice.” However, the professors did not discourage Denise from using any politically-charged elements in her work; they objected specifically to her use of symbols from her home country. This indicated that by “everybody,” the professors actually meant White Midwestern Americans (such as themselves).

Denise was embarrassed to admit that she eventually “gave in” and followed the committee’s advice, “because to be able to get A’s in classes for your beautiful work, you have to produce what they like. Not what you like.” I argue that this situation was not just harmful to Denise – who suffered psychologically from having her cultural identity rejected and repressed by the professors, but was also detrimental to the educational development of all the students in the department, who were deprived of several of the potential benefits of a diverse classroom.

Furthermore, one has to wonder, what kind of education was really taking place within this context, if students felt forced to conform to the ideological views of their professors, in order to receive positive evaluations of their creative work?
In another example of rejection by faculty, a young woman from Central Asia, studying in a different department at BSU, repeatedly complained about how hard it was to earn good grades on written assignments. She explained to me that what her U.S. professors deemed “proper academic writing” was in fact very culture-specific, and in this case, American-centric. In her home country (as in many Eastern countries), it was considered a lack of sophistication to write so linearly, i.e. to have “one central point or theme with every part contributing to the main line of argument, without digressions or repetitions” (Using English for Academic Purposes [UEFAP], 2010, p. 1). Due to her previous schooling, this international had difficulty conforming to the style of writing favored by her American professors, and so it took her considerably longer than her American and Western international peers to write an A-worthy paper.

Although this young woman was fluent in English and had received several recognitions for the quality of her research, she still felt intimidated by the need to word her arguments in a specific manner, lest she appear unintelligent. She knew that, unless she conformed to the norms and standards of American academic culture, she would be judged as deficient by her American professors (Hsieh, 2006).

In another particularly elucidative account, Aurora narrated her experience in the introductory graduate class offered by her department of study:

On the first day of class, the professor gave us an assignment called “Prominent Journals in our Field.” I asked him, “Could I include journals from, let’s say, Japan in my list, as they are part of the Pacific Professional
Association based in Australia?” And he said, “No, I mean, it’s not as valuable.” I asked, “Why?” And then he told me that, “Well, you know, it’s just something that we were told not to trust in, because it’s much more prestigious to be published in an American journal. Because, you know, out of all the countries in the world, the United States is the place where our discipline is most developed.” So I said, “Well, this is not quite correct, especially in our field, and besides, this is the university, you’re supposed to provide students with knowledge of the universe. So we should get universal knowledge, not just locked within the American perspective!” And he said, "Yeah, I mean, I understand, you’re right, but this is how we were taught.” And I still remember this, because it impressed me a lot: He said, “It’s much more prestigious, we were taught to do so, and this is just how we see the world. And that’s what you’re supposed to do.”

Introductory graduate courses offered by each department (commonly referred to as “the 601 class” or “the Intro class”) are in fact intended to socialize new graduate students into their respective disciplines, by familiarizing them with key concepts, scholars and publications in their fields of study. Evidently, Aurora’s professor had these course objectives firmly in mind when he devised the first day’s assignment. However, it is meaningful to note how Aurora’s contributions were quickly dismissed as less valuable, simply because the journals she wished to include in her list were published outside the United States. The professor did not inquire, for example, if the journals were scholarly and peer-reviewed; he
automatically assumed that, because they were foreign, they were “less prestigious,” and that was enough to make them inadmissible for the assignment. Also worthy of note is the fact that neither the title (“Prominent Journals in our Field”), nor the instructions of the assignment made any overt references to national boundaries; nevertheless, as Aurora’s conversation with the professor elucidated, “our field” inescapably implied “our field in the United States.”

The American-centrism inherent to this assignment (and the entire course, as taught by this particular professor) had become a sort of bittersweet joke among internationals in Aurora’s department. I personally heard accounts from internationals in at least four different cohorts about how they tried, to no avail, to convince the professor to allow international journals to be included in the assignment. It saddens me to think how many opportunities of exposure to diversity of thought were missed because faculty chose to believe that “our field is most developed in the United States,” without ever researching (or encouraging their students to research) the work of foreign scholars.

Rejection by Staff

In addition to the distress of feeling rejected by classmates and instructors, internationals reported much frustration in dealing with the University’s administrative staff. Participants’ complaints mainly focused on the less-than-adequate services provided by two offices, University Apartments (UA) and the Rinker Center for International Programs (RCIP). To be fair, this does not necessarily mean that these offices were doing a particularly poor job of servicing
internationals, in comparison to other offices on campus. However, because they were in constant contact with the international student population, one would expect their staff to have been more sensitive to the specific needs of international students.

Aurora’s dealings with the University Apartments Office, on the day she moved into her unit in Scheidler Apartments, were regrettably typical. The first challenge came when she attempted to pay the $300 security deposit in cash. Aurora had taken care to procure the necessary amount in U.S. currency, but she could not have anticipated that the UA Office would only accept U.S. checks or money orders. Like most newly-arrived internationals, Aurora did not yet have a U.S. bank account, so she could not write the office a check; nor did she possess a car with which to drive to the nearest post office, where she could have purchased a money order. Luckily, she did manage to locate an acquaintance who agreed to write the check for her, in exchange for cash.

After completing the check-in process, Aurora was given the keys to her new home. She left the UA Office alone and wandered around the Scheidler complex for some time, trying to locate her assigned apartment. Apartment numbers in Scheidler did not follow a particularly logical sequence, and no one from the UA Office offered to walk Aurora to her unit, much less help her carry her heavy suitcases. When Aurora finally located and opened the door to her apartment, she realized that she had been assigned an unfurnished unit. There was no bed to sleep
in, no kitchen utensils with which to cook. Having just arrived in the United States, Aurora returned to the UA Office to ask for help in setting up her new home.

I went back to the [University] Apartments Office and asked the lady behind the counter, “Where can I buy food, plates, furniture?” The lady told me to go to Walmart. “What is ‘Walmart’?,” I asked. “It’s a big store, like Kmart.” Okay, a big store. “How do I get there?” was my next question. “It’s on McGalliard.” Okay... but what’s 'm'galierd'?! The exchange described by Aurora points to a substantial disconnect between the actual needs of newly-arrived international students and the level of service provided by the staff at University Apartments. It is important to note that the miscommunication between the two women did not stem from a language barrier. Aurora was fluent in English and perfectly capable of understanding directions; what she lacked at the time was contextual knowledge of her brand-new environment. She had no way of knowing that ‘m’galierd’ was short for McGalliard Road, one of the main streets in Muncie, along which many of the major stores are located. Moreover, even if she had been able to locate McGalliard Road on a map, this would not have answered her original question, “How do I get there?”

Aurora was certainly not the first – nor would she be the last – international student to ask such basic, yet perfectly legitimate questions at the UA Office. Nevertheless, the staff made very little effort to answer these questions in a way that was actually helpful to newly-arrived internationals. Instead of proactively responding to students’ needs – e.g., providing new residents with a map showing
nearby supermarkets and local bus routes – the staff left internationals to figure things out on their own.

Months after moving into her apartment in Scheidler, Aurora mentioned her frustrating move-in experience to another international, a young woman from South Asia living in Anthony Apartments. Aurora recalled:

My friend, she was actually really upset. She outright asked me, “Don’t you feel like the students, the staff, everybody here is arrogant?” I said, “no, not exactly…” [My friend replied,] “Yeah, because you’re White.” And now that I think about it, I saw her once, talking to one of the [UA] staff members. My friend wasn’t speaking very loudly, and she was speaking with an accent – I mean, every one of us has an accent, but hers was quite noticeable – and I saw that the lady who was standing behind the counter, she was… It’s not that she was annoyed, but she was kinda… Let’s say, she was uncomfortable just talking to the [international] student. And my friend was really upset, and self-conscious about her color of skin, telling me “Oh, it’s because you’re White!” I felt so bad, I mean, she’s absolutely nice, she’s a very nice and polite girl, she wasn’t being rude to the staff member or anything.

Most Americans would probably have guessed that Aurora was not a U.S. citizen, simply because of how she looked and dressed. Still, her pale skin and European-sounding accent afforded her a degree of “white privilege” (Johnson, 2006). In contrast, the young woman from South Asia, who had darker skin and a thicker accent, experienced a stronger dose of rejection by UA staff. As Aurora...
described it, the staff member appeared uncomfortable simply communicating with the South Asian student, even though the student was addressing her politely.

What the South Asian student called arrogance is clearly linked to Hsieh’s (2006) notion of an American ideology of cultural homogeneity, by which those who are unable or unwilling to fit the dominant culture are attributed a deficient identity.

Both Aurora and the South Asian student were intelligent and accomplished young women, who sought help from UA staff very shortly after arriving in a foreign country. Despite their best efforts to communicate their needs to the staff, neither succeeded in getting the help they needed. Instead, they both experienced rejection and were attributed deficient identitities, simply because they did not fit the profile of residents with which UA staff members were comfortable communicating.

Unlike University Apartments, the Rinker Center for International Programs was an office dedicated almost exclusively to serving internationals. RCIP was ultimately responsible for recruiting, admitting and advising the University’s international students in virtually all academic and legal affairs. Unfortunately, RCIP staff had a reputation for being just as insensitive as the other administrative personnel on campus. Their insensitivity was particularly apparent in the International Student Orientation event organized by RCIP at the beginning of every semester.

For quite some time, I had been receiving emails from the University, talking about Orientation events that I should plan to attend before classes started. But it took me a while to figure out that I was expected to attend three different orientations:
one in my department of study (where I would also be working), another at the
Graduate School, and a third at RCIP. The problem was, all three events took place
during the same week: I was triple-booked! Every email I received stressed the
importance of attending a particular event, and I was afraid that I would get in
trouble if I didn’t comply. I needed the departmental training on how to be a good
teaching assistant, but I also needed to know the Graduate School’s rules for pursuing
my degree. And I certainly didn’t want to inadvertently break any U.S. immigration
laws!

When I explained my dilemma to a staff member at RCIP, she quickly instructed
me to prioritize the International Student Orientation (ISO) and attend the other
events only if I had free time. She made it clear that the other offices on campus didn’t
realize I was an international student; they would understand if I missed their
orientations. However, if I failed to show up for the ISO, RCIP would be forced to place
a hold on my student record and prevent me from registering for classes. When I
emailed my department chair and the Graduate School to explain the situation, they
did not seem too pleased with the fact that I was using my ‘international status’ to
avoid attending their events. I felt like there was a political tug of war going on, and
internationals were caught in the middle.

The International Student Orientation was supposed to run Monday through
Friday, from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm. We were not given a detailed schedule of activities;
rather, we were told to show up promptly on Monday morning, and everything would
be explained to us then. I kept my fingers crossed for there to be enough gaps in the ISO schedule to allow me to sneak off to the other two orientations.

A second logistical challenge came when I realized that I had no way of getting to campus before 8:00 am. The University shuttle wasn’t running (because classes were not officially in session yet), and the first city bus going from Scheidler Apartments (where I lived) to campus left around 8:10 am. None of my international neighbors owned a car either, so we all got on the 8:10 bus together and made our way to the ISO venue as fast as we could. I felt bad about being tardy, but I also wondered if the staff at RCIP could not have foreseen our logistical difficulties and made other accommodations – like arranging for the University shuttles to start running a week early, or beginning the Orientation at 8:30 am.

When we arrived at the ISO venue, we realized our tardiness would not be an issue. The large hall was completely packed with approximately three hundred international students, most of whom looked jetlagged, dazed and confused. RCIP staff were impatiently directing internationals one way or another and barking orders at each other across the hall. Senior international students who were volunteering at the event treated attendees more kindly, but had very little information to give out. It took the staff the better part of an hour to register attendees, distribute information packets and get everyone seated. While I waited for the actual orienting to begin, I stressed about the important information I was no doubt missing at the other two orientation events.
After the run-of-the-mill welcome speeches by RCIP senior personnel, an immigration specialist instructed us on how to fill out several U.S. Immigration forms contained in our information packets. The specialist stressed the importance of being perfectly accurate in the information we wrote on the forms, lest we get in serious trouble with the Department of Homeland Security. Many internationals had questions regarding these forms: Some had difficulty understanding the language (very technical English); others had forgotten to bring their documents as RCIP had requested; others just wanted to make extra-extra-sure they weren’t making a stupid mistake that would get them deported. Staff members and volunteers did their best to assist everyone, but the entire process was time-consuming and largely inefficient, because those who finished quickly had no choice but to sit idly while the more complex cases were handled. When everyone was done, each international student was instructed to place his/her passport, immigration documents, and forms into an envelope, which would be collected by RCIP for copying and temporary safekeeping. It made me a little nervous to surrender all my personal documents that way, but I didn’t feel like I had much of a choice either. As I watched the hundreds of envelopes being collected, I could only hope that my papers would be handled ethically and that nothing would be misplaced32.

