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## MAKING THE GREAT JOURNEY: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

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MAKING THE GREAT JOURNEY: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

by

Anh Le

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
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For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Professor Barbara Y. LaCost

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2010

MAKING THE GREAT JOURNEY: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

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University of Nebraska, 2010

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The main purpose of the study was to produce an overview of international students' experiences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) as articulated via their own words. The knowledge drawn from this study served as useful reference information for programs and courses geared toward international students. Given the many challenges facing international students and the great benefits that they bring, this study explored the experiences of international students at UNL. Although there has been a substantial amount of literature about international students, most of the research has been focused on a particular aspect of international students such as advising relationships or mental health issues. The results of the current study contributed to the pool of knowledge about international students at UNL by portraying a holistic picture of the overall experience.

The population from which the sample was drawn were enrolled UNL international students in the 2009-2010 academic year who were at least 19 years of age and who had been UNL students for at least one semester and included undergraduate, master's level, and doctoral students. The sample from which data were collected was based upon a willingness to respond to and complete the study's survey; thus it was a non-random and self-selected sample. The final sample included 116 respondents. The

researcher developed a survey that addressed the various aspects of international students' college experiences. The survey was a 20-question survey with 15 open-ended components and five questions seeking general demographic information including the participants' class standing, total years at UNL, gender, country of origin, and major at UNL.

The results indicated that most of the participants are generally satisfied with their experiences at UNL. Three main themes emerged: perceptions, challenges and opportunities, and self-involvement. Many participants reported having great experiences with the educational system, professors, and student services. Character-building was reported by many participants as one of the main advantages of studying in the U.S. Participants also commented on major challenges such as language and culture barriers, making friends with domestic students, and feeling homesick.

## Acknowledgement

My own journey as an international student in a social science field has been a challenging one. However, I have been fortunate to have so many friends and mentors who gave me support and encouragement through this long journey. I would like to give special thanks to the following individuals and groups for their generous support:

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My fellow students in the Student Affairs Graduate program cohort, for being such a supportive and happy part of my life in the last two years. Despite all the differences we might have, we really have become a family. I am grateful to have had this one-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be part of this family, my home away from home.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

In recent years, international collaboration and cooperation have become a major national trend in the higher education sector (Bartram, 2007; Komives, & Woodard, et al., 2003). International students, and their dependents, have proven to be an important constituency in higher education, bringing substantial revenues to host institutions and contributing significantly to their host countries' intellectual and cultural capital (Lee, 2007). Therefore Komives (2003) has advised that student affairs professionals should increase their awareness and knowledge of international collaboration as part of their efforts to become and to stay proactive in the ever-changing and complex world of student experience.

#### ***Reasons for Attracting International Students***

As the effects of globalization have become more prevalent in higher education, the competition among countries to attract international students has been heightened as well. Countries that are making especially strong efforts to attract international students are as follows: the United States of America (henceforth, U.S.), the United Kingdom, Australia, France, and Japan (Skinner & Shenoy, 2003). Skinner and Shenoy have suggested that multiple factors contribute to host countries' desire to attract international students. They contend that these factors may be categorized as economic, political and security, and academic.

### ***Economic Factors***

- International students and their dependents bring money into the economy
- International graduate students serve as research assistants, thereby contributing to technological and scientific advancements in their host countries
- Many international doctoral recipients remain in the host countries as academics or researchers, thereby contributing significantly to the host countries' economies and national interests
- The expansion of globalization in higher education helps create new jobs in the field of international educational exchange.

### ***Political and Security Factors***

- International students that do return to their home countries are likely to have a sense of good will toward their former host countries.
- Educating international students can be an opportunity to shape future leaders who will be guiding the development of their home countries.
- Educating international students contributes to the success of host countries' development assistance programs (for example, many U.S. educated international students participate in U.S. development agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development [USAID]).
- International students provide the host countries with an exposure to different cultures and political philosophies that may be integral to the host countries' security concerns.

### ***Academic Factors***

- International students contribute significantly to cultural diversity on campuses.

International students, often among the top academic performers in their home countries, provide a healthy and stimulating competition to the host countries' students (Skinner & Shenoy, 2002).

### ***Reasons for Students to Seek International Education***

Skinner and Shenoy (2003) suggested that the factors that lead students to becoming international students can be categorized as “push” and “pull” factors:

- The “push factor” refers to those factors that contribute to students' decisions to seek higher education in countries other than their home countries and can include poor educational systems, social discrimination, limited entry-level job opportunities, and a variety of political and economic factors.
- The “pull factor” refers to incentives that attract international students toward certain host countries and can include scholarship availability, quality of the education system, political ties, cultural and linguistic similarities, and the hope that holding an international education credential will help with achieving better, more lucrative careers.

### ***Support Services for International Students***

Skinner and Shenoy (2003) provided an overview of the typical services for international students at American higher education institutions. These services include visa and immigration services, English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes, orientation programs, and host family programs. Usually, there is collaboration among institutions'

international student services offices, admissions offices, student affairs offices, academic advisers, and interested professors in the effort to support international students.

International student advisers are usually specialized counselors who help students with academic, immigration/visa, acculturation, language, financial, racial and ethnic, cultural, and religious issues.

### ***International Students in the U.S.: Numbers and Impact***

Perhaps the most comprehensive statistics collected on international students in the U.S. are reported by the Institute of International Education (IIE) in the annual *Open Doors* report (2008). *Open Doors* provides information on a wide variety of topics, including the annual enrollment of international students in the U.S., the annual enrollment of international students in the Intensive English Program, and the annual enrollment of domestic students in U.S. study abroad programs. The data on international students, partially summarized below, are disaggregated in the report to address questions concerning places of origin, economic impact on states, and leading institutions.

In the 2007-2008 academic year, according to the most recent report (IIE, 2008), the total number of newly enrolled international students in the U.S. was 173,122. This represents a 31% increase from the 2004-2005 academic year. The total enrollment of international students in four-year institutions in 2008 was 623,805. These numbers represented the promising potential of the international education field.

Asian students comprised the majority of international students in the U.S. As of 2008, India was the top emigrating country at 15.2% followed by China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. The most popular field of study was Business and Management



(19.6% and 17% respectively); Engineering, Physical and Life Sciences, and Social Sciences were among the more popular fields of study, as well. However, the most significant increase was seen in Agriculture, with a 19.9% (from 7,461 students in 2006-2007 to 8,945 students in 2008-2009) increase over the 2006-2007 academic year (IIE, 2008).

In addition to contributing to institutional cultural capital and campus diversity, international students also have contributed significantly to the U.S. economy. The majority of international students (62.3% in 2007-2008) were supported through personal and family funds. About 25% of international students received funds from U.S. colleges and universities, 3.4% from their home government, and 4.7% from current employers. In total, about 72.6% of the international students received most of their funding from sources outside of the U.S. In addition to paying tuitions, international students must pay for books, living expenses, transportation, food, housing, entertainment, and health insurance. Most of these students are charged non-resident tuitions that are often higher than resident tuitions. As a result, institutions' local economies acquire a substantial amount of income from international students. According to the 2008 *Open Doors* report, international students' total contribution to the U.S. economy was estimated to exceed \$15.5 billion.

### ***International Students in Nebraska***

According to University of Nebraska-Lincoln's International Affairs Office's (IAO) Web site, there were more than 1,400 enrolled international students in the Spring of 2009, which made up just over 6% of the university's total enrollment. Business and

Engineering stood out as the two most attractive areas for international students, with 285 and 317 enrolled international students, respectively.

UNL's international students originated from 95 countries. The countries of origin of international students at UNL reflected the reported national trend. The top five places of origin were Asian countries. The leading country of origin was China, with 396 students. India followed, with 130 students. Malaysia, South Korea, and Japan were the next three leading countries of origin, with 107, 96, and 51 students, respectively.

The sizeable difference between resident and non-resident tuition rates contributed to international students' positive economic impact on the university. At UNL, for the Spring of 2009 semester, resident undergraduate students paid \$179.75 per credit hour while their non-resident counterparts paid \$533.75. UNL resident graduate students paid \$237.50 per credit hour while non-resident counterparts paid \$640.25 (UNL Fact Book, 2009). In addition, all international students contributed economically through purchase of room and board, insurance, and service fees. In the academic year of 2007-2008, international students and their dependents in Nebraska contributed over \$80 million statewide in tuition and fees, living expenses, and funding (IIE, 2008).

### ***Context of the Problem***

The steady increase in the number of international students in higher education is culturally and economically beneficial for the host communities and institutions. However, challenges have arisen as part of the expansion of international education collaboration. Carroll and Ryan (2005) pointed out that the increased numbers of international students in Western universities brought challenges for lecturers and

international students alike. The authors noted that lecturers did not know how to respond to increasingly diverse student characteristics and needs. These lecturers can be overwhelmed by the demands of meeting the unfamiliar needs of international students while meeting the academic expectations of their institutions, developing new programs, and generating income. Domestic students, too, find the transition from secondary to post-secondary education challenging. They need to become accustomed to academic language and conventions. They also need to become more independent in their learning and active in class participation. International students face these conventional difficulties . . . and more. They struggle to adjust to new and sometimes contradicting social norms and values, achieve academic success while experiencing different and unfamiliar modes of teaching and learning, and cope with homesickness and loneliness. Also, since the majority of international students are funded by personal or family sources, they are likely to feel greater pressures to succeed. International students must cope with these challenges without their usual social and emotional support system; additionally, they may feel pressured by the implications that academic failure will have upon their visa status (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Furthermore, inherent assumptions of the Western academic setting can work against international students (Nisbett, 2003). As a result, frustrated staff and faculty members hold a “deficit view” of international students. In the deficit view, international students are seen as

lacking in independent, critical thinking skills; as plagiarisers or rote learners, speaking broken English and having awkward way of participating in class [...] We [staff and faculty members] often hear or read clumsy English and misinterpret this as clumsy thinking. We see plagiarism where we may not have noticed it among local students. We equate language skills and confident styles with intelligence and the results of hard work. In our busy lives, and usually

frantic assessment periods, we generally do not have the time and patience to look beyond style for the substance and understanding. (Carroll & Ryan , 2005, p. 6)

Much of the earlier literature on international students emphasized the need for the students to adjust as quickly as possible to the host countries' academic traditions and often viewed differences as deficits (Hellmundt & Ryan, 2005). However, later scholars have moved away from this focus on perceived deficits and have stressed instead the value to be found in different ways of thinking and learning. Hellmundt and Ryan (2005) also pointed out that staff and faculty members erroneously have viewed international students as a homogenous group rather than recognize the variety of social, political, and cultural backgrounds represented. To add to the challenge, international students' perceptions of their needs and of how well they have been met can be significantly different from the perceptions of staff and faculty members (Bartram, 2007; Ryan, 2005).

Given the many challenges facing international students and the multiple benefits that they bring to UNL, this researcher explored the experiences of international students at UNL. Although substantial literature about international students exists, most has focused on a particular aspect of international students, e.g. advising relationships or mental health issues. The results of this research contributed to the pool of knowledge about international students at UNL by portraying a more holistic picture of the overall experience.

### ***Problem Statement***

The main purpose of the study was to produce an overview of international students' experiences at UNL as articulated via their own words. The knowledge drawn

from this study can serve as useful reference information for current and future programs and for courses geared toward international students.

### ***Research Questions***

The following aspects of international students' experiences were explored:

1. The reasons that encouraged international students to choose to come to study in the U.S.;
2. Their initial experiences at UNL, including their first impressions of the overall atmosphere, diversity level, food, language, classes, resident halls, and airport pick up;
3. Their subsequent general experiences with life at UNL, including classes, professors, residence halls, and opportunities for involvement;
4. Their experiences with interacting with staff, faculty, and other students (domestic or international);
5. Their difficulties with social and academic life as an international student;
6. Their efforts to adjust to and partake of life at the university and in the U.S. generally (e.g., joining social groups or student groups, talking to professors, and making friends);
7. Their experiences of individuals' or organizations' impact on academic and social life;
8. Their involvement with student organizations on campus;
9. Their perceptions of the impact of student involvement on social and academic life;

10. Their perceptions of changes they have experienced in personal, social, and academic life;
11. Their perceived reasons for said changes;
12. Their perceptions regarding the availability and impact of role models on campus;
13. Their general thoughts about the whole of their experience (i.e., positive, negative, or both).

### ***Definition of Terms***

*International Student*—A student from another country who is studying in the U.S. on a non-immigrant student visa, classified as an F-1, M-1, or J-1. This definition does not include permanent residents, resident aliens, “green card” holders, students on other sorts of visas, refugees, or immigrants. This definition is inline with the definition used by the International Affairs Office (IAO) at UNL. However, according to a staff member in IAO, the university administrators considered international students to be those students who were not U.S. citizens or permanent residents. Since the inviting participation in the study was sent through IAO’s listserve, the researcher relied on the IAO’s definition of international students for this current study.

### ***Delimitations***

This study was limited to international students at UNL in 2009-2010 academic year who were at least 19 years of age and who had been enrolled at UNL for at least one semester.

### ***Limitations***

Since the characteristics of international students and of U.S. institutions vary significantly, the findings cannot be generalized to other institutions. Also, participants may have left out or distorted their responses to the survey questions.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

The main purpose of the study was to produce an overview of international students' experiences at UNL as articulated via their own words. The knowledge drawn from this study should serve as useful reference information for current and future programs and for courses geared toward international students. Given the many challenges facing international students and the great benefits that they bring, this study aimed to explore the experiences of international students at UNL. Although there has been a substantial amount of literature about international students, most of the research has been focused on a particular aspect of international students such as advising relationships or mental health issues. The results of the current study contributed to the pool of knowledge about international students at UNL by portraying a more holistic picture of the overall experience instead of just one aspect. Therefore, the literature review for this study included a wide range of topics such as international student enrollment, benefits of international students on campus, challenges faced by international students, adjustment, coping strategies, experience with staff and faculty, and interaction with local students/ people.

