A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES WITH CROSS-CULTURAL INTERACTIONS AND THE STUDENT ADJUSTMENT PROCESS

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Joan Wilkinson Burkhardt

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Abstract

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand how everyday cross-cultural interactions affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students attending a private research university in the northeastern United States. To fulfill this purpose, three research questions were formulated as a foundation for this investigation: a/ What are undergraduate international students’ personal constructions of successful adjustment? b/ What is the nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students? c/ How do undergraduate international students describe the impact of university diversity initiatives for promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions? Data included nine semi-structured, in-depth interviews, four field observations, field notes, and documents. Data was analyzed using general inductive analysis, constant comparison, and included multiple coding strategies. Participants represented a range of demographics in keeping with the demographics of the site institution, including region of origin and gender. Other selection criteria included self-reported level of adjustment, year of study, and age range.

Findings show that undergraduate international students personally construct successful adjustment in terms of readiness to engage in a new intercultural environment, achieving balance, and a campus community that feels like home. The nature of cross-cultural interactions that affected adjustment is characterized by finding and embracing common ground and managing cultural tension. The impact of university diversity initiatives for promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions is described as creating an us/them divide, promoting solidarity, and establishing a cultural presence. From these findings, four salient conclusions were drawn. First, readiness to engage in a new intercultural environment – the practice of mentally preparing oneself to be flexible, adaptive, and take full advantage of new experiences – is the beginning of
the student adjustment process. Second, adjustment is a dynamic process that continues throughout undergraduate international students’ U.S. university experiences. Third, formal university events foster recognition of the campus diversity international students help provide, but their impact on everyday cross-cultural interactions is both positive and negative. Fourth, the mode by which undergraduate international students are introduced to their U.S. campus affects their integration and future interaction patterns.

Keywords: international students, cross-cultural interactions, intercultural interactions, diversity, adjustment, persistence, intergroup contact, higher education
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My cup runneth over.
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CHAPTER ONE: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

A 2002 initiative by the Association of American Colleges and Universities sought to identify paramount goals and hurdles for higher education in the twenty-first century. The resulting report included the recommendation that students be prepared to function proficiently in a diverse world. In an era of globalization, increasing diversity of domestic students in American higher education institutions (HEIs) is only one part of the equation to meet these recommendations. Supporting international diversity is the other part of the equation, which is an institutional imperative. Allan Goodman, President and CEO of the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2011a), stresses the importance of active engagement among U.S. and international students. He argues that exchanges between international and domestic students impart critical skills that will empower students to address global challenges via collaboration across national boundaries and cultures. In addition to creating internationally diverse populations on campuses, environments must be created in which cross-cultural interactions can thrive (Asquith, Bristow, Schneider, Nahavandi, & Amyx, 2011, 2011). Such environments should include sufficient numbers of internationally diverse students (Hurtado, 2005), as well as institutional programs that effectively promote frequent, positive cross-cultural interactions.

Frequent cross-cultural interactions in higher education settings have implications for students, their nations, and their world. For example, college students who interact with diverse peers demonstrate changes in social, cognitive, and egalitarian outcomes (Zuniga, Williams, & Berger, 2005) by their sophomore year in college (Hurtado, 2005). Specific skills include the ability to view the world from another’s perspective, take pluralistic views, and resolve conflict (Hurtado, 2005); frequent interactions also increase motivation, self-confidence, and cultural
awareness (Chang, Denson, Saenz, & Misa, 2006; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002).

American higher education institutions continue to actively recruit and matriculate international students, emphasizing structural diversity and the concept of “global education.” For the purposes of this study, structural diversity refers to the makeup (structure) of a student body; a “structurally diverse” campus is comprised of culturally, racially, ethnically, and/or nationally diverse students. According to *Open Doors 2011*, the number of new undergraduate international students enrolling at United States HEIs increased by 6.5% from the 2009-2010 to the 2010-2011 academic year (IIE, 2011c), and growth is predicted to continue in the years ahead (IIE, 2011b). Bringing more international and domestic students together on U.S. university campuses does not automatically result in cross-cultural social interactions (Rose-Redwood, 2010; Ward, 2001).

Cross-cultural interaction, used interchangeably with “intercultural interaction,” is defined as a reciprocal experience or communication exchange with someone deemed by an interactant to be of a different ethnicity. Ethnicity refers to one’s belonging to a social group that shares a common national or cultural tradition. HEIs need to consider both frequency and quality of cross-cultural interactions to meet diversity recommendations. Simply recruiting international students is insufficient; typically, both international and domestic students seek others who have similar backgrounds, cultures or languages (Anderson, Carmichael, Harper, & Huang, 2009; Asquith et al., 2011; Cigularova, 2005). In order to succeed in an increasingly global world, it is necessary to interact and communicate in diverse settings and across diverse cultures. HEIs must foster these competencies, which “are often in short supply among graduates of higher education” (Engberg & Hurtado, 2011, p. 416) by promoting cross-cultural interactions in students’ everyday lives, not just in formal programs or in class.
Employers continue to seek college graduates who think analytically, problem-solve collaboratively, and interact and communicate effectively in diverse settings and with diverse individuals (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002; Bikson & Law, 1994; Engberg & Hurtado, 2011); thus, students who acquire these skills become stronger candidates in the workforce and have skills necessary to compete globally (Brustein, 2007). International students facilitate the acquisition of these skills by bringing an international perspective (Ward, 2001), challenging existing cultural and/or racial assumptions, enriching academic dialog and expertise, affording cross-cultural communication opportunities (IIE, n.d.), and increasing cultural and/or racial diversity on U.S. campuses. In that globalization calls for diversity on an international scale, HEIs encourage a strong international student presence. They must also ensure that international students have appropriate support and an environment that encourages mutually positive cross-cultural interactions. It is, therefore, the responsibility of HEIs hosting international students to provide effective diversity initiatives that help welcome and integrate international students into the university community. HEIs also need to facilitate the adjustment of international students to encourage academic and social success.

Despite the current and predicted growth of international students attending U.S. HEIs, few studies have addressed persistence in international students (Andrade, 2006), students’ first-year transition/adjustment experiences, and related university programming (Mori, 2000). Persistence, used synonymously with “retention,” is defined as continuous enrollment at one university. In order for an international student to persist, he/she must successfully adjust to the host environment. For the purposes of this study, adjustment is defined as the process through which a student acclimates socially and emotionally to life in a new environment (an American university) and culture (American culture). This study anticipates that adjustment affects
persistence. The quality and frequency of cross-cultural interactions in which international
students engage have the power to affect their adjustment and, in turn, their persistence at an
American university (Anderson et al., 2009; Cai & Rodriguez, 1996-7; Cigularova, 2005; Kegel,
2009; Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timini, 2004; Smith, Bowman, &
Hsu, 2007; Tochkov, Levine, & Sanaka, 2010).

At the turn of the millennium, Mori (2000) contended that international students “have
always remained one of the most quiet, invisible, underserved groups on the U.S. campus” (p.
143). Although many HEIs have developed diversity initiatives in an effort to address this issue,
adjustment is an individual process. Thus, the onus to adjust is often still left largely with
international students (Bevis, 2002; Lee & Rice, 2007). Diversity initiatives are defined as
programs and/or policies created by a HEI to encourage diverse (cross-cultural and/or cross-
racial) interactions; such interactions are shown to benefit adjustment (Anderson et al., 2009; Lee
& Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Designers of effective diversity initiatives view
adjustment as a shared responsibility between international students and HEIs; the institution
understands and accommodates the specific, individual needs of international students and
facilitates their adjustment process (Lee & Rice, 2007). While diversity initiatives may be
beneficial to international student adjustment and persistence, knowing the day-to-day cross-
cultural interactions in which these students are participating is essential to understanding how
adjustment is affected by these interactions. This understanding may help guide institutions in
addressing persistence in their host environments.

**Conceptual Framework**

This study explored the day-to-day cross-cultural interactions in which international
students participated and the impact of these interactions on their adjustment to life at an
American university. Although formal university programs exist to foster cross-cultural interactions and support the adjustment process, they may not be sufficient. The conceptual framework that informed how this phenomenon was studied is a convergence of elements of Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux’s (2005) social psychological perspective of intercultural contact and Russell and Petrie’s (1992) adjustment model, which emerges from the field of counseling psychology. Dixon et al.’s (2005) perspective served as a lens for exploring the everyday cross-cultural interactions of undergraduate international students, including the meanings and constructs they used to make sense of these interactions. Russell and Petrie’s (1992) adjustment model provided a framework by which formal institutional intervention programs – in the case of this study, university diversity initiatives – were understood and assessed. Given that adjustment and persistence are critical to international students’ success, the following conceptual framework facilitated an understanding of how participants constructed meaning from their everyday cross-cultural interactions. It also guided an exploration of how social and/or environmental factors and institutional interventions may have affected both cross-cultural interactions and adjustment.

A discussion of the conceptual framework will begin with Gordon Allport, as his work is necessary for understanding modern intergroup contact research. Next will be a critique of traditional contact research, followed by Dixon et al.’s (2005) perspective of intercultural contact. This section will include discourse on the importance of considering everyday interactions and individuals’ personal constructions of their interactions with others. Adjustment research will then be introduced, followed by a discussion of Russell and Petrie’s (1992) adjustment model. This section will focus on social and environmental factors affecting cross-
cultural interactions: social support and campus environment, social adjustment, and program/institutional interventions.

**Perspectives on Intergroup Contact Research**

Intergroup contact research stems from the field of social psychology. Leading social psychologist Gordon Allport (1954) investigated strategies education systems could employ to promote intergroup contact, thereby increasing communication and reducing prejudice among groups of students. This study viewed international students as a group on HEI campuses; intergroup contact included contact with other international student sub-groups (e.g., based on ethnicity or nationality) and/or contact with other campus groups (e.g., home nation students, faculty, staff) and sub-groups (e.g., Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Muslim-Americans).

Allport’s (1954) seminal contact hypothesis has long been regarded as one of the most influential contributions to social psychological research (Brewer & Brown, 1998), particularly concerning the reduction of prejudice and discrimination and facilitating desegregation. He identifies four conditions ideal for optimal contact between groups: (a) equal status among groups in a situation, (b) common goals, (c) intergroup cooperation, and (d) support of law, customs, and authority. For example, both international and domestic students might be “equal status” in that they are university students and share goals such as passing courses and achieving degrees. Students from each group may work on class or community projects together and are supported by university programs and policies. Allport (1954) acknowledges, however, that such contact may result in intergroup members becoming acquaintances, but may not spawn communication that results in friendliness; more intimate relationships are likely to increase acceptance and understanding among groups. Thus, Pettigrew (1998) adds a fifth optimal condition: (e) the contact situation should have the potential for friendship to evolve. Within
these overarching conditions, intergroup contact researchers have created an extensive list of specifications for facilitating optimal contact situations. For example, ideal contact should:

- be personal;
- occur regularly and frequently;
- have the potential to result in acquaintances and/or authentic friendships;
- occur across various social situations and settings;
- be considered important by participants;
- occur between equal status individuals;
- be organized around cooperation toward a common goal;
- be institutionally sanctioned;
- be anxiety and negativity-free; and
- occur with individuals considered “typical” of another group.

According to the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), the more contact one has with people of various cultures, races, and ethnicities, the more tolerant one becomes toward members of those groups (Torngren, 2011); however, as evidenced by the recommendations above, this does not mean generalized contact. For example, in order to maximize tolerance, contact is recommended to occur in non-competitive, anxiety-free situations among individuals sharing equal status who are each typical of a specific yet different group. Higher education environments are competitive and may produce anxiety. Such formulaic, prescriptive conditions provide a model by which the contact hypothesis may be tested in ideal circumstances; however, in the context of today’s highly globalized HEI campus environments, such a model is insufficient. What traditional contact research (e.g., Allport, 1954) has not explained is how these conditions might relate to the experiences of actual people in everyday situations (Dixon et
Moreover, it focuses on contact, or, bringing diverse groups together, but lacks methods to move beyond contact and promote intercultural interactions and relationship building. Allport (1954) acknowledges that such intimacy is essential to cultural sensitivity.

Critics of traditional contact research (Bramel, 2004; Dixon et al., 2005; Halualani, 2010; Pettigrew, 1998) argue that a strategy that seeks to identify and explain optimal conditions within which contact should occur is fraught with limitations. For example, according to Dixon et al. (2005), the prescriptive conditions presented are idealistic and may not occur naturally in common practice. Additionally, traditional contact research ignores personal, individual constructions and meanings of contact and resilience. It disregards participants’ own sense-making within the context of their individual circumstances.

Pettigrew (1998) adds that Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis is laden with facilitative, yet non-essential stipulations; these conditions and their effects may not generalize to other people, groups, or situations, particularly in an everyday context. For example, a cross-cultural interaction occurring after class between an international student and his/her American professor may not be anxiety-free and may not be considered an equal status cross-cultural interaction; however, this interaction could still positively affect the adjustment of an international student. The student might leave the interaction with a better sense of social or academic expectations in the American classroom. Further, the learning garnered through this interaction could affect the student’s desire to persist, particularly if such interactions continued to occur over time, in an everyday context. Dixon et al.’s (2005) perspective of intercultural contact informed this study by drawing attention to the importance of everyday, seemingly unremarkable or non-idealized cross-cultural interactions and their potential impact on the student adjustment process.

Moreover, their perspective shows that in order to maximize the benefits of contact, participants
must move beyond simply being in the presence of one another; they must engage in intercultural interactions.

**Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux’s (2005) Perspective of Intercultural Contact**

In order to move beyond the limits of the contact hypothesis and promote research that improves interventions that apply to an increasingly globalized world, this study was framed by Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux’s (2005) perspective of intercultural contact. The authors suggest research in four areas that may help shift thinking from ideal, prescriptive contexts to everyday contexts and personal constructions (adapted from pp. 703-707): (a) mundane encounters between groups, (b) participants’ personal constructions of their interactions with others, (c) political ideology and the reproduction of inequality, and (d) comparative analysis. Of these four, the first two extensions were most applicable to this study and will be addressed further in the following sections.