For the next task, we were divided into groups of twenty or thirty students and led by an international student volunteer to the University’s health clinic. There, we were told simply that before we could register for classes, we had to undergo

32 RCIP returned my envelope on the following day, with all my documents in proper order.
something called a ‘TB test’. The exact nature of the test was never explained, nor were its potential side effects discussed. I was given a form to sign, but because we were pressed for time, I did not get the chance to read the fine print. I was shown into a small room where a nurse waited with a needle in hand. I asked her if she was going to draw blood, and she replied, “Oh, no, don’t worry, this test isn’t invasive or anything.” She then pricked my forearm with the needle and told me to come back to see her within 48 to 72 hours, to see whether or not my arm had swelled. I left the clinic thinking that I really should check the dictionary for the meaning of the term ‘invasive’.

As I later found out from my Brazilian family doctor, a ‘TB test’ (also called a tuberculin test or PPD test) is used to determine if someone has developed an immune response to the bacterium that causes Tuberculosis (P. Volkmann, personal communication, August 2007). A very small amount of a derivative of the bacterium is injected into the top layers of the skin; a positive response indicates that the person being tested either is currently ill with Tuberculosis, has been exposed to the disease in the past, or has received the BCG vaccine against it. Severe reactions to the test are rare, but not unheard of.

By the time everyone in our group had been tested, it was almost noon. I could not believe how much time we had wasted.... Why hadn’t RCIP just given me a list of the errands I needed to run on campus and let me zip through them? Moreover, why couldn’t I have been told about these procedures two weeks earlier, when I arrived in Muncie and had nothing better to do than sit around and wait for classes to start? I
checked the ISO schedule for the afternoon and decided to spend at least a couple of hours at the Graduate School orientation. With any luck, graduate students at Ball State were treated with a little more respect than internationals.

International students are, by virtue of U.S. Immigration law, different from American students. They are required to fill out more forms, get tested for Tuberculosis, and receive specific information from their host institutions. They do not, however, need to be treated like small children, for whom condescending parents must make all the decisions. RCIP’s treatment of internationals clearly showed that the office whose mandate was to serve international students did not trust them to follow instructions on their own. Instead of being asked politely to comply with legitimate federal regulations, internationals were half-jokingly threatened with deportation and subtly coerced into turning in their documents and undergoing medical exams without asking questions.

In the end, RCIP’s paternalistic attitude did a great disservice to both international students and the RCIP staff. Instead of feeling empowered by all the new information they had just acquired, internationals left Orientation with a low sense of self-efficacy and even greater uncertainty regarding their new environment. The staff at RCIP, who regularly complained about tight schedules and heavy workloads, set themselves up to receive even more requests for help from internationals, who felt incompetent to deal with even minor issues. Instead of focusing on improved strategies for meeting the concrete needs of international students, RCIP expended valuable resources in micromanaging internationals.
My second semester at Ball State, I took a class that required student groups to plan, develop and deliver a training session on a communication-related issue. I excitedly approached the RCIP staff member in charge of the International Student Orientation with the idea of providing Intercultural Communication (ICC) training for RCIP staff and volunteers. She misunderstood my suggestion and assumed the ICC training would be for internationals, so they could learn how to communicate more effectively with Americans. I explained that, while we could certainly leave the training open to internationals, I felt the staff and volunteers could greatly benefit from learning a few ICC techniques. These would come in handy not just during Orientation, but in everyday interactions with internationals, throughout the academic year. The staff member answered, “But what would you teach them? I mean, besides ‘speak loudly,’ what can you really tell them?” I was dumbfounded.

The attitude of this University staff member struck me as ignorant and condescending, but not necessarily mean-spirited. I wondered if perhaps the person had simply reacted under stress, or without the chance to think the matter through. Unfortunately, the same attitude was consistently displayed by RCIP staff, both in oral and written communication with internationals.

A particularly disturbing episode involving the Rinker Center for International Programs occurred in Spring 2009. On March 26, an RCIP staff member emailed the University’s international student body to communicate a change in policy regarding health insurance requirements. The email announced that “as of Fall 2009, Ball State University will require that all international students
enroll in the BSU health insurance” (RCIP, personal communication, March 26, 2009). Comprehensive health insurance coverage is a legal requirement for all international students in the U.S., but Immigration law does not specify the insurance provider. Until that point in time, BSU internationals had been given the option to enroll in the “BSU health insurance” (offered through Bollinger, Inc.) or purchase coverage from any other provider that met Immigration’s legal standards.

The email from RCIP offered no justification for the change in policy, but clearly stated that “we no longer accept health insurance policies other than the BSU offered policy” (RCIP, personal communication, March 26, 2009). It also included a link to a website where the Bollinger insurance plan could be purchased, and added for good measure that “anyone not enrollment [sic] in the policy by August 24, 2009 will have a hold placed on their student record.”

When asked, in writing, why RCIP was changing the policy, the staff member replied simply that the Dean of RCIP “has decided that all students should enroll in the BSU policy” (RCIP, personal communication, March 27, 2009). The staff member’s answer revealed the autocratic nature of the decision and begged a second question: If the U.S. Government does not care what insurance provider international students choose (as long as they are adequately covered), why should the Dean of RCIP care?

Many internationals were upset about RCIP’s autocratic and unjustified decision to limit their choice of insurance provider, especially because the Bollinger

---

33 I have chosen to omit the name of the staff member who sent out the emails because I understand that this individual was not personally responsible for the policy decision, but rather relayed the information on behalf of the Rinker Center for International Programs.
plan was notoriously more expensive than other plans offering comparable coverage. Internationals communicated their dissatisfaction to each other in everyday conversations, but lacked knowledge of any mechanism or venue within the University, through which they could file a formal complaint. An opportunity presented itself during a social event organized in mid-April by the dean and associate dean of another unit on campus. Three internationals explained the situation to the deans, who listened with concern and agreed to look into the matter.

On April 28, 2009, RCIP sent out another email on the issue of health insurance requirements. Although the email was framed as an update (instead of a retraction), it effectively reverted the RCIP Dean’s previous decision. The message, written in far more complex terms than the first, instructed internationals to “select a health insurance policy from the USA and take it to Larry Cistrelli, Director of Risk Assessment & Insurance Benefit Programs, in AD 301 to have your policy reviewed to make sure it has the same coverage as BSU policy carries” (RCIP, personal communication, April 28, 2009).

Several internationals I spoke to admitted that they did not see the reversal as a victory, but rather as a frightening wake-up call. They had come to accept the fact that RCIP staff was sometimes insensitive and condescending towards international students, but this was a far more serious offense. RCIP had become paternalistic to the extent that its Dean felt entitled to take away internationals’ choice in a matter that carried both financial and health-related consequences for internationals, without offering any rational justification for the decision. The
reality that it took action from other deans in the University to control RCIP’s abuse of power left internationals feeling vulnerable and disempowered. Like children who depended on other adults to stop their parents’ bullying, they wondered if they could trust the people primarily charged with caring for them. The fact that RCIP never acknowledged their mistake or apologized only added insult to injury.

The behaviors of RCIP staff exemplified the general posture of the BSU community towards internationals. Government policies and the behaviors of domestic students, faculty and staff implied the belief that “International students come here because they want a better education; therefore, it is up to them to adapt to our way of doing things.” The American ideology of cultural homogeneity (Hsieh, 2006) made it very difficult for internationals to feel welcomed on campus; it also impeded the University’s efforts in recruiting internationally.

**Theme Two: Devaluation**

The second hypothesized relationship of the Rejection-Identification Model was also substantiated in my observations of international students at Ball State University. Feeling rejected by the system, fellow students, faculty and staff was hurtful to internationals. Although internationals felt slightly better knowing that the rejection they experienced actually constituted pervasive discrimination against international students in general (rather than prejudice against each of them individually), they still suffered *devaluation*. Participants communicated about their feelings of devaluation mainly in terms of doubting themselves and overreacting to life pressures.
Although the theme of devaluation emerged in my interactions (informal conversations and formal interviews) with both international men and women, the most “forceful” (Owen, 1984) accounts came from women. There may be several explanations for this. First, it is possible that international women experienced stronger feelings of devaluation and therefore addressed this topic at greater length in conversation. Second, the international women I interviewed may have felt more comfortable than the men in discussing their feelings of inadequacy with me (a fellow international woman). A third possibility is that international men and women were experiencing equally strong feelings of devaluation, but women are generally socialized from a young age to communicate about their feelings, whereas men are not (Tannen, 1995).

**Doubting Oneself**

In the process of adapting to student life at Ball State University, internationals often doubted their ability to meet the expectations surrounding them. For many internationals, the United States and BSU (an American university) represented an entirely new social context, where old identities were of little relevance. Accomplished and assertive adults found themselves worrying about their ability to perform well even relatively simple tasks.

Ugur, a young woman from the Middle East, recalled the feelings of uncertainty she experienced as she went through the bureaucratic process of applying for admission to BSU:

34 A noteworthy exception was Quiro’s candid account about feeling hurt when his American classmates engaged in friendly conversation with other American classmates, but not with him and his compatriots (on pages 1-2).
They gave me enough information, but sure it was stressful, because you are going abroad, this is the first time you are trying to do something outside your country, and you just don't know. Even if you send all the documents, you're still not sure if everything is okay, did I miss anything? Nowadays, my friends [from my home country] are applying [to study at Ball State] next semester; you cannot believe their questions! [laughs] It seems really funny to me now, but I was like them too. It's really stressful.

Ugur’s comment spoke to the difficulties associated with learning how to operate in a new social context. Although she had pursued a very successful academic career in her home country, she doubted herself when it was time to enter an American university. She worried that she would make a mistake in the application process, or perform inadequately in some other way that would cause BSU to deny her admission. These feelings of anxiety and self-doubt during the application process were quite common among internationals. Like Ugur, many of us later laughed about how we lost sleep over minor details in our applications. We were afraid that the opportunity to study abroad would slip through our fingers if we made even one tiny, stupid mistake.

Liliane, a young woman from Asia, spoke about her difficulties in overcoming the language barrier:

I know that to communicate in English with me is kind of sometimes hard [for Americans] to do, harder than communicating with other Americans. So, whenever I meet some American [people] here, I just [have] a little
uncomfortable feeling, because I might make [them] feel some [difficulty] to communicate with me. The Americans have [to make] some more efforts for me. They need to give me more time... It might be just my personality, but I don't want to make other people uncomfortable, just because of me. So, maybe this [is why] I don't try to meet more people, more Americans here, because just staying [with internationals from my home country] is more comfortable. But I know that’s not the sound direction for me, ‘cause I have to study in a Ph.D. program, so to overcome the language obstacle, yeah, it is kind of a requirement for me.35 Yeah, I have to overcome my mindset.

By her own admission, Liliane was reluctant to engage American peers in conversation because she did not want to impose on them to make an effort to understand her imperfect English. Even though she knew this behavior prevented her from making friends and improving her command of the language, it was hard for her to overcome this mindset of self-criticism and doubt.

The language barrier was such an integral part of Liliane’s life as an international that she regarded this difficulty as inherent to the international student identity. During our interview, she told me:

Actually, I never noticed that you came from Brazil, because your English was so perfect! [In] international students, the English [proficiency] is less [developed] than [in] native Americans, but your English... is not what I

35 I was proud to learn that, slightly over a year after this interview took place, Liliane had significantly improved her command of the English language and achieved her goal of been offered admission into two doctoral programs in her field of study at prestigious American universities.
expect from an international student. So, yeah, in my head, you are not an international student, because your English is so perfect.

Liliane’s comment could be understood as a compliment, but it also pointed out that I was afforded significant privileges because I spoke English without a discernible accent (at least by Midwestern American standards). Liliane was aware that her American classmates and professors sometimes attributed her with a deficient identity (Hsieh, 2006) simply because she was not fluent in English. Although she was a very intelligent woman with more professional experience than many of her peers, she felt self-conscious about expressing her views in classroom discussions and approaching American students outside of class.

Elena, a young woman from Europe, also communicated feelings of self-doubt in connection to the language barrier:

You know, I've lost confidence in myself since I've been in the U.S. I feel dumber here, always having to ask someone to proofread my papers, struggling to find the right words to express myself... I felt a lot smarter back home!