#### ***International Student Enrollment***

Even though the 9/11 terror attacks had negatively impacted international student enrollment in the U.S. (Lee & Rice, 2007; Urias & Yeakey, 2009), recent years have seen consistent increases in the number of international students enrolling in U.S. education institutions (Baik & Greig, 2009; Hsieh, 2006; Lin & Betz, 2009; McLachlan & Justice,



2009; Rice et al., 2009; Wang, 2009). In the 2007-2008 academic year, according to the most recent report (IIE, 2008), the total number of newly enrolled international students in the U.S. was 173,122. This represents a 31% increase from the 2004-2005 academic year. The total enrollment of international students in four-year institutions in 2008 was 623,805. However, U.S. business schools may have seen some decreases in their international MBA applications due to visa problems and loan difficulties (Damast, 2009).

A recent report, by the Council of Graduate Schools, based on responses from 245 institutions surveyed in February, 2009, indicated current trends in graduate international applications (Schmidt, 2009). Although foreign applications for graduate programs at master's-level institutions are down by 17%, an increase of 5% at doctoral universities suggested that international students were increasingly favoring doctoral institutions as their destination (Schmidt, 2009). Also, foreign applications for graduate programs were up by 6 % among the 100 institutions with the largest enrollments of international graduate students, but were down by 4% at all institutions that fell beyond the top 100. Nathan E. Bell, director of research and policy analysis for the Council of Graduate Schools, commented that although doctoral institutions have previously differed from master's level institutions in the size of increases or decreases in their international applications, this year is the first year in which one group is up and the other is down. Karen P. DePauw, vice president and dean of graduate education at Virginia Tech, and chairwoman of the Council's Board of Directors, suggested that doctoral institutions have a clear advantage in competing for international applicants because of their greater

resources to offer research and teaching assistantships and other forms of financial aid. She added another reason for the advantage: earning a doctoral degree has become increasingly more important around the world.

As world economies struggle, competition among host countries for international students becomes fiercer. Labi, Birchard, and Overland (2009) discussed the competition for international students among the top destination countries – Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States. They posited that although these destination countries have posted recent gains in international student enrollments, the competition was so fierce they cannot afford to rest. China and India, the two leading countries of origin for international students, have rapidly improved their own higher education systems, opening up options for greater number of students to obtain a high quality education at home. British government plans to loosen their restrictions on foreign students' ability to obtain employment after graduation, allowing them to stay up to two years instead of the current one year limit. Canada has improved its visa application and approval process as well as changed its immigration regulations to allow international students to work off-campus while studying in Canada. Australia has a rather unique approach to attract international students. While international student overall enrollments in Australia only increase by 4.5% in 2008, the vocational college and training sector has seen an impressive increase of 46.9%.

The U.S. also is experimenting with vocational international education (Fischer, 2009). The Community College Summit Initiative Program was established in the 2007-2008 year. The program reflects a growing recognition among American education

leaders and government officials that United States must do a better job reaching out to those international students who are not members of their countries' socioeconomic elite. Upon acceptance to the program, students from participating countries – Brazil, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, South Africa, and Turkey— have their students' tuition and fees, housing, and other study-related expenses covered while they complete a one-year certificate or a two-year associate degree. The first class of the program, in the fall of 2007, was made up of 84 students. The program's effectiveness is still uncertain. However, it has opened up a new area for development in international education.

Lee (2008) suggested some reasons for the decline in international students enrollment in the U.S.: (a) aggressive marketing and presence of international recruiters from competitors (e.g., Australia), (b) changing policies in host countries that extend visa stays for international students (e.g., Canada and Britain), (c) U.S. cumbersome and costly visa procedures and the Patriot Act, and (d) perceptions of discrimination against international students, especially Middle East students.

### ***Benefits of International Students on Campus***

There are multiple benefits of having international students on campus including a range of economic and social benefits for the host community (Neri & Ville, 2008). International students contribute significantly to cultural diversity on campuses. They bring cultural enrichment to campuses and new perspectives to classroom discussions, thus increasing the campuses' awareness of and appreciation for other cultures and countries (Ellis, Sawyer, Gill, Medlin, & Wilson, 2005; Klomegah, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007; Lee, 2007; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Sam, 2001).

In this global age, an important educational goal of higher education is to prepare students to achieve global competency. International students can substantially contribute to this educational goal (Lee, 2007; Luxon & Peelo, 2009). Also, research suggested that attending a school enrolling substantial numbers of international students might help American students increase their cultural sensitivities and skills in interacting with people from different backgrounds (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). In addition to bring cultural enrichment and global awareness to campuses, international students contribute substantially to the host economies (Bektas, Demir, & Bowden, 2009; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Lee, 2007; MacLahlan & Justice, 2009; Neri & Ville, 2008; Ng & Smith, 2009; Wang, 2009). According to the *Open Doors* report for 2008, international students' total contribution to the U.S. economy was estimated to exceed \$15.5 billion (IIE, 2008). Also, international students that do return to their home countries are likely to have a sense of good will toward their former host countries; some of them might become future leaders guiding the development of their home countries. Therefore, international students could ultimately act as catalysts to benefit relations between countries (Lee, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007).

### ***Challenges Faced By International Students***

While all students entering higher education have to cope with the new facets of this educational environment, the majority of international students have to deal with additional challenges such as language and culture gaps (Bradley, 2000; Ellis et al., 2005). Similar to domestic students, international students are at risk for developing mental health problems, but international students are at higher risk due to loss of support

systems and acculturation stress (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Mental health problem, such as depression, psychosomatic complaints, anxiety and paranoid reactions, have been suggested to be common among international students (Sam, 2001).

Rosenthal, Russell, and Thomson (2008) conducted a study of 979 international students attending an Australian metropolitan university that addressed the students' perceived need for and use of university health and counseling services as well as their evaluation of those services. In addition, the researchers explored three domains of international student well-being: (a) relating to others, (b) living and studying in Melbourne, and (c) health and health-related behavior. The results suggested that (a) international students are under-utilizing both health and counseling services due to lack of information about services and, to a lesser extent, have doubts and discomfort about the services and (b) that within-person variables played a stronger role than culture in accounting for students' help-seeking decisions.

Mitchell, Greenwood, and Guglielmi (2007) examined the counseling center utilization patterns during a two-year period for 218 international and 222 domestic students at a large, public university in the eastern part of the United States. The data revealed that international students were significantly more likely than U.S. students to have been hospitalized for psychiatric reasons. Also, the study found that international students used crisis hours more often than did U.S. students.

The difficulties faced by international students contributed to international students' mental health risk; they included language difficulties, cultural shock, difficulties in negotiating day-to-day social activities, racial and ethnic discrimination

(Lee & Rice, 2007; Lee, 2007, 2008; Li, Fox, & Almarza, 2007; Sam, 2001; Wang, 2009; Zhao et al., 2005) and a lack of physical activity (Yoh, Yang, & Gordon, 2008). The literature on international students identified some major problems such as loneliness, lack of support, few meaningful relationships with host nationals, culture shock, unfamiliar modes of teaching and learning, a changing sense of identity, unrealistic family and self-expectations, financial problems, crises at home, adverse experience in the host country, isolation, and alienation (Deakins, 2009; Hanassab, 2006; Klomegah, 2006; Leask, 2009; McClure, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2007; Neri & Ville, 2007; Rosenthal et al., 2008). When international students, especially doctoral students, return home, they can find themselves feeling frustrated because of the vast differences between their overseas doctoral training and the reality of their home countries (Robinson-Pant, 2009).

A qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with 22 Asian students at a New Zealand tertiary institution provided a critical summary of important challenges: (a) language difficulties and cultural differences, (b) unfamiliar patterns of classroom interactions, (c) lack of knowledge of academics norms and conventions, (d) inadequate learning support, (e) difficulties in making friends with domestic students, and (f) lack of sense of belonging (Campbell & Li, 2008).

In a study of 200 international students in Australian universities, Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, and Ramia (2008) found that two thirds of the group had experienced problems of loneliness and/or isolation, especially in the early months. Lee and Rice (2007) addressed international student perceptions of discrimination. Based on in-depth interviews with 24 students from 15 countries, the authors considered a range of

difficulties the students encountered that ranged from perceptions of unfairness and inhospitality to cultural intolerance and confrontation. Some participants in the study reported that Americans lack of desire to understand another culture contributed to their feeling of cultural alienation. Some participants even experienced direct abuse involved verbal insults, which left deep impressions that these students could not easily forget. Urias and Yeakey (2009) conducted an analysis of the U.S. student visa systems that emphasized its misperceptions, barriers, and consequences. The researchers concluded that international students and scholars' first experience in the U.S., especially those from the Middle East, was often one of frustration and anxiety. Going through the regulatory maze proves to be another challenge for international students in the U.S.

### *Adjustment*

International students' adjustment to their new life overseas can be a dynamic and multifaceted process (Brown & Holloway, 2008). In an ethnographic study of international postgraduate students at a university in the south of England, Brown and Holloway (2008) found an association between the passage of time and a gradual decrease in acculturative stress. However, this was not a generalizable process; there was fluctuation not only in experiences across the student body but also in the individuals' subjective sense of success across different aspects of life in the new country.

In a study of 124 Turkish students studying in the U.S., Bektas et al. (2009) found that social support and self-esteem were predictors of psychological adjustment. Also, the results revealed that separation—co-national relationships—was the typical attitudes of the participants in terms of their acculturation.

Wang (2009) introduced the concept of resilience into the study of adjustment of international graduate students at U.S. universities. He explored relationships among resilience characteristics, background variables, and adjustment problem areas, and the effects of resilience and background variables on adjustment. The study's statistical analyses revealed that resilience characteristics were moderately associated with background variables, correlated negatively with adjustment problem areas, and better correlated with adjustment problem areas than were background variables. These correlations suggested that resilience had the greatest association with adjustment.

### *Coping Strategies*

International students actively employ different coping strategies to deal with the overload of changes (Grayson, 2008; McClure, 2007; Tran, 2008; Wei, Ku, Russell, Liao, & Mallinckrodt, 2008). Wei et al. (2008) conducted a study of 354 international students at a large, public, Midwestern U.S. university. They examined three coping strategies (reflective, suppressive, and reactive), along with self-esteem, as moderators of the relation between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms. The results suggested that an increased tendency to use suppressive coping appeared to strengthen the association between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms. For high self-esteem students, the study concluded, there was a significant positive association between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms for students who report high levels of reactive coping— indicating that high use of reactive coping can put high self-esteem students at risk for depressive symptoms when faced with high levels of discrimination.



### *Interactions with Staff and Faculty*

The impression of quality is an important part of international students' overall experience. Staff and faculty interactions are among the top concerns of international students when it comes to evaluating their experiences with institutions (Tan & Simpson, 2008). Staff and faculty could play different roles in international students' lives. The forefront roles are academic teaching roles. Support services staff have some contact with international students also. Mentors and advisors also serve an important roles in international students' experience (Hu, Thomas, & Lance, 2008; Rice et al., 2009; Wedding, McCartney, & Currey, 2009). However, staff and faculty members often do not know what to do when interacting and helping international students. Also, research suggested that there was a gap between expectations of international students and staff and faculty members (Bradley, 2000; Kingston & Forland, 2008).

Bradley (2000) conducted a two-year research project describing the difficulties that academic staff experience when responding to international students with mental health problems. The researcher relied on information from various perspectives. In the first phase of the study, 492 academic staff in one of the older universities in the UK responded to a questionnaire asking them to describe the difficulties they experienced when responding to students with mental health problems. The second phase extended the survey to academic staff teaching on social work programs in other higher education institutions. The third phase was a series of six half-day focus groups for students, support staff, and lecturers. Many staff members in the study reported feeling unskilled and incompetent in dealing with students with mental health problems. International

students in the study reported that staff needed some form of cultural awareness training since they were likely to misread the signs and misinterpret meanings. This group also reported that on-going support for international students was important as a preventative measure since the pressures for them were greater than for domestic students.

A study by Kingston and Forland (2008) revealed gaps in expectations and perceptions between international students and academic staff. Through focus group discussions, interesting information emerged from both sides. International students reported that lecturers just did not care about international students. However, the tutors and tutorial programs were perceived positively. International students also enjoyed and were comfortable with group work because it gave them opportunities to interact with domestic students in a supportive environment. Being too busy with studies was cited as a main reason for international students were non-utilization of support sources. Academic staff reported that international students, though hard working and highly motivated, also seemed to struggle and often underperformed in relation to their domestic counterparts. Staff commented that though there was an initial dislike for group discussions and presentations, international students were highly adaptive and grew to enjoy the variety of assessment techniques. The authors of the study suggested that more consistent and constant guidance for academic staff was needed to bridge the gap of expectations between international students and academic staff.

### ***Interaction with Local Students/ People***

Well-structured interactions between international students and domestic students could be beneficial to both groups. International students have expressed a desire for, and

an expectation of, greater contact with domestic peers (Deakins, 2009). Peer tutoring programs, in which domestic students assist international students, have received positive comments (Lassegard, 2008), however, such interactions were few and far between for several reasons (Brown, 2009; Dunne, 2009; Leask, 2009). For example, international students have a strong desire and need to mix with co-national friends because of the comfort offered by shared language, shared heritage and access to instrumental support (Brown, 2009). Dunne (2009) speculated that domestic students might feel nervous about starting conversations with international students. He found that domestic students differentiated themselves from international students not only on national cultural differences, such as language, but also on their overall approach to the higher education experience. Leask (2009) argued that improved interactions between domestic and international students may be dependent on the ways in which institutions use both the formal and informal curricula to encourage and reward intercultural engagements. She suggested that a range of people across institutions engaged with the internationalization agenda over time to improve interactions between domestic and international students.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

This study explored the experiences of international students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). The intent of the study was to gain knowledge about international students' perceptions of their college experience at UNL. The resultant data served as a reference for higher education administrators with policy-making responsibilities. Also, staff and faculty members could utilize the data to inform their work on course design and improve their teaching methods. Student affairs professionals could likewise beneficially consult this study as a guide for successful event planning and services programming.