**The significance of the “everyday.”** Dixon et al. (2005) argue that researchers must move beyond the study of optimal contact. Instead of focusing on contact that occurs under ideal, often rare conditions, the authors advocate research “on the mundane, seemingly unimportant encounters that constitute the overwhelming majority of everyday contact experiences” (p. 703). The authors use “mundane encounters” to describe interactions that occur in an everyday context and may seem, on the surface, to be unremarkable, uneventful, or non-ideal. Awareness of such interactions may help designers of university diversity initiatives, for example, to understand the varying social exchanges occurring between groups, their contexts, the communication processes of participants, and barriers and motivators to interaction. Such knowledge may be useful for knowing what situations and contexts might be most conducive to successful interventions.
Dixon and Durrheim (2003) and Lee (2000) conducted studies exploring both cross-racial interaction and avoidance practices that might otherwise have been disregarded if Allport’s (1954) contact perspective had been employed. By studying “mundane” contact experiences, researchers in both studies found that everyday contact experiences often had the power to reinforce or exacerbate racial divides. This research demonstrates the potentially profound insight that may be revealed by observing cross-cultural interactions occurring in natural, everyday settings.

Dixon et al. (2005) argue that traditional contact theory (Allport, 1954) might lead researchers to ignore everyday exchanges as meaningless or peripheral to ideal contact conditions; however, casting aside detailed information about ordinary interactions prevents researchers from understanding the wider implications of such exchanges. In doing so, researchers “cannot appreciate the nature and variety of ordinary encounters...and, by implication, the full range of situations in which interventions can, or should, be attempted” (Dixon et al., 2005, p. 704). By focusing on ideal conditions or ways to socially interact, a holistic view of how, when, and why social interactions occur and what can be done to encourage frequent, positive interactions is not achieved. Dixon et al.’s (2005) perspective on the significance of “mundane” contact was used to achieve a holistic view of the relationship between cross-cultural interactions and adjustment in this qualitative study.

**Personal constructions of interactions.** Dixon et al. (2005) challenge the field to move beyond formal classifications of contact by considering personal constructions of interactions with others. This study defines personal constructions as the practices and interpretive frameworks used by people who are attempting to make sense of their everyday cross-cultural interactions. In day-to-day life, contact may take on many meanings and occur within a wide
range of social dynamics and practices. The authors charge that academic research has “defined, measured, and operationalized” (p. 704) contact by creating a finite set of general, optimal conditions. Dixon et al. (2005) argue that this methodological approach may not align with the practices and interpretive frameworks used by people who are attempting to make sense of their everyday interactions. That is, their personal constructions may not be the same as the concepts created by social psychologists.

Connolly’s (2000) study illustrates what may happen when predetermined frameworks, such as those set forth by the contact hypothesis, are imposed on contact experiences without considering the personal experiences of people as they relate to others: instead of bridging a divide and building friendly relationships, bringing two cultural groups together exacerbated factional beliefs and hostilities. The author argues that to know why this occurred, it is imperative to solicit participants’ personal perspectives within the context of the event. Thus, Dixon et al. (2005) present a new framework “that proceeds not from a top-down imposition of pregiven categories but from a detailed, bottom-up analysis of participants’ own frameworks of meaning as they are applied within particular social contexts” (p. 704). This alternative framework does not attempt to nullify Allport’s (1954) model; rather, it presents a supplement to existing contact research in order to achieve a more holistic view of contact situations.

Dixon et al. (2005) argue that cultural communities may have different, even contradictory ideas of the meaning of contact (e.g., Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2006). These culturally rooted beliefs may have significant implications for interventions intended to encourage group interactions; these beliefs may also help explain when and/or why certain contact experiences are successful or not. Knowing the unique ideas held by culturally diverse international students regarding the meaning of contact may be invaluable to this researcher and
the wider academic community for understanding what makes contact meaningful in positive terms. This knowledge may be useful for creating diversity initiatives that promote such interactions in everyday practice.

**New Directions: Recovering Personal, Individual Constructions of Everyday Interactions**

Dixon et al. (2005) succinctly and effectively offer the charge this researcher chose to accept:

What is crucial, then, is that researchers pay closer attention to the voices and concerns of ordinary people. They must adopt methods of data collection and analysis that are adequate to the diversity and contextual specificity of lay constructions of the meaning of contact. In this way, they may begin to bridge the gulf between contact as it is operationalized in the psychological literature and contact as it is understood, evaluated, and practiced in ordinary life. (p. 706)

**Perspectives from Adjustment Research**

Literature on adjustment to higher education settings stems largely from the field of counseling psychology. Existing research and theoretical perspectives on adjustment focus primarily on issues such as mental and physical health, strategies for adaptation and coping, and transition and change. For example, international students often face depression, which may equate to personality type (Beck, 1983) or the manner in which a student reacts to grief (Tochkov et al., 2010). Homesickness is another common issue affecting international student adjustment. Abrupt loss of propinquity to friends and family is argued to be the primary reason for stress and homesickness among international students during the transitional period from home to new environments (Fisher, 1989). Research related to these issues, including acculturative stress, adaptation, homesickness, and culture shock literature, are included in a
review of the literature, as such adjustment issues are shown to affect and be affected by everyday social interactions.

In selecting a conceptual framework to guide an investigation of how to help students facing these issues, it was critical to identify a model that included the role of institutions in understanding these social and environmental issues and creating effective interventions to help students adjust. In order to help students persevere, interventions ideally occur proactively to assist students during their initial community integration, before they become homesick, bewildered, and lonely (Lee & Rice, 2007; Anderson, Carmichael, Harper, & Huang, 2009). Thus, the model that seemed most applicable to this study was Russell and Petrie’s (1992) adjustment model. All of the elements included in this model are recognized to be significant to student adjustment; however, this study focused on social and environmental factors as they related to social adjustment.

**Russell and Petrie’s (1992) Adjustment Model**

Within the field of counseling psychology, Russell and Petrie (1992) present an organizing model of factors that influence the academic adjustment process of university students. The model shown in Figure 1 is divided into three primary sections: (a) Factors Predictive of Academic Adjustment and Success, (b) Academic Adjustment Outcome Variables, and (c) Interventions. For the purposes of this study, “success” will be defined as persistence. The first section, predictive factors, is divided into three content areas: academic, social/environmental, and personality factors. Factors related to home nation and family are not included. The second section, outcome variables, is divided into three variables: academic performance, social adjustment, and personal adjustment. Finally, the third section, interventions, is divided into two categories: interventions focused on counseling and/or skill,
and interventions that are focused on a program and/or institution. The authors argue that each of the domains, factors, and categories must be explored and evaluated in order to achieve the most holistic view possible; however, this study focused on social/environmental factors that affected cross-cultural interactions, specifically social support and campus environment, social adjustment, and program/institutional interventions. Figure 1 visually illustrates Russell and Petrie’s (1992) adjustment model and highlights, in grey, the focus of this study:

Figure 1. Academic Adjustment and Success Organizing Model
Adapted from Russell and Petrie (1992, p. 487).

A student’s peers and the campus environment within which he/she lives affect adjustment. Research demonstrates that psychological and physical health is positively affected by social support from peers and family. For example, according to Okun, Sandler, and
Baumann (1988), students who are socially unsupported and encounter negative life experiences perceive a lower academic life quality than students who are supported socially. Campus environment has the potential to positively or negatively impact students’ adjustment. Russell and Petrie (1992) contend that “students might increase their positive academic experiences by becoming more involved in their campus community and, particularly, by interacting socially with peers and faculty” (p. 493).

Russell and Petrie (1992) argue that considering “nonacademic variables” (p. 502) is important, in that students’ academic adjustment does not simply include academic factors; “the criteria for academic adjustment include students’ intrapersonal and social development” (p. 502). Although international students are part of a campus group that participates in the adjustment process, each student has his/her own, unique adjustment experience. Thus, both group and individual interventions would likely be most effective.

**Summary**

Together, elements of Dixon at al.’s (2005) perspective of intercultural contact and Russell and Petrie’s (1992) adjustment model were ideal for an examination of how university diversity initiatives affected the cross-cultural interactions and adjustment of international students within the context of their everyday lives at a U.S. university. This conceptual framework facilitated an understanding of what cross-cultural interactions both facilitated and inhibited adjustment from the perspective of international students. Moreover, it helped guide an exploration of personal constructions of successful adjustment.

**Problem Statement**

Given global trends and an increasingly diverse world, many HEIs recruit and matriculate international students. Research universities, whose mission is to expand international research
collaboration and production, are often especially active in their international recruitment efforts. Creating internationally diverse campuses is only part of the equation for capitalizing on the benefits of globalization. Campus environment is also critical, as it influences the potential for frequent, quality interactions (Hurtado, 2005) among international and domestic students. However, universities may become so preoccupied with discussing formal diversity initiatives and emphasizing structural diversity that they neglect to spend time fostering cross-cultural interactions among internationally diverse students (Rose-Redwood, 2010) and helping welcome and integrate international students into their university communities. Programs or events at many HEIs may be superficial efforts to appear conscious of the importance of international diversity (e.g., cultural festivals), without actually encouraging interactions among international and domestic students (Rose-Redwood, 2010). HEIs that do spend time developing diversity initiatives may be well-intentioned, but they may not know how these initiatives affect the daily lives of international students in practice.

Given how HEIs focus on formal programs, it is highly possible that a disconnect exists between what many U.S. HEIs think stimulates cross-cultural interactions and what actually encourages frequent cross-cultural interactions in international students’ everyday lives. Little literature offers insight that may help institutions ameliorate this gap. HEIs benefit from the diverse campus communities international students help provide; thus, it is the responsibility of institutions hosting international students to actively promote cross-cultural interactions among international and domestic students and help international students adjust to life at an American university. However, few studies explore the social experiences of international students studying at American universities; this paucity is particularly profound in qualitative studies of undergraduate international students. Moreover, existing adjustment literature discusses
adjustment processes in the context of pre-given frameworks (Ferraro, 1990; Winkelman, 1994); little research explores cross-cultural interactions in natural, everyday contexts and seeks to recover international students’ personal, individual constructions of successful adjustment.

In order to understand what a university might do to increase international student persistence, a private research university in the northeastern United States was identified that was ideal for this study. An eighty percent five-year persistence rate was the threshold for what was considered by this study to be a high persistence rate. The university exceeded this threshold for students overall, and the rate was even higher for international students. By studying a campus context in which the international student persistence rate was high, an opportunity existed to understand more about the role of formal university programs in facilitating student adjustment and how students were successfully adjusting. Qualitative methods were used to achieve the meaning and understanding this study sought.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to understand how everyday cross-cultural interactions affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students attending a private research university in the northeastern United States. Based on the intellectual goals, conceptual framework, and qualitative methodology of this study, three research questions were formulated as a foundation for this investigation:

1. What are undergraduate international students’ personal constructions of successful adjustment?
2. What is the nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students?
3. How do undergraduate international students describe the impact of university diversity initiatives for promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions?

**Significance of the Research Problem**

Understanding the experiences of international students is critical to HEIs in the United States in order to encourage social and academic development (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002) and healthy student adjustment (Anderson et al., 2009; Cai & Rodriguez, 1996-7; Cigularova, 2005; Kegel, 2009; Lee & Rice, 2007; Museus, 2008; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2007; Tochkov et al., 2010). Both international and domestic students transition into a new educational environment when entering college. However, international students must also face a new culture with customs, behaviors, and often a language very different from their own (Tochkov et al., 2010).

The absence, presence, and frequency of cross-cultural social interactions have notable influence on students and their potential for success, including healthy student adjustment. When students are isolated and lack support in their new environments, which may be the case with international students transitioning into life at an American university, they may not persist beyond their junior year (Scherer & Wygant, 1982). The diversity initiatives of a university play a crucial role in this regard; they may serve as interventions to facilitate the adjustment of this at-risk population, particularly when they commence early in students’ transition to U.S. campus life (Anderson et al., 2009; Lee & Rice, 2007; Scherer & Wygant, 1982).

The quality of cross-cultural interactions has been demonstrated to impact students’ long-term social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Hurtado, 2005). For example, students in Hurtado’s (2005) study who report positive interactions with diverse students are shown to be associated with such outcomes as interest in social and poverty issues, belief in the personal
power to exact social change, interest in race-based initiatives, and regard for the common good. Negative informal interactions are purported to reinforce group differences “rather than include a serious exploration of commonalities...when left to chance” (p. 601). Hurtado (2005) notes that frequency of interactions is important; however, controlling the quality of interactions is significant to positive outcomes. Both faculty and administrators, collectively and individually, have the power and responsibility to stimulate everyday cross-cultural interactions and promote healthy, nurturing environments for international students (Asquith et al., 2011).

Research that helps foster a deep understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and interpretive frameworks of international students as they make sense of their everyday intercultural interactions and adjustment processes may allow peers, faculty, and administrators to be more empathetic and supportive to a group of students who face critical challenges as they adjust to unfamiliar environments. Findings may be a significant asset to both my university and the wider academic community for creating diversity initiatives that facilitate adjustment and increase international student persistence. Dixon et al.’s (2005) model identifies the need to understand everyday interactions; Russell and Petrie’s (1992) model establishes the vital role of institutions in creating interventions to help students adjust. Thus, asking international students about their experiences with campus diversity initiatives in a daily context – what is and is not working to promote cross-cultural interactions and student adjustment – may assist in bridging the divide between structural diversity and diversity initiatives that effectively engage international students in frequent, quality (Hurtado, 2005) cross-cultural interactions (Rose-Redwood, 2010) and promote their adjustment to life at an American university.
Positionality Statement

As a qualitative researcher, I was the primary instrument in this study; that is, I interacted with participants and documented, interpreted, analyzed, and described my subject matter (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). As a human instrument, researcher bias – personal thoughts, feelings, opinions, and tastes – presented a concern. The site I chose for this study is both my alma mater and place of employment; thus, I was emotionally invested in the institution and it was convenient to sample. In order to minimize researcher bias, I phrased my interview questions as neutrally as possible and was mindful of my own body language, tone, and facial expressions during interviews so as not to lead interviewees. I utilized an inductive approach to data analysis (Merriam, 2002; 2009); that is, I allowed themes to emerge from data – from the participants’ words – as opposed to testing themes I had created beforehand.