Like Elena, many internationals lost confidence in themselves when they left their home countries and came to the United States. Although it is perfectly natural for individuals to be more competent and articulate when expressing themselves in their native languages, the communicative effort that international students undertake daily often went unnoticed. Many internationals admitted feeling
exhausted during their first weeks at BSU, by virtue of having to operate twenty-four hours a day in English and in a new environment. As Elena recalled:

You arrive [in the U.S.] and your brain doesn’t stop; you are really tired, because of the language, you have to work and study in this language, and at the very beginning, during the first month, we feel very tired. Not only me; we feel very tired, all of us.

Even internationals who were fluent in (or native speakers of) English felt the toll of operating outside their linguistic and cultural comfort zones. For Leila, a young Black woman from Latin America, language and ethnicity were very closely linked to the feeling of belonging:

When I first came on campus, I was like, “Where are the Black people? Where are the Black people?!” That first semester and the first summer were really hard [for me], ’cause I kept [thinking], “Where are the Black people?” and then, “Where are the people from my world region?” I just needed [to see] them, you know? [Otherwise] you feel even more alone than you are, because you don’t have someone that understands. You always have to filter what you’re saying, or even how you talk. I have to think a lot more before I talk, you know, because I have to kinda filter, “Should I say this? They’re not necessarily gonna know what I’m talking about.”

Leila came from a country where English was an official language, but she was accustomed to hearing it spoken in a very different accent and with a particular “regional flavor.” For this reason, when she communicated with Midwestern
Americans at Ball State University, albeit in English, their vocabulary and pronunciation still sounded unfamiliar. Leila felt she had to “filter” and adapt the way she talked, lest Americans misunderstand what she had to say. Having to navigate in an unfamiliar linguistic and cultural environment left Leila, as well as many other internationals, experiencing isolation and self-doubt.

The fact that students around her did not look familiar either left Leila feeling even more displaced:

It’s like there is a different standard of good-looking, or beautiful, here. So, you kinda have to get your psyche accustomed to not being noticed. Like, no matter how confident you are with yourself and how you look, for me, if you’re surrounded by people of a certain body type, it still messes with your head. I know, when I’m home and I’m walking down the street, that some guy is gonna say, “Hi, good-looking!” or whatever. Here, they might even consider that sexual harassment! [laughs] But I miss it! I admit it! Because it makes you feel good that somebody’s noticed that you look good, come on now! [Here] it kind of lends itself to, “I’m just gonna put on a t-shirt or whatever, ‘cause who cares at this point in time?”

Leila used humor and lightheartedness in expressing her feelings, but she nevertheless spoke of a painful process. Her account probably reflected the feelings of many Black students, domestic and international, who arrived at BSU and found that the campus population was not nearly as “diversified” as the University’s website photos and promotional materials suggested. The experience of being a
physically-distinguishable minority affected internationals’ perceptions of
themselves; whereas Leila had felt beautiful when she lived in her home country,
she lost confidence in her appearance when she moved to BSU. Like Leila, many internationals suffered a loss in self-esteem from not fitting the local standard of beauty. Leila said it best: Being surrounded by people who don’t look like us and didn’t find us beautiful “messes with our heads.”

*Overreacting*

*I remember coming home from class one night, and heading straight for the couch, bursting into tears even before I took off my shoes. We’d had a pop quiz in class that evening, my first pop quiz ever, and I was sure I’d failed it. I was so disappointed in myself – my first graded assignment as a master’s student in the U.S., and I’d blanked! You should have read those articles more carefully, Julia, I chided myself. You’re used to getting by without much effort, but this is different. This is an American university, they expect more. Images of red “F”s and the disapproving faces of my professors flashed before my eyes. Maybe you’re not as good as you think you are. Maybe you’re not good enough to make it through this program.*

*I’d been holding back the tears until I could be alone, all through the class period and on the shuttle ride back home. But now that I was there, all of a sudden my apartment didn’t feel like home anymore. The kitchen table, the couch, the curtains, everything that had seemed so beautiful and perfect and wonderfully my own that morning, now seemed cold and uninviting. I wanted to go home-home, to my family’s home in Brazil. I wanted so badly to get on the next plane to Porto Alegre and pretend*
I’d never set foot on Ball State University... But even as I cried, I knew that going home was not an option. I’d invested too much time, too much money, turned down too many other opportunities to come here. Besides, what would I say to my parents, to my friends, to everyone who had been so happy (and jealous!) because of my good fortune, of being awarded a scholarship to get a master’s in the U.S.? No, turning back wasn’t an option.

I slept on the couch that night, curled into a tight ball, but I was careful to set the alarm clock before I cried myself to sleep. I had to teach the following day, and I was terrified of oversleeping and having my students complain to my department. I couldn’t afford to lose my teaching assistantship.

As it turned out, I did fairly well on the pop quiz, but even if I had failed it, its significance in the final course grade – not to mention the grand scheme of the degree I pursued at BSU – was so minor, that it certainly did not merit such a dramatic reaction. My fear of being fired from my job as a teaching assistant (TA) was not grounded in reality either. Although timeliness and professionalism were certainly stressed by my department of study, occasionally TAs overslept and missed a class; as far as I know, no student, domestic or international, was ever summarily fired for it. The truth was, my perception of events was distorted, and I overreacted36.

36 Some of the feelings I experienced are likely shared by many new graduate students, regardless of national origin, as they adjust to the demands of graduate student life. However, the financial and logistical constraints and emotional pressures faced by international students are significantly greater.
In the course of my research, I realized that other internationals were prone to overreacting, too. Elena, who had always prided herself in being independent and self-confident, admitted:

[S]ometimes, you know, I have a lot of feelings that are like, exaggerated. And I don’t know why. [Actually,] I do know why: It is because I am here, and everything is different, and you are living something so different and you are so far away from home, that you feel different. But this I don’t like. You know, sometimes I say [to myself], “Eh eh eh!” I don’t have myself under control, you know? It seems like, now you are more susceptible? That’s something that I don’t like, that I feel dependence.

Elena quickly realized that she was overreacting to the challenges she faced in her new environment. She accurately attributed this susceptibility to the fact that she was away from home, and that her unfamiliar surroundings made her feel more vulnerable to life events that she would otherwise take in stride. The fact that Elena depended on others to accomplish daily tasks – always having a friend proofread her papers for English grammar and spelling mistakes, for example – contributed to her feelings of vulnerability and of not being in control of her life.

Leila was also bothered by the vulnerability and dependence inherent to her legal status as an international student:

This is my eighth year as an international student. I always say that I hate living on expiry dates. That’s how I feel, like a gallon of milk or something.
You know, you’re always just kind of tense, because this date is coming, or that date is coming, and... ugh!

International students in the United States are under strict requirements to keep their immigration documents current. For individuals who stay in the country for many years, this often means having to renew passports, visas and permits periodically. The renewal processes are generally quite bureaucratic and time-sensitive. BSU internationals were constantly reminded by RCIP staff not to let their documents expire, lest they “lose status” and risk deportation. The fear of making a mistake that would cost them dearly only added to internationals’ sense of not being in control.

Leila’s analogy about feeling like a gallon of milk about to expire communicated that she was deeply bothered by how much importance the U.S. Government and RCIP placed on dates. Unlike a gallon of milk, internationals did not “spoil” and need to be “tossed out” if they missed a deadline. Surely there were more dignified ways for “the system” to evaluate if an international student was law-abiding and trustworthy. Deep down, Leila did not believe she was at actual risk for “expiring,” but it hurt her to know that the conditions for continuing pursuing her education in the U.S. left little room for mistakes.

Isaita, a young woman from Latin America, spoke about feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities of her life as an international student:

Sometimes I feel too much responsibility on my shoulders. Sometimes.

When I arrived, I had just gotten married and I was going to study for my
master’s here, in a different country, in a new school, with no friends, no family, and sometimes it has been overwhelming. Sometimes. So, sometimes I have thought: Ah, I just wanna be home, where everybody takes care of me! But, yeah, here you have to take care of yourself, you have to pay your bills, and you have to remember that the deadline of paying the rent is the first day of the month, and then also if you have a credit card, you have to remember that it’s the eleventh of the month, and ah, you have the insurance of the car, you have to pay for that too, and well, the fees, and the health insurance for yourself, so sometimes... And then of course you have to be a good wife, and you have to be a good student, and I still have to be a good daughter, and try to communicate with your family. Plus, having a social life, because I have to socialize. Agh! So, sometimes I have felt overwhelmed.

Isaita used the adverb “sometimes” so often in her account that I had to wonder if she did not actually mean to say that she felt overwhelmed all of the time. Once again, being in an unfamiliar environment, away from family and friends, amplified the difficulty in dealing with relatively minor, everyday tasks, like paying bills. Like Leila and me, Isaita felt that there was very little room in her life for making mistakes, and she worried about not adequately fulfilling the roles of wife, student and daughter. Clearly, she was under considerable pressure (from others and herself) to manage the competing demands of academic, family and social life.

The internationals I interviewed spoke at length about the psychological suffering related to experiencing rejection. Most internationals were at least
partially aware of their feelings of devaluation, which they expressed in terms of doubting themselves and overreacting to minor life events. Unfortunately, a vicious cycle ensued: Experiencing rejection lowered internationals’ self-esteem and triggered feelings of self-doubt; because they doubted their ability to overcome the challenges of their new environment, internationals were prone to overreact to relatively minor obstacles. This added to the stress in their lives and fed into renewed self-doubt.

**Theme Three: Minority Group Identification**

The third hypothesized relationship of the Rejection-Identification Model was also confirmed in my observations of international students at Ball State University. As a means of coping with the rejection and devaluation they experienced, internationals turned to the international student community for comfort and solace. Participants’ accounts illustrated their views of internationals as a family and as a larger community, as well as a clear “us versus them” attitude, all of which are consistent with high levels of minority group identification.

**A Family of Internationals**

International students at Ball State University often used the metaphor of family to describe their relationships with fellow internationals. This metaphor communicated feelings of deep connection, trust and safety.

Quiro explained how he realized that international friends would be extremely important in his new life as an international student:
As our orientation got started, we started knowing many international students, we made friends and we started believing that, you know, we are very, very far from our country and our family, so here we have to make the friends as our family. So, from the day of the orientation we started doing that, and gradually we succeeded in making many friends nearby, first neighbors, and then in the college and in the university.

In a sense, international friends acted as a surrogate family, when blood relatives were too far away to provide comfort. Like Quiro, many internationals realized during the week of Orientation that they could rely on other internationals to help them to adapt to their new environment.

Isaita described her relationship with internationals in similar terms:

I get along with [my coworkers], but usually that stays there, in the department. I leave [the office] and my life is basically with international students. I really feel that my family is the international students. I feel that if we are thinking about something, about a party, of celebrating, or going somewhere, I think [of] international students, not U.S. students.

Isaita’s remarks communicated a clear separation between her work life and her personal life. Whereas U.S. students inhabited the first, internationals dominated the latter. The international family provided sanctuary from professional and academic obligations.

Mary, a young woman from Europe, spoke of a family of internationals in connection to her experience living in the residence halls. Residence halls (also
known as *dorms*, short for *dormitories*) at Ball State University comprised 29 buildings spread throughout the campus, where students’ living space consisted of a multi-purpose study/bedroom, which was typically shared with a roommate (necessarily of the same sex). Although there were variations from hall to hall, most rooms were approximately 12 feet by 16 feet with 8-foot ceilings, and included two beds, two desks, two chairs, and closet space. In the majority of halls, the occupants of a floor all shared a small number of bathrooms; few rooms came with a private bathroom.

Mary lived in Shively Hall, the residence hall to which many undergraduate internationals were assigned:

As we are all international students [living] in the same building, we kind of built this family here, and all the students, we tend to listen to the other and act like we are sisters or brothers, and yeah, I mean, the family is more between international students than international students with Americans. Much like a family of blood relatives, internationals in Shively shared the same living space, listened to each other and offered loving support. It is interesting to note that, although American students also lived in Shively Hall, they were not included in Mary’s metaphor of family.