International students are among the student groups that most require special support due to their unique and difficult situations. The transition from high school to college is challenging even for domestic students, as they must quickly accustom themselves to academic language and conventions as well as become more independent in their learning activities and become more active in class participation. International students have to face these same difficulties and many more. They must struggle to adjust to new and different social norms and values, achieve academic success while adapting to unfamiliar modes of teaching and learning, and cope with homesickness and loneliness . . . all at the same time. Also, since the majority of international students are supported by personal or family funds, they tend to feel more urgently the pressure to be successful. They must cope with all of these challenges without their usual support system, such as close friends or family. In addition, many of the inherent assumptions of the Western

academic environment work against international students (Nisbett, 2003). Many staff and faculty members appear to be frustrated with what they perceive as a lack of academic competence, initiative, and independence among international students (Carroll & Ryan, 2005).

### ***Research Questions***

Given the unique and difficult situations of international students, one would hope and expect that the more knowledge about their experiences higher education professionals have, the more likely these professionals would be able to provide them with effective support services. Although substantial literature exists about international students, much has been focused on a particular aspect of international students such as advising relationships or mental health issues. This research contributed to the pool of knowledge about international students at UNL by portraying a holistic picture of the overall experience.

This study explored UNL international students' college experiences in the following areas:

1. The reasons that prompted international students to choose to come to study in the U.S.;
2. Their initial experiences at UNL, including their first impressions of the overall atmosphere, diversity level, food, language, classes, resident halls, and airport pick up;
3. Their subsequent general experiences with life at UNL, including classes, professors, residence halls, and opportunities for involvement;

4. Their experiences with interacting with staff, faculty, and other students (domestic or international);
5. Their difficulties, as international students, in adapting to social and academic life;
6. Their efforts to adjust to and partake of life at the university and in the U.S. generally (e.g., joining social groups or student groups, talking to professors, and making friends);
7. Their experiences of individuals' or organizations' impact on academic and social life;
8. Their involvement with student organizations on campus;
9. Their perceptions of the impact of student involvement on social and academic life;
10. Their perceptions of changes they have experienced in personal, social, and academic life;
11. Their perceived reasons for said changes;
12. Their perceptions regarding the availability and impact of role models on campus; and
13. Their general thoughts about the whole of their experience (i.e., positive, negative, or both).

### *Design*

This study was both quantitative and qualitative in nature. A survey methodology was selected intentionally over face-to-face interviews in an attempt alleviate the fear of

language inproficiency. Through this method, the researcher reached out to those international students who may not have participated due to their shyness or fear of embarrassment when communicating in English.

### ***Population***

The population from which the sample was drawn was UNL international students enrolled during the 2009-2010 academic year who were at least 19 years of age and who had been UNL students for at least one semester; the population included undergraduate, master's level, and doctoral students. The sample from which data were collected was based upon a willingness to respond to and complete the study's survey; thus it was a non-random and self-selected sample. The final sample included 116 respondents.

### ***Instruments***

The researcher developed a survey that addressed the various aspects of international students' college experiences. The survey was a 20-question survey (Appendix A) with 15 open-ended components and five questions seeking general demographic information including the participants' class standing, total years at UNL, country of origin, and major at UNL. Fifteen questions were framed as quantitative survey questions with an opportunity to expand on answers. Participants were invited to describe their experiences at UNL in depth. A series of initial questions were piloted on four international students. The results indicated that the instrument should: (a) include questions that call for shorter answers and (b) be in survey format. Two professors in the Educational Administration department at UNL reviewed the survey instrument. Minimal

changes were made. The final survey's face validity – the likelihood that the questions in the survey addressed the issues being studied – was established.

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

The researcher contacted UNL International Affairs Office (IAO) to request the office's assistance in distributing an announcement about the study. The Director of the office agreed to help. Upon receiving application approval from the UNL Internal Review Board (IRB) (Appendix B), the researcher emailed a copy of the announcement and the link to the survey to the IAO. The study announcement was emailed to all international students on the IAO's listserve (about 1600 students). The link to the survey was attached to the message. The announcement specified that the researcher was seeking UNL international students who were at least 19 years old and had been enrolled at UNL for at least one semester. Qualified students who were interested in participating in the study were encouraged to complete the survey by October 30, 2009. Completed surveys were printed so that participants' personal information could be excluded. Printout copies were organized into a folder and kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's private office.

The sample's demographic information allowed the researcher to suggest the possible existence of any significant trends. This demographic information included: (a) class standing, (b) years at UNL, (c) country of origin, (d) major at UNL, and (e) gender.

### ***Data Analysis***

The quantitative component of the survey was analyzed to provide counts and percentages for each option of each question. The qualitative responses were subjected to



thematic content analysis using standard qualitative procedures. The analysis of the data was inductive, building on the respondents' actual comments. For each response, the research identified each question's key points. The researcher then analyzed each question across all responses to identify categories in that particular area of the participants' experience. All of the categories for each of the questions were then further analyzed to identify major themes in the international students' overall experience.

### *Summary*

This chapter outlined the methodology used in this research study. Given the nature of the data collected and the potential uniqueness of the respondents and their experiences, qualitative procedures enhance the responses to provided basic survey questions. Upon completion, the qualitative review of the survey responses provided valuable information on the experiences of UNL international students in important areas. Although the results of this study are not widely generalizable to other institutions of higher education, the results would be helpful to and practical for UNL staff and faculty members, as well as for UNL administrators, in terms of their utility in improving the understanding of international students' experiences at UNL.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Quantitative Results**

This study explored the experiences of international students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). The researcher developed a survey that addressed the various aspects of international students' college experiences. The survey was a 20-question survey (Appendix A) with 15 open-ended components and five questions seeking general demographic information including the participants' class standing, total years at UNL, country of origin, and major at UNL. Fifteen questions were framed as quantitative survey questions with an opportunity to expand on answers. Participants were invited to describe their experiences at UNL in depth. A series of initial questions were piloted on four international students. The results indicated that the instrument should: (a) include questions that call for shorter answers and (b) be in survey format. Two professors in the Educational Administration department at UNL reviewed the survey instrument. Minimal changes were made. The final survey's face validity – the likelihood that the questions in the survey addressed the issues being studied – was established.

A summary of the quantitative component of the responses could provide a brief overview of the participants' characteristics. The summary included (a) demographic information, (b) reasons for choosing the U.S. as destination, and (c) perceptions on various aspects of college life.

#### ***Demographic Information***

Demographic information included (a) class standing, (b) years studying at UNL, (c) gender, (d) major, and (e) country of origin.

### ***Class Standing***

Thirty six percent of the respondents were undergraduates; 64% were graduate students (see Table 1).

Table 1

*What year are you in school?*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
Freshman	11.2	13
Sophomore	3.4	4
Junior	12.1	14
Senior	9.5	11
Master	22.4	26
Doctorate	41.4	48
<i>Answered Question</i>		<i>116</i>
<i>Skipped Question</i>		<i>0</i>

### ***Years at UNL***

Eighty nine percent of the respondents reported having been at UNL for four years or less (see Table 2).

### ***Gender***

Sixty one percent of the the participants were male. Thirty nine percent were female (see Table 3)

Table 2

*How many years have you been studying at UNL?*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
1	46.6	54
2	19.0	22
3	11.2	13
4	12.1	14
5	2.6	3
6	1.7	2
7	3.4	4
8	0.9	1
9	0.9	1
10	1.7	2
<i>Answered Question</i>		<i>116</i>
<i>Skipped Question</i>		<i>0</i>

Table 3

*What is your gender?*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
Male	61.2	71
Female	38.8	45
<i>Answered Question</i>		<i>116</i>
<i>Skipped Question</i>		<i>0</i>

## *Majors*

The participants represented a wide variety of majors (58) at UNL with engineering and business as the two most popular majors (see Table 4).

Table 4

*What is your major?*

Major	Students	Major	Students
Accounting	5	General Study	1
Actuarial Science	3	Geosciences	1
Advertising	2	History	2
Agribusiness	1	Industrial And Systems Engineering	
Agricultural Economics	2	Management	1
Agronomy	1	Industrial Engineering	1
Architectural Engineering	1	Information Technology	1
Architecture	1	International Business	3
Business Administration	7	Journalism	2
Biological Sciences	2	Leadership Studies	1
Biological Systems Engineering	3	Literature	1
Business And Management	3	Management	1
CBA-Finance	1	Marketing	2
Chemical Engineering	1	Math	1
Chemistry	2	MBA	1
Civil Engineering	6	MCA - Marketing, Communication	
Computer Science	3	Studies, and Advertising	1
Dietetics	2	Mechanical Engineering	4
Economics	3	Media And Political Science	1
Educational Psychology	2	Natural Resources Science	1
Electrical Engineering	10	Nutritional Science	1
Electron	1	Physics	1
Engineering	3	Plant Physiology And Biotechnology	1
Engineering Mechanics	2	Political Science	4
Entomology	2	Sociology And Studio Arts	1
		Special Education And Communication	
		Disorders	1

Table 4 continues

Major	Students	Major	Students
Environmental Health Occupational Health and Toxicology	1	Statistics	2
Finance	4	Survey Research	3
Forensic Science And Technology	1	Teacher of English as a Second Language in Spain	1
Food Science	1	TLTE	1
		Veterinary And Biomedical Sciences	1

### *Countries of Origin*

The participants represented 45 countries with China and India as the two top countries of origin (see Table 5).

Table 5

*What is your country of origin?*

Country	Students	Country	Students
Armenia	2	Malaysia	8
Bangladesh	2	Mexico	1
Botswana	1	Morocco	1
Brazil	3	Netherlands	1
Cameroon	1	Nigeria	1
Canada	1	Pakistan	1
China	33	Philippines	1
Czech Republic	1	PRC	1
Ecuador	1	Romania	1
Egypt	1	Russia	1
Ethiopia	1	Slovakia	1
France	2	South Korea	2
Germany	5	Spain	2

Table 5 continues

Country	Students	Country	Students
Ghana	1	Sweden	2
Hungary	1	Switzerland	1
Saudi Arabia	1	Syria	1
India	15	Taiwan	1
Indonesia	1	Tajikistan	1
Iran	3	Thailand	1
Jamaica	1	Trinidad and Tobago	1
Japan	1	Tunisia	1
Lebanon	1	Turkey	1
		Viet Nam	4

According to the demographic information reported above, the sample has the following characteristics:

1. The majority of the participants are graduate students
2. The majority of the participants have been studying at UNL for four years or less
3. The majority of the participants are males
4. The participants represented a wide variety of majors (58) at UNL with engineering and business as the two most popular majors
5. The participants represented 45 countries with China and India as the two top countries of origin

### ***Reasons for Choosing The U.S. At Destination***

The two most prominent reasons for the participants to choose to study in the U.S. were the availability of scholarships (N = 55, 47.4%) and the perception of great academic programs (N = 79, 68.1%) (see Table 6).

Table 6

*Why did you choose to come to study in the U.S.? Please choose all that apply!*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
Your relatives or family members study/studied here	16.4	19
Your friends study here	10.3	12
You have scholarships	47.4	55
The U.S. has great programs in your major	68.1	79
To learn more about other countries	31.9	37
Other	14.7	17
<i>Answered Question</i>		116*
<i>Skipped Question</i>		0

\* Respondents could choose more than one option, therefore, the total number of answers are more than 116.

### ***Perceptions***

The participants were asked to share their perceptions about various aspects of their study abroad journey.

#### ***First Impression of UNL***

The majority of participants (N = 88, 76.5%) reported having excellent and good experiences when they first arrived at UNL (see Table 7).

#### ***Overall Perceptions of Life at UNL***

The majority of respondents (N = 93, 80.9%) rated their experiences with life at UNL as excellent or good (see Table 8).



Table 7

*Please rate your experience when first arrived at UNL (the atmosphere, diversity level, food, language, classes, resident halls, airport pick up...)*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
Excellent	24.3	28
Good	52.2	60
Adequate (OK)	21.7	25
Bad	0.9	1
Horrible (really bad)	0.9	1
Comments offered		25
<i>Answered Question</i>		<i>115</i>
<i>Skipped Question</i>		<i>1</i>

Table 8

*Please rate your experience with life at UNL (classes, professors, resident halls, involvement...).*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
Excellent	26.1	30
Good	54.8	63
Adequate (OK)	16.5	19
Bad	2.6	3
Horrible (really bad)	0.0	0
Examples offered		23
<i>Answered Question</i>		<i>115</i>
<i>Skipped Question</i>		<i>1</i>

### ***Experiences in Interacting with Professors, Faculty, and Fellow Students***

The majority of participants (N = 93, 80.8%) rated their experiences interacting with professors, faculty, or fellow students as excellent or good (see Table 9)

Table 9

*Please rate your experience in interacting with professors, faculty, and other students (domestic or international) at UNL? Please be as detailed as possible with examples!*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
Excellent	27.8	32
Good	53.0	61
Neutral (OK)	15.7	18
Bad	2.6	3
Horrible (really bad)	0.9	1
Examples offered		28
Answered Question		115
Skipped Question		1

### ***Perceptions About Difficulties And Challenges With Life In The U.S.***

Most respondents (N = 104, 90.4%) reported having some or very few difficulties (see Table 10).

### ***Strategies To Adjust To Life In The U.S.***

Making new friends (N = 97, 83.6%) and talking to professors (N = 62, 53.4%) were reported to be the two most common ways for the participants to adjust to life at the university and in the U.S. as a whole (see Table 11).