I did not select present or former students or students with whom I had prior contact. I also did not solicit students from the continuing and professional education college population, at which I am a faculty member. Instead, I sought participants from the university student population who were likely not familiar with my college faculty role. I introduced myself to potential participants as a faculty member at the college, but also as a researcher from Northeastern University who was working on her doctoral thesis. I made it clear that my role in this study was doctoral researcher, not faculty member.

Definition of Terms

Adjustment: the process through which students acclimate socially and emotionally to life in a new environment (an American university) and culture (American culture)
**Cross-cultural interaction:** used interchangeably with “intercultural interaction;” a reciprocal experience or communication exchange with someone deemed by an interactant to be of a different ethnicity (see definition of ethnicity)

**Diverse:** showing a great deal of ethnic and/or racial variety

**Diversity initiatives:** programs and/or policies created by a HEI to encourage cross-cultural, cross-national, and/or cross-racial interactions

**Ethnicity:** refers to one’s belonging to a social group that shares a common national or cultural tradition

**Home nation students:** international students who originate from the same nation and/or culture

**Persistence:** used synonymously with “retention;” continuous enrollment at one university

**Personal constructions:** the practices and interpretive frameworks used by people who are attempting to make sense of their everyday cross-cultural interactions (adapted from Dixon et al., 2005)

**Structural diversity:** for the purposes of this study, refers to the makeup (structure) of a student body; a “structurally diverse” campus is comprised of culturally, racially, ethnically, and/or nationally diverse students
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand how everyday cross-cultural interactions affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students attending a private research university in the northeastern United States. Based on the intellectual goals, conceptual framework, and qualitative methodology of this study, three research questions were formulated as a foundation for this investigation:

1. What are undergraduate international students’ personal constructions of successful adjustment?

2. What is the nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students?

3. How do undergraduate international students describe the impact of university diversity initiatives for promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions?

Introduction

A significant opportunity exists for American colleges and universities to capitalize on the “benefits of diversity” (Chang, Chang, & Ledesma, 2005, p. 13) and consider what is and is not making international diversity effective in practice. In order to maximize the potential benefits a diverse environment can provide (Chang et al., 2005), HEIs must facilitate engagement (Anderson et al., 2009) by fostering meaningful relationships among internationally diverse students. Campus environment is essential to influencing frequent, quality interactions, which, in turn, generate benefits (Chang et al., 2006) such as healthy student adjustment and social and academic development (Gurin et al., 2002).
Using elements of Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux’s (2005) perspective of intercultural contact and Russell and Petries’s (1992) adjustment model, this study explored undergraduate international students’ everyday cross-cultural interactions and their personal constructs of successful adjustment. This study also investigated how international students perceived the effectiveness of their university’s diversity initiatives. This knowledge may help bridge the gap between structural diversity and diversity strategies that effectively engage students in frequent, positive cross-cultural interactions (Rose-Redwood, 2010) and promote persistence. Such knowledge may be invaluable to both this researcher and HEIs interested in understanding how their diversity initiatives may or may not be affecting international students in practice. The question used to guide this review is: How do the interactions among and perceptions held by ethnically and/or racially diverse international students at U. S. higher education institutions affect student adjustment?

Scope and Organization of this Review

This literature review will examine three interrelated bodies of literature: student interactions, international student perceptions, and student adjustment. Topics for review include benefits and barriers to interaction, the interdependent relationship among interactions, perceptions, and adjustment, and the significance of meaningful engagement to students, their nations, and their global community. This review will also consider the importance of quality and frequency in cross-cultural interactions, in addition to student perspectives on best practices for achieving consistent, positive interactions among diverse students. Finally, limitations found in the literature will be identified and a study designed to help fill these gaps will be introduced.

Although significant literature exists focusing on student interactions, perceptions, and student adjustment, it often focuses on students from a specific ethnic group, e.g., Chinese,
Asian-Indian, or Asian American students (Heggins III & Jackson, 2003; Lu & Hsu, 2008; Museus, 2008; Smith et al., 2007; Tochkov et al., 2010). This is not surprising, in that the top two places of origin for international students in 2009-10 were China and India (IIE, 2011a, p. 4). Additionally, limited literature is found concentrating on international students (Anderson et al., 2009; Cigularova, 2005; Kegel, 2009; Lee & Rice, 2007; Mori, 2000; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Rose-Redwood, 2010; Tochkov et al., 2010; Trice, 2004; Urban & Orbe, 2007). Thus, in an effort to inform this review, literature has been chosen that addresses diversity with regard to nationality, culture, ethnicity, and/or race.

Research demonstrates that university students understand and define “intercultural” and “culture” based on their perceptions of the race, nationality, or ethnicity of the student(s) with whom they are interacting (Halualani, 2010). In conducting a study on cross-cultural interactions and student perceptions of diversity programs, Rose-Redwood (2010) presents data based exclusively on a sample of students from a nation other than the United States. Other researchers/authors do not define “cross-cultural” in terms of geographic origin, and collect samples from ethnically or racially diverse students instead (Asquith et al., 2011; Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004; Chang et al., 2006; Engberg & Hurtado, 2011; Halualani, 2010; Hurtado, 2005; Museus, 2008; Smith et al., 2007). It must be made clear that this author does not assume international students will be of a specific or different race than the majority of students at the U.S. universities they are attending, although this may be the case. However, in an effort to collect recent, relevant, high-quality literature for this review, it is necessary to extend the parameters of “intercultural” or “cross-cultural” beyond “international.”
Student Interactions

Chang, Chang, and Ledesma (2005) stress the importance of not only comprising a diverse student body, but of assisting the “benefits of diversity” (p. 13). The authors assert that it is not sufficient to recognize the influence of informal contact and learning; it must be clear how to achieve these advantages of diversity. For example, institutions must commit to capitalizing on the benefits of diversity and then act to make that happen. Research demonstrates that providing opportunities for students to interact with diverse peers contributes to numerous advantages, including increased motivation, self-confidence, and cultural awareness (Chang et al., 2006; Gurin et al., 2002). Additionally, participating in inter-group discourse significantly affects students’ abilities to view the world from the perspectives of others and promotes pluralistic views (Hurtado, 2005). Recent research has questioned if cultural diversity on college campuses matters to students (Asquith et al., 2011). Chang et al. (2006) contend that if we are to know if diversity matters, we must first understand exactly what makes it effective or ineffective.

One major factor that affects intercultural communication is willingness to communicate (WTC). McCroskey and Richmond (1987) define WTC as the likelihood that a person will initiate conversation if presented with the opportunity. Lu and Hsu’s (2008) survey study on WTC in cross-cultural interactions between Chinese and American students presents several factors that affect intercultural WTC: motivation, communication apprehension, and self-perceived communication and language competence. Their findings suggest that American students have higher levels of WTC than Chinese students. Cultural differences are purported to be one possible explanation for this finding; the “Asiacentric style” (Lu & Hsu, 2008, p. 85) of Chinese students stresses group accord and silence, whereas the “Eurocentric” (Lu & Hsu, 2008, p. 85) style of Americans values direct, candid communication. Self-perceived language and
communication competence may also affect this finding, in that English is reported to be the language most commonly used in interactions between Chinese and American students. If competence in Chinese language is not critical to American students, they may be more confident, thus, more likely to initiate exchanges with Chinese students in English (Lu & Hsu, 2008).

One Indian male participant in Lee and Rice’s (2007) case study exhibits high levels of WTC, yet voices frustration at being thwarted from interacting and knowing more about the culture in which he is immersed. He articulates feeling excluded from everyday experiential opportunities with American students because he does not participate in the partying, drinking, and open sexual exchanges of his American peers. Cultural differences are a clear barrier to interaction in this case. However, it would be interesting to know the personality traits of students participating in these studies, as such attributes likely play roles in WTC and apprehension. For example, according to McCroskey and Richmond (1991), regardless of self-perceived communication or language abilities and cultural similarities or differences, a student who is more introverted by nature may become anxious in social situations. Such students are, therefore, less likely to initiate or respond to opportunities for engagement under the best of circumstances.

Evidence shows that comprising a racially/ethnically diverse campus is connected with higher frequencies of cross-racial interactions among college students (Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004; Engberg, 2007). However, heightened engagement is relative to perceptions of a positive racial climate (Jayakumar, 2008). Moreover, although increased campus diversity has been shown to correlate positively with White students’ patterns of cross-racial interactions, other racial/ethnic groups have not demonstrated the same consistent effects (Chang et al., 2004;
Engberg & Hurtado, 2011). Smith et al.’s (2007) survey study indicates that Asian and European American college students strongly prefer to associate socially with members of their own racial groups; these findings are consistent with studies of other groups; e.g., African-American students (Lee, 1993). The study also shows that Asian students feel more comfortable interacting with White students than Whites are socializing with Asians. This finding conflicts with Lu and Hsu (2008), who indicate that American students have higher levels of WTC than Chinese students. According to Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, and Armstrong (2001), several factors may account for this disparity, including whether or not students are competing directly for resources. For example, in Smith et al.’s (2007) study, White students are most comfortable interacting with Black students, and least comfortable socializing with Latino/a students. The study was conducted in a geographic location in the United States where the largest minority group is Latino/a; thus, the Latino/a population is likely to be perceived by White students as direct competition for resources. Other elements that may factor into this discrepancy include immersion time, perceived language competency, racism, and/or student backgrounds.

A significant challenge facing many universities who strive to capitalize on the benefits of diversity is students who come from homogenous school and community backgrounds (Engberg & Hurtado, 2011). More specifically, Engberg and Hurtado (2011) note that White students from homogenous racial/ethnic backgrounds may be more cautious and wary in their exchanges with diverse students, whereas Latino/a and Asian students demonstrate positive interactional outcomes from increased diversity. This difference could be due to Asian and Latino/a minority groups coming from more diverse community backgrounds. Additionally, perhaps because these students are members of minority groups with histories of enduring discrimination and prejudice, they might better recognize and be more open to cultural diversity
on campus (Asquith et al., 2011). Students experience diversity initiatives in different ways, thus merely engaging in them may not be sufficient to inducing pluralistic perspectives (Engberg & Hurtado, 2011). If diversity plans challenge students to evaluate their own varying social identities and those of others and foster more opportunities for groups to learn about one another, it is likely that students will develop more pluralistic views (Engberg & Hurtado, 2011).

In a case study by Rose-Redwood (2010), international graduate students offer perspectives, in their own words, on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of diversity initiatives in their daily lives at a U.S. university. This is the only study found by this author that focuses exclusively on how international students view the diversity initiatives in place at their institutions and, despite its attention to graduate students only, is considered by this author to be a valuable resource. Additionally, although no specific theoretical framework is overtly stated as guiding the study, its focus on individual student experiences and perceptions in an everyday context implies a conceptual framework similar to the one utilized by this author (Dixon et al., 2005; Russell & Petrie, 1992). It is, therefore, necessary to devote specific attention to a discussion of this study.

Many students interviewed in Rose-Redwood's (2010) study note that although events like weekly coffee hours and movie trips are offered by the university, only international students are invited to attend. Social interactions among American and international students is, thus, not encouraged. Additionally, international students who attend these events segregate socially by nationality or ethnicity. These findings support Dixon et al.’s (2005) argument that “ideal” or “artificial” conditions do not typically reflect everyday life and may be less effective at stimulating powerful interactions than everyday contacts. Ordinary, seemingly unremarkable contacts may become extraordinary social interaction patterns. Students in Rose-Redwood’s
(2010) study voice concern that although nationality clubs offer much-needed support to international students, they also isolate students by encouraging social segregation. Contrarily, Harper and Quaye (2007) contend that campus ethnic organizations are essential milieus for social involvement, racial and cultural identity development, and self-expression.

The role of faculty in encouraging cross-cultural social interactions is discussed in highly positive terms (Rose-Redwood, 2010). Students whose departments host regular social events indicate that they are more likely to socialize with diverse students, including Americans, other internationals, and co-nationals. Participants in a case study by Lee and Rice (2007) echo the importance of academic departments, noting that how welcome and comfortable an international student feels has much to do with department affiliation. Departments that do not actively promote social connections among students reduce engagement opportunities and increase social segregation (Rose-Redwood, 2010). Clearly, frequent department events are important venues for culturally diverse students and faculty to discuss topics related to their areas of study, shifting the focus from cultural differences/barriers to common interests. This finding concurs with intergroup contact research, which argues that dividends increase when intergroup contact occurs in a context of shared interests or goals.

Students in Rose-Redwood’s (2010) study make several recommendations for improving the quality and frequency of cross-cultural interactions: department socials, American-international student conversation partners, better campus-wide publicity of cultural events, pairing American and international students in classes, and offering assignments and activities that are inclusive of multiple cultures. Again, these findings highlight the importance of initiatives that promote cross-cultural interactions in a sustained, day-to-day context. One of the most striking inconsistencies found in the literature is with regard to university sponsored
cultural events. Asquith et al. (2011) discuss the benefits, from a researcher’s perspective, of international student groups that host events sharing a specific nation’s culture, food, and customs, for example. From a student’s perspective, these events may be viewed as superficial facades, in which a university does not know how to actually encourage interactions, but wants to present an appearance of diversity initiatives (Rose-Redwood, 2010). In this respect, Asquith et al. (2011) appear to recognize the importance of cultural diversity, but fall short of understanding its meanings and implications, in practice, to students themselves; that is, their study addresses the question of if diversity matters without really understanding what makes diversity effective in the first place. To achieve this, more research is warranted on the perspectives of international students regarding their views on effective and ineffective contexts and practices that encourage positive, everyday cross-cultural interactions.