Elena, who also lived in Shively Hall, spoke about how much she depended emotionally on her international family:

I feel dependence. And I don’t like dependence, at all! But in Shively, we are like a big family, and here, all of a sudden neighbors are very important to
you, because they are like your family. And you miss them. Oh my God! One of my neighbors is going away for the weekend. So, you know, if he is leaving, I miss him, because usually we are together twenty-four hours a day almost. And I know I’m gonna miss my friend who is going back to Europe so much more... I don’t like it, because... [breathes deeply] I think that I’m strong. But I like to pretend that I’m stronger than I am. [laughs]

Like Elena, many internationals relied heavily on their international neighbors for a sense of safety and security. It was hard not to (over)react negatively to their absences, even if only for a weekend.

The International Student Community

Whereas the family metaphor was used by some participants to describe a more intimate connection with a relatively small number of individuals, virtually all the internationals I met referred to a larger international student community. Analogous to the international family in Shively Hall, participants often associated perceptions of this tight-knit community with the physical space of University Apartments.

BSU’s University Apartments comprised two on-campus apartment complexes, Anthony and Scheidler, located on the north and far northwest sections of campus, respectively (see Figure 2 - Places to Live on the Ball State University Campus on p. 125). In these apartments, residents’ living space included a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom and one, two or three bedrooms. All 521 units came with a refrigerator and a stove/oven; only a small number could be rented fully
furnished. The apartments could be occupied by a single resident, two same-sex roommates, married couples, and families.

Patrick, a young man from Asia, explained his decision to live in Scheidler Apartments:

One reason [why I chose to live in Scheidler] is that I heard, before coming to Ball State, that in Scheidler many people stay together, in a close community. So, you get a look and feel for international students, you get to mix with a lot of internationals, and also some Americans as well. So, that’s the stuff that played at the back of my mind, [the idea of] being a part of an international community.

Like Patrick, many internationals found the prospect of belonging to a community of international students appealing. As they prepared to move to a new country, they had a sense that at least they would be living among friends.

At the end of his first year at Ball State University, Patrick was pleased with his decision to live in Scheidler:

Today I am more enriched than [back in] those days when I was in my home country. Here I got to know many people from the international community. I’m interested in international culture, their history, their geography, their politics, so it was a learning experience for me to get to know people from Romania, Russia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Italy, France, England... I think it made my days much brighter, knowing such things, firsthand experiences from people from all these countries.
Figure 2 - Places to Live on the Ball State University Campus (BSU, 2009b)
Many internationals shared Patrick’s sense that, through the BSU international student community, they had been afforded valuable opportunities to meet, befriend and learn from individuals that had come to the United States from all over the world.

The positive construction of difference shared by internationals was communicated through the respect, curiosity, and open admiration they displayed towards the cultural backgrounds of other internationals. Like Patrick, many internationals took true pleasure in learning about each others’ religions, food, landscape, ceremonies, and even politics. One tradition in particular epitomized this posture of openness and mutual respect; potluck dinners, hosted in internationals’ homes, allowed for the sharing of exotic foods and provided opportunities to establish cross-cultural friendships.

A typical international potluck usually took place in an apartment in Scheidler or Anthony on a Friday or Saturday night. Invitations were made by international host(s)/hostess(es) via Facebook and word-of-mouth, and all guests were asked to bring a dish or drink for everyone to share. Most international attendees home-cooked their contributions or brought bottles of wine, whereas the few Americans in attendance would usually bring store-bought food items, like nachos or fruit pies. As many as forty guests would cram into a single apartment’s living room and kitchen, sitting on furniture and on the floor, balancing paper plates on their laps. Latecomers would forego the luxury of sitting altogether and ate standing up.
Despite the unsophisticated “dinner setting,” international potlucks were widely appreciated and regularly attended by the international student community. These events helped restore internationals’ sense of pride in their national origins – especially when their national recipes garnered compliments – and reminded everyone present that “difference is a good thing.” The act of commensality (i.e., fellowship at table) counteracted feelings of homesickness, rejection and devaluation, and further strengthened the international student minority group identity.

Quiro, who like Patrick also lived in Scheidler and regularly attended and hosted potlucks, reasoned that, although internationals came from a variety of backgrounds, they also had much in common:

Many of our next-door neighbors are Americans, but we don’t know them properly. Rather, we know the international students all over Scheidler, in a much, much better and close manner. Might be there are several reasons for that, but I think that the bonding between the international students is generally closer because of their common platform. They all are international, they’re away from their friends and families and close “near and dear” ones, so it gets them into the same platform.

Indeed, internationals consistently found that they had more in common with other internationals (even those from radically different parts of the world) than with American students.
Caroline recalled a recent conversation with international friends who were also from the African continent:

We were saying that when we were in Africa, like, each one of us thought the other countries were so different from our own. Which is true, because each country has more than I don’t know how many tribes, and like a million languages, and you share a language with maybe one or two other countries. But we were saying it’s funny, it’s very interesting that when we are away from home, we find ourselves so close together. Actually, the things that bring us together are much more than the things that separate us.

Caroline’s remark made it clear that, although differences did exist among international students – even among those who came from the same geographic region, in the social context of the BSU campus, the similarities among them were far more relevant. Internationals chose to emphasize their commonalities, thus reinforcing the minority group identity.

Internationals versus Americans (or Us versus the U.S.)

Sadly, participants rarely mentioned close, meaningful relationships with American students as a significant aspect of their experiences at Ball State University. Some internationals expressed disappointment over this fact; others had already come to terms with the reality of a clear opposition between internationals and Americans, or us versus the U.S.

Mary recalled her initial expectations when she was assigned to live in Shively Hall:
Well, at first I was a little bit disappointed because I thought we would be with American people, you know? And interact with them and everything. And my first roommate was Chinese. I'm not saying I was not happy to have a Chinese roommate, but I expected to be more into the American culture, by living with them and well, like in the other residence halls and everything. But after a while I'm happy being with international students. We do things all together and we help each other, because we understand each other, we live the same experience, so it's easier.

The University’s decision to house undergraduate international students all together in the oldest residence hall on campus was ill-advised. As a result of this decision, internationals were deprived of valuable opportunities to interact with American students outside the classroom environment. This was the primary reason many of them had chosen to live in the residence halls in the first place. Moreover, internationals were left with the distinct impression that BSU had reserved the worst possible accommodations for its international guests.

Elena offered the University a bit of advice:

About the image of the University: If you want to have a good image, do not put the international students in the worst, in the oldest building of the University. I am a bit older, but there are a lot of very young people [here in Shively], and I hear things like, “Do you like your room?” “Yeah, it’s like being in prison.” These students are gonna call home and they are gonna say that.
And they are gonna say it to everybody. This is not a good image at all. When you arrive here, you know, the first impression is not good.

Elena made a fundamentally important point: Internationals talked to their friends, families, classmates, coworkers and acquaintances who were still in their home countries. If they spoke happily about international student life at BSU, they became volunteer recruiters for the University. On the other hand, if they told stories of residence hall rooms that felt like prison, they drove away potential recruits.

In the case of Shively Hall, the distance between internationals and American students was deliberately encouraged by the University through its housing policies. In other instances, however, this division appeared to emerge organically.

Llamarlat, a young man from Asia, expressed his wish to see internationals and Americans interacting more often in social settings:

I have friends from everywhere here, because people from everywhere are here [at Ball State]. So, I was thinking that I want to combine my friends, so we can party at the same place, all together. But it seems that it doesn’t work that way... Maybe it’s because of cultural differences, but American students told me that when they go to international parties, some of them feel nervous, I don’t know. And it’s the same for international students going to American parties too. It’s like, there’s a little bit of a gap maybe.

The nervousness that American students felt when attending international parties, and vice-versa, could be understood in terms of group membership. Americans instinctively felt they did not belong to the international student community that
was hosting the party. Internationals, having previously experienced negative
treatment by American counterparts, were also not eager to attend social gatherings
where they might risk further rejection.

Villa-Lobos, a young man from Latin America, distinguished between
internationals and American students in terms of open-mindedness:

I think we have the advantage, as internationals, to have a more open mind
than other people. We like to meet people, we like to share our culture, and
some students here are just like, “I have been in Muncie all my life.” It’s like, “I
mean, you haven’t been to Chicago, for example?” “No, I don’t need to.” I
mean, that kind of mentality kills me, seriously. But, you know, you have to
learn to respect that also.

It was very difficult for internationals to understand how American students could
be content to stay within state boundaries, when they had chosen to travel across
the world in search of an international education. The opposite was also true:
American students had a hard time comprehending why internationals would want
to leave their home environment.

Patrick also saw in American students a reluctance to leave their cultural
comfort zone:

I don’t know why, but it seems that [American students are] happy with their
own cocoon life. They pretty much love to stay inside the imaginary shell
they have created for themselves, which they hardly, hardly ever break to
mix with international students. They have, I think, an inclination towards
keeping only American students as their friends. I don’t know what kind of psychological phenomenon is behind this, but this is what I have observed, on and off campus, inside and outside classes.

Whereas internationals routinely “broke out of their shells” to learn about the culture of fellow internationals and to better adapt to life in the U.S., American students worked hard to remain inside their cultural “cocoons.” These two opposing views of difference – one inherently positive, the other negatively charged – made it almost impossible for students to relate to each other across group boundaries.

Quiro articulated the problem in terms of socialized behavior:

It is an acceptance problem towards [people from] outside America. It is for outside Americans, non-U.S. This is a strong concept here, either you are from the U.S. or you are not from the U.S. American or not. I think that they are brought up in an environment where they are taught from their school days that, “you are the Americans.” This concept of American-ness is very present here, like “you are American,” “he is American,” and “they are American.” And the rest of the world is separate. So this is a strong feeling in them, I think.

Quiro believed that the American ideology of cultural homogeneity (Hsieh, 2006) was taught to Americans from a very young age, and that this explained why they were unwilling to engage with internationals. Their feelings of cultural superiority entitled them to remain within the boundaries of their cultural comfort zone. It was up to internationals to adapt to the American way of doing things.
Denise viewed the division between internationals and American students in terms of a clear opposition:

I call all the internationals friends. We are united to be non-Americans.

[laughs] That’s why we are all friends. And this has nothing to do, like, against any American person, I mean, my roommates, some of my friends are Americans... But, they’re not special as we are. [laughs]

Denise’s remarks left little room for doubt: She believed that the unifying factor underlying the international student minority group identity was the fact that all its members were “non-Americans.” The notion that internationals were “special” was in reality a coping mechanism to counteract the devaluation internationals felt as a result of the rejection by their American students, faculty, staff and institutions.

In sum, participants’ accounts widely supported Schmitt et al.’s (2003) findings that “common treatment from the majority alone may be enough to create a sense of identification with a newly created category” (p. 9).
Chapter Five – Improving the International Student Experience

Throughout the course of my study, participants shared with me37 a wealth of practical and creative suggestions as to how international students’ quality of life on campus could be improved. As internationals told me about their personal experiences at Ball State University, they also gave me valuable input on how the University could work to improve the international student collective experience.

Many of these suggestions were directly related to the feelings of rejection and devaluation discussed in Chapter Four and spanned a number of aspects of international student life. As expected, some suggestions would require that BSU expend financial, material, and/or human resources; others, however, could be implemented fairly easily and inexpensively, and might even help lighten the workload of overburdened University staff members.

The quality and variety of participants’ suggestions indicate two things. First, BSU internationals as a student population have idiosyncratic needs, many of which, at the time when I conducted my study, were not being met by the University. I

37 My interview schedule included the specific question “What are some of the things Ball State University could do, or do better, to improve the quality of your experience as an international student?” However, it is interesting to note that many participants offered suggestions even before being prompted to do so. Additionally, some internationals and even a few faculty members who heard about my research were kind enough to share their thoughts with me outside the setting of a formal interview. In particular, I would like to thank Mr. Ricardo Fernández and Dr. Maria Williams-Hawkins for their valuable input.
argue that this gap in service merits the Administration’s timely attention, especially in light of the University’s strategic goal to substantially grow the international student population by 2012. Without active intervention, the issues identified in my study are likely to worsen over time, compounded by the increase in the number of internationals on campus.

Second, participants’ suggestions show that, if given the opportunity to provide the University with feedback, internationals have valuable ideas to contribute. It makes sense that internationals would be more aware of their own needs and also highly invested in providing information to University decision-makers about how to address these needs. Such feedback constitutes a knowledge pool that BSU can tap into to develop low-cost, high-impact programs that will improve international student life and promote a welcoming, multicultural campus environment.