Table 10

*Please rate your difficulties in social and academic life as an international student  
(language barrier, culture shocks, food, lifestyle, ideas...)?*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
A lot of difficulties	9.6	11
Some difficulties	45.2	52
Very few difficulties	45.2	52
Examples offered		43
<i>Answered Question</i>		<i>115</i>
<i>Skipped Question</i>		<i>1</i>

Table 11

*What have you done to help you adjust to life at the university and in the U.S as a whole?  
Please choose all that apply!*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
Join social groups	32.8	38
Join student organizations	34.5	40
Talk to professors	53.4	62
Make new friends	83.6	97
Use student services (career services, student involvement...)	31.0	36
Other	11.2	13
<i>Answered Question</i>		<i>116*</i>
<i>Skipped Question</i>		<i>0</i>

\* Respondents could choose more than one options, therefore, the total number of answers are more than 116.

### ***Support***

Majority of the respondents (N= 69, 61.1%) reported having received help from individuals or organizations since they have been in the United States (see Table 12).

Table 12

*Have you received help from any individual or organization with your academic and social life since you have been in the U.S? Please describe some of the people or organizations that helped you out the most!*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
Yes	61.1	69
No	38.9	44
Names of individuals or organizations		49
<i>Answered Question</i>		<i>113</i>
<i>Skipped Question</i>		<i>3</i>

### ***Involvement In On-Campus Organizations***

About 55% of the participants reported not being involved with any organizations on campus (see Table 13).

### ***Perceptions Of The Benefits Of On-Campus Involvement***

Most respondents (N = 95, 84.1%) reported thinking that being involved in organizations and activities on campus helped develop social and academic life (see Table 14).

Table 13

*Are you in any organizations on campus? If yes, please list the organizations' names and describe how you got involved with them!*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
Yes	44.8	52
No	55.2	64
Names of organizations		49
<i>Answered Question</i>		<i>116</i>
<i>Skipped Question</i>		<i>0</i>

Table 14

*Do you think being involved in organizations and activities on campus help you develop your social and academic life? If yes, how? If no, why?*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
Yes	84.1	95
No	15.9	18
Explanations offered		56
<i>Answered Question</i>		<i>113</i>
<i>Skipped Question</i>		<i>3</i>

### ***Perceived Changes***

The three most perceived changes were: (a) more mature, (b) more confident in academic ability, and (c) more comfortable interacting with people from different countries (see Table 15).

Table 15

*How have you changed personally, socially, and academically since you have been in the U.S? Please choose all that apply!*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
I feel more mature	68.1	79
I feel more confident in my academic ability	68.1	79
I feel more comfortable interacting with people from different countries	72.4	84
I feel less connected to my own culture	17.2	20
I feel more materialistic	12.1	14
I feel more individualistic	40.5	47
Other	9.5	11
<i>Answered Question</i>		116*
<i>Skipped Question</i>		0

\* Respondents could choose more than one options, therefore, the total number of answers are more than 116.

### ***Perceived Reasons For Changes***

Academic experiences, social experiences, and personal experiences were reported by most participants to contribute to their changes (see Table 16).

### ***Role Models***

About 56% of the participants reported not having a role models in the university (see Table 17).

Table 16

*What made you change? Please choose all that apply!*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
Academic experience (classmmates, professors, projects...)	76.7	89
Social experience (making new friends, student groups...)	73.3	85
Personal experience (your own efforts to change)	72.4	84
Situational experience (financial, health, age...)	56.0	65
Other	2.6	3
<i>Answered Question</i>		<i>116*</i>
<i>Skipped Question</i>		<i>0</i>

\* Respondents could choose more than one option, therefore, the total number of answers are more than 116.

Table 17

*Do you have any role models in the university to look up to?*

Answer Options	Percent	Count
Yes	43.5	50
No	56.5	65
Description of role models		42
<i>Answered Question</i>		<i>115</i>
<i>Skipped Question</i>		<i>1</i>

## **Chapter Five**

### **Qualitative Results**

The main purpose of the study was to produce an overview of international students' experiences at UNL as articulated via their own words. Given the many challenges facing international students and the great benefits that they bring, this study aimed to explore the experiences of international students at UNL. Although there has been a substantial amount of literature about international students, most of the research has focused on a particular aspect of international students such as advising relationship or mental health issues. The results of this study contributed to the pool of knowledge about international students at UNL by portraying a holistic picture of the overall experience.

The researcher analyzed the open-ended components of the responses using thematic content analysis procedures. For each response, the researcher identified each question's key points. The researcher then analyzed each question across all responses to identify categories in that particular area of the participants' experience. All of the categories for each of the questions were then further analyzed to identify major themes in the international students' overall experience. The following themes emerged:

#### **Perceptions:**

- General perception of the new environment
- Perception of services/program on campus
- Perception of staff, faculty, and professors
- Perception of mentors/role models



#### Challenges and Opportunities:

- Benefit of studying in the U.S.
- Challenges faced by international students
- Support system

#### Self Involvement

- Individual efforts in the adjustment process
- Most memorable experiences

### **Perceptions**

#### ***General Perception of the New Environment***

General perception of the new environment included the respondents' perception of the United State, the local community, and the university campus.

***Perception of the U.S.*** For many international students coming from countries with political and cultural systems that differ significantly from the U.S., the U.S. offers a whole new dimension of rights and possibilities. One participant cited “freedom of speech” as one of the reasons to study abroad in the U.S. Another participant reported feeling very fortunate to have the opportunity to study in the U.S.:

I really was interested in the U.S. people and culture and wanted to get education here and become part of the culture. It was never my goal to remain in the States, but after experience life from different aspects, I have chosen to reside in the U.S. permanently. But it was mostly due to the U.S. mission of welcoming diversity into this country that allowed me [to] pursue higher education here. There is perhaps no other country so much open to diversity as the U.S. I knew I [would] have my basic human rights secured and can be a responsible part of this society. I have really enjoyed learning what I wanted to learn about the culture and people here. Oh, I also like the English language a lot...

Despite all the difficulties that come with being an international student, one participant shared that being in the U.S. was the best experience: “Being for two different months in the States was the best experience I have ever had. I learnt a lot and I met lot of people, what really helped me in many senses.” Another participant reported feeling that U.S. could serve as role model for political and economical development in his/her home country:

I feel U.S. is a role model for India in the areas of democracy, pluralism and economic structure. I feel that whatever developments in politics and economics occur in the U.S. will eventually occur in India, may be some years later. I wanted to study U.S. political and economic through Journalism program.

One participant whose master’s degree was from an institution in Europe and who was pursuing a doctoral degree in the U.S. shared that the experience in the U.S. was excellent. “I did my master in Europe and I just want to say that I wish I had the chance to do it here! But I am glad I am doing my PhD in the U.S. and [at] UNL.”

Beside the participants who reported feeling happy and fortunate to be in the U.S., there were some who expressed some less than positive experiences. One participant “felt that it is such a lonely place.” Another participant reported feeling that the there was a lack of individual style in the restaurant industry in the U.S. “Pubs are all the same, domestic restaurants are all the same, there is not really any individual style, everything is franchise.” Interacting with people in the U.S. was challenging for one participant. “People don't talk to each other, very hypocritical, they are always telling you that it's fine and then go and complain elsewhere.” Another participant reported not knowing “how to start a talk when first meet[ing] people.” Difficulty in forming long lasting close friendships in the U.S. made one participant feel depressed. “Friendships tend to be less

close in the US and truly experiencing this was a bit depressing.” Another participant shared his/her description of the U.S. culture: “‘Every man for himself.’ That is my description of social culture here.”

***Perception of the Midwest/Lincoln.*** Some participants reported feeling welcome and safe in Lincoln. One participant reported being pleasantly surprised by how friendly local people were: “I was amazed how friendly the locals were to me.” “It just feels home away from home. I feel secure in Lincoln,” shared another participant.

For many other participants, however, the impression was not that positive. One participant observed that “people in the Midwest are more conservative than others.” Another participant commented that “Lincoln is culturally underdeveloped.” Another participant shared: “The city of Lincoln is too small for me...and without [a] car I feel so inconvenient. Also, the public transportation system is too bad compared with China. (Maybe everyone has their own cars, but...)”

The extreme weather in the Midwest was another challenge for many international students. One participant commented, “I don’t like food and cold weather, but great people.”

***Perception of the campus.*** Some participants commented that the campus did not appear to be very diverse. One wrote:

The campus is not diverse enough; the only dominating cultures represented are Chinese, Indian and a couple of others. The campus needs to be more diverse, and perhaps offer scholarships to students from other less developed countries that would otherwise never get a chance to study abroad.

Another participant just commented that “when it comes to diversity level, it’s bad.” The perceived lack of diversity made one participant feel very isolated: “I am the only African

in all my classes, in my hall; I feel like I am the only African almost everywhere.”

Another participant reported feeling that even though the campus seemed big and diverse, international students still felt isolated:

Honestly, even though UNL is big and diversity, but most of my friends are international students. My overall experience is UNL is nice, but a bit isolate, because I do not understand America students, their culture, and their lifestyles. When I talk with them, I keep a distant and hope I speak the right thing in the right situation.

One participant commented that the transportation services could use some improvement:

Public transportation is a big issue that the city and the campus are having. It is hard to get to places if the city bus doesn't run past 6:30, and the UNL bus serves only between East and City campuses. We perhaps need to get rid of the bus system and add small/mini vans that can go to places faster and more frequently.

Many other participants, in contrast, reported that the campus climate was so warm and enjoyable. One shared, “If I had the chance to choose all over again where to study UNL would still be my first choice.” “The university itself is a great place with many qualified and highly competitive professors, good grad students and an adequate infrastructure,” wrote one participant. Another participant expressed satisfaction with campus life: “I couldn't ask for more. UNL is a place where a lot of activities are happening all the time, from Big Red Welcome, Japan Night or even Karaoke Night at Selleck.” “I could not have asked for a better atmosphere. I loved the food at Selleck. The airport pick up was very nice indeed. Everything was just perfect,” concurred one participant. Living on campus was a great experience for one participant:

I lived in dorm during my first semester and it was a great experience! I know many friends from different countries, and I enjoyed socializing with them. I like to live on campus because it makes me feel like I get involved in the campus, and I enjoyed the unlimited meal plan.

One participant commented on how welcoming the people on campus were “from the airport pickup guy, RA and the academic advisers.”

***Perception of Services/Programs on Campus***

Many participants commented on the quality of services and programs on campus. As with other subjects, the participants’ report was a mix of positive and negative experiences. These comments - focused on first arrival services, resident halls, and International Affairs - provided some insight into what the university has been doing very well and what would need some improvements.

***First arrival services.*** One participant’s first impression of the university services was not a favorable one: “Airport pickup was not good that time but I do know that it recently has greatly been improved.” Another participant was rather critical about quite a few services and programs:

The New Student Orientation was just overwhelmingly long; too many topics in a few long-hour days. The information should be given to students step by step, and perhaps make hard copies of everything said in the lecture. The International Affairs office is not in a good location. It has to be near enough to the Union where there is more attention for activities. The campus is a little bit complicated geographically. I think new students would need to get a better campus map to get around more easily.

Another participant also commented on the public transport system: “the public transportation system is too bad compared with China..(Maybe everyone has their own cars, but..).”

At the other end of the spectrum, some participants were positively impressed with the airport pickup service as one participant put it: “The airport pick up was very nice indeed. Everything was just perfect!” Another participant expressed the same

opinion: “The people here are just so welcoming, from the airport pickup guy, RA and the academic advisers.” The University also provides some great programs that one participant was very impressed with: “The university has great programs to support the students such as "International Teaching Assistant Training" by the university Teaching and Learning Center. Chemistry department also have great orientation program.”

***Residence halls.*** Residence halls received much attention from the participants, both negatively and positively. One participant was of the opinion that “residence halls are too expensive.” Another participant shared the same thought: “residency halls... good, but cafeteria at the time when I lived in Selleck was not that good, limited time of meals and also very expensive.” Concurred another participant:

Residence halls are too expensive. I always keep people with poor economic conditions in mind when I think of the prices. It needs to become affordable for more people; not just for those who can afford any price, but also for those who can't afford at all.

“I stayed in the dorms for a year and I was not satisfied with that, it was too expensive and I couldn't leave because I had to pay lot of money. Leaving outside was better for me,” explained one participant.

Many participants, on the other hand, complimented the great services in residence halls. One participant described his/her experience with residence halls:

I lived in dorm during my first semester and it was a great experience! I know many friends from different countries and I enjoyed socializing with them. I like to live on campus because it makes me feel like I get involved in the campus and I was so enjoyed the unlimited meal plan.

Another one just “loved the food at Selleck.” One participant commented that “resident halls are good.” The residence halls staff were perceived positively by many participants.

One participant reported having “good friends and Resident staffs in Hall.” Another participant commented that “residence hall RA's quite active and concerned.”

***International Affairs.*** As with residence halls, International Affairs office received mixed review from the participants. One participant just commented that he/she did not like International Affairs. Another participant appeared to be very frustrated with his/her situation:

To be honest, I believe that you do not receive much support when it comes to your future. I have the feeling as soon as you graduate; International Affairs wants to get rid of you. They do not understand that you may be torn between two cultures, that you built relationships to people within the last few years, that you face a little identity crisis, etc. People at International Affairs can make a cold-hearted impression. I know that they deal with complicated situations every week, however, the future can be pretty scary in terms of work permit or permanent residency. I have been living in this country for many years. It feels like my second home. International Affairs needs to hire international people who have been in my situation; otherwise, they will never understand what challenges I really face.

One the other hand, many students reported having great experiences with International Affairs. International Affairs office and its Lincoln International Networking Community (LINC) programs were mentioned by several participants. One participant enthusiastically expressed appreciation for International Affairs, “International Affairs tax form help was great!” Another participant wrote, “I have been receiving help from [a staff name] from the international office. I am so grateful for her.” Additionally, international student groups such as International Students Fellowship (ISF), Cultural Ambassadors, and International Student Organization (ISO) have been acknowledged by many participants as helpful resources for them at UNL. One

participant listed several international student focused groups, “CSSA, SIFE, ISO, Cultural Ambassador.”