Quality and Frequency of Interactions

The quality and frequency of cross-cultural interactions among students affect a number of outcomes. College students who interact with diverse peers demonstrate changes in social, cognitive, and egalitarian outcomes (Zuniga et al., 2005) by their sophomore year in college (Hurtado, 2005). More specifically, quality of interactions is shown to have an effect on students’ logical problem solving and complex thinking skills. Positive, meaningful interactions with diverse students are associated with such outcomes as heightened cultural awareness, interest in social issues, belief in the personal power to exact social change, and the ability to take another’s perspective (Hurtado, 2005). Whether interactions are positive or negative has marked affects on achievement and development, respectively (Engberg, 2007). Establishing quality connections with fellow students, domestic or international, correlates negatively with
homesickness and stress among international students, and quality is demonstrated to matter more than frequency of interpersonal interactions with regard to this issue (Kegel, 2009).

Frequency of interactions is, however, also important. The more opportunities students have to communicate in a second language, for example, the more likely it is that their communication skills will improve; in turn, the likelihood that foreign students will initiate conversations with native speaking students increases (Lu & Hsu, 2008). Lu and Hsu (2008) argue that non-native speakers become more willing to communicate with native speakers the longer they are immersed in a foreign country. Frequent interactions also provide students with opportunities to practice democratic skills and conflict resolution (Hurtado, 2005).

An extant survey study by Chang et al. (2006) indicates that students who have higher frequencies of cross-racial interactions demonstrate more dividends since starting college than students with fewer cross-racial interactions. Of the outcomes tested – “Openness to Diversity, Cognitive Development, & Self-confidence,” (Chang et al., 2006, p. 449) – frequent cross-racial interactions have the most significant effect on openness to diversity. It is worthy of note that interaction frequency is dependent upon adequate numbers of diverse students on campuses, in departments, classrooms, and extracurricular venues (Hurtado, 2005). Having a limited population of minority groups (e.g., African or Latino/a Americans) on campuses hampers attempts, even from the most eager students, to interact with diverse groups in a frequent, everyday context. As a result, when international students do socialize, it is often more likely to be with dominant culture (White American) students, and/or fellow international and home nation students (Rose-Redwood, 2010).

Controlling the quality and frequency of cross-cultural interactions is significant to positive outcomes (Chang et al., 2006; Engberg, 2007; Engberg & Hurtado, 2011; Gurin et al.,
2002; Hurtado, 2005; Kegel, 2009; Lu & Hsu, 2008; Zuniga et al., 2005). Whether it is the responsibility of administrators and/or faculty to intervene is a potential source of debate, as is the most effective level of structure so as not to be artificial or imposing when attempting to induce everyday interaction. Both faculty and administrators, collectively and individually, have the power to stimulate frequent, positive interactions and promote healthy, nurturing environments for diverse students (Asquith et al., 2011).

**Interactions Affect Perceptions**

Prior negative experiences with cross-cultural interactions may cause students to be apprehensive and anxious about participating in future intercultural engagements, and often avoid encounters altogether (Cai & Rodriguez, 1996-7). In other words, negative experience begets a perception of future negative experience. In Halualani’s (2010) in-depth interview study, students of different cultures, genders, ages, and socioeconomic classes articulate highly negative perceptions about Middle Eastern students, although their interactions are reported to be limited. Respondents report perceiving a feeling of separatism in which Middle Eastern students do not want to be known, thus interactions are impossible; the onus for this communication failure is placed on the Middle Eastern students. Interestingly, over one half of students interviewed report that they have never had an interaction with a Middle Eastern student, yet still discuss interactions with this cultural group in negative terms. This demonstrates that, in addition to context (e.g., history, current politics and ideologies), the *absence* of interactions may fuel stereotypes and have damaging effects on perceptions.

In certain situations, intercultural contact may reinforce long-held assumptions and even exacerbate cultural discord. Although participants in Connolly’s (2000) study are not higher education students, his findings inform this argument. The author studied a community plan in
Northern Ireland that brought groups of ten and eleven-year-old Protestant and Catholic students together for a dance with the goal of fostering friendly interactions and, in turn, reducing prejudice and building positive relationships among these historically divided groups. The idea of the plan was based on Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis. Connolly’s (2000) results demonstrated that instead of bridging a divide and building friendly relationships, the dance actually fortified the factional beliefs of each group and further inflamed hostilities between them. The author argues that to know why this occurred, it is imperative to solicit participants’ personal perspectives of interactions within the context of the event.

Positive interactions with diverse peers also affect perceptions, as illustrated by former Princeton University president, William Bowen: “when individuals are exposed to differences in others, they are ‘stimulate[d]...to reexamine even their most deeply held assumptions about themselves and their world’...it is in this reexamination process...that indifference is shed and truth and shared values are discovered” (as cited in Chang et al., 2005, p. 11). Likewise, when students engage in positive, frequent cross-cultural interactions with peers in a variety of milieu, they bank favorable experiences. Over time, these experiences foster the development of intercultural sensitivity (Halualani, 2010).

**International Student Perceptions**

Many highly skilled international students are pursuing higher educational opportunities outside of the United States due to a perception of unfriendliness, discrimination (Lee & Rice, 2007) and hostility (Johnson, 2005) toward international students. In many cases, international students feel uncomfortable on U.S. campuses, but have difficulty articulating the cause(s) of their discomfort; other students voice feeling ignored during classroom lessons/activities and/or shut out by fellow students (Lee & Rice, 2007). Lee and Rice (2007) note that some students
attribute these feelings to self-perceived lack of English language fluency. Students who are self-confident about their ability to communicate effectively have higher levels of WTC (Lu & Hsu, 2008) and experience less discomfort in their host environments (Heggins III & Jackson, 2003). McCroskey, Burrows, and Marie (2003) contend that people who speak in a language that is not their first language are likely to view themselves as less competent communicators. This perception causes increased apprehension about and even avoidance of intercultural communication opportunities. Increased confidence in speaking another language raises chances that a student will initiate communication. Lu and Hsu (2008) discuss the “face-protected orientation” (p. 76) of Chinese culture. This applies to WTC in that because Chinese students are sensitive to public judgment, they are less likely to attempt communication in a second language to “save face.”

Other international students sense that peers and faculty perceive them to be incompetent as a result of their lack of familiarity with western pedagogy (Lee & Rice, 2007). Students who are not accustomed to open discussion in the classroom, for example, may take time to become comfortable with new classroom dynamics. In the meantime, feeling as if one is perceived to be inept is likely to hinder interaction. Some international students explain the limited attendance of American students at international student events to be the result of apathy. They perceive American students to be disinterested in cultural events, although said international students also state that American students receive little, if any, information about these events due to lack of university advertisement and absence from nationality club email lists (Rose-Redwood, 2010). Additionally, this same group of international students states that social events organized by their international student office are intended for foreign students, thus are not designed to foster interactions among international and domestic students. This mixed information makes one
question how the perception of American students as apathetic is formed, as the view is not adequately supported by experience. Further research to determine the root of this perception is suggested.

**Perceptions Affect Interactions**

As previously stated, even if campus diversity exists, the level of cross-racial interactions, for example, will not increase unless students perceive a positive racial climate (Jayakumar, 2008). If multicultural international and/or domestic multicultural students perceive cultural discrimination, the atmosphere of the school and/or community may become unfavorable (Lee & Rice, 2007). Regardless of the initiatives in place, perspective has the power to inhibit positive interactions among diverse students. For example, findings presented by Smith et al. (2007) show that Asian students feel less comfortable interacting with Black students and more comfortable interacting with White students. The researchers note that one reason for this finding may be perceptions held by Asian students as a result of the media; Whites are typically portrayed as affluent and good-looking by Asian media, whereas Blacks may be presented in a less positive way. These media images fuel stereotypes, and lack or absence of any contact with Black students in particular feed these perceptions and, in turn, shape student comfort levels.

Dixon and Durrheim (2003) and Lee (2000) conducted ethnographic studies that inform this discussion, despite contexts that lie outside higher education. The authors studied everyday interactions (or lack thereof) at a beach in post-apartheid South Africa and in shopping areas in U.S. “Black” and “White” neighborhoods, respectively. By observing the contact dynamics of Black and White beachgoers (Dixon and Durrheim, 2003), store patrons and retail employees (Lee, 2000) occurring in these everyday settings, the researchers were able to explore both cross-
racial interaction and avoidance practices that might otherwise have been disregarded if Allport’s (1954) contact perspective had been employed. Researchers in both studies found that everyday contact experiences often had the power to reinforce or exacerbate racial divides. Even if participants had received the benefit of programming based on Allport’s (1954) hypothesis, it may not have been transferable to the ordinary contexts studied; prior experience with “ideal” contact may not have lead to tolerance or interaction. For example, in Dixon and Durrheim’s (2003) study, White beachgoers were observed to leave the beach in quantity when quantities of Black beachgoers arrived; the perception of unavoidable intergroup contact resulted in the flight of one group. Specific numbers of people per group are not stated. Additionally, both Whites and Blacks were observed to congregate by race along the beachfront and maintained “racially exclusive umbrella spaces” (p. 704).

For fourteen months, Lee (2000) observed Black and White shopping areas and interviewed seventy-five Black store patrons about their experiences shopping in White and Black U.S. neighborhoods. According to her observations, Black shoppers were treated more negatively in white shopping areas; interviews reveal that Black shoppers felt as though they were followed, surveilled, and treated with suspicion. Moreover, Lee (2000) observed that Black shoppers would dress and/or speak in a certain way to de-emphasize their race when shopping in White areas. Black shoppers’ perceptions of a hostile climate resulted in personal behavior modification and may have thwarted potential intercultural interactions from the start.

Unlike the previous studies discussed in this section, students in a study by Halualani (2010) explain culture in terms of nation of origin. This definition causes students to view intercultural interactions as exchanges with foreign students who are different from them. Interviewees share overwhelmingly favorable perspectives of cross-cultural interactions with
students of different nationalities; however, nations are perceived in different ways. Interactions with students from the East and Europe are discussed in highly positive terms, such as “‘perfect’... ‘ideal’...‘fascinating’ [and] ‘exciting’” (Halualani, 2010, pp. 256-257). In contrast, African students are not discussed and interactions with Middle Eastern students are viewed to be ill fated from the start. African students may not be mentioned due to under-representation on campus. Strongly negative perceptions of Middle Eastern students may be caused by lack of interactional experience with this group, cultural and/or communication differences, the hostile climate of post-9/11 America (Lee & Rice, 2007), and other social, historical, and political factors. Collectively and individually, these elements are significant barriers to positive interactions across cultures. In turn, perceptions and interactions have the potential to impact adjustment for many student groups.

“Third Culture Kids”

An unexpected finding of this study is that four out of nine participants perceived themselves to be “third culture kids” (TCKs) and used this specific descriptor to convey how they identify culturally. As a result, this section was added to the literature review in order to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the findings. Although the focus of this study was not on third culture kids, participants’ experiences that led to this self-identification inform their perspectives.

The neologism “third culture” was coined by sociologist, anthropologist, and social psychologist Ruth Hill Useem in the mid-twentieth century to describe observations made during her family’s cross-cultural experiences while living abroad (Useem, n.d.). Useem (n.d.) states that she used this phrase to describe, “the styles of life created, shared, and learned by persons who are in the process of relating their societies, or sections thereof, to each other. The term
‘Third Culture Kids’ or TCKs was coined to refer to the children who accompany their parents into another society” (para. 7). Pollock and Van Reken (2001) define third culture kid as:

A person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background. (p. 19)

The result of living in cultures different from one’s own is an amalgamation of the values and norms of one’s host and home nations into a unique third culture (Gillies, 1998). Each individual’s third culture is relative to his/her unique background and experiences; various aspects of each host culture are synthesized into a lifestyle and value system distinctive to that person (Pollock & Van Reken, 1987).

Numerous advantages of being a TCK are found in the literature. For example, because TCKs have grown up in cultures other than their own, they easily relate to other cultures (Stultz, 2003). Dewaele and van Oudenhoven’s (2009) quantitative study of multilingualism and multiculturalism in TCKs found that “the experience of having to fit in and being in contact with different languages and cultures strengthens Cultural Empathy and Openmindedness” (p. 443). Because they have been exposed to cultural differences during their international experiences, they become acute observers and tolerate diversity well (Gillies, 1998). Moreover, TCKs tend to be multilingual (Dewaele & van Oudenhoven, 2009; Gillies, 1998; Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2003), thus are able to communicate readily with people of other cultures. They are highly adaptable, culturally literate, have a broad world-view, appreciate differences in others, and do not take long to transition to new places when traveling abroad (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Tokuhama-
Moreover, according to Langford (1998), TCKs are exceptionally diplomatic, patient, flexible, and sophisticated.

According to the literature, there are disadvantages to being a TCK as well. Because they have a unique culture all their own, TCKs may feel separate from their peers and parents (Gillies, 1998) and have no sense of ownership in one specific culture (Barringer, 2000; Pollock & Van Reken, 1987; 2001). They may experience a sense of rootlessness (Barringer, 2000; Langford, 1998; Tokuhama-Espinoza, 2003), in which they do not know what to call home. Due to their transience, it may be difficult for TCKs to form strong, long-term relationships (Tokuhama-Espinoza, 2003). Gilbert’s (2008) qualitative study shows that TCKs experience many losses “related to persons, places, pets, and possessions” (p. 93). Moreover, the author found that TCKs experience “loss of meaning related to various aspects of themselves...these existential losses focused on safety and trust, the loss of personal identity, and the loss of home” (p. 93). These losses may lead to a feeling of “alienation and unresolved grief” (Barringer, 2000, p. 1). In Dewaele & van Oudenhoven’s (2009) quantitative study, TCKs scored significantly lower on “Emotional Stability” (p. 443) than non-TCKs.