The following recommendations reflect ways in which Ball State University can work to better meet the physical, psychological, academic, and social needs of its international student population. At the university level, my recommendations are grounded in understandings of Organizational Communication; on an interpersonal level, they draw on concepts of Intercultural Communication. Ultimately, they aim to alleviate the feelings of rejection and devaluation experienced by internationals, while still allowing them to benefit from the positive effects of the minority group identification process described in Chapter Four. In hopes that these recommendations will actually be implemented (or at least discussed) by the
Administration, I have grouped them according to the University constituency for whom they are most relevant. This way, each office or academic unit can easily locate the ideas that directly relate to their work with internationals.

**Recommendations for the University Administration**

Ultimately, international student recruitment and the internationalization of a university are undertakings that require a broad base of support from the campus community. It is up to the Higher Administration to set the tone for such endeavors and consistently reinforce the message that “international students are important to our university” through both discourse and practice.

**Recognizing Specific Needs and Providing Additional Support**

It is important that University administrators become aware of the many ways in which international students’ needs differ from those of other student populations. Equally important is the consequential commitment to provide the necessary additional support. Research is a crucial component in any effort to gain and raise awareness; luckily, a wealth of information is readily available from a variety of sources. Organizations like the Institute of International Education (IIE), the Association of International Educators (NAFSA) and the Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange regularly publish high-quality reports on the situation of international students in the United States and abroad. Quantitative and qualitative studies specifically focusing on BSU internationals can be commissioned to external or in-house researchers. BSU scholars (junior and
senior, domestic and international) have conducted research\textsuperscript{38} that can also help inform policy. Dissertations and theses (like this one) are available through University Libraries free of cost, and researchers are often willing to serve as subject matter experts and consultants to the University. Once the relevant data have been gathered, workshops and information sessions can be organized to disseminate information to key audiences. Intercultural communication training opportunities can be made widely available to students, faculty, staff and even members of the larger community in the form of outreach programs.

\textit{Setting the Tone}

Internationals feel appreciated when they hear the President of the University give a speech on the valuable contributions of international students to the BSU campus. These speeches can have an even greater impact if they are delivered not only to international audiences at the annual President's Dinner, but also to the wider campus community, at events like the Freshman and Graduate Student Orientations. The simple message “international students are important to our university” can be incorporated into the University’s overarching communication strategy. Considering the international recruitment goal is expressed in numerical terms, speeches can also reference specific enrollment data, such as “there are over 600 international students from over 80 different countries currently studying at Ball State University.” Orientation speeches, particularly those addressing younger students, can also include a friendly call-to-action, such as “we

\textsuperscript{38} Noteworthy examples of such scholarship include: Al-Mashaqbeh, 2003; Edghill, 2010; Hansen, 2010.
invite you to help us welcome our international guests onto our campus” and “we encourage you to reach out to the international students in your classes, in your residence halls, at your jobs.”

*Making an Ethical Commitment*

Ball State University can take this opportunity to raise its ethical standards and commit to increased transparency in all its interactions with international students. This includes (but is not limited to) providing more transparent information regarding: Finances (i.e., costs of living, tuition, fees, what is and what is not included in waivers, scholarships and assistantships); English language proficiency requirements for admission into academic programs; and the legitimate options available to internationals for complying with U.S. Immigration laws, as in the case of health insurance policies. A bold statement can be made by appointing an ombudsperson (or international student advocate) to help resolve complaints and grievances that arise in the meantime.

This commitment can be made out of the understanding that international students tend to be at a disadvantage when dealing with the University as an institution. Rules and regulations are written in technical English. Policies and procedures assume a certain degree of familiarity with the American educational system. Expectations of what constitute students’ rights and obligations (as well as the university’s rights and obligations) are culture-specific. Transparency is paramount for building trust and encouraging international students to come (and invite their friends to come) to BSU.
Rewarding Initiatives that Promote Internationalization

The process of internationalizing a university is not just the responsibility of the international student office; every single member of the campus community can be encouraged to contribute. Faculty can include international analyses into their courses and invite international speakers (including students) into their classrooms. Students can participate in work/study abroad opportunities, virtual international exchanges and on-campus programs and activities focusing on international/intercultural issues. Staff can work to identify specific ways in which their respective offices and departments could best meet the needs of the international students they serve.

Fundamentally, members of the campus community who are already promoting internationalization and multiculturalism can be publicly recognized for their commendable leadership. Their ideas, tools and experiences can be disseminated as “best practices” throughout the University, providing the incentive and the knowledge for others to follow their examples. Awards and prizes can be used to reward faculty and staff members who provide top-notch services to international students, and scholarships can be offered to students who demonstrate a strong international/intercultural component in their studies. An additional way to clearly communicate the premium placed on internationalization

---

39 A noteworthy example of how best practices may be disseminated can be found in Dr. Linh Nguyen Littleford’s videos on “Teaching International Students,” which are available to the campus community through the BSU Office of Educational Excellence (BSU, 2011).
is to offer an “international notation” on students’ official transcript\textsuperscript{40}. For faculty and staff, a similar effect can be achieved by incorporating measures of internationalization into their job evaluation criteria (Pope et al., 2004).

\textit{Education Diversified}

The Ball State University slogan, “Education redefined” can be adapted and used in a university-wide campaign to raise awareness about the benefits of diversity in education. Internationalization can play into the larger message about how \textit{everyone} benefits from a multicultural education. A variety of units on campus can be asked to contribute to the initiative, including the Rinker Center for International Programs, the Office of Institutional Diversity, the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies and the Multicultural Center, to name just a few. University Libraries and University Program Board can also adhere to the campaign, by displaying books and showcasing films that center on issues of multiculturalism.

The presence of Ishmael Beah, author of \textit{A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier}, on the BSU campus made quite an impression on students in the 2009-2010 Freshman Connection class. World-renowned speakers like Mr. Beah can be invited to address the campus community as part of the \textit{Education Diversified} campaign too. Student organizations like the Social Justice League, the International Studies Association, the Latino Student Union, the Black Student Association and the Greek community can also make valuable contributions. The campaign’s central messages

\textsuperscript{40}The University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada is in the process of instituting such a notation, and staff members at the University’s International Centre for Students are optimistic about the effects on students’ motivation to seek international experiences (T. Rogge, personal communication, April 2011).
can emphasize that “a diversified education benefits all of us” and that “everyone has a role to play in fostering diversity on campus.”

**Recommendations for the Office of Housing and Residence Life**

Housing is a fundamentally important part of the relationship between Ball State University and its international students. Whether it is a room in the residence halls or an apartment on the north end of campus, the living space provided by the University constitutes an internationals’ “home away from home.” Policies that leave international residents feeling mistreated and misunderstood only compound the effects of rejection and devaluation experienced elsewhere on campus. Staff’s efforts to provide hospitality and comfort, on the other hand, can go a long way in establishing trust and making internationals feel welcome at BSU.

**Welcoming New Residents**

When developing policies and procedures, the Office of Housing and Student Life (HSL) can take into consideration that internationals often move into their rooms and apartments shortly after arriving from the airport. Very few have private means of transportation, and even fewer have had the chance to set up a U.S. bank account or purchase a cell phone or a laptop. HSL can accept first-time payments in cash or international credit cards, or work with the Bursar’s Office to have security deposits charged to internationals’ student accounts. HSL can also make available pay phones (with the capability to make international calls) in residence halls and University Apartments, so that internationals can communicate with their loved
ones back in their home countries. A computer with Skype installed can also be made available; internationals can log on with their own accounts, or make calls from an HSL account and pay (in cash) for the cost of the call. When international residents check in, HSL can provide them with a map and detailed instructions on walking, biking, or taking the bus to key locations in the area, including grocery stores, furniture stores and banks.

Finally, the UA yard sale held at the end of the Spring semester helps graduating students sell their possessions; unfortunately, most newly-admitted international students arrive on campus in late July or August, so they do not benefit from the sale. HSL can consider setting up a small area for residents to leave unwanted items (in good shape) as donations for future residents. Similarly, bicycles that are abandoned on campus can be reconditioned and offered to new residents (on a first-come, first-serve basis) or rented/sold for a small fee.

Transparency in Communication

Once again, many of the concepts that are quite obvious to American students are not so self-evident to internationals. In some countries, for example, universities do not even offer on-campus housing, so the concept of a “meal plan” is literally foreign to many internationals. The Office of Housing and Student Life can

41 Skype is a computer software that enables users to hold video-conferences over the Internet, free of charge. Skype credits can also be purchased inexpensively, allowing users to call land line phones around the world.
42 Graduating residents often donate such items to the local Goodwill store, which is located far from campus. This initiative could save new residents the trip (especially considering few internations own cars) and make the task of setting up a new home considerably easier for both American and international residents.
43 At the end of the Summer term, BSU maintenance crews remove the locks and dispose of dozens of bicycles that have been abandoned on the bike racks around campus.
set the example for transparency by communication with its international residents in clear and explicit terms. Along with any form that has to be filled by a student, HSL can provide a glossary of terms, offering explanations in simple English of what each term entails. An example of such an explanation can be:

“Move-in date” is the first day in the semester when students can get their keys at the HSL office and take their personal belongings into their rooms in the residence halls. Students can move in after the move-in date, but they cannot do so before that date. This is because, during the breaks, the rooms are cleaned, repaired and prepared for the new residents. For this reason also, students cannot leave their personal belongings (like clothes, books, and bed sheets) in their rooms during the breaks.

Terms that probably merit similar explanations include (but are not limited to): residency requirement, room and board, meal plan, move-out date, hall closure, security deposit, rent, utilities and maintenance. HSL can also avoid unpleasant surprises (and complaints) by posting photographs and detailed descriptions of rooms and facilities in each residence hall, so that internationals have a better sense of where they will be living before they sign a contract.

The hefty penalties charged by HSL from students who cancel their contracts can be waived, on a case-by-case basis, for international students, if it becomes evident that the international resident signed the contract in good faith, but was unaware of a significant aspect of the agreement (e.g., he/she didn’t realize that a particular residence hall lacked a fully-equipped kitchen in which to cook meals).
International students’ ability to earn money in the United States is strictly regulated by Immigration law, so HSL can take care to provide detailed information regarding all costs associated with the housing options available to internationals. (For example, the choice to live in a residence hall entails not just the cost of the room, but also the need to purchase a meal plan and pay for laundry by the load.)

**Integrating Residence Halls**

Many internationals regard living in an American-style university dormitory as a significant part of their educational experience in the United States. As the number of international undergraduate students at BSU increases, more residence halls will have to remain open year-round. Instead of just meeting demand for this housing category, BSU’s Office of Housing and Student Life can pique the interest of students – international and Americans – by advertising the benefits of living in a residence hall that does not close during holidays and breaks. By “growing” the all-year resident population, HSL can then afford to transform one of the more modern halls into the designate “open year-round” hall. Internationals can then benefit from accommodations that are at least as comfortable as those offered to their American counterparts, and there will no longer be a logistical reason for why international and American residents cannot be integrated.

HSL can then offer both international and American students a fuller, more enriching experience by offering to pair residents cross-culturally when they sign up for a room. Integration can be a well-publicized and incentivized option, but need not be mandatory. Students who wish to interact cross-culturally can be given the
option to do so within their living spaces; students who prefer to live with a same-culture partner can be given other opportunities to engage cross-culturally, in contexts where they feel more comfortable.

Transportation to/from University Apartments

University Apartments (Scheidler and Anthony) are already regarded positively as housing options by international graduate students; in part, this stems from the longstanding association of the international student community with these physical spaces. The main drawbacks concerning specifically Scheidler Apartments are its distance from the central part of campus and the absence of safe sidewalks leading to campus. Very few internationals own cars, so they largely depend on public transportation to leave the complex. The single most important improvement that UA can make is to arrange for uninterrupted, year-round public transportation between Scheidler Apartments and the central part of campus. This can be accomplished through a partnership with the City bus service, or more plausibly with the BSU shuttle service. Service need not be very frequent during evenings, weekends and breaks, but transportation can be made available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. When this is accomplished, virtually every single international graduate student\textsuperscript{44} will be a potential resident for Scheidler Apartments. This measure can also make on-campus apartments a more attractive housing option for American students, who generally own cars but may see a benefit in not having to drive to and park on campus every day.

\textsuperscript{44}In the 2009-2010 academic year, this would have meant 272 potential international graduate student residents, plus their dependents (BSU, 2010b).
Regardless of public transportation options, providing a safe crosswalk for pedestrians and cyclists to cross McGalliard Road and walk/ride to campus can minimize the risk of a serious accident.