### ***Perception of Mentors/Role Models***

An overwhelmingly majority of the participants reported having their professors, advisors, and supervisors as their role models. “Professors who has administrative responsibilities” served as ideal role model for one participant. Another participant expressed admiration for his/her advisor: “My advisor is role model for me as he is very punctual and regular in his work.” The ability to balance work and family life is also important as one participant wrote about his/her role model:

My advisor...he is a real gentleman ... and he knows well how to manage his time. He stays from 8 AM to 5 PM and does everything ok ...give the students a lot of time.... and I think when he goes back home....he can give a lot of time to his family as well (as he returns after 5 PM).

Another participant reported that his/her role models were “co-adviser [name] and some of our great faculty that I was lucky to meet [name].” Being patience is another great quality that international students look for in a role model as one participant shared:

My adviser-I admire his patience; I also want to imbibe the fact that he actually listens to what anyone has to say without forming a judgment. He believes in the interdisciplinary nature of various sciences, which is something very few scientists do these days. There are other professors that I admire too. I also look up to some exceptional students here who balance work, study and extra curricular activities- I admire their time management skills.

Another participant concurred: “My advisor [name]. He has a lot of stuff on his plat[e] but he always gets them done. He maintains a good working relationship with all the relevant people I can think of.”



Professors were also mentioned by many participants as great role models. “One of the professors. Teaches well and interacts well with students, lighthearted yet knowledgeable,” wrote one participant. Another participant shared that “usually it was a professor. (Several usually.)” One participant reported being so impressed by the dedication of one professor:

He's a professor at UNL. He's kind and helpful towards students. Although he's a chair of an academic department, he always find time to answer all the questions that students have. I once had an email reply from him at 6:00am on Saturday!

Several other participants mentioned “my professors” as their role models including “influential and notable leaders in my department.” One participant specifically mentioned “minority faculties” as his/her role models.

Supervisors are also great role models, according to some participants. One participant shared admiration for his/her supervisor: “My supervisor. Good friend, good guidance, helpful, very knowledgeable.” “Great supervisors, great faculty throughout the department” were another participant’s role models. “My supervisor and other professors who i admire their experience,” concurred one participant. Another participant reported that his/her role models were “managers and co-workers at work.”

Some participants also have peer role models. Classmates were mentioned several times. “One of my classmates who works very hard,” reported one participant. Another participant looked up to other students who could balance life and work: “I also look up to some exceptional students here who balance work, study and extracurricular activities- I admire their time management skills.” Upper-class students were also considered role models as one participant pointed out that his/her role models were “all my seniors who

got flying color in their results.” “Senior PhD students” were role models for another participant. One student found role models in friends who live “an exemplary life:”

I have a few Christian friends who live an exemplary life. They always find time to invest in others and they focus on fostering good relationships. And yet they still find time to study and be involved in organizations. One of my friends has recently graduated in civil engineering and already has a good job, and he has inspired me the most.

One participant reported being inspired by a celebrity:

There is a celebrity from Hong Kong called Winifred Lai. She is a writer, a scholar, an editor in chief for a fashion magazine, a model, a dresser and a designer. I appreciate her independence and brave. She gave up her career, and went to Paris to continue master study. She is the person I want to be in the future.

Another one considered her “husband” as her role model.

***Ideal mentors/role models.*** Many participants, however, reported that they could not find any role models on campus. When asked to identify some qualities they would like to see in role models, many of these participants reported wanting someone who could “relates well with international students.” One participant described his/her ideal role models as “someone who cares for students, especially international students, because they may be some language barriers and different academic settings and style of teaching.” “A person that has been in many countries and in many different cultures,” suggested one participant. Another participant wanted “someone who is educated, driven, reliable and has an understanding of a global world.”

The ideal role models should also care about the students as one participant described:

Someone who cares for the students’ career - not the research project and the grant. Someone who respects others instead of abusing the power they have. There were few professors who were really passionate about their work and at the

same time was very caring about students career - but I didn't have much of personal contact with them to make them my role model.

Another participant concurred: "I would like to have a role model who understands students' personal liking and responsibilities. Not only pushing for work in lab, but also saying himself to hard working students to go on leave and have fun." An ideal mentor/role model should "just care about students needs and don't care his own agenda at all.. Ideal mentor should be like your life saver..."

Besides professors/faculty, many participants expressed wishes to have peer mentors or role models. One participant wanted to have a mentor that "can help me with my academic as well as social life, more like a brother/sister." "Someone who is around my age and who is mature enough to [have] decent conversations," wrote another participant. Having an international student as role model was also in the wish list of one participant: "An International student who has spent less than three years in the U.S. and whose name is always on the dean's list and at the end, after graduation finds a high paying and interesting job." Another participant expressed the same wish:

Someone that would have the same major as me maybe. Or someone that I would have something in common with, like an international student. It would really help to know more about how being an international student changed his/her life.

Some participants suggested some desirable qualities in a mentor or role model:

"confident, funny, interesting, knows what she/he wants from life;" "knowledgeable in one's field and open to others who have expertise in other fields;" "who can help in finding a job or after school prospects;" and "a positive one from a relative field." One participant reported that his/her father was also a mentor.

### *Perception of Staff, Faculty, and Professors*

Majority of the participant reported having positive experiences in interacting with faculty/professors. One participant described his/her experience: “My advisor and the professor with whom I worked as a TA are very good persons ... never pressurized me .... gave me enough time for deadlines.” “Regarding the professors and the classes, I am very satisfied,” wrote another participant. One participant was impressed with UNL professors’ expertise in their field: “In general, I think that the professors at UNL are extremely helpful and really know what they’re talking about.” “My professors for example are very helpful,” concurred another participant. One participant complimented the great treatment he/she has been receiving from professors: “All the professors treated me very well and they did provide me a lot of helps when I asked from them. I like the information that was being taught in most of my classes.” Quite a few other participants felt the same way: “Professors treat students fair and equal,” “professors are very kind and patient,” “professors are ready to help at any time.” Another participant commented that “the professors are very approachable.” Some participants stated that they had “good relationships with professors.” One participant was particularly grateful for the support from faculty/professors: “I had great experience with my Theatre Arts professors. They looked beyond my horrible accent and clumsy English and inspired my artistic ability. They were very supportive and provided me lots of opportunities to improve my skills.” “In my view my professors have always been ready to help students whether international or domestic,” wrote another participant. One participant recalled a time when his/her professor helped him/her: “I went and talked to my history lecturer about the difficulties I

face when it comes to fast essay writing during exams. He understood me and promised to help.” One participant showed appreciation for professors’ interest in global issues: “My advisor and professors are very supportive and kind to me. They really have interest in global diversity.” “Professors are usually extremely helpful and willing to spend time to help me out. I have excellent TA's too,” reported one participant.

Although the majority of participants expressed positive perceptions about staff, faculty, and professors, some participants shared some negative experiences. One participant reported having mixed experience with the staff/faculty in the department:

I had great experience with the chemistry staff and teaching professors. However, the lab I worked for my thesis was very abusive, hostile, discouraging and unfortunately bad. Lots of students and post-doctorate fellows suffered from the abusive advisor and his wife. Complaints had been filed to the human resource. But no action was taken to protect to the students or the post docs, by the university as per my knowledge. But again, I have wonderful and successful time with the rest of the chemistry department faculty and staff.

Another participant shared his/her observation: “I noticed that not all professors are actually fully qualified to teach at university level. Also, not all professors have reasonable office hours for students to visit.” One participant expressed frustration with one of his/her professors’ communication skills: “I had a bad time in a course taught by an India professor. Because, I could hardly understand what he said and what he wrote....His spoken English was too bad.” “Some of the professors are just not caring about teaching. They think [about] research and their resume most of the time,” stated one participant.

Unfair treatment was mentioned by another participant:

I had to have negative experiences with a couple of professors, because grading was unfair; there was profiling and preconceived notions towards some students. Not many professors truly like to be confronted, but once they are confronted, they take revenge by lowering grades.

Perceived discrimination was a negative experience for one participant: “My experience with faculty and professors is generally good. However sometimes some faculty show discrimination where they favor a student over another which I think is wrong.”

Another participant expressed strong frustration with one particular situation: “There was one professor last semester that I didn't like, macroeconomics. He was not open to help students with answers. Hated him.” One participant summed up his/her experience with professors:

Generally, classroom experiences are often good and no problems there. But when dealing with some professors and advisors, the experiences seems to be daunting. To say the least, I have learned how NOT to be a bad teacher from these negative experiences.

### ***Challenges and Opportunities***

Challenges and opportunities included the respondents’ support system, perceived challenges, and perceived benefits of studying in the U.S.

### ***Support System***

Majority of the participants have received helped from individuals or organizations with their social and academic life since they have been in the U.S. Diverse sources of support were mentioned. Unsurprisingly, international- student -focused groups are among the most popular sources of help for international students.

International Affairs office and its Lincoln International Networking Community (LINC) programs were mentioned by several participants. One participant enthusiastically expressed appreciation for International Affairs, “International Affairs tax form help was great!” Another participant wrote, “I have been receiving help from [a staff name] from the international office. I am so grateful for her.” Additionally, international student

groups such as International Students Fellowship (ISF), Cultural Ambassadors, and International Student Organization (ISO) have been acknowledged by many participants as helpful resources for them at UNL. One participant listed several international student focused groups, “CSSA, SIFE, ISO, Cultural Ambassador.”

Another important source of support for international students is co-national groups on and off campus. One participant pointed out, “international groups and fellow Filipinos within and outside of UNL.” Another participant was grateful for the help of some local co-national families, namely “a couple of Armenian families,” “some Africans, especially Cameroonians living in Lincoln.” Besides the local families, international students were usually eased into their new life by co-national student organizations or friends. Some of the co-national student organizations mentioned by the participants are CSSA- Chinese Students and Scholars Association, African Student Association, India Student Association, and NUMSA- Nebraska University Malaysia Student Association. One participant mentioned that she/he has received help “from my Malaysian friend.”

Friends have also played an important role in helping international with their social and academic life. One participant recalled, “Some friends who live on my floor, especially one Korean girl... was trying to take care of me.” Another participant was deeply grateful for friends for helping adjust to the new life in the U.S. “My friends helped me a lot. They helped me integrate in their groups.” Another participant shared, “I think my friends and host family (former professor of mine, but I've never lived with her)

helped me the most.” One participant shared appreciation for his friends, “My colleague and friend [name] and many other friends at UNL”

Academic departments were also mentioned as a great source of help for international students. Two participants listed the athletic department as the primary source of help. One of them appreciated the help from the “tutoring from athletic department. Overall the athletic department and all athletes and staff there.” Another participant reported feeling that he/she was supported by the School of Natural Resources Graduate Student Association (SNRGSA). One engineering student expressed appreciation for the engineering mechanics office. Another participant enthusiastically acknowledged the help of the community in the College of Journalism and Mass Communication. Major-related groups were also popular sources of support for international students. One participant received support from the Actuarial Science Club. The Friends and Food Science Club was also mentioned as a great source of help.

Some participants considered faculty, staff, professors, and advisors their benefactors. One participant listed “adviser [name] and co-adviser [name]” as one of the sources of support. Another participant was grateful for the help from “major advisor, professors.” Another participant also received help from “advisor, and some of the professors.” “My department, my advisor,” wrote another participant.

Local families also extended their support to international students. One participant commented that he/she has learned so much from the help of local American families:



I have been in regular contact with numerous American families ever since I stepped in this country. They have shared with me as much as I have with them. We always learned from each other and I could always share any issues and success I have with them without hesitation. Directness of American people helped me learn more.

Another participant mentioned, “Lincoln family for international students,” as the primary source of support.

Student service offices and groups around campus have also played an important role in helping international students. Two participants acknowledged support from the LGBTQ Resource Center. Another participant was helped by “academic counselors.” Three participants expressed their appreciation for Career Services. One wrote, “Career services, especially [name], has been very helpful.” One participant mentioned Trio Program at SCC as a source of support. Another participant received support from “Rotaract, the Daily Nebraskan, and my host family.” The Writing Assistance Center was mentioned as very helpful by one participant. One participant mentioned the UNL Taekwondo Club as a support group. Another participant felt very strongly about the Student in Free Enterprise (SIFE) group, “Joining SIFE is one of the best choices I made in my life.”

Two participants received support from church-related groups. One participant was deeply moved by the help he/she has received from such groups:

I joined Campus Crusade for Christ and some of the friends I've made there have become almost like family. I get to spend holidays like Easter at an American friend's home and he's always willing to bring his international friends home as well as explore the U.S. - we went on a ski trip to Colorado last spring break, and we've gone camping numerous times around Nebraska.

***Student organizations.*** Campus involvement has been considered a great way to help students connect to college life. Many of the participants in this study are very active in many student organizations on campus. Most of them, unsurprisingly, are involved with international student focused organizations. The international student focused organizations mentioned by the participants were:

- LINC (3)
- ISO (4)
- Iranian student organization (2)
- Indian Student Association (6)
- African student organization (3)
- International Students Fellowship (ISF) (1)
- UNL Korean student association (1)
- NUMSA (4)
- Muslim students associations (1)
- International Students Club-for athletes (1)
- Cultural Ambassadors (1)
- Lincoln Foreign Friend Society (1)

Academic related groups are also popular among international students. Some of the participants are involved with:

- Student in Free Enterprise
- Department student committee
- Department of agricultural economics graduate student organization
- "IEEE- electrical engineer organization
- School of Natural Resources Graduate Student Association (SNRGSA)
- The food science club
- "PSGSA - through department of study
- AiChe UNL
- American Institute of Architecture Students
- Tau Sigma National Honor Students Association
- Actuarial Science Club

Participants are also involved in various other student organizations that fit their personal interests and needs:

Student in Free Enterprise  
 Photo club  
 ITE student chapter  
 Bruners club  
 Extreme Christian group  
 UNL taekwondo club  
 SIFE, BMES  
 Ping pong club: natural interest  
 Tau Sigma  
 Golden Key  
 Phi- U  
 Foto-unl  
 Queer Student Alliance  
 Campus Crusade for Christ - a few Christian friends invited me to join  
 The human rights and human diversity project  
 SAAC- Student Athlete Advisory Committee  
 Track and Field Leadership Council  
 Indian Student Association  
 Rotary club  
 UNL vegetarians and vegans club  
 ISA, SIFE, HLUG

***Peer connections.*** Literature on international and domestic students interactions suggested that international students desire such interactions but do not get enough. In this study, comments from participants support the literature. Even though a few international students have been successful at making friends with American students, a majority of the comments expressed frustration with not being able to cross the invisible wall between domestic and international students. One participant “was amazed by how friendly the locals were.” Another participant was moved by how friendly and helpful Americans were, “I have met wonderful Americans who are always ready to help.” Another participant described the local people as “very nice and helpful.” A majority of the participants reported that it was easier for them to make international friends than American friends. One participant wrote that “international students are supportive and

very friendly.” One participant commented on how frustrating it was to interact with domestic students:

I can easily make international friends rather than making friends with Americans. Few of them are interested in what I'm interested in. They can be very nice and polite, but don't always want to make friends with me.