The literature clearly demonstrates that third culture kids bring unique cultural perspectives to their environments. These perspectives enrich the educational institutions they attend; however, few studies explore the experiences, perspectives, and adjustment processes of TCKs attending U.S. HEIs. It is critical that institutions hosting TCKs are aware of the individual relational and emotional issues they may face, including self-identity, sense of belonging, and relationship forming (Fail, Thompson, and Walker, 2004). Moreover, HEIs must be aware of the unique counseling needs these students may have (Barringer, 2000). Langford
(1998) contends that TCKs’ “broad international perspective” (p. 30) makes them quintessential examples of what future citizens will be like in our increasingly global societies.

**Student Adjustment**

For the purposes of this study, adjustment is defined as the process through which a student acclimates socially and emotionally to life in a new environment (an American university) and culture (American culture). Existing literature clearly demonstrates the impact of both positive and negative interactions and perceptions among diverse groups on student adjustment (Anderson et al., 2009; Cai & Rodriguez, 1996-7; Cigularova, 2005; Kegel, 2009; Lee & Rice, 2007; Museus, 2008; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2007; Tochkov et al., 2010). The absence or presence of cross-cultural social interactions have notable influence on students and their potential for success. For example, research shows that spending more time communicating with American students positively affects the psychological adjustment of international students (Cigularova, 2005) and reduces homesickness (Tochkov et al., 2010). Homesickness has a negative effect on academic performance, social integration (Lee & Rice, 2007; Tochkov et al., 2010), and mental health, and is demonstrated to induce anxiety and depression (Tochkov et al., 2010). Both international and domestic students transition into a new educational environment when entering college; however, international students must also face a new culture with customs, behaviors, and often a language very different from their own (Tochkov et al., 2010).

**Language Fluency and Communication Experiences**

Lack of English language fluency is one of the most critical challenges international students face (Anderson et al., 2009; Mori, 2000). It is both a predictor of homesickness and stress, and is a barrier to social interaction (Kegel, 2009; Tochkov et al., 2010). Lu and Hsu
(2008) contend that how students perceive their own language capabilities more significantly predicts how students will cross-culturally adjust than actual linguistic proficiency. Thus, the more competent students perceive they are in a second language, the better their adjustment in a new culture is likely to be. Past experience plays a crucial role in this regard. When students have positive communication experiences, they are more likely to adapt successfully; likewise, negative past experiences are likely to cause future failures (Cai & Rodriguez, 1996-7). According to Cai and Rodriguez (1996-7), students who have only negative communication experiences may eventually isolate themselves from cross-cultural exchanges entirely.

**Interactions With Host Nation and Home Nation Students**

Salient research is found surrounding the importance of interactions with both host nation and home nation students (Mori, 2000; Rose-Redwood, 2010; Tochkov et al., 2010; Yeh & Inose, 2003) and with ethnic student organizations (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Museus, 2008). Mori (2000) asserts that forming a support system of students from one’s home country is critical to the welfare of international students, but that limited numbers of home nation students may restrict interaction. Dixon et al.’s (2005) perspective of intercultural contact stresses the importance of ordinary, everyday interactions among diverse groups; Mori’s (2000) study illustrates a need for such interactions among homogeneous national/cultural groups. When seeking support, international students prefer home nation students who speak their native language (Cigularova, 2005). A phenomenological study conducted by Museus (2008) analyzes ethnic student organizations and their role in the cultural adjustment of African American and Asian American students at predominantly White institutions. Findings suggest that such organizations are vital for providing students with familiar, culturally authentic environments. Harper and Quaye (2007) contend that campus ethnic organizations are essential milieus for
social involvement, racial and cultural identity development, and self-expression. Contrarily, although students in Rose-Redwood’s (2010) study recognize the vital support such organizations provide, they also voice concern that affinity groups based on nationality isolate students by encouraging social segregation.

It is also argued that interacting with students from one’s host country is essential to international student experiences (Kegel, 2009) and more frequent interaction with host country students predicts healthier student adjustment (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Acculturative stress levels increase among students who socialize primarily with other international students, as opposed to students who socialize with both domestic and international students more equally (Poyrazli et al., 2004). According to Poyrazli et al. (2004), acculturative stress is defined as “a marked deterioration of the general health status of an individual; it encompasses physiological, psychological, and social aspects that are explicitly linked to the acculturation process” (p. 74). Acculturation is defined as “a process of cultural change that results from repeated, direct contact between two distinct cultural groups” (Poyrazli et al., 2004, p. 73). Nonetheless, international students show preference for interacting with students from their home countries first, other international students second, and, lastly, students from their host nation (Cigalarova, 2005). This presents a challenge in that, “the most effective solution to psychological challenges, developing quality relationships with host national students, is also the least likely to actually occur” (Anderson et al., 2009).

Fisher (1989) contends that abruptly losing nearness to friends and family is the primary reason for stress and homesickness during the transitional period from home to new environment. This argument demonstrates the critical importance of meaningful relationships within close physical proximity. It also presents an opportunity for future research regarding if,
how, and/or to what extent new friendships/bonds created in a student’s host country fill this void and alleviate homesickness.

**Cultural Barriers to Adjustment**

Asian and Asian American students represent the largest population of any ethnic/racial minority group attending American colleges and universities today (Hune, 2002; IIE, n. d.). Interestingly, Kuh (2005) asserts that compared to other racial groups, Asian American and African American students indicate that they are less satisfied with their higher education experiences. Racism and stereotypes play significant roles in shaping the identities of Asian Americans, negatively affecting self-esteem and identity development (Smith et al., 2007). Smith et al. (2007) note that prejudice generates prejudice; that is, not only may Asian students experience negative outcomes as a result of prejudice against them, but they may, “protectively segregate themselves from other racial groups and thereby maintain racial hierarchies reinforced in the wider society” (p. 437). Asian international students experience fear about comprehending and appropriately interpreting a new language in context (Mori, 2000) and of being excluded in their host environments if their peers cannot understand them (Tochkov et al., 2010). Asian international students regularly report higher acculturative stress levels than European students studying at American universities (Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli et al., 2004); homesickness, loneliness, and depression are pervasive (Heggins III & Jackson, 2003; Wehrly, 1988).

Although not as proportionately significant a group, African international students report even higher stress levels than Asian and Latin American students in an exploratory study by Constantine, Okazaki, and Utsey (2004). According to Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, and Utsey (2005), this may be attributed to a stronger cultural emphasis on intimate interpersonal relationships than those to which Americans are accustomed.
Culture Shock

In addition to racial discrimination, adjusting to new customs, foods, and rules, international students may experience culture shock (Anderson et al., 2009; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Although a seemingly obvious problem, Anderson et al. (2009) argue that it is the least understood socio-cultural issue. Moreover, host universities often provide few services to support international students, who are particularly susceptible to this problem (Mori, 2000; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Winkelman (1994) defines culture shock as, “a multifaceted experience resulting from numerous stressors occurring in contact with a different culture” (p. 121). Four phases of culture shock have been identified by researchers: (a) honeymoon, (b) crises, (c) adjustment, reorientation & gradual recovery, and (d) adaptation, resolution or acculturation (Ferraro, 1990). According to Winkelman (1994), stage two, the crises stage, is when students become overwhelmed by frustration, begin to feel lonely and helpless, and want to return home. International students who experience culture shock may become distrustful, irritable, overly concerned with health, hostile toward host culture members, depressed, and their work performance may decline (Brislin, 1981; Heggins III & Jackson, 2003). Increased student mobility (i.e., leaving home) is argued to increase the risk of maladjustment and poor health (Fisher & Hood, 1988). However, this risk may be ameliorated by past mobility experience. International students with past experience leaving home may have more realistic expectations and may, thus, be able to cope more effectively in new environments (Fisher, Murray, & Fraser, 1985).

In order to help students persevere, institutional interventions ideally occur proactively to assist students during their initial community integration, before they become homesick, bewildered, and lonely (Lee & Rice, 2007; Anderson et al., 2009). The onus, therefore, is not
entirely on international students and what they can do to cope or adapt. The host nation and, more specifically, host institution, also bear responsibility to facilitate the adjustment of this at-risk population (Lee & Rice, 2007) by promoting frequent, positive intercultural interactions in international students’ everyday lives. As Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) note, “universities should see the implementation of these programs [to educate faculty, staff, and the campus community...to help international students understand and cope with discrimination, homesickness, and the transition to college life] not as an expense, but as an investment” (pp. 277-278).

**Summary**

A significant opportunity exists for American colleges and universities to look beyond the question of if diversity matters (Asquith et al., 2011) and consider what is and is not making diversity work (Chang et al., 2006) in practice. In order to maximize the potential benefits a diverse environment can provide (Chang, et al., 2005), colleges and universities must facilitate engagement (Anderson et al., 2009) by encouraging cross-cultural interactions among international and domestic students. However, universities may become so involved with emphasizing structural diversity that they neglect to spend time actively fostering interactions among these students (Rose-Redwood, 2010). Campus environment is critical to influencing frequent, quality interactions, which, in turn, generate benefits (Chang, Denson, Saenz, & Misa, 2006) such as healthy international student adjustment.

**Limitations and Conclusions**

Several limitations in the reviewed literature on diverse (cross-cultural and/or cross-racial) student interactions, student perceptions, and adjustment present opportunities for further research. First, existing research on student adjustment is varied and emphasizes adaptation and
coping strategies, affects on mental and physical health, and academics. In other words, extant research focuses primarily on the student’s role in his/her adjustment process. A dearth of research exists on what HEIs can do to facilitate the student adjustment process generally; this paucity is particularly profound in adjustment literature on international students (Bevis, 2002; Lee & Rice, 2007). Knowing what settings, conditions, and/or strategies international students perceive to be effective and/or ineffective for facilitating frequent, positive cross-cultural interactions in an everyday context will be invaluable to universities seeking to improve their diversity initiatives and adjustment and persistence efforts. Andrade (2006) contends that, to date, no study has investigated how international students’ interaction with their campus community affects persistence. Factors that may affect international students’ ability to persist include financial challenges, personality traits, actual and self-perceived language ability and communication competency, and academic ability and commitment; any one or all of these factors may affect persistence. These factors may also affect adjustment. Adjustment is an overarching factor that affects the persistence of all international students. If an international student is able to adjust to life at an American university, he/she is anticipated to be more likely to persist. In that there is a dearth of research on the role of HEIs in facilitating international student adjustment, this study was designed to help fill this gap.

Second, limited literature is found that focuses on the experiences of international students studying at U. S. universities, which presented both a challenge for this review and an opportunity for further research. Studies that do focus on the experiences of international students and their perceptions of life at an American HEI have centered largely on graduate students or specific racial or ethnic groups and have used a quantitative inquiry strategy. Most existing studies on students’ cross-cultural social interactions base findings on data collected via
large-scale surveys that inquire about students’ positive and/or negative cross-cultural contact experiences generally (e.g., Asquith et al., 2011; Chang et al., 2006; Hurtado, 2005; Lu & Hsu, 2008; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Smith et al., 2007; Tochkov et al., 2010; Trice, 2004; Zuniga et al., 2005). Halualani (2010) argues that, “By solely relying on institutional survey data, we miss out on uncovering what this notion – [cross-cultural] interaction – means to [students] via qualitative...methods and in relation to their own identities, experiences, and lives” (p. 251). Therefore, a qualitative study of undergraduate international students was needed to achieve the depth of understanding this study sought.

Finally, the reviewed literature demonstrates the potential impact frequent, positive social interactions, namely the beneficial effect of these interactions on successful adjustment. However, a paucity of literature explores cross-cultural interactions in natural, everyday contexts and international students’ personal constructions of successful adjustment. A study designed to promote a deeper understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and interpretive frameworks of international students as they make sense of their everyday intercultural interactions and adjustment processes will allow peers, faculty, and administrators to be more supportive to a group of students who face critical challenges as they adjust to unfamiliar environments.

This qualitative study explored the everyday cross-cultural interactions of undergraduate international students and their personal constructions of successful adjustment. Moreover, it investigated their perceptions of the impact of the university’s diversity initiatives. Findings may assist in bridging the divide between structural diversity and diversity initiatives that effectively engage students in frequent, positive interactions (Rose-Redwood, 2010). Findings may also be an asset to both my university and the wider academic community for creating diversity initiatives that facilitate adjustment and increase persistence.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand how everyday cross-cultural interactions affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students attending a private research university in the northeastern United States. Based on the intellectual goals, conceptual framework, and qualitative methodology of this study, three research questions were formulated as a foundation for this investigation:

1. What are undergraduate international students’ personal constructions of successful adjustment?
2. What is the nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students?
3. How do undergraduate international students describe the impact of university diversity initiatives for promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions?

Interpretivism

Interpretivism underpins qualitative research. As such, it is important to understand the basic tenets of interpretivism in order to inform the qualitative methodology chosen for this study. The sociological strategy of understanding the actions and meanings of individuals in the context of their personal perspective (Williams, 2000) is the core of interpretivism. Livesey (2006) contends that from an interpretivist perspective, social interaction focuses on three basic principles: consciousness, action, and unpredictability. Consciousness is the idea that humans are aware of both themselves as individuals and in relationship to others. Depending on the situation, human beings make purposive decisions about their behavior; however, behavior can also be unpredictable. As students live from day to day, they reinvent their social worlds, and
every student interprets his/her world differently. Understanding how students form these “social realities” (Livesey, 2006, p. 5) is essential to understanding social behaviors. Thus, in examining how diverse students perceive one another and interpreting their interactive experiences, I was able to gain deeper insight into how these students’ realities were constructed and how those constructions affected social behaviors (e.g., interactions).