*Intercultural Communication and Conflict Resolution Training*

Training in Intercultural Communication (ICC) and Conflict Resolution (ConRes) techniques can be made mandatory for all HSL staff and interns, including Resident Advisors (RAs). Such trainings can also be offered to residents, especially those who sign up to share living quarters with cross-cultural partners. Training sessions can be made available throughout the academic year, in the format of short lectures and interactive information sessions; more intensive workshops can be offered over the breaks, specifically targeting UA staff. ICC and ConRes sessions can be marketed as good life skills for everyone, regardless of national origin, as well as particularly useful in fostering intercultural friendships. HSL can work together with the Rinker Center for International Programs to develop context-specific ICC trainings; the BSU Communication Studies Department and the BSU Center for Peace and Conflict Studies can be asked to provide expertise in Conflict Resolution.

*Providing Comfort through Food*

Food is an important issue for internationals, as evidenced by both their loving appreciation of international potlucks and their bitter complaints about meal plans and substandard kitchen facilities in residence halls. Just as the international potluck dinners developed organically into a tradition within the international student community, events that allow for commensality can be organized actively by
HSL. These offices can brainstorm ways and occasions in which international
cuisine options can be made regularly available to international and American
residents. For internationals who enjoying cooking their own meals, adequate
facilities (in residence halls) and even recreational cooking classes can be provided.
Finally, HSL can arrange for weekly “grocery runs” to local stores (like Meijer’s,
Walmart and Marsh) using the BSU shuttle\textsuperscript{45}.

\textit{Relevant Programming}

Programs and activities of interest to BSU internationals can be held in-loco
for the benefit of both residents and program organizers. The Pilates classes offered
during Spring 2010 in the Scheidler Community Room, for example, were well
received by international residents in the complex. Likewise, the International
Night, an initiative by the BSU Counseling Center, was popular among residents in
the Hurst and Mysch Halls. HSL can continue to work with other offices on campus
to provide relevant programming to its international residents (and their families).

A key consideration when setting up these events can be internationals’
scheduling convenience. Graduate students, for example, are usually busy during
the evenings, when most of their classes are held. Programs will likely have higher
attendance rates if organized during weekends or breaks, when internationals often
complain about the absence of University-sponsored activities. Cultural and
religious holidays, like the Christian Easter and the Muslim Eid, are times when

\textsuperscript{45} The University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada, organizes a “Bison Grocery Run” on weekends for
students living in its residence halls. This service is especially popular during the winter months,
when low temperatures and snow make shopping for groceries difficult. International and Canadian
students alike use the service, which is offered free of cost to students.
internationals feel particularly homesick; activities to celebrate such occasions can help internationals feel more comfortable in their “home away from home.” Celebrations like these can also represent an opportunity for intercultural learning and contact between American and international students.

**Recommendations for the Rinker Center for International Programs**

The Rinker Center for International Programs bears great potential – and responsibility – for significantly improving the international student experience on the BSU campus. However, it need not attempt to accomplish this mission on its own. As argued earlier, internationalization is not exclusively the responsibility of the international student office; every single member of the campus community can be encouraged to contribute.

*A Mandate to Educate*

The single most effective way RCIP can help promote internationalization is by making education an integral part of its mandate within the University. As Pope et al. (2004) posited, “multicultural competence – those awareness, knowledge, and skills that are needed to work effectively across cultural groups and to work with complex diversity issues – can no longer be viewed as a specialty or area of expertise for a limited few” (p. xv). RCIP can work with a variety of offices, organizations and individuals on campus to raise awareness about the needs of international students and encourage students, faculty, and staff to develop multicultural competence. RCIP can become the University’s go-to resource for expertise on issues of internationalization and international education.
Training in Intercultural Communication and Conflict Resolution (discussed earlier, in connection with housing) can be made available widely to the campus community, in the form of workshops, information sessions, and even awareness campaigns. Such training can be developed in conjunction with the Communication Studies Department, the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies, the Counseling Center, the Career Center, and the Office of Institutional Diversity, among others. To support the development of context-relevant training for different audiences, data can be compiled from external sources (e.g., IIE, NAFSA), from scholarship produced by BSU faculty and students, and from RCIP’s own investigations into the needs of BSU internationals. Surveys and focus groups can also be used to solicit feedback (and garner support) from the international student community, as well as from faculty and staff who work intensively with internationals. Often, these individuals have developed creative and highly effective solutions to dealing with challenges involving international students. Their solutions can be included in the trainings as best practices for academic departments and offices on campus to replicate.

Welcoming and Integrating (instead of Orienting)

Most international students arrive on campus feeling anxious and disoriented, but also very excited about beginning their educational journeys in the United States. Whereas important information must be imparted to them, Orientation can also be about welcoming international students and integrating them into the BSU campus community. By establishing a relationship of trust and respect with

---

46 Denise used an analogy of hospitality to explain this sentiment; “Orientation should be like welcoming someone into your home,” she said.
internationals from the start, RCIP can position itself as a fundamentally important piece in the University’s network of support for internationals.

RCIP can coordinate with academic departments and the Graduate School to ensure that international students make optimal use of their time during Orientation Week. RCIP can also consider scheduling the International Student Orientation on the week before other orientations on campus take place (i.e., two weeks before classes begin)\(^47\). Moreover, the goals of “orienting” internationals can continue to be pursued throughout the first semester of their studies at BSU; the focus of ongoing sessions can be “helping [international] students to understand cultural norms of American higher education, including faculty expectations, the nature of relationships with professors and advisors, and classroom dynamics” (Trice, 2004, p. 685).

RCIP can assemble a handbook highlighting important policies and regulations affecting international students. The handbook can be distributed in hard copy on the first day of the ISO and made available online throughout the year, for internationals’ easy reference. In fact, newly-admitted internationals can reference it even before they leave their home countries. Besides serving as a visual aid during ISO information sessions – particularly useful for students whose oral comprehension of English is not optimal, the handbook can help internationals who, for whatever reason, are unable to attend Orientation. Considering the overwhelming amount of information that is imparted to international students

\(^{47} This may not be feasible in the Spring term because of the Christmas/New Year's holidays, but it is possible in the Fall, when the largest group of internationals traditionally arrives.
during that first week on campus, the Orientation Handbook can be a valuable source of reference for internationals throughout their time in the United States. It can also help empower internationals to seek answers on their own to their everyday questions, thus lightening the workload of RCIP immigration specialists and advisors.

RCIP can invite American students, faculty and staff to participate in the International Student Orientation. These “experts” in American cultural practices can provide firsthand accounts of common misunderstandings and laughable situations between Americans and internationals. By understanding the cultural logic underlying Americans’ behaviors, internationals can become better equipped to communicate cross-culturally with their host nationals, as well as be psychologically prepared to handle minor conflicts – hopefully with good humor. Members of all academic departments and administrative offices can be invited, but individuals from the departments of Anthropology, Communication Studies and Modern Languages and Classics can be recruited specifically, as their fields can make particularly significant contributions to the process.

Special attention and care can be given to the tone of all communications – oral and written – with internationals. RCIP staff can avoid at all cost the use of threatening language, such as mentions of deportation. Compliance with U.S. Immigration laws can be stressed in more constructive ways, such as emphasizing that “Americans take rules and laws very seriously” and asking internationals to
“please follow all rules and laws very carefully; if you have any questions, please ask us at RCIP, and we will be happy to help you.”

ISO information sessions can cover academically-related topics, as well as U.S. Immigration regulations, thus offering a more balanced approach between the “international” and “student” dimensions of internationals’ socialization into the new context. A mandatory session – “American University 101” – can address the issue of managing academic workload, i.e., what to expect when signing up for a class, teachers’ expectations of students, syllabi use, assignment completion, and on-campus resources (e.g.: reference librarians at Bracken Library, tutors at the Learning Center and the Writing Center). This session can be offered separately to undergraduate and graduate internations. Throughout the academic year, complementary sessions on academic topics can be offered by RCIP in conjunction with the Counseling Center, the Learning Center, the Writing Center, the Intensive English Institute, and the Career Center. RCIP can also survey internationals about what knowledge and skills would be most useful to them, and then develop workshops and information sessions to meet those needs in a timely manner. Two weeks before final exams, for example, a session on test-taking strategies can be offered; two months before graduation, workshops on resume writing and job interviewing skills can be particularly useful to graduating internationals.

48 For a study on the career-related needs of international students, see Bohonos (2009).
Integrating Families

Internationals are sometimes accompanied by their spouses, children, and extended relatives when they come to the United States (Bowman, 2011). These individuals may or may not be enrolled officially as BSU students, so they are often “invisible” to offices and departments on campus. RCIP can make a concerted effort to include this important international constituency in its programming. Additionally, “BSU family ID” cards (similar to the BSU IDs given to students) can be given to dependents so that they too can access University services, such as Bracken Library, the gyms, and discounted tickets for events in Emens Auditorium.

Becoming More “Customer-Friendly”

There are several ways in which the RCIP can make itself more “customer-friendly” to internationals. For example, RCIP can structure itself internally in a way that makes sense to international students looking at the office from outside. This includes de-personalizing services; instead of pointing to an individual staff member’s name, RCIP can ask students to direct their questions about U.S. Immigration laws to the Immigration Services section of RCIP. This way, even international students who are new to the University will know the correct office to contact. RCIP can then design its website to reflect the needs of different groups of internationals (e.g.; prospective, newly admitted, enrolled, alumni). RCIP can open Skype accounts to match each of its sections and make this information readily available on every web page; this way, internationals all over the world can contact
RCIP inexpensively and in real-time. Social media like Facebook, Orkut, LinkedIn and Twitter can also be used to connect RCIP with specific constituencies.

A final consideration involves the actual friendliness of staff when interacting with internationals. RCIP can take care to hire, train, and retain as employees individuals who truly enjoy working with international students. Ideally, RCIP staff share the international student community’s understanding that “difference is good.” Constant training and mentoring can be provided to staff members who have daily and direct contact with internationals; Intercultural Communication and Conflict Resolution techniques can be reviewed periodically. RCIP can work to minimize the American-centrism of its own policies and procedures, whenever possible. (This can be done with the help of an advisory council, representing a cross-section of international students, including different national origins, religions, and academic levels.) Finally, RCIP employee evaluation criteria can include foreign language skills, particularly those languages that are in high demand in everyday interactions with internationals (i.e., Mandarin Chinese, Korean, Arabic, Persian/Farsi, Turkish and Spanish).

**Recruiting Internationals**

Recruiting international students is significantly easier when current internationals are satisfied with the quality of the services being provided by RCIP and with the overall campus climate. RCIP can ask internationals to refer friends and family members from their home countries to apply to study at BSU. Internationals currently enrolled can be given electronic and print brochures on the
University’s program offerings and be asked to distribute these materials to friends they think might enjoy coming to BSU. Current internationals can also be invited to write and video-record “testimonies” on key aspects of BSU student life which they are enjoying. Such materials can be produced in internationals’ native languages, according to culturally-appropriate scripts, and posted on the RCIP website.

International students who come to Ball State University through exchange programs and for English language classes (i.e. as non-degree seeking students) can also be encouraged to return to BSU to pursue a full degree. RCIP can work together with the Graduate School and academic departments to provide internationals with information on degree offerings, available forms of financial aid (especially graduate assistantships) and the application deadlines. The same applies to family members of internationals who are already in the United States.

**Recommendations for Academic Departments**

Students’ departments of study are essentially their academic homes; in many cases, they are the BSU context in which students spend most of their waking time. (This is especially true for graduate students who hold appointments as teaching, research or lab assistants.) As such, departments have the greater responsibility of nurturing the educational development of international students.

*Admitting and Employing Internationals*

Academic departments that employ international graduate students as teaching assistants – or in any capacity that effectively requires fluency in English – can consider including clear English language requirements as part of their
admissions/hiring processes. TOEFL scores can be requested in advance, instead of making a provisional appointment, pending the international student’s results on a test to be taken upon their arrival at BSU. It is preferable to deny the application of under-qualified students before they leave their home countries, than to have to devise less-than-adequate solutions after internationals have expended the time and resources to move to the United States. Interviews via telephone and Skype can be used to ascertain international applicants’ command of the language, and also to answer questions and communicate support during the stressful process of applying for student visas (see Figure 1 on p. 69). Few international students can afford to visit campus before making the decision to enroll, but real-time conversations via Skype (as opposed to email conversations) also communicate departments’ interest in attractive candidates, and vice-versa. Throughout the application and admissions processes, departments can provide international students with ample opportunity to ask questions and validate expectations, so that both parties’ rights and obligations are clear. In the case of graduate programs, for example, departments can inform international applicants about the general April 15th deadline to accept or decline offers of admission.