Another participant described his experience with domestic classmates: “Horrible interaction with classmates, they all know each other and don't need to know me. They clearly show it to me, and it is the same thing in my hall.” One participant was lucky enough to overcome some difficulties in making friends:

The first semester, nobody knows me. It was really a tough time. Even though I knew all the materials in classes, I felt lonely. Let's take one of the classes that I have taken during my first semester. I was the only international student in that class and my classmate were not really friendly with me. Nobody talks with me during the class and that feeling was horrible. I learned to speak with them, and finally I have some classmate who was willing to be friend with me. Even though I do not have many close classmates right now, it is much better than my first semester. At least I can easily talk with them during the lecture hour.

Some participants commented on how much more difficult it was to make domestic friends than international friends. One participant wrote, “The relationship between international students are nice and cooperated. But, I feel there is a gap between America students and us. Another participant shared observation of local people: “People don't talk to each other, very hypocrite. They are always telling you that it's fine, and then go and complain elsewhere.” Another participant called for more effort on the domestic students' part to close the gap:

Somehow, however I feel that it would be better if domestic students (i.e., resident Americans) would put a little more effort in trying to get to know international students, otherwise sometimes we really do feel like we do not belong here.

Another participant reported feeling isolated and left out in class:

I don't like group work with American students. Sometimes it can make me very uncomfortable and frustrated. I feel isolated all the time. I am a sociology major student. It's hard for an international student to study American society due to the culture and ideology differences. It happens all the time that American students discuss on some social or political topic that I'm not familiar with, and they just ignore me in group work. If I ask a question or express an opinion, they don't care or don't even give any response.

One participant commented that he/she had a difficult time interacting with other international students:

I did not find any social difficulties with domestic students, but I did find difficulties with other international students; but I guess that some cultures have different life styles, ways of thinking and traditions that it is hard for me personally to accept or adjust to.

One participant found difficulties in making friends with both international and domestic students. "After one year, I found it very difficult to make friends with local and international students."

### ***Challenges Faced by International Students***

Participants in the current studies identify four major difficulties facing international students: (a) language barrier; (b) food; (c) balancing work, coursework, and social life; and (d) cultural differences.

***Language barrier.*** A large number of participants in the current study reported having difficulties in communication and adjustment due to language barrier. "Language is generally a common problem for all international students," wrote one participant. One participant shared that "language barrier and cultural differences" are the most difficult issues at the beginning of life in the U.S. "The biggest problem is cultural barrier and language. What I mean is that we cannot communicate as well as a true American."

Limitation in the ability to speak and understand English created distress for many international students as one participant pointed out:

I cannot read very fast, and cannot understand what the local speaking completely. When they talk about the humor, I don't know why they are laughing, because I didn't understand what they were saying. Also, it seems that the local do not slow their speaking when we talk...

Not being able to express themselves fully in English was a major concern for one international student. "Language and culture probably seems a bit tough for me because my mother language is not English. It is kinda hard to express what I am trying to say in few words."

One participant reported that the language barrier severely hampered academic performance: "Giving speeches represented a challenge for me because of language barrier. Or just be active in class and respond to my teachers' questions. Hard to make myself understood." Even reading in English is an obstacle for international students' academic life: "I read slower in English than I do in my own language. The ability to make inferences and relate contents is also a bit worse when the material is in English." Another participant shared the same frustration: "Some of the students get A because they can express themselves better than you. In fact, they are just average in academic quality."

Feeling embarrassed when local people do not understand what international students say is another issue caused by language barrier as one participant shared:

Language barrier is the most difficult that I feel. Ideas are also different. Usually, I do not give out my ideas in class, and I feel shy when American students just don't know what I spoke. "What's that?", "what did you say?"...Sentences like

this make me nervous because they just don't understand what I am talking about. Expression is a problem, I meant.

Not being able to communicate ideas and express one's self fully in English could lead to isolation. "Sometimes, difference in languages makes us isolated with the society." Language barrier prevent international and local students to have meaningful conversation. One participant considered it "the biggest gap between domestic and international students." However, many international students kept on trying to overcome the language barrier as one participant did, "I have some problem with understand the whole lecture, but I'm moving forward step by step."

**Food.** Amidst all the difficulties and challenges that come with adapting to the new life in the U.S., food appeared to be a major concern for some participants. One participant expressed disappointment with food in the U.S. "I hate the food, healthy food is too expensive, and bad food is cheap." Another participant declared, "too much fat in the food and it has no taste in my mouth." Gaining weight was another problem that came with the changes in diet for international students: "The food had the biggest impact on my life. I've heard that all international students put on weight once they get to US, and I am one of them. Americans have fatty food!" For some, however, food is not an issue at all. "Food is not a barrier for me because I love cheese and all dairy products!"

Finding varieties of food presented another challenge for international students. One participant reported that it was "harder to find good and diverse food than elsewhere." Two other participants shared that finding food that were appropriate for their religious practice were challenging: "I'm from Muslim background...so food is one problem."

Being deprived of comfort food appeared to be another challenge for international students. One participant wrote wistfully, “Now, if only I were to get my mom's homemade breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, tiffin.”

***Balancing work, course load, and life.*** For any college student, balancing work and course load poses a great challenge. However, for many international students, it is even a more prominent difficulty since working while in college is not the norm or expectation in their cultures. One participant wrote:

I was used to being a full-time student without combining it with work. At UNL I faced some difficulties managing the time I devote to my lab work with my school work but my advisor was very helpful in helping me strike a good balance.

Some participants were not prepared for the heavy course load in U.S. higher education. One participant exclaimed, “Busy, busy, and busy! Learning lots of new stuff and get motivated! But sometimes course load is more than expected.” Another participant reported that he/she “did not get any time from research to get bored.”

Struggling to balance work, course load, and social life appeared to be a big challenge for many participants. When asked the reasons for not getting involved on campus, some participants cited time constraint as the main obstacle. “I just can't afford time for any organizations.” “I wish I could join, but actually I haven't, because of the study and the fear.” “Well, I was not associated much because most of my attention was dedicated in my lab.” A participant, who was a graduate student, expressed frustration with not being able to have a social life. “A graduate do not have a life to spend in organizations, and professors do not understand you. They just ask you to work a lot...”



One more challenge that is unique for international students regarding work is that they face legal limitations that domestic students do not (Urias & Yeakey, 2009).

International students only can seek employment on campus. Even with off-campus internships, they have to seek approval from the International Affairs office and justify that the internships are strictly related to their majors. Having all these legal limitations was understandably frustrating for many participants in the current study. One participant shared:

The most difficult part was getting used to the legal limitations of not being able to work off campus which would actually offer more income and less hours away from studies. I had to put so many hours on on-campus employment at student wage, simply because working off-campus was illegal.

In some majors, international students found it harder to find jobs on campus. “One very frustrating [challenge] is the limited number of work options on campus that pertain to my major.”

***Cultural differences.*** Cultural differences were reported to be major obstacles for participants in the current study to integrate into their new environment in the U.S.

International students could work hard to overcome their language barriers, but sometimes the cultural barriers are the toughest to cross. One participant expressed: “The language barrier is decreasing dramatically, while the culture shocks and the idea differentiation still strongly hamper my communication with American students.”

Many participants emphasized cultural differences as major challenges. When asked about difficulties with life in the U.S., many of the responses included cultural differences: “language barrier and cultural differences;” “language and culture;” “culture conflict, language barrier (the longer I stay here, the less the language barrier I have),

lifestyle, homesickness;” “culture shocks and lifestyle;” “language, culture, food;” “cultural barrier and language;” “culture, lifestyle”...

The culture barrier was reported to be even bigger for international students from certain background: “I’m from Muslim background...so food is one problem...also my culture is Eastern that is too different from the one here....maybe that’s a reason I cannot mix up with the American youngsters much!”

One participant pointed out that sometimes the cultural differences are not just between the international students and locals but also among international students:

I did not find any social difficulties with domestic students, but I did find difficulties with other international students; but I guess that some cultures have different life styles, ways of thinking and traditions that it is hard for me personally to accept or adjust to.

The cultural obstacle could be very persistent or even worse over time and sometimes lead to international students feeling isolated:

[I] feel left out in the class sometimes due to the culture difference and the language barrier. Though I think my English skills are better compared to most International students, I still have few common topics with American students due to the culture difference.

### ***Benefit of Studying in the U.S.***

Literature on international students has focused heavily on the difficulties they encounter in the journey abroad. However, many participants in this study expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to study in the U.S. and acknowledged the positive changes resulted from their experiences in the U.S.

Many participants wrote about the high quality of the U.S. educational system including “excellent teaching techniques, freedom of speech, and advancement of the

use of technology.” Another participant expressed appreciation for the U.S. “quality of education especially in research.” Quality of education could also mean a wide range of majors. One participant shared: “I was interested in the field of Toxicology. This isn't a very well known field in India due to which there are not really any Masters/PhD programs offering Toxicology as a major field of study there.” “Good teaching quality” was mentioned by another participant. One student summed it up nicely: “My home country does not have a good education system. I value what UNL offered students. I think that I am lucky to have a chance to study here.” Career advancement and job opportunities were also the main draw for some participants. “To find better job opportunities,” wrote a participant.

In addition to having the opportunity to experience the U.S.'s high quality education, many participants realized that they have developed significantly as a result of their experiences in the U.S. For one, they have to use the internet so much more to keep in touch with families and friends back home: “giving more time in Facebook and telephone to hold my country's buddies.” “Being more interested in studies,” noted one participant. For students who came from big city living backgrounds, “enjoying the nice nature around” was another positive change in their life. One participant shared some self-observation:

I have seen myself come out of my shell, and become more confident (not just academically, but in general). Academically, I see myself trying to put what I learn into practice. At every step, I see myself question how a particular theoretical thing can be applied in the real world (This wasn't the case before).

Having to adapt to the whole new culture, as difficult as it might be, gave one participant the opportunity to develop more self-confidence: “Overall, I feel I am

prepared for a leadership role. Openness and flexibility to change have allowed me to experience newer approaches to different aspects of life.” Another participant “learned how to deal with multicultural groups” as a result of exposure to the diverse population in the U.S. The same participant also reported that he/she has become “more low-contextual and direct” to adapt to the U.S. culture. “I dare to speak what I thought,” wrote a participant. Another participant reported feeling “more realistic and more independent.” Being far away from home has pushed many international students to “grow up much faster”:

I think I grew up much faster being far away from home. I had to learn how to file my taxes, how to get my car fixed, how to do laundry, how to deal with health insurance, the list goes on and on. Moreover, I think I am a little bit more competitive because American students underestimate your skills because you have an accent. You want to prove them wrong, and you want to show that you can accomplish the same or even more in terms of grades and internships.

Academically, international students were encouraged to develop critical thinking and team-work skills as one participant reported: “I am more critical in reading other people's research. I am a better team worker.”

### ***Self Involvement***

Respondents reported being proactive in the adjustment process by getting involved on campus or making friends. Also, this section include the respondents’ reported most memorable experiences.

### ***Individual Efforts in the Adjustment Process***

Adjusting to a new environment is not an easy task. With the language and culture barriers, this task is even more difficult for international students. Even though there are many programs and events aiming at helping international students adjust to

their new lives, individual efforts are necessary for successful adjustment. Many of the students participated in the current study were actively trying to adjust to their new environments. One participant wrote about his/her effort to overcome the language barrier: “I worked quite a bit to get rid of my accent, but now, if I don't tell people that I'm foreign, they can't tell.” Another participant stated his/her determination to overcome difficulties in classroom: “I have some problem with understand the whole lecture, but I'm moving forward step by step.” To fix the food problem, one participant decided to “import food and cook more myself.” Learning to be open minded about other cultures is another way to adjust to the U.S. multi-culture environment:

I had to just simply realize that if I want to be successful here, I've got to learn how people do things here. So, I had a mixture of great many U.S. and non-US friends through whom I gained a great wealth of knowledge on life in America. The most important part was to understand that just because this culture is different from the one where I grew up does not mean that one is wrong and the other is right. There are cultural norms, expectations, and standards in each country, and I had to simply keep that in mind while living and studying in the U.S. I just needed to accept that what is done here is what is good for here and there is nothing wrong with that. It takes willingness from a person not to judge too much the culture he/she is in; otherwise all the fun is gone...

Interacting with local people helped many participants feel at home in the U.S. “Being a part of American family” was reported by a participant to be very helpful in the adjustment process. Another participant concurred:

Living with a host family (even for only a year or a couple months) is great experience and can really help in adjusting to a new language and new culture. I'm lucky I got to do that for a year and I think that really helped my English skill. Also, make more American friends and try to speak English as much as I could because that's the main reason I came to the US in the first place.

Getting “a job on campus” also encouraged some students to interact more with domestic students and local people. One participant, who worked in the university

dining service, shared: “I think working experience did improve my English and I learned American's culture through my co-workers.” Utilizing the “counseling” service helped one participant tremendously in adjusting to life on campus.