Interpretivists argue that, “reality is intersubjective in that it is socially constructed, such that it can be described and represented through diverse perspectives” (Butin, 2010, p. 60). In documenting these perspectives, there is no definitive truth. “Facts” about behavior are bound by context, and cannot be universally applied to all people, times, and situations; in fact, these “realities” may not apply to different people who share the same situation (Livesey, 2006). In investigating and chronicling stories, interpretivist researchers are a part of them (Butin, 2010), and, because knowledge is relative, one researcher’s narrative is as cogent as another’s (Livesey, 2006). Davidson (1986) argues that, “What a fully informed interpreter could know about what a speaker means is all there is to learn; the same goes for what the speaker believes” (p. 315). In examining the perspectives of diverse students, for example, the concept of “fully informed” is relative. Byrne (1998) notes that Davidson’s statement “is consistent with the idea that some of a speaker’s beliefs and meanings are not knowable by a researcher, because they are completely hidden, and so unlearnable, and so no part of ‘all there is to learn’” (Textual evidence section, para. 13). According to Butin (2010), the best an interpretivist can do is truthfully and rigorously document the perspective being examined.

How human beings react to people and situations is dependent upon their environment and their perceptions of it (Willis, 2007). If researchers are to effectively understand why international and domestic students do or do not interact, for example, they must understand how
those students perceive the world – including the people and policies – around them. Willis (2007) argues that, “for interpretivists, what the world means to the person or group being studied is critically important to good research in the social sciences” (p. 6). Max Weber (1947) introduced the concept of verstehen, or empathetic understanding, as a means to conduct scientific inquiry. According to Weber (1947), all people share experiences: the experience of being a human being, and the capability to create and use meanings. Thus, social scientists could use verstehen to garner an understanding of other humans by “walking in their shoes.” By perceiving the world as another views it, one can better understand the other’s culture, in addition to the stimulus for and meaning of the other’s behavior (Glass, 2005). Wilhelm Dilthey, a twentieth-century contemporary of Max Weber, argued that the purpose of the human sciences was to understand human behavior, not explain it (Brown, 1976; Harrington; 2000). For Dilthey, lived experience was the appropriate subject of social science research (Willis, 2007) and was essential to expanding an understanding beyond one’s own specific situations (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2011). He advocated verstehen as the most effective method for gaining this understanding (Dilthey, 1977).

A qualitative methodology was ideal for studying international student experiences in that it facilitated a deeper understanding of unique perspectives and how those perspectives may have affected outcomes. The question used to guide the literature review relates directly to interpretivism, in that it is designed to gain a rich understanding of students’ experiences (Dilthey, 1977) and how individual students view their worlds: How do the interactions among and perceptions held by ethnically and/or racially diverse students at U. S. higher education institutions affect student adjustment? Interpretive theorists Max Weber (1947) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1977) advocated verstehen, or, empathetic understanding, as a means to “walk in the
shoes” of other humans. This approach connects directly to the above question in that it facilitates a better understanding of the interdependent relationship among individual student perceptions, social interactions, and adjustment in everyday settings. The research questions formulated for this study also align with interpretivism in that they were designed to elicit participants’ individual experiences with and perceptions of everyday cross-cultural interactions, student adjustment, and the diversity initiatives affecting both. This approach to inquiry allowed me to identify shared experiences and perceptions among participants’ individual realities.

**Strategy of Inquiry**

I am interested in the everyday experiences of students as described in their own words. In keeping with interpretivism, I believe there is no one definitive truth. Quantitative research seeks answers, whereas I seek understanding; every story is equally “real” and important. I do not regard any experience as trivial and believe that everyday experiences are significant in the context of a given phenomenon. I want to know what it is like to “walk in the shoes” of another person and explore how that person makes sense of his/her experiences. Emergent design is something to which I am committed; I wanted my study to evolve and go where it needed to go, without being confined to a rigid design. For these reasons, qualitative inquiry best suited my research questions and world-view.

According to Merriam (2002), “the key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (p. 3). My research questions focus on the experiences of students and were intended to have students reflect on those experiences (Maxwell, 2005; Seidman, 2006). They ask students to recount their experiences in their own words and were designed in such a way that only an undergraduate international student can provide answers (Bermudez, n.d.). Qualitative research does not
measure relationships and/or causation (Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun, 2012); however, process causality (Maxwell, 2005) is a benefit of qualitative research. For example, quantitative researchers are interested in to what extent X causes Y; qualitative researchers are interested in the process through which X causes Y (Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative research has explanatory value that quantitative research cannot achieve. Moreover, the paucity of qualitative studies related to my problem of study demonstrated a need for this research approach.

**Research Design**

The research design that fit my problem of study, intellectual goals, world-view, and conceptual framework was a basic qualitative study that used general inductive analysis (GIA) (Merriam, 2009). Thomas (2006) calls this design a “general inductive approach” (p. 237); Merriam (2002) also refers to this type of research as a “basic interpretive study” (p. 4). According to Thomas (2009), this approach is “easy to use, does not require an in-depth understanding of a specialist approach, and produces findings that defensibly address evaluation objectives and questions...[it] provides a convenient and efficient way of analyzing qualitative data for these purposes” (p. 246). It was, thus, an ideal approach for me as a novice researcher. Merriam (2002) notes that an interpretive qualitative approach is also appropriate when researchers are interested in understanding how people interact with and experience their social worlds and the meaning these interactions and experiences have for them. In that the goal of this study was to understand personal constructions of meaning, cross-cultural interactions, and adjustment processes of undergraduate international students in the context of their everyday lives, this design was appropriate.

Thomas (2006) defines *inductive analyses* as: “approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from
the raw data by an evaluator or researcher” (p. 238). Inductive approaches differ from deductive approaches in that inductive analyses allow findings to emerge from themes found in the data, whereas deductive analyses test to see if data is consistent with extant or researcher-constructed hypotheses or theories (Merriam, 2002, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Thomas, 2006). A general inductive analysis allowed me to serve as a key research instrument, in that I gathered data personally (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). It also helped me succinctly condense raw data, demonstrate links between my research questions and findings, and “ensure that these links are both transparent (able to be demonstrated to others) and defensible (justifiable given the objectives of the research)” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). The product of this study is rich, thick description (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002); words (as opposed to numeric or statistical data) were used to communicate what I have learned about the phenomenon of study, including detailed descriptions of context and participants. Quotes taken from field notes and participant interviews were included to fortify thick description and allow participant voices to speak. According to Merriam (2002), excerpts and quotes are instrumental to the descriptive nature of qualitative research.

**Research Site**

My research setting was a private research university in the northeastern United States consisting of approximately 2246 undergraduate students. This site will henceforth be referred to as “Eastern University.” Women comprise 60 percent of this population and 11 percent are international students. Of these international students, 12% originate from Europe, 12% from Africa and the Middle East, 14% from Latin America, and 57% originate from Asia; of this 57%, 41% are from China, 12% from Vietnam, and 19% originate from the Indian Subcontinent. The Indian subcontinent includes India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.
The five-year average retention rate for first-year undergraduate students is approximately 89 percent; the five-year average retention rate for undergraduate international students is approximately 91 percent. (Citations omitted to protect confidentiality.) In attempting to compare these averages to national averages for undergraduate international student retention, no recent data was found. Statistics regarding persistence rates for undergraduate international students are reported only by individual higher education institutions. Even *Open Doors 2011* (IIE, 2011c) focuses on enrollment and growth rates for undergraduate international students, but does not include data about retention. Data from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) reported a 70 percent six-year graduation rate for students who were non-resident aliens, as opposed to a rate of 54 percent for students in general in all divisions in 2002 (NCAA, 2007). Thus, by comparison, a high persistence rate for undergraduate international students at the site chosen for this study demonstrated an opportunity to learn about what this institution may be doing to effectively foster cross-cultural interactions and encourage healthy student adjustment. Moreover, this site was chosen as it is my alma mater and place of employment; thus, I was emotionally invested in the institution and it was convenient to sample.

**Participants**

Purposeful selection, also called purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009), was used to secure participants for this study. In this sampling strategy, people and settings are deliberately chosen to provide information that cannot be collected as well from other selections (Maxwell, 2005). According to Creswell (2007), this strategy is useful for assuring a quality sample. Moreover, maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009) was used; this strategy “documents diverse variations and identifies
important common patterns” (Creswell, 2007, p. 127). I sought and built variation in participants over the course of the study. A limitation to this strategy is that by not selecting a more homogenous group of participants, I had less data about any “particular kind of...individual within the study, and [was not] able to say as much in depth about particular instances” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 90). However, generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research; rather, the goal is to understand the unique experiences of individuals (Maxwell, 2005). Interpretivism argues that, “reality is intersubjective in that it is socially constructed, such that it can be described and represented through diverse perspectives” (Butin, 2010, p. 60). In documenting the perspectives of participants, there is no definitive truth. “Facts” about behavior are bound by context, and cannot be universally applied to all people, times, and situations; in fact, these “realities” may not apply to different people who share the same situation (Livesey, 2006).

Initially, the Office of Intercultural Affairs (OIA) assisted in securing a pool of potential participants by emailing recruitment materials to undergraduate international students directly from their student database. This office did not determine who was selected for participation. Four interviewees were secured from a pool of students who responded to this recruitment email. The Association of International Students (AIS) was also contacted for help in distributing recruitment materials; I attended a weekly AIS meeting and secured three interviewees. One interviewee contacted me via email after being referred by a participant; I made contact with the final interviewee because she was on the board of a campus cultural group.

A recruitment letter (Appendix A) and questionnaire (Appendix B) were emailed to all undergraduate international students at the university with a valid email address on file. The questionnaire was designed to collect participant attributes such as gender, age range, nationality, race and/or ethnicity, year of study, major(s), first language(s), whether students had passed the
Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the International English Testing System (IELTS), or the Pearson Test of English (PTE) and were comfortable conversing in English, level of self-perceived adjustment, and whether students had prior contact with me. The recruitment letter included a brief statement outlining the nature and purpose of the study (Seidman, 2006), my contact information, an assurance of confidentiality, and a request to return the questionnaire directly to me via email within one week’s time if interested. I reviewed all returned questionnaires, contacted eligible respondents (based on inclusion and exclusion criteria) via email, and asked to speak briefly with them via telephone (approximately 15 minutes). At this time, I reviewed the nature and purpose of the study, and ensured that students understood the expectations and benefits of participation; I addressed any questions and/or concerns. Participants were then selected based on this discussion and a willingness to participate in the study. I either emailed or telephoned selected participants (based on the preferred contact information provided in the questionnaire) to arrange a mutually convenient time for an interview. Participation was completely voluntary and those selected were purposefully sampled per the following inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Study participants included a group of nine undergraduate international students. Interviews were conducted (one per participant) until a saturation point was reached; that is, until no new information or themes emerged among data (Creswell, 2007). Diverse international undergraduates – as opposed to those of a specific national, racial, or cultural group – were selected in order to “capture the heterogeneity in the population” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 89). Existing studies related to my topic focus largely on graduate students or specific racial or ethnic groups, e.g., Chinese, Asian-Indian, or Asian American students (Heggies III & Jackson, 2003; Lu & Hsu, 2008; Museus, 2008; Smith et al., 2007; Tochkov et al., 2010). Therefore, a study
designed to understand the multiple experiences and perspectives of diverse undergraduate international students was warranted.

Based on the demographics of the university, selected participants included 40% males and 60% females; whenever possible, at least one male and one female was selected to represent each of the following four geographic regions: Latin America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and Europe. Students from Canada and Australia were not selected due to cultural similarity to the U.S. and under-representation or no representation on campus, respectively. Interviewing continued until at least one student from each region was interviewed. The final sample included two African males (one North African and one West African), one female South American, one male from central Europe, and five Asian students; of these five, two were South Asian (Indian Sub-Continent; one male, one female), one was an East Asian female, and two were Southeast Asian females.

In order to be included in the study, respondents had to be either second, third, or fourth year students. First-year students were not be selected because they had not yet demonstrated they would persist to the next year of study in the United States. Originally, fourth year students were not included in the study, as the site University requires a highly demanding project that must be completed as a requirement for graduation. However, so many seniors responded to my recruitment email – even though the materials clearly stated that I was only seeking second and third year students – that I reconsidered this choice. I submitted a modification request to IRB so I could change my sampling protocol to include seniors; this change was approved by IRB. During our pre-interview discussion, I made certain to ask each eligible senior if they were sure participation would not impose undue stress; all replied that they wanted to participate. The final sample included four sophomores, two juniors, and three seniors. The following Table 1 presents
a visual illustration of the final sample.

Table 1

*Final Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Sophomore</th>
<th>Junior</th>
<th>Senior</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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<td>North Africa</td>
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<td>East Asia</td>
<td>1F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
<td>1F</td>
<td>1F</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

M = male; F = female

In order to minimize bias and avoid the possibility of undue pressure, I did not recruit any of my own students, present or former, or students who were attending the college at which I teach as an adjunct instructor. This exclusion did not affect range and variation as international students enrolled in the college likely would not have qualified for selection due to their status as English as a Second Language (ESL) students who may not have met the university’s minimum score on the TOEFL, IELTS, or PTE. These tests measure the threshold for English fluency. Although international students enrolled in the university may have had a range of English language skills, they had met the basic level of proficiency required to study at the university, measured by tests such as the TOEFL, IELTS, or PTE. Participants must have felt comfortable communicating and/or participating in the informed consent process in English. This was a
requisite for participation and is recognized to be a limitation to the proposed study. However, according to the NIH Office of Extramural Research (2011), all information and/or communications must be delivered to participants in a language that is understandable to them.