Welcoming Contributions

International students can be encouraged to contribute to their departments of study in the same ways as their American counterparts, but also as true agents of internationalization. Internationals are often willing to serve as guest speakers in class lectures and panels, for example. Besides traditional course contents,
Departments can organize debates around current events, focusing on international or domestic issues that are of interest to the campus community. For example, when the U.S. health care reform was being debated politically, an international panel exploring different health care systems and perspectives from around the world would have been timely and informative.

Speaking engagements such as these allow internationals to practice communicating professionally in English and help build their resumes; they are also excellent opportunities for American students, faculty and staff to be exposed to different worldviews, paradigms and professional contexts. As an international student who had the privilege of participating in several such events, I felt flattered by professors’ invitations and always left the speaking engagement with a renewed sense of self-efficacy.

**Departmental Liaisons**

Departments with newly-admitted international students can be proactive in integrating the new arrivals with their senior classmates, both American and international. It is up to department chairpersons and advisors to set the tone for how the new arrivals will be welcomed. If there is already an international student within the department who is willing to serve as a liaison to the new international, then the department can offer to cover the cost for an airport pickup – whether in the internationals’ own car or (more likely) through public transportation (such as

---

49 Such a panel would arguably also have done a civic service to American voters, who were being bombarded with political propaganda that superficially presented health care systems of different countries as better or worse than America’s.
the Star of America shuttle\(^50\)). Even if the logistics of the trip are not ideal, new arrivals will appreciate being greeted at the airport by a friendly face. The title of Departmental Liaison can be made into an official designation given to students who display above-average intercultural communication skills; departments can offer certificates of appreciation and even letters of recommendations in exchange for liaisons’ services. Liaisons can also represent their departments at the International Student Orientation, as “experts” in American cultural practices. At the very least, departments can ensure that their new international students are connected to other students in the department before they arrive on campus.

*Internationalized Curricula*

Departments that are intent on recruiting internationally can consider revising their program curricula (and course syllabi) to meet the demands of global markets. This revision can be a valuable asset for American students; for internationals, it is a necessary precondition. Departments can ask internationally-employed alumni (and internationals currently enrolled in their courses) for suggestions on which topics to update or expand. These alumni can also be invited back to campus as guest speakers. In classroom discussions, internationals can be encouraged to contribute their knowledge of non-American practices, paradigms, and professional contexts.

\(^{50}\) Transportation from the city of Muncie, where Ball State University is located, to the Indianapolis International Airport has long been an issue for internationals, who rarely own cars. Since October 2009, Star of America has been providing daily shuttle services from BSU to Indianapolis. At the time, round-trip tickets cost approximately $40.
Departments can also take into account the fact that U.S. Immigration laws make it very difficult for international students to find off-campus jobs, even after graduation. Building the option of a formal internship into program offerings can be very helpful to internationals, because it allows them to formally apply for Curricular Professional Training (CPT) work permits. In effect, the concept of CPT formalizes one of the greatest selling points for American education, a clear focus on the application of theory to real-world situations.

**Recommendations for Individual Faculty and Staff Members**

Individual faculty and staff members may not be in a position to single-handedly internationalize the BSU campus, but they can make a world of difference in the lives of individual international students. In my case, I was recruited, taught, employed, advised, supported, and mentored by a professor with whom I became friends nearly ten years ago; my international student experience would have been significantly different (and significantly less positive) if this faculty member had not been willing to go “above and beyond” for me. Like me, many internationals have benefited from meaningful relationships – or interactions – with dedicated, caring individuals in the BSU community.

*Clarifying Expectations*

Many aspects of university life that seem like “second nature” to American students, faculty and staff are actually quite culture-specific. As a result of this, students who grew up outside the U.S. and were socialized into non-American educational systems can reasonably be expected to have different understandings of
terms and activities, when compared to American students. BSU faculty and staff can take every opportunity to ensure that international students understand clearly what is expected of them.

One example is the definition of plagiarism, specifically within the context of research (Bowman, 2011): In some countries, it is perfectly acceptable to transcribe portions of a published author's text into one’s own papers without explicitly citing the original work. A brief discussion of the University's Student Academic Ethics Policy (BSU, 2009a), both orally (in class, at the beginning of the semester) and in writing (in the course syllabus) can help mitigate doubts and prevent embarrassing misunderstandings. In fact, a candid explanation of the university’s expectations may benefit not just international students, but also American students, who are often surprised to learn that “double-dipping” is considered a form of plagiarism.

*Describe, Interpret, Evaluate (DIE)*

International students not only have different needs than American students; they also communicate differently about their needs. Additionally, behaviors that may be regarded as disrespectful by Americans may be considered socially appropriate in other cultural contexts. When interacting with internationals, faculty and staff members can apply the Describe, Interpret, Evaluate (DIE) technique of Intercultural Communication, which reminds us to consider alternative

---

51 According to the Ball State University Student Code, double-dipping (also known as self-plagiarism or repeat submission) means “submitting as newly executed work, without faculty member’s prior knowledge and consent, one’s own work which has been previously presented for another class at Ball State University or elsewhere” (BSU, 2009a, p. 1).
interpretations for a person’s behavior, before making the leap from observation to judgment (Kohls, 2001).

The DIE technique involves three steps: Describe, interpret, and evaluate. This is an example of how it can be applied to an interaction between an international student and a staff member in an administrative office on campus. The first step calls for a detailed description of the problematic behavior that is being observed. (Instead of saying, “The student is disrespectful,” which is a judgment, the staff member can observe, “The student does not look me in the eyes when she asks for my help in filling the form.”) The second step is to brainstorm different interpretations, positive and negative, for why the person may be behaving in that manner. (“The student may not want to look me in the eyes. The student may think I am ‘beneath’ her, so she refuses to look me in eyes. The student may be too shy to look me in the eyes. The student may have been taught that it is impolite to look a person – particularly a figure of authority – in the eyes.”) The third step is to decide on the most reasonable interpretation for the person’s behavior, taking as much contextual information as possible into account. (“The student says ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ when she asks for my help. She does not ‘meet the eyes’ of my co-workers either. I know someone who has traveled to her home country; maybe my friend can tell me if this is a common behavior there?”)

Faculty and staff members who experience difficulty interacting with an international student can approach the international, openly but gently, and explain politely their concerns or expectations. Preferably, this can be done as soon as the
difficulty arises, before animosity or embarrassments develop. In cases where the international student has a low level of proficiency in English, faculty and staff can explain their concerns in writing, taking care to use basic grammar and vocabulary. If the matter cannot be resolved in this manner, RCIP can be contacted for specific advice\textsuperscript{52}; an interpreter can also be procured, if the language barrier is significant.

Ultimately, faculty and staff members will do well to remember that international students face significant challenges and make very real sacrifices to pursue an education in the United States. Internationals are heavily invested in attending the University; the members of the BSU campus community can acknowledge and reciprocate internationals’ investment by acting as gracious hosts. Fostering strong interpersonal relationships between international students and American students, faculty, and staff is a fundamental step towards promoting a welcoming, multicultural campus environment from which everyone can benefit.

\textsuperscript{52} Faculty members who wish to develop/enhance their multicultural competence can refer to Dr. Linh Nguyen Littleford’s work titled “Understanding and Expanding Multicultural Competence in Teaching: A Faculty Guide” (Littleford, 2005).
Chapter Six – Conclusions

Lately, I find myself smiling at strangers on campus who I assume are international students. Sometimes I base my assumptions on their physical appearance, or the language I overhear them speaking; more often, though, I recognize their facial expressions, which range from slight-to-complete disorientation. I realize, of course, that I am engaging in stereotyping, but I figure there can be very little harm in smiling randomly at strangers. I do this in hopes that my smile will signal openness and friendliness to the “suspected” international and maybe, just maybe this will brighten their day a little. If they assume I am American, then perhaps I can help restore their faith in U.S. hospitality; if they identify me as a fellow international, then at least they will be reminded that, no matter how challenging their experience here is, we are in it together.

Summary of Findings

In this auto-ethnographic study, I set out to better understand what the international student experience was like for international students attending Ball State University. I found that, on the BSU campus, “international student” was a social category that carried negative value attributions; in social comparison terms, the mainstream category “American” was clearly preferable (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).
BSU *internationals* faced pervasive discrimination, which they experienced subjectively as rejection from the mainstream (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Internationals felt rejected in their interactions with American students, faculty and staff, as well as “the system” in general. Americans’ treatment of internationals communicated their belief in American cultural superiority and their expectation that internationals conform to American standards and norms. This rejection was hurtful to internationals, who experienced psychological harm in the form of devaluation. Specifically, they talked about doubting themselves and overreacting to relatively minor life pressures.

Internationals turned to fellow internationals for support and solace. They often used a family metaphor to communicate their dependence on their international friends, especially within the context of life in the residence halls. They also almost unanimously cited the existence of a larger international student community, often in connection with the physical space of on-campus apartment complexes. Although internationals came from a variety of cultural backgrounds, they formed a very tight-knit community on the university campus.

Among other things, the international student community shared an understanding that “difference is a good thing.” Internationals displayed this belief by showing respect and curiosity for each others’ cultural practices, food, politics and language. This attitude of openness and acceptance of difference contrasted starkly with the internationals’ perceptions of how American students, faculty and staff negatively constructed difference. Internationals’ and Americans’ opposing
views on difference were one of the main reasons why the international student community was not well-integrated into the general BSU student body.

These findings are consistent with the predictions of Social Identity Theory and the Rejection-Identification Model. Schmitt et al. (2003) found that “common treatment from the majority alone may be enough to create a sense of identification with a newly created category” (p. 9). The international student minority group identity was indeed an integral part of BSU internationals' life on campus. As one international explained, “We are united to be non-Americans.”

When asked about the ways in which the University could improve the quality of the international student experience, participants in my study offered a wealth of suggestions. I used their suggestions and their experiences to structure recommendations as to how the University Administration, the Office of Housing and Student Life, the Rinker Center for International Programs, academic departments, and individual faculty and staff members can better meet the needs of current internationals, as well as facilitate the recruitment of more international students and promote a more welcoming, multicultural campus environment.

**Voice and Truth**

Truth be told, living in a foreign country and operating in a foreign language can be very humbling experiences. Unfortunately, for internationals at Ball State University, it was more than humbling; it was harmful to the self. The international student minority group identity was an important part of my international student
experience long before I formally began my research for this thesis. In fact, its importance was what prompted me to conduct the study in the first place.

Holland et al. (1998) explained that “identities [are] key means through which people care about and care for what is going on around them” (p. 5). I cared that my fellow internationals and I were facing pervasive discrimination on campus. Although I enjoyed a certain degree of “white privilege” (Johnson, 2006) among internationals, some of my friends suffered severe devaluation, to the point of presenting with psychosomatic ailments. When it came time to choose the topic for my thesis research, I chose to engage in auto-ethnography and use my research to advocate for the international student community.

In many ways, this study is deeply personal to me. This work is my truth, and as such, I am exposed through it. However, I did not want my work to speak the truth of only one individual. I wanted it to communicate the experiences of many internationals, so that perhaps we might move beyond individual truths and arrive at a collective truth. This is why I asked fifteen fellow internationals to join me in narrating the international student collective experience. I am very grateful to them for sharing with me – and with the reader – their narratives, each powerful in its own way.

Villa-Lobos, who was about to receive his doctoral degree from Ball State University, summed up his personal experience as an international student – and probably that of many other internationals – in this way:
I feel like I’m gonna close a *huuuge* chapter in my life. And the first thing that comes to my mind is that I am a stronger person now. It has been a great experience, but also very hard in some moments, you know. Being away from your family, your friends... Being alone, when you are at home working until 3 am and you don’t have any energy left, but you have a deadline, you have a project due... That’s your goal, and you have to draw energies out of nowhere to keep going. Just being a foreign student, you need to learn how to defend yourself in some way, because it’s another culture, another language, and there are great things, but it’s also very tough. So, I feel like now I can do anything, basically, after coming here and getting a degree – in another language! I think that’s a great accomplishment that we all have, as internationals.

I agree wholeheartedly with Villa-Lobos that earning our respective degrees from Ball State University represents a great accomplishment for all of us. However, I believe internationals should not have to expend so much energy to “defend themselves” in their educational environment. If Ball State University is intent on meeting its international recruitment goals, then the Administration must take on the corollary obligation to make life a little less tough for internationals.