Many participants reported trying to “get involved as much as possible” to connect to the campus as one participant wrote: “I am involved with International Students Fellowship. I meet many American families and international students.” Another participant “was a very active member of numerous student organizations.” Getting connected with the academic department was a way for one participant to adjust to college life in the U.S.: “I tried to work closely with the college (College of Journalism and Mass Communication) community.”

Getting involved on campus was reported by many participants to be the main avenue to connect and adjust to college life in the U.S. An overview of the participants’ on campus involvement revealed that they were involved in international student-focused groups, academic major-related groups, and personal interests or hobbies groups.

Most of them, unsurprisingly, are involved with international student focused organizations. The international student focused organizations mentioned by the participants were:

- Lincoln International Networking Community-LINC
- International Student Organization-ISO
- Iranian student organization
- Indian Student Association
- African student organization
- International Students Fellowship- ISF
- UNL Korean student association
- Nebraska University Malaysian Student Association-NUMSA

Muslim students associations  
 International Students Club-for athletes  
 Cultural Ambassadors  
 Lincoln Foreign Friend Society

Academic related groups are also popular among international students. Some of the participants are involved with:

Student in Free Enterprise  
 Department student committee  
 Department of agricultural economics graduate student organization  
 "IEEE- electrical engineer organization  
 School of Natural Resources Graduate Student Association (SNRGSA)  
 The food science club  
 "PSGSA - through department of study  
 AiChe UNL  
 American Institute of Architecture Students  
 Tau Sigma National Honor Students Association  
 Actuarial Science Club

Participants are also involved in various other student organizations that fit their personal interests and needs:

Student in Free Enterprise  
 Photo club  
 ITE student chapter  
 Bruners club  
 Extreme Christian group  
 UNL taekwondo club  
 SIFE, BMES  
 Ping pong club: natural interest  
 Tau Sigma  
 Golden Key  
 Phi- U  
 Foto-unl  
 Queer Student Alliance  
 Campus Crusade for Christ - a few Christian friends invited me to join  
 The human rights and human diversity project  
 SAAC- Student Athlete Advisory Committee  
 Track and Field Leadership Council  
 Indian Student Association  
 Rotary club

UNL vegetarians and vegans club  
ISA, SIFE, HLUG

Many participants also discussed the benefits of campus involvement in their personal and social lives. Most of them reported that campus involvement helped them “meet new people,” “get more experience,” “know more about local community culture,” “develop social skills,” and “expand my vocabulary.” One participant summed up the benefits of being involved on campus: “It will help with adjusting to life at UNL and Lincoln.”

“Making new friends is a great way to fertilize one's social life,” stated one participant. Many participants reported making new friends as one of the major positive results of campus involvement. One participant found that being involved on campus “helps by putting you in contact with other students with the same major or similar interests, which facilitates the development of friendships.” Getting involved on campus also expanded one participant’s connections with the university staff:

It helps interact with others, make new friends, learn [from] staff (either academic knowledge by attending seminars/conferences organized by these organizations; or about life in general by attending special meetings dealing with certain topics (such as women is science meeting etc.).

Creating shared experiences is another way being involved on campus could help international students strengthen friendships: “It allowed for me to create shared experiences with people who went on to be good friends.”

Participants also reported having learned new skills and information through their involvement on campus. One participant shared that being involved helped him/her “understand the processing and operation of the organization.” “Interacting with others



helped to develop social skills,” stated another participant. Involvement in student organization also “can provide more information” about what is going on on campus. “Being in an org help you know more and learn more,” wrote one participant. Developing communication skill is another benefit of being involved: “Through that we will come to know many people and talk to them develop our communication skill.” Another participant concurred: “Being involved in activities on campus has given me the opportunity to meet new people and make new friends. It has also helped improved my communication skills.”

A large number of participants reported that being involved on campus help them “expand views,” “improve English skills,” “have more fun,” and “know more [about] Americans’ lifestyle, culture” at the same time. “You know more people, more chances of speaking English,” wrote one participant. Being involved also “helps interact with a variety of students.” “Interacting with different people from different backgrounds is always interesting,” reported one participant. Another participant elaborated: “Interacting with people and knowing how and what they think in general was a big help for me in understanding more about their cultures.” Another participant reported being benefited in several ways: “It helps me understand American culture better. Definitely helps my English and expand my vocabulary (worsens my grammar though). Also I get to go places and volunteer and meet important people from the community.” “Improve English skills, learn the new culture and have more fun,” concurred another participant. Being involved in student organizations also helps with academic life as one participant shared: “I have the chance to get to know more people and learn about their cultures. I also have

the chance to go on academic conferences in the Midwest which helps a lot in my studies.” Connecting to other people with similar interests is another benefit: “more opportunities to communicate with others in your field or in a similar situation with you.” “You meet new people and it helps you understand how things work better in USA,” reported one participant. Being involved on campus, according to one participant, could help international students in “getting closer to the life style of being an American university student [and] knowing more about local community culture.” Expanding views is another benefit that comes with meeting new people as one participant put it: “You meet people, which gives perspectives, other than the one that you are conditioned or have come to believe.” “More interaction with people of different culture would enrich one's experience here,” stated one participant. Another participant pointed out that being involved on campus also can provide “more entertainments along my academic life.” One participant shared his/her observation:

Of course, it is significant for international student to be involved in various organizations. The biggest mistake is to hang out with people from your own country. Unfortunately, many Asian students do that. It is a disadvantage for your communication skills. To improve one's English skills and learn about the American culture, you have to become friends with American students and professors.

### ***Most Memorable Experiences***

At the end of the survey, participants were asked to share comments on their most memorable experiences. The responses were a mix of negative and positive experiences. However, positive comments substantially outnumbered negative ones.

***Negative experiences.*** Most of the participants reported “homesickness” as a major drawback of studying abroad. Even though they “miss being home”, many

international students could not afford to go home for holidays due to financial reasons.

One participant shared that “airline tickets are very expensive.” “Staying away from family for an extended period” was a major difficult for one participant. “The negative part would be the fact that you are not so close to your family anymore and that could be a challenge,” concurred another participant. Shared one participant:

The only negative was that everything is a bit harder because I was in a new environment (don't know where to get health care, or what medicines you should take and how to get them), because I missed my family (and traveling back and forth), and because learning in English is a bit more challenging than learning in my own language. For example, at first I would only understand about 90% of what professors/students would say in class.

Personal changes are also reported to be a concern. A “disconnection” with the native culture or “root” was a negative change for one participant. “You become a strong capitalist, no more socialism, looking for interest everywhere,” concluded one participant. Another participant concurred: “I have a lot of friends become materialistic and they spent their parents’ money and live in luxury, such as buy nice car, buy many branded clothes, etc.” One participant shared:

One negative thing is - out of sight is out of mind - when you are away from near and dear of the past; you are not on the same page as they are. You are removed from those whom you have left behind, not just physically but in many other levels.

“Being away from home... has the potential to drive you away from your culture. I did not experience this but I saw it with many friends,” noted one participant.

For some participants, having to adjust to the Midwest was a challenge. The weather, unsurprisingly, was not so popular among international students. “All I can say is the crazy weather,” responded one participant when asked about negative experiences.

“It is too cold (especially in Nebraska),” concurred another participant. However, most comments were about the perceived lack of interest in global knowledge. One participant sounded emotional about the topic:

Nebraska-it is in the Midwest, nobody is interested in anything else than American football. No matter what Obama does it is by far not as good as how the Republicans would do. Nobody remembers what a dumb fool Bush was... It is hard to find open minded locals. They are very friendly but extremely superficial.

Another participant expressed similar experience: “Some Americans assume that Asians can't speak English and I have a bad experienced especially in group projects.” “Nebraska is a very conservative state, which makes it harder for Europeans,” noted another participant. One participant wrote: “Close-minded ethnocentric people have been a challenge to deal with.” Another participant reported having similar experience:

There are Americans who are blinded by their arrogance and ignorance. You should never judge others before getting to know them. I wish they would care more about other languages and cultures. It will be their downfall in the future.

One participant shared his/her perception about the U.S. as characterized by: “too much individualistic, lack of respect for other cultures and ideas.”

Some participants reported having negative experiences with professors/advisors.

One participant wrote: “In UNL professors are biased towards American student.

Sometimes they behave as racist.” Another participant shared that “dealing with advisors/professors who think that international students are not well- informed” was a negative experience. The perceived lack of a voice in the advisor selection process was a problem for one participant:

Once student comes to US, he or she is stuck with the same advisor for rest of degree even if he does not like him. By the time he is confident enough to understand the things going on around him, he is quite ahead in his degree and

can't leave it without loss of a significant period of time he already have spend in his lab. There should be an open, confidential and supportive system after six months of student's arriving here to ask for his likings and experiences and he should be given a very friendly opportunity to change lab if he needs. This will also push the advisors to be more supportive if they like the student.

Aside from typical student-faculty conflicts, international students sometimes have to deal with legal problems. "Feeling powerless and being threatened that if "the boss" is not made satisfied someone would get thrown out of the country - is very BAD," reported one participant. Another participant exclaimed: "Too much forms and other stupid stuff that you have to deal with daily because you are not an American citizen."

Some participants reported having negative experience with some services on campus. One participant shared: "health center - they don't care. Bad experiences with dental office, very bad!! Sometimes would seem like all that matters to people is materialistic things." Another participant concurred:

The Health Center is just not supportive enough. One time my feet had much blood due to new shoes and I walked all the way there to ask for two bandages (10cents each), and they had to direct me to the pharmacy to purchase. I didn't have cash with me. Basically, my health insurance through UNL doesn't even qualify me for two bandages a semester.

The frustrating experiences with services on campus were shared by another participant:

I have had some very bad and negative experiences from the people who works in the student insurance office located in Health Services, she thinks she is making me a favor, and from one lady who works in the cafeteria who asked me to speak English because English is the official language of the university...Is that right? What about diversity? This kind of people destroys the university image...

***Positive experiences.*** As mentioned above, the positive comments from the participants have substantially outnumbered the negative comments.

Many participants reported feeling more matured, independent, and open-minded as the result of having to adjust to their new life in the U.S.:

1. Studying in U.S is definitely a good thing for my life. It enables me to get to know about the world.
2. Positive: Experiencing and know how to handles this. Knowing that it is hard to find open minded locals. They are very friendly but extremely superficial."
3. Positive: see what it is like to live by yourself, helps your independence; make wonderful friends; learn how to interact with different people; understand that different cultures/people have different perspective on things; let some prejudices about people/cultures go
4. It gives you lot of confidence.
5. Independence and exposure
6. Positive: a lot of chances to practice English, make new friends, learn new culture, grow more independent at a younger age ...
7. Positive: Open mindedness.
8. Positives are being alone without a comfort zone and the negative could be the same
9. Positive parts are: it made me more open to difference, more hard working, more direct and straight-forward, more communicative, more knowledgeable in various areas, more prepared for advanced academic and career success, more skilled in human-relations.
10. Study more, learn more, see more-positive
11. Helps you to become independent and mature
12. Pro: experience new things
13. The positives are obvious: you feel comfortable in interacting with others because the US has a very good mix of people from very different cultures and it is also a country that encourages people to be proud of their roots.
14. Many cultures gather here and there's a lot to learn from everyone.

15. Become more mature; more independent; widen my horizon; feel more culture
16. Improve English, know a new culture and a new country in good conditions
17. Positive things: I become more independent-thinking and more responsibility. Besides, I get a chance to know people from different countries and I enjoyed listening different stories from different people.
18. Positive: independence
19. Advantages: Being able to become independent; started doing the herculean works that I never done; can learn American Culture, American Culture used to be more open-minded compared with Malaysia.
20. It expanded my horizon. Gave me a new point of view and take in life. I feel more empowered in making decisions everyday and I am encouraged to better the community that I live in.
21. Learn more about different culture, and know my own culture better.
22. It is always a positive thing to learn about a new culture, US is a very diverse society in my opinion.
23. Exposure and independence are the positive.
24. Positive: Different kind of work experience; Personality opens more to global level; It makes us understand about feelings of people from different nations.
25. Diversity gives me an opportunity to get to know people from many different walks of life. Although I find that being a student is very stressful, I find that when professors are tough on us, we learn so much more and are more likely to be able to deal with the working world someday.
26. Positive: It helps people become more mature and independent. And it is also a good choice for advanced professional study.
27. Positive: Very open minded people, very supportive and understanding and makes me feel comfortable in my own skin.
28. You get a great experience and get to know about other cultures.
29. Meet a lot of new people and get to know yourself in a new way.

30. "Positive: more independent; more outspoken and outgoing; widen eyesight; more confident in dealing with human relationship.
31. Positive: learning new culture, expanding the knowledge horizons, experiencing the latest technological innovations.
32. Positive: Better language, familiar with American life, Academic Environment, Paid study
33. One can make anything out of oneself, here in the U.S. of A. If so called /positive/ things happen to me i.e. if things that happen to me are /positive/, I've earned it and so is vice-versa.
34. It definitely has taught me to be self-sustaining and independent. I mastered my English and got a chance to learn practical journalism skills and have practical experiences that would never have been possible at home.
35. Studying abroad makes a person more independent and mature. While being far away from home, a person will learned to make the right decisions for him/her self from academic, social to financial decision.
36. On the one hand, I have amazing American friends who care about me very much. We call each other every single day. Sometimes I forget that I am from somewhere else. They make me feel home.
37. Positives- get exposed to different cultures; learn from experts in their fields; socialize with new people.
38. Being alone forces you not only to stand on your own but to humble yourself and seek help from others.
39. Positive: More experience and challenge
40. Good: new culture, new horizon, new friend, new lifestyle,

The participants also shared appreciation for the quality of the U.S. educational system and opportunities for professional development:

1. Positive: academic oriented
2. Help to learn English faster...
3. Exceptional education in my field
4. Cultural diversity (learning about the US)



5. Very focused educational system
6. Good academic institutions, research opportunities, and possibly improved job availability.
7. I like the fact that they have T.As in every of my courses. These TAs helped a lot in my studies.
8. Positive: More opportunities to work and discuss with people from different background; more opportunities to attend high level conferences.
9. "Positive - language improvement, cultural and academic experiences
10. Positive: Good quality education and research, experience with working with various people, learning the good things of a great nation
11. Positive: course structure is very dynamic. It emphasizes on practical understanding more than theoretical.
12. Positives: great scientists and leaders in my field, great courses, availability of equipments, good laboratories and facilities in general, great opportunity to learn how to be independent and take responsibilities, great chance to make friends from all over the world...
13. Positives- The education system here is amazing. It actually prepares you for the outside world. Hands-on training with equipment, when you work with a professor, is another positive.
14. The other positive is that there is a lot of cutting edge research going on so you feel more knowledgeable in your field.
15. Teaching is an important soft skill that is not taught in European classrooms.
16. Quality in my field (biological sciences).
17. Positive: You are in the U.S.; your school and studies are acknowledged worldwide; you can be the best if you want ad if you work enough for that.
18. I was really amazed by the huge amount of available materials here at UNL. It is really enjoyable to read several sources.
19. I think studying abroad is a very good opportunity for my future career. The academic program is very strong and the best in the world, in my opinion.
20. Positive: learn tons of knowledge.