Other selection criteria included a willingness to participate in one seventy‐minute, audio‐recorded interview that would be published in my dissertation and other publications (Moustakas, 1994) and a member‐checking exercise (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005) in which participants reviewed an executive summary of my findings to check for accuracy and offered feedback via email. As part of my interview protocol, I took approximately ten minutes before each interview to verbally walk students through the informed consent form (Appendix D), which was written in as simple English as possible. Moreover, I emailed the consent form to participants before their scheduled interview so they had the opportunity to review these materials and were prepared to ask questions for clarity.

Selected participants were between the ages of eighteen and twenty‐four, as students in this age range were likely to have the most traditional university experience. Information regarding students’ major(s) was also collected to ensure that participants were not all from the same academic department. Students were be asked to state, on a scale of one to five, how adjusted they felt they were at the university (1 = not adjusted; 5 = very well adjusted). Those who answered three (adjusted), four (well adjusted), or five (very well adjusted) were eligible for selection. This ensured that students had experience with successful adjustment, which was the phenomenon of study. Finally, students who had prior contact with me, in any context, were excluded from the study.

**Relationship to Participants**

I am an instructor for a college of continuing and professional education within the
university at which I conducted my study. I selected students from the larger university population as opposed to the college student population and did not select participants with whom I had any prior contact. According to the Institutional Review Board Guidebook (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 1993), students may be considered a special class of subjects. Although typically a concern in biomedical research involving students as subjects, students may agree to participate in any study because they believe doing so will elevate their standing with faculty and declining will be harmful to them in some way; in other words, their consent may not be freely given (HHS, 1993). To ensure the students understood that their participation was voluntary and would in no way affect their grades or status at the university, I introduced myself to potential participants as a faculty member at the college in which they were not enrolled as students, and also as a researcher from Northeastern University who was working on her doctoral thesis. I made it clear that my role in this study was doctoral researcher, not faculty member. To be sure they had the chance to comprehend the informed consent form, I distributed the form in advance of the interview so that they had the opportunity to read it.

During the informed consent process, I clearly stated, both verbally and in writing, that participating in the study was entirely voluntary and participation or non-participation would in no way affect students’ standing at the university or with other faculty. All interactions and communications were and will continue to be kept confidential; identifying information was kept in a lockable drawer for the research team’s reference only. Students felt no pressure to participate, were told that they could withdraw freely from the study at any time without repercussions, and all decisions and/or responses were free of researcher influence (National Institutes of Health [NIH] Office of Extramural Research, 2011). These facts were clearly
explained to participants at the time they signed the informed consent form and were reiterated as necessary throughout the informed consent process.

The relationship between researcher and participants was an ongoing “creation and renegotiation of trust, intimacy, and reciprocity” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 84). The benefit to students was that I was a willing, highly interested listener who cared deeply about their stories. Participation afforded them the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Participants’ insight may help universities better serve the needs of international students; thus, participation may help improve programs for them and for fellow international students. Additionally, society will benefit from a greater understanding of intercultural communication and the potential for improved programs for international students who bring rich cultural diversity to campuses in the United States. Participants received a thank-you note for participating in the study.

Data Collection

Initially, a recruitment letter (Appendix A) and questionnaire (Appendix B) were used to collect participant attributes such as gender, age range, nationality, race and/or ethnicity, year of study, major(s), first language(s), whether students had passed the TOEFL, IELTS, or PTE and were comfortable conversing in English, level of self-perceived adjustment, and whether students had prior contact with me. This information was used for the participant selection process. In keeping with a qualitative approach to inquiry, participants each engaged in one semi-structured, face-to-face, approximately 70-minute interview. Approximately ten of these minutes were used to go over the informed consent form. Interviews were conducted in a comfortable, private room reserved in the campus library at a time that was convenient for each participant. Interviews were digitally audio-recorded and professionally transcribed immediately after each interview. A flash drive containing audio recordings of interviews and raw transcribed
data were stored in a lockable file cabinet until transcripts were verified for accuracy; data was also stored on a password-protected computer that was only accessible by the research team.

I listened to interview recordings and compared them to raw transcripts to ensure accuracy. Participants’ identities were then coded to protect confidentiality; I de-identified transcripts by removing all identifiable information, including the names of people and places. The students and the University were each assigned a pseudonym to protect confidentiality. Interviews were conducted until a saturation point was reached; that is, until no new themes emerged among data (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005). Data was used only for the purposes of answering the research questions formulated for this study.

An interview guide (Appendix C) was carefully developed based on Butin (2010) and Merriam’s (2009) guides to qualitative interviewing. Participants were asked several neutrally phrased, open-ended interview questions per research question, each one designed to approach its related research question from a different perspective and elicit deep, elaborative responses as opposed to “yes” or “no” answers (Butin, 2010). For example, I asked participants, “If I were a student from your home country, what would you tell me about what it takes to be successful at this university?” Additional questions and/or prompts were used as appropriate, depending on participant responses. I asked about experiences, feelings, and instincts related to my research questions. As a follow-up to the above interview question, I used such probes as, “How did you learn that lesson?” Notes were taken during interviews to record observable behaviors not communicable via transcriptions (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, visible emotions). I noted, for example, that Michelle often took some time before answering questions that asked for examples of specific cross-cultural interactions. She would smile and laugh to herself, clearly recalling a specific experience, but would then answer my question generally, without the details
she appeared to have enjoyed recalling. Even when probed, it was difficult to draw out details from her. Reflective memos were written after each interview to document my overall thoughts and impressions; these memos included an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An audit trail is a journal or series of memos documenting the research process as it is happening; it includes reflections, questions, and decisions I made in response to problems, ideas, or issues I confronted while collecting data (Merriam, 2009). In these notes, I discussed having learned that in order to balance my workload and not become overwhelmed, I needed to limit interviews to no more than two per day. I also needed at least one hour in between each interview to write a reflective memo and regroup. The audit trail includes several issues I faced, including a problem with the professional transcription service I used: “Interview 2 transcript received from [transcription company]; document is “corrupt” and will not open. Contacted transcription company; no response, but perhaps closed due to NE blizzard.” I contacted the company repeatedly, and ultimately received a new transcript and a service discount. The ultimate goal of these interview sessions was to have “meaningful and ‘deep’ responses that [took] the shape of narratives...[and] data ‘thick’ enough to analyze” (Butin, 2010, p. 97).

In addition to interviews, I conducted three observations at campus locations frequented by diverse university students, domestic and/or international, on a day-to-day basis: weekly AIS meeting, campus cafe, and common area at the library. I observed interactions in these average, everyday contexts. I took field notes, documenting details about the location/environment, observed behaviors, visible emotions, facial expressions, gestures, and other relevant social and contextual factors as interactions did or did not occur. No identifying information was included. For example, during my observation at the student center cafe, I wrote in my field notes: “No students eating alone.” On the night of the weekly AIS meeting, it was cold and raining heavily,
yet approximately thirty students still attended. They were obviously excited to be there; camaraderie was apparent among them. One student even rode into the room on a scooter, which he offered to other students to take rides. I also attended a popular annual international music and dance show produced by AIS, as it was referenced by every participant in the study. I wrote reflective memos after each field observation to document overall thoughts and impressions. After the show, I described the clear sense of pride and excitement each group showed about sharing their national team’s performance. Additionally, I noted that even though the event was student-run, an immense amount of time and money had clearly been invested on the part of the university; to me, this demonstrated value of the campus’ international diversity. All field notes and memos are stored in a lockable file cabinet.

Finally, relevant documents, including advertisements and program materials for the international music and dance show, emails from participants and University administrators, and information (statistical and descriptive) found on the University’s website were included to further triangulate the data collection process. Triangulation is when a researcher collects “information using a variety of sources and methods” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 92). This facilitated a broader view of the phenomenon I studied and ensured that findings were not limited by one data source. Any documents not intended for public use (e.g., emails) are stored in a lockable file cabinet and password-protected computer. Like interview transcripts, all documents were de-identified to protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data, in the form of transcribed interviews, field notes, reflective memos, and relevant documents were analyzed manually. Data was analyzed using a general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative data (Merriam, 2009). The outcome of this analysis was the development
of categories based on themes that I, as researcher, identified as most important to highlight based on my interpretation (Merriam, 2002). These themes related back to the research questions and conceptual framework. The following Table 2 visually illustrates the general inductive analysis process that was utilized in this study:

Table 2

*General Inductive Analysis Coding Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial close reading of raw text conducted</th>
<th>Specific text segments related to research quest. identified</th>
<th>Text segments coded to create categories; codebook created</th>
<th>Redundancy and overlap among categories reduced; creative synthesis</th>
<th>Most important categories that express themes created</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple pages of raw text</td>
<td>Multiple segments of text</td>
<td>25-30 categories</td>
<td>15-20 categories</td>
<td>8 themes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Corbin and Strauss (2008), Creswell, (2007), Merriam (2009), and Thomas (2006)

Transcripts were analyzed as they were received, and observations and documents were analyzed as they were collected. Multiple coding approaches were used in the proposed study: open and axial coding, descriptive and in vivo coding, and constant comparison. In their discussion of grounded theory data analysis, Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest a two-stage coding approach: open and axial coding. Open coding, also known as first-cycle coding (Saldana, 2009), involves “breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 198). In other words, data was broken up into meaning units by identifying key phrases or paragraphs. Codes were assigned to each of these meaning units; codes were stabilized, and recorded in a codebook. A stabilized code is firmly grounded and unlikely to change; stabilized codes do not conceptually overlap. The codebook included
each code, its definition, and examples from the data that exemplified each code. For example, as I analyzed the first two transcripts, I found that participants described experiences in which they faced cultural ignorance but made the choice to not let these experiences affect them negatively. I assigned such meaning units the initial code “rejecting negative influences.” Rejecting negative influences meant that participants did not allow their adjustment to be negatively affected by the ignorance of others. I found examples in future interviews in which participants also rejected negativity, which led to a preliminary theme about understanding what is important.

Next, in axial coding, also called second-cycle coding (Saldana, 2009), these concepts or categories were related back to one another. In other words, data that was broken apart was put back together in connected, thematic form. This stage was more interpretive than the open coding stage; patterns were recognized and matched to creatively synthesize categories. For example, the early code “rejecting negative influences” became part of the overarching category “managing cultural tension.” I revisited transcripts and recoded examples of rejecting negative influences as “disengaging.” As a group of categories gained prominence, I collected examples under each category. For instance, I revisited the codes “self-reflexivity,” “making compromises,” “gaining cultural proficiency,” and “challenging assumptions.” I identified similarities among them, and renamed them as properties of “managing cultural tension.” Ultimately, three refined properties were identified for this category: “disengaging,” “accommodating,” and “challenging cultural assumptions.”

The analysis process began with closely reading raw text until I was well acquainted with its content and recognized/understood themes emerging within it. Next, I identified specific categories based on these emergent themes. Some categories were more general in nature,
whereas others were more specific. General categories included “difficult lessons” and “comfort in the familiar.” More specific categories included “value of friendship networks” and “sharing food.” These categories served as a tool to organize data as it was sorted for further analysis; however, they were substantive categories as opposed to organizational categories (Maxwell, 2005). According to Maxwell (2005), substantive categories “are primarily descriptive, in a broad sense that includes description of participants’ concepts and beliefs; they stay close to the data categorized” (p. 97). Organizational categories, in contrast, are “broad areas or issues that you establish prior [emphasis added] to your interviews or observations, or that could usually have been anticipated” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 97). This is a critical distinction, in that inductive analyses do not test hypotheses or theories (Merriam, 2002; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Thomas, 2006). Substantive categories were created using descriptive and in vivo coding. Descriptive coding is when a code is developed to describe what is found in data, e.g., beliefs/concepts of participants (Maxwell, 2005). Examples of initial descriptive codes included “resilience” and “emulating positive role models.” In vivo coding is a process in which the exact words of interviewees are used to create category names/code labels (Creswell, 2007). For example, “us/them divide” is an initial quote found in several transcripts, and emerged as a final overarching theme. I reviewed these categories, reducing overlapping and redundant codes. “Sharing food” and “value of friendship networks” were combined under the in vivo code “feels like home.” This code ultimately became a final theme: “campus community feels like home.”

Throughout data analysis, I engaged in the process of constant comparison (Merriam, 2009). Constant comparison is the process in which segments of data are compared to identify patterns (i.e., similarities and differences); data are then grouped together based on similarity, are named, and become a category (Merriam, 2009). The evolutionary examples included in
previous sections that describe open and axial and descriptive and in vivo coding exemplify this dynamic process. Every time I chose a segment of text and coded it, I compared it to every other segment of text I had coded in the same way (Online QDA, 2012). This process ensured consistency and allowed me “to consider the possibility either that some of the passages coded that way [didn’t] fit as well (and might therefore be better coded as something else) or that there [were] dimensions or phenomena in the passages that might well [have been] coded another way” (Online QDA, 2012, Constant comparison section). Transcripts were coded after each interview; constant comparison continued throughout the analysis process. Similar codes were combined into more overarching categories and key quotes were selected that represented the crux of a specific category until a refined set of categories and their properties, or characteristics (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), was developed.

The result of this inductive data analysis was eight overarching categories that expressed key themes; seven more specific properties were identified for two of these categories. Once I created a near final copy of categories, their properties, definitions of each category and property, and supporting quotes drawn from transcripts, I emailed it to all participants. They were asked to review this summary of my findings and provide feedback as a member-checking exercise (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005). The purpose of member checking is to solicit feedback from participants about data and conclusions to ensure that my interpretations align with what participants intended to communicate (Maxwell, 2005). Maxwell (2005) considers member checking to be the most important tool for eliminating misinterpretations of meaning and views it as a way to identify researcher biases and misunderstandings. Five participants responded via email that they had reviewed the executive summary and supported my findings. No suggestions or proposed changes were offered.
Overarching categories and properties were used as organizational headings to write a narrative of my findings (Creswell, 2007). They captured the critical features identified in the data and related directly to the research questions and conceptual framework. I included a definition and thick description of each theme; thick description includes significant detail about context and findings (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Multiple quotes were drawn from original data to support these findings and their ultimate organization.