**Contributions of This Study**

This study is original in three ways. First, it combines Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the Rejection-Identification Model (Branscombe et al., 1999) with ethnographic methods of inquiry, thus adding depth to our
understanding of the minority group identification process. Second, my use of reflexive auto-ethnography allows for the facilitation of a multi-voice reconstruction (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) and emic insight into what it meant to be a BSU international. Third, as an applied project, my study aims to create a virtuous cycle, in which the University actively improves internationals’ on-campus experience, and internationals contribute to the University’s recruitment efforts. To this end, I provide recommendations – based on participants’ suggestions and grounded in understandings of Intercultural Communication and Organizational Communication – on how the University can promote a more welcoming, multicultural campus environment.

**Limitations of This Study**

Like any research endeavor, this study has several limitations, which can and should be addressed through further inquiry. First, my study risks a certain degree of generalization. Cohen (1994) warned against the dangers of overlooking the importance of the self and consequently misrepresenting a collectivity of individuals as a homogeneous mass. The international student community at Ball State University was by no means a homogenous body. Each international was a distinct individual, whose idiosyncratic experiences and subjectivities allowed him/her to experience life at BSU in a unique way. Whereas general themes emerged in my conversations with internationals, there was also considerable variability between individual narratives.
Second, there is the trade-off between depth and breadth. Whereas qualitative inquiry allows researchers to delve deeply into participants’ lived experiences, quantitative methodologies offer breadth, allowing procedures and results to be replicated across contexts of space and time. In this study, I chose to prioritize depth in lieu of breadth, so it is not readily possible to verify if my findings accurately reflected the experience of most BSU internationals, or international students at other universities.

Third, almost two years passed from the time when I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork until the moment I finalized this manuscript. Thus, the ethnographic snapshot that I presented to the reader in this study is not current. It is important to acknowledge that the international student experience at BSU may very well have changed since the 2009-2010 academic year.

Finally, my position as “passionate participant” undoubtedly influenced the processes of data collection and analysis. Despite my best efforts to speak to individuals of different national origins, ages, and academic levels, the fifteen internationals I interviewed did not represent an accurate cross-section of the international student population. My selection of participants was probably limited to individuals within my network of personal and professional acquaintances; I may also have unconsciously selected internationals who I suspected would have compelling stories to tell. Moreover, as I analyzed the dataset of interview transcripts, fieldnotes and journal entries, it is possible that I interpreted participants’ experiences and narratives through the lens of my own personal
international student experience. Although I shared the finished manuscript with my participants (and received mostly positive feedback from them), I did not build formal member checks into the research design.

**Future Directions**

There is a wealth of possibilities for future research involving international students. In terms of research design, triangulated data (Jackson, 2004) can be obtained by integrating qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry; an online survey can be combined with ethnographic interviewing, for example, to provide both replicability and generalizability of the study. A fuller understanding of the in-group/out-group dynamics on campus can also be achieved by including other constituencies as participants in a study. American students, faculty, and staff can be interviewed, for example, on their experiences interacting with BSU internationals. The different perspectives of these groups can help validate if the rejection internationals perceived was intentional/deliberate, accidental/unconscious, or even a distortion in their collective perception.

Formal member checks can also be integrated into the research design, so that participants may validate officially the researcher’s interpretations of their narratives. Considering that some internationals may not be able to verbally articulate in English the subtleties of their experiences, nonverbal methods of inquiry can be used. Approaches like photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) may allow for more inclusive, participatory, and compelling narratives to emerge.
In terms of research focus, several themes that emerged in my analysis of internationals’ accounts merit further exploration. These themes include (but are not limited to): the differences between the lived experiences of international women and men, graduate and undergraduate students; the particularities of international families’ lives on campus; the role of food and commensality in the international student community; and the construction of “home” by international students.

Finally, theories in Communication and Cultural Anthropology can be integrated with Social Identity Theory and the Rejection-Identification Model to further our understanding of how social categories and power imbalances are constructed through communication. Muted Group Theory and Co-Cultural Communication Theory (Orbe, 1998; Urban & Orbe, 2007), for example, may hold particular promise for multi-disciplinary research endeavors.

**The Times They Are a-Changin’**

Since I left the Ball State University campus in May 2010, time has passed, and things have likely changed. Like a photograph, my auto-ethnographic study provides a richly-detailed image of what reality looked like at a certain point in time and place. A similar study, if conducted today, would yield different findings.

For the sake of fellow internationals who are still at BSU, I hope that the University Administration has taken steps to provide additional support to international students as they pursue their education in the United States. If this is not yet the case, then steps can be taken now to change the international student
experience for the better. If adequate support is provided, Ball State University can succeed in growing its international student population. The entire BSU community can benefit – economically, educationally, socially, and civically.

In closing, I leave you with a quote by Caroline, who articulated the central argument of this master's thesis in a simple, yet very powerful manner:

International study is an area that has a lot of potential; it's an area that the University can really tap into, if they just invest the resources. I don't think it would cost them that much, because international students bring a lot of money into the U.S. So, if only the University could invest just a bit of that money to improve international students’ experience here, it would reap benefits beyond what it ever imagined. So, you know, I recommend that administrators take time to find out what the international students really need, and tailor the University’s services [to these needs], and have people follow up on students’ experience.
Afterword

I am sitting at the gate, waiting to board the airplane that will take me from Miami, my last stop in the United States, to Brazil. I am dazed, exhausted physically and emotionally, from sleeping too little and saying too many goodbyes. I am usually a light packer, but today I am breaking all the rules of efficient travel; I have paid a small fortune to check three ridiculously overweight suitcases and I am lugging around two very bulky carry-on items, both stuffed to capacity. If you saw me, you might mistake me for a tourist on the way home after quite the shopping spree. Not even close. I am an almost-graduated international master’s student, and today I am going Home.

Actually, the concept of Home is a bit fuzzy for me these days; I am not entirely sure where it is located or how it is defined. But I do know that, in my luggage and in my heart, I am carrying items that money cannot buy. The self awareness that comes from living in a foreign country. The knowledge acquired in university classrooms, as well as in other walks of life. The memories of three unforgettable years spent on the BSU campus. Above all, I am taking with me friendships – international and American – that I will never forget.

The plain truth is, my international student experience has forever transformed who I am and how I understand this world.


Ball State University. (2010b). *New graduate, international, and study abroad enrollment: On- and off-campus unduplicated.* Retrieved from http://cms.bsu.edu/About/FactBook/~/media/DepartmentalContent/Factbook/0910PDFs/Enrollment09/Onoff_newgradintlsa09.ashx


World Health Organization. (2010, May). *What do we mean by "sex" and "gender"?*

Appendix A – Interview Schedule

1. How did you decide to come to Ball State University?
2. When/How did you choose your program of study?
3. When/How did you decide where you would live?
4. Talk to me about your experience at Ball State and in the United States.
5. Who are your friends, the people with whom you spend time?
6. Are you happy with your decision to study at Ball State?
7. What are some things the University could do (or perhaps do better) to improve the quality of your experience?
8. If a good friend of yours from back home told you he/she was thinking about studying abroad, would you recommend he/she come to Ball State?
9. Is there anything you’d like to talk about that we haven’t covered?
10. Please choose a pseudonym for yourself; I will use it when writing about our conversation.
Appendix B – IRB Approval Documents

1. IRB-approved Informed Consent Form (last modified January 20, 2009)
2. IRB Letter of Approval dated February 4, 2009
3. IRB Letter of Approval (renewed) dated February 10, 2010
Study Title  The International Student Experience

Study Purpose and Rationale
The purpose of this research project is to better understand how international students experience college life at Ball State University. Findings from this research may result in recommendations to the University about how to better satisfy the needs of international students.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria
To be eligible to participate in this study, you must be between the ages of 18 and 35, be a non-US citizen and currently enrolled as a student at Ball State University.

Participation Procedures and Duration
For this project, you will be asked a series of broad questions regarding your experience thus far as an international student at Ball State University. Our conversation will take between 45 and 90 minutes.

Audio Recording
For purposes of accuracy, with your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. Any names used on the audio recording will be changed to pseudonyms when the recording is transcribed. The audio files will be kept on the investigator's personal laptop, protected by passwords.

Data Confidentiality
All data will be maintained as confidential, known only to the members of the research team. No identifying information such as names will appear in any publication or presentation of the data.

Storage of Data
The audio recordings, their transcripts, and other types of notes will be stored on the investigator's personal laptop, protected by passwords. If paper copies of the data are made, they will be stored in the investigator's home, in a locked drawer to which only she has access. Once data have been analyzed, all audio recordings and transcripts will be destroyed. Only members of the research team will have access to the data.

Risks or Discomforts
The only anticipated risk from participating in this study is that, due to the personal nature of some of the questions/topics we will discuss in this interview, you may experience negative emotions (such as homesickness or anxiety). You may choose not to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

Who to Contact Should You Experience Any Negative Effects from Participating in this Study
Should you experience any negative emotions, there are counseling services available to you through Ball State University's Counseling Center, which is located on-campus, (765) 285-1736.

Benefits
By participating in this study, you may benefit from reflecting on how you are experiencing college life as an international student at Ball State University. You will also be given the chance to voice any concerns or suggestions you may have regarding the University's treatment of international students' needs. Finally, should the University decide to implement any of the recommendations resulting from this study, you may see an improvement in the quantity and quality of the institutional support available to international students like yourself.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw your permission at anytime for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing this form and at any time during the study.

IRB Contact Information
For your rights as a research subject, you may contact the following: Research Compliance, Sponsored Programs Office, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070, irb@bsu.edu
Study Title  The International Student Experience

Consent

I, _________________________________________, agree to participate in this research project titled, “The International Student Experience.” I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

To the best of my knowledge, I meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation (described on the previous page) in this study.

____________________________________  __________________
Participant’s Signature                  Date

Researcher Contact Information

Principal Investigator:
Julia Marina Ruiz Osso, Graduate Student
Communication Studies
Ball State University
Muncie, IN  47306
Telephone: (765) 702-5557
Email: julia.osso@gmail.com

Faculty Supervisor:
Dr. Laura O'Hara
Communication Studies
Ball State University
Muncie, IN  47306
Telephone: (765) 285-1998
Email: lohara@bsu.edu
The Institutional Review Board has approved your Revision for the above protocol, effective February 4, 2009 through February 3, 2010. All research under this protocol must be conducted in accordance with the approved submission.

Editorial Notes:

1. The IRB would like to suggest using the following standard wording on your informed consent document in regards to counseling services, "Counseling services are available to you through the Counseling Center at Ball State University (765-285-1376). If you develop uncomfortable feelings during your participation in this research project, you will be responsible for the costs of any care that is provided [note: Ball State students may have some or all of these services provided to them at no cost]. It is understood that in the unlikely event that treatment is necessary as a result of your participation in this research project that Ball State University, its agents and employees will assume whatever responsibility is required by law."

As a reminder, it is the responsibility of the P.I. and/or faculty sponsor to inform the IRB in a timely manner:

- when the project is completed,
- if the project is to be continued beyond the approved end date,
- if the project is to be modified,
- if the project encounters problems, or
- if the project is discontinued.

Any of the above notifications should be addressed in writing and submitted electronically to the IRB (http://www bsu edu/irb). Please reference the IRB protocol number given above in any communication to the IRB regarding this project. Be sure to allow sufficient time for review and approval of requests.
for modification or continuation. If you have questions, please contact Amy Boos at (765) 285-5034 or akboos@bsu.edu.
Institutional Review Board

DATE: February 10, 2010
TO: Julia Osso
FROM: Ball State University IRB
RE: IRB protocol # 106859-3
TITLE: International Student Experience
SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report
ACTION: APPROVED
DECISION DATE: February 10, 2010
EXPIRATION DATE: February 9, 2011
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

The Institutional Review Board has approved your Continuing Review/Progress Report for the above protocol, effective February 10, 2010 through February 9, 2011. All research under this protocol must be conducted in accordance with the approved submission.

As a reminder, it is the responsibility of the P.I. and/or faculty sponsor to inform the IRB in a timely manner:

- when the project is completed,
- if the project is to be continued beyond the approved end date,
- if the project is to be modified,
- if the project encounters problems, or
- if the project is discontinued.

Any of the above notifications should be addressed in writing and submitted electronically to the IRB (http://www.bsu.edu/irb). Please reference the IRB protocol number given above in any communication to the IRB regarding this project. Be sure to allow sufficient time for review and approval of requests for modification or continuation. If you have questions, please contact Amy Boos at (765) 285-5034 or akboos@bsu.edu.