21. We will get practical knowledge... More matured and [learned] how to handle things independently. How to handle lots of work at a time.
22. Superb resources, good lecturers, vibrant and exciting life on campus.
23. Good education (quality)
24. Advantages: high level of education, independent life, learn how to be a hard working person, have good experience after graduation (job opportunity)
25. As media and political science major, I have found the U.S. an ideal country to study those fields of study. You find almost someone from every country. You can learn from many other people and culture without going to their countries.
26. GREAT research opportunity
27. Better sources for scientific research
28. Positive - better education and better understanding of an international community.
29. I like the education system (except for the tuition). Many classes offer hands-on projects.
30. education quality, international experience
31. The graduate studies system is great, with such personalized attention and closely working and discussing with very knowledgeable people.

Even though the comments were written in different ways and forms, they reflected some major themes of positive experiences: the quality of UNL education, personal development and accomplishments, exposure to diversity, and formation of friendships with other international students and the locals.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Suggestions and Recommendations**

The participants' comments painted a holistic picture of their experiences at and perceptions of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. While most of the comments reflected positive experiences, some participants did express concerns about various aspects of their experiences. Based on the current study's findings about those concerns, the author has comprised a list of recommendations for future development of international student affairs and suggestions for future research.

#### ***Student Affairs Recommendations***

##### ***1. Designate an Office in Student Affairs for International Students***

Many participants mentioned International Affairs as their main point of contact with the university. While the International Affairs staff and programs were perceived as being very helpful, some participants reported feeling like the staff in International Affairs were too busy to help all international students. Their concerns are real. With almost 2000 international students at UNL, it is understandable that the International Affairs staff would be short-handed in addressing all the needs of international students. Also, the legal regulations pertaining to international students have grown significantly more sophisticated over the past few years. Record keeping and compliance matters have consumed a big part of International Affairs capacity. Although international students acknowledged the significance of legal compliance, they have other needs that would require efforts from the Student Affairs division. Some Students Affairs departments have implemented events and programs to address these needs. The International

Football, the International Basket Ball Kick-Off, and the Student Involvement Fair for International Students are among the efforts to help international students connect to the university community. However, in the Student Affairs division, there has been no designated office whose main mission is to support international students. This office or even just one staff/faculty member could serve as the bridge between International Affairs and Student Affairs services. While collaboration between International Affairs and Student Affairs has been strong, having a designated officer will help consolidate all the projects and show a great commitment to international students' well-being. This office or officer will have a wide range of knowledge about international students' legal requirement and challenges as well as services available for them in Student Affairs. Also, this office will collaborate with the Admissions Office to inform prospective students about the Student Affairs Division right at the point of initial contact. Ideally, this office should be located inside or near by the International Affairs office to ensure easy access for the students and enhance communication with International Affairs.

## ***2. Reach out to international alums about their perceptions, experiences, and suggestions***

It might take a few years for graduates to reflect on their college experience and realize what they could have done to make the most out of college. The same is true for international students. Since many international students return to their home countries after completing their study in the U.S., it could be difficult to track them down. However, with so many media social networks now, educational institutions could be creative with their approach to reach out to international alums. Surveying them about

their perceptions, experiences, and suggestions might be a great way to reconnect with them. These alums could provide insightful and reflective feedback on how they feel about their educational institutions. Also, reaching out to these alums could help improve or enhance the perception they already have about the institutions. Some participants in the current study reported that the main reason they chose certain institutions were because their parents, siblings, or friends were or had been studying at those institutions. For international students who are confronted with seemingly endless choices for a U.S. education and who do not know much about the U.S., it makes sense that many students would choose to attend the institutions that they heard about through friends and families. That is why reaching out to international alums should received more attention from educational institutions.

***3. Develop/enhance student leadership programs, seminars, or courses focus on bring international and domestic students together in a meaningful, cooperative, and open atmosphere.***

In this study, participants commented that they wished they had more positive interactions with domestic students. Also reflecting in many participants' comments is the frustration of not feeling accepted. One participant shared:

I can easily make international friends rather than making friends with Americans. Few of them are interested in what I'm interested in. They can be very nice and polite, but don't always want to make friends with me.

Professors may have the best intent when they mix international and domestic students together in group projects. However, if not done properly, group projects could make the international students feel even more isolated and ignored by their domestic

teammates. Interactions between international and domestic students should be well-thought out and carefully planned so that both groups are encouraged to share and work at a team. Having in-class ice-breaking activities or small group discussions before assigning big project groups could help the students warm up to one another and make international students feel more comfortable and confident participating in class discussion or group work. According to the author's informal conversations with international students who attended the 2009 LeaderShape program, all of them commented that they made new domestic friends that they would not have made back on campus, that they felt more confident in themselves and less intimidated by domestic students, and that they were going to get involved on campus more. The LeaderShape program is a great example of how an open and encouraging environment could help bring international and domestic students together. Meaningful interactions are the key to help foster positive relationships between international and domestic students.

#### ***4. Enhance diversity among the faculty and staff***

According to the UNL 2009-2010 fact book in the General Regular Faculty by Rank, Gender, and Ethnicity section; 15.75% of faculty are ethnic minority ([http://irp.unl.edu/dmdocuments/fb09\\_10.pdf](http://irp.unl.edu/dmdocuments/fb09_10.pdf)). The number ethnic minority among regular staff is a lot smaller, only 7.94%. Among the rank of full professors, only two out of 545 are female minority. These figures show that the university has been able to attract a larger percentage of minority individuals among faculty than among staff. However, many international students still could not find role models on campus due to the perceived lack of successful international staff or faculty. In an informal conversation, an

international student expressed that he was excited to see the author working in an office staff position since most of the international individuals he has encountered work in dining hall or custodian services. UNL administrators have been focusing on promoting diversity among faculty and staff. However, special efforts are needed to specifically attract and retain international talents, individuals to which international students could relate to.

***5. Strive to have someone who could advocate for international students on campus***

There are strong traditions and well-respected individuals on campus to advocate for ethnic minority students. However, there appears to be a lack of individuals among high-ranking faculty or administrators who are strong advocates for international students. If there are such individuals, they need to be more vocal and visible since most international students do not know about them. International students need such individuals to advocate for programs and administrative decisions benefiting international students. One might argue that international students just stay here for a few years while other ethnic minority groups stay here permanently. However, international students are in effect informal ambassadors from other countries. Also, as a special student population at UNL, they deserve to receive just as much attention and support as other minority groups do.

***6. Establish a Student Leaders for Diversity Forum***

Another way to promote support for international students is to create an annual event similar to the Empowerment Forum and the LeaderShape program to bring student leaders from international student groups, minority student groups, and other student

groups together. This forum could be named Student Leaders for Diversity Forum. This event will specifically target student leaders who are interested in promoting diversity at UNL. Special efforts should be made to reach out to international student groups' leaders to build a bridge between international students and the university. These student leaders could be sponsored to attend one weekend of activities and discussion about diversity and leaderships. This event could be a combination of the Empowerment Forum and LeaderShape. Students attending this event will have a chance to interact with faculty and staff, build their leadership skills, and enhance their knowledge about how to promote an inclusive atmosphere on and off campus.

#### ***7. Establish/enhance peer mentor programs in department***

There are certain majors and departments that attract more international students than others. According to the 2009 Open Doors report (IIE, 2008), business and engineering are the most popular fields of study for international students in the U.S. This national trend is well reflected at UNL. International students in other major such as journalism, arts, and nutrition could face even more perceived isolation due to the lack of fellow international students in their department. Academic departments could take the initiative to organize international student peer mentor programs. The peer mentors could be domestic students or international students who have been successful academically and socially at UNL. Even though International Affairs has a peer mentor program in place, LINC; it was not tied to academic majors. LINC mentors might not be equipped to answer major related questions. This academic peer mentor program could be established with a small budget. One graduate student could be in charge of coordinating the



program. Mentors could be compensated as student workers. These programs could create more on-campus jobs opportunities for international students as well as provide them with valuable leadership experience.

#### ***8. Establish a Coalition for World Culture***

UNL has more than 100 countries represented in its international student population. However, only a few groups of students such as China, Japan, or Malaysia have been able to form functioning student associations and put on sound cultural events. Students from other countries or regions such as French or Albania have expressed interest in sharing their cultures. However, they do not have the means to do so due to the small numbers of students. UNL could help establish a Coalition of World Culture comprised of all international student group representatives as well as interested domestic student groups. This Coalition should be placed directly under the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs office to encourage memberships and will serve as a coordinating agency for member groups. Members of the coalition will attend weekly or bi-weekly meeting to share their cultures, build leadership skills, and assist one another in cultural events. There is a need for a coordinating association for all the international student groups on campus to enhance collaboration among the groups, promote cultural sharing, and represent international students in student government or administrative issues. Also, a unified international student population might be able to enhance international students' position and visibility in the campus community.

### ***Further Research Directions***

#### ***1. Identify the gaps in expectations between international students and staff/faculty***

The current study explored international students' experiences through international students' perspective only. There are other constituencies involved in the international education field. Research on UNL staff and faculty's perception of international students could be helpful in identifying the gaps between staff and faculty's and international students' regarding expectations and opinions. Understanding these gaps is necessary to develop or improve programs targeting international students and to provide appropriate support for staff and faculty in dealing with international students.

#### ***2. Research best practices in recruiting and retaining international students***

Studies about best practices in recruiting and retaining international students should be conducted to identify the best ways to attract and keep international students. Students have different learning styles. International students might have a different mindset about what learning means. However, assuming that their learning styles are solely determined by their cultures could run the risk of overgeneralization. Individual backgrounds and personalities are important factors. Although researchers acknowledged the influence of their culture, they need to find ways to study objectively the most effective ways to teach and support international students.

#### ***3. Explore domestic students' experiences with international students***

Although the relationships between international students and faculty and staff are important in the students' success, domestic students also play a role in international students' academic and social lives. Studies of domestic students' perception of and

experience with international students are needed to identify the factors influencing interactions between domestic and international students. These studies could help inform faculty and staff of ways to design meaningful interactions that foster positive relationships between domestic and international students.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Survey Questions**

## SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. What year are you in school?
2. How many years have you been studying at UNL?
3. What is your gender?
4. What is your major?
5. What is your country of origin?
6. Why did you choose to come to study in the U.S.? Please choose all that apply!
7. Please rate your experience when you first arrived at UNL (The atmosphere, diversity level, food, language, classes, resident halls, airport pick up...).
8. Please rate your experience with life at UNL (classes, professors, residence halls, involvement...)?
9. Please rate your experience in interacting with professors, faculty, and other students (domestic or international) at UNL?
10. Please rate your difficulties in social and academic life as an international student (language barrier, culture shocks, food, lifestyle, ideas...)?
11. What have you done to help you adjust to life at the university and in the U.S as a whole? Please choose all that apply!
12. Have you received help from any individual or organization with your academic and social life since you have been in the U.S? Please describe some of the people or organizations that helped you out the most!
13. Are you in any organizations on campus? If yes, please list the organizations' names and describe how you got involved with them!

Are you in any organizations on campus? If yes, please list the organizations' names and describe how you got involved with them!

14. Do you think being involved in organizations and activities on campus help you develop your social and academic life? If yes, how? If no, why?

15. How have you changed personally, socially, and academically since you have been in the U.S? Please choose all that apply!

16. What made you change? Please choose all that apply!

17. Do you have any role models in the university to look up to? If yes, please describe your role models

18. If you have not had any role model here at UNL, please describe your ideal mentor that you would like to have on campus!

19. Given your personal experience, what do you think are the positive things about studying abroad in the U.S? What are the negative?

20. If you have any other experiences that you would love to share, please feel free to share with us!

**Link to the full survey on Survey Monkey:**

[http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=AMZGYhSDy\\_2fvqRK1x\\_2fTRzRQ\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=AMZGYhSDy_2fvqRK1x_2fTRzRQ_3d_3d)

## **Appendix B**

### **IRB Approval Letter**



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September 3, 2009

Anh Le  
Department of Educational Administration  
121 Centennial Mall S St Lincoln, NE 68508

Barbara LaCost  
Department of Educational Administration  
127 TEAC UNL 68588-0360

IRB Number: 20090910018 EX  
Project ID: 10018  
Project Title: Experience of international students at UNL

Dear Anh:

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

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Final Approval: 09/03/2009. This approval is Valid Until: 05/15/2010.

1. The approved informed consent email has been uploaded to NUgrant (First email to participants-Approved.doc file). Please use the text of this message to send to participants. The IRB# has been included in this document. If you need to make changes to the informed consent form, please submit the revised form to the IRB for review and approval prior to using it.

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

- Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that

indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;

- Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

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

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

Sincerely,

Mario Scalora, Ph.D.  
Chair for the IRB