Data Storage and Destruction

Digital files of audio recordings, transcripts with identifiable information and de-identified transcripts, initial participant questionnaires, and a master list of participants are stored in a lockable file cabinet and on a password-protected computer. Audio recordings, interview transcripts with identifiable information, initial participant questionnaires, master list of participants, and all other identifiable data will be destroyed (digital files deleted and hard copies shredded) within one year after completion of the study, with the exception of informed consent forms. De-identified transcripts will be stored indefinitely. Consent forms will be retained for three years after the completion of the study in a lockable file cabinet; scanned copies will be stored on a password-protected computer. Three years after completion of the study, hard copies of informed consent forms will be shredded and scanned copies will be deleted.

Reliability and Validity

Ensuring the reliability and validity of my findings was a key concern; however, in that this study used qualitative methods, validity was more of a concern than reliability. In the context of academic research, “reliability means ‘repeatability’ or ‘consistency.’” A measure is considered reliable if it would give us the same result over and over again” (Research Methods Knowledge Base, 2006, Theory of Reliability section). Qualitative research does not seek to
measure; rather, it seeks depth of understanding. The nature of a qualitative study is to include contexts and people, and contexts change. In order to have as reliable an interview guide as possible, I conducted an informal pilot interview with one individual who closely resembles my planned interviewees (Maxwell, 2005). This pilot test checked whether my interview questions asked what I intended them to ask. Throughout the study, I made sure the guide was clear to participants; minor changes in wording were made to ensure clarity as needed. However, qualitative research is not externally generalizable; that is, it does not typically represent a larger population outside the context of the study (Maxwell, 2005). The same interview guide used with different people may yield very different results. Maxwell (2005) argues that, “the value of a qualitative study may depend on its lack of external generalizability in the sense of being representative of a larger population” (p. 115). Based on Creswell’s (2007) recommendation, I enhanced reliability by making high-quality audio recordings of interviews and had them professionally transcribed.

It is critical to demonstrate that validity threats to the proposed study were carefully considered before they could have occurred and that plans were in place to minimize these potential issues. Validity means, “being sure of the strength and accurateness of one’s conclusions” (Butin, 2010). In order to minimize mortality, purposeful sampling was used. Mortality refers to “the loss of [participants] in a study due to attrition, withdrawal, or low participation rates” (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 179). Potential participants were provided with a questionnaire and recruitment letter to ensure they fully understood the nature and purpose (Seidman, 2005) of the study before they agreed to participate. I contacted respondents who met the inclusion criteria (outlined in Data Collection section) and asked to speak briefly with them on the telephone. At this meeting, I revisited the nature and purpose of the study and answered
any questions they had. Final participants were selected based on this discussion and a willingness to participate in the study.

Butin (2010) notes that ‘‘response effect bias’’ (p. 97) is a concern in face-to-face interviewing; that is, interviewees may tell an interviewer what he/she wants to hear in order to please the interviewer or provide more socially acceptable answers. In order to minimize this threat, an interview guide (Appendix C) was very carefully constructed. In keeping with Butin (2010) and Merriam’s (2009) suggestions, it included neutrally phrased open-ended questions, follow-up questions, and prompts that were designed to evoke deep, elaborative responses. I was mindful of my own body language, expressions, and tone in order to minimize this bias; however, in that I could not change my race nor gender and both have been shown to contribute to this issue (Butin, 2010), the threat these factors posed could not be entirely eliminated.

As a qualitative researcher, I was the primary instrument in this study; that is, I interacted with participants and documented, interpreted, analyzed, and described my subject matter (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). As a human instrument, I was adaptive and responsive to participants, attentive to nonverbal and verbal communication, and able to process and clarify information immediately; I also had the opportunity to have participants check the accuracy of my interpretations and explore responses to achieve depth of understanding (Merriam, 2009). As a human instrument, researcher bias – personal thoughts, feelings, opinions, and tastes – presented a concern. In order to minimize this threat, I did not select present or former students. I also did not solicit students from the continuing and professional education college population, at which I am a faculty member. Instead, I sought participants from the university student population. Interview transcripts were analyzed for emergent themes
using a general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative data (Merriam, 2009). In order to minimize validity concerns about data analysis, this technique was very closely followed.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stress the importance of ensuring trustworthiness in a qualitative study. The authors present four elements that bolster trustworthiness: (a) credibility (confidence in findings), (b) transferability (demonstrating that findings may be applicable in contexts other than the one studied), (c) dependability (findings are consistent and replicable), and (d) confirmability (findings evolve from participants, not the researcher). According to Thomas (2006), the elements most applicable to data analysis are peer and/or stakeholder checks to establish credibility and a research audit to enhance dependability. This audit included a comparison of research findings/my interpretations with original data. Member checking (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005) was used as a means to verify alignment between my interpretations and participants’ intended meanings. I provided all participants with an executive summary of my findings via email. I invited students to comment on the perceived accuracy of these findings and offer suggestions or concerns. In order to further assure trustworthiness, specifically credibility and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), triangulation was used. In triangulation, researchers collect information using multiple sources and methods (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). Interview transcripts, coding records, document analyses, field notes, reflective memos, constant comparison (Merriam, 2009), and member checking (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005) were used to verify themes that emerged from data. Finally, throughout the study, I sought and reviewed competing explanations and discrepant data to challenge my findings as they emerged.

It is appropriate to acknowledge that qualitative research has limitations. First, it is debatable whether participants’ original intended meaning may be grasped via text or the spoken
Second, readers may become familiar with social knowledge (Schutz & Wagner, 1970) but may always be voyeurs of private experiences (Simmel, 2003). Finally, qualitative research is dependent on the language and communication skills of both the participants and the researcher. In that language is the key medium for conveying meaning and participants’ “realities,” ineffective communication or language skills could limit the quality of interviews and, in turn, the analysis itself. This was a particular concern for this study due to the nature of participants, most of whom reported that English was not their first language.

The strengths of qualitative research made it well suited to this study and its strengths outweigh its limitations. First, data was collected from people who had personally experienced the phenomenon being researched; this lends credibility to the study. Second, qualitative analysis is a highly reflective process; as researcher, I identified and reflected on key themes in an attempt to understand the nature of the phenomenon – the shared experience – being studied. Third, field observations, participant interviews, and document analysis facilitated deep understanding of the phenomenon being researched. Fourth, as a qualitative researcher, I identified shared emergent themes among the experiences of participants. This process is designed to help both the researcher and readers to feel empathy (verstehen) for people who have experienced what has been described. Finally, qualitative inquiry focuses on understanding, interactivity, and engagement with one’s world (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). The subjective “human” nature of qualitative research is, arguably, its greatest asset.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

A relationship with participants in this study was developed based on intimacy, reciprocity (Maxwell, 2005) fairness, trust, honesty, and respect. Each signed informed consent form will be stored in a lockable file cabinet for three years after the completion of this study.
These forms were also scanned and stored in a password-protected computer. The guidelines presented by the NIH Office of Extramural Research (2011) were followed; for example, participation was voluntary at all times, participants could have withdrawn from the study at any time without penalty, and all decisions and/or responses were free of researcher influence. As such, I had no prior contact with participants and they were chosen based on their relation to the problem of study as opposed to availability, compromised position, or vulnerability.

I anticipated the most minimal of risk to participants as a result of their participation in this study. However, ethical challenges that could have arisen were considered. For example, in that research participants were international students, English was not a first language for some of them. Misunderstandings or misinterpretations could have occurred between researcher and participants. Students were asked if they were comfortable with communications taking place in English. All written and verbal communications were delivered in as simple English as possible. I asked questions to ensure that participants understood what I was trying to communicate and to clarify what they told me to ensure I understood them correctly, as appropriate. Participants were asked to review an executive summary of my findings to ensure I had correctly interpreted what they intended to communicate. Additionally, social and cultural sensitivity were essential (Mertens, 2005). I made every effort to understand appropriate/acceptable social practices and customs for each participant before conducting interviews.

Students may have feared that participation/non-participation in the study would affect their standing at the university. To address this concern, I assured participants throughout the informed consent process that their university standing would not be affected by participation or non-participation in the study. I was not in a position to assign grades to participants nor affect their academic progress.
Loss of confidentiality about students’ perspectives on university programs was another possible risk. Students who were interested in participating in the study responded directly to me to ensure that the university did not know who was participating. Now or in the future, I will not disclose who is participating in the study unless required by law. Interviews were arranged between each participant and me only and were conducted in a private location. Transcripts were de-identified as soon as they were compared to original audio data to ensure accuracy. All data (identifiable and de-identified) was/is being stored in a lockable file cabinet and/or a password protected computer accessible only by the research team. De-identification included removing names of all departments and specific programs, in addition to names and places to avoid potential offense to faculty and administrators.

As a higher education instructor who was not involved in the development or implementation of initiatives affecting international students, works only with international students in a classroom setting, and did not select students with whom I had any prior contact, I foresee minimal threats to the validity of my inquiry as a result of my relationship to the problem of study. My gain from this study was deeper understanding and eventual degree conferral as a result of doctoral thesis completion. However, my obligation and focus was always to secure and advance the well being of research participants and what participants, not I, stood to gain from this project. The findings of this study are presented in the following Chapter Four.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to understand how everyday cross-cultural interactions affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students attending a private research university in the northeastern United States. Based on the intellectual goals, conceptual framework, and qualitative methodology of this study, three research questions were formulated as a foundation for this investigation:

1. What are undergraduate international students’ personal constructions of successful adjustment?

2. What is the nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students?

3. How do undergraduate international students describe the impact of university diversity initiatives for promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions?

The following chapter begins with an introduction to the nine study participants, followed by a presentation of research findings. Throughout this chapter, the Association of International Students is referred to as “AIS” and the Office of Intercultural Affairs as “OIA.” The research site is referred to as “Eastern University,” “Eastern,” “the University,” and “here.”

Study Participants

Primary data for this study was collected via nine interviews with participants who are all undergraduate international students at Eastern University; supporting data was collected from documents and four field observations. Unexpectedly, of the pool of nine participants, four used the specific descriptor “third culture kid” (TCK) to convey how they identify culturally. According to Pollock and Van Reken (2001), TCK is defined as, “a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK
frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any” (p. 19). One of the TCKs in this study – Alex – briefly mentions that he is a TCK when clarifying his answers on the demographics questionnaire (i.e., he answered both Iranian and Central European as his ethnic background, but refers to himself as “White”); however, unlike the other three participants who identify as TCKs, he does not explicitly revisit this identification, nor does he describe a nomadic background. The other three TCKs in this study – Cora, Monica, and Michelle – describe lives that include varying degrees of transience, in which they not only grew up in cultures that were different from their parents’, but traveled frequently, sometimes living in different cultures for extended periods of time. All three eventually ended up attending international boarding schools with highly diverse students populations. The concept of “third culture kid” was unfamiliar to me, and although it was not the focus of this study, this self-identification informs participants’ experiences and perspectives.

The following participant descriptions have been arranged in the order in which participants were interviewed. Additionally, Table 3 presents a visual representation of key demographic information, which was used in the participant selection process to ensure range and variation. This information includes gender, region of origin (including the acronym “TCK” if the participant identified as such), race, ethnicity, or nationality (as specific information as possible without risking loss of confidentiality), year of study, first language, and self-reported level of adjustment. Participants responded to the question, “On the following scale, how adjusted do you feel you are at this university?” Potential responses ranged from one (not adjusted) to five (very well adjusted). Only those students who reported three (adjusted), four (well adjusted), or five (very well adjusted) were selected for participation. All participants are
between eighteen and twenty-four years old and each has been assigned a pseudonym to protect confidentiality.

Table 3

*Participants’ Key Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Region of Origin</th>
<th>Race, Ethnicity or Nationality</th>
<th>Year of Study</th>
<th>First Language</th>
<th>Adjustment Level Reported</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soufiane</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>North Africa</td>
<td>Arab/Berber</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reema</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Hindi</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>South America</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>5</td>
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**Interview One: Soufiane**

Soufiane is a North African male and is a sophomore at Eastern University. English is not his first language. He is double-majoring in Economics and Political Science and is attending Eastern on a highly selective scholarship. Soufiane describes success in terms of what he can achieve in the U.S. but not in his home nation:

I hope to double major, so to me, to be able to study four years and then have two degrees is something that is unheard of back home ... Academically speaking, that's my number-
one goal and that's what I would consider success, is two years and two months from now being at graduation and graduating with a double degree and then hopefully getting a job.

Soufiane also equates success with having a lot of money and power; however, he makes clear that it means “doing something that is substantial ... nothing illegitimate, nothing in the black market ... yet at the same time that makes you profit.” Soufiane attended an “Americanized” high school in North Africa and visited the United States once before coming to Eastern University. He enjoys soccer and describes himself as an outgoing, sociable person.

**Interview Two: Reema**

Reema is an Indian female who is in her senior year at Eastern. English is not her first language. She appreciated the opportunity to take classes in different disciplines before ultimately selecting Economics as a major. She describes what this chance to experiment with different courses means to her:

I’ve been through a phase where I was just doing something because it was decided for me and not decided by me. I didn’t really do well, despite me working 16 hours a day on it. It wasn’t giving me the results because I was just sitting there and doing it because I had to, not because I wanted to. I didn’t want to repeat that.

Reema says her choice to come to Eastern was a risk, in that she was not familiar with the University; she chose to come to the U.S. based largely on her receipt of a scholarship. Despite these funds, she is paying much more to attend school in the U.S. than she would have in her home nation. Opportunity was another major factor in her decision to come to the U.S.:

There are a lot of opportunities here. In India what I felt was I was competing to participate, because there were so many people and there were only so many people who could get involved in certain things. There used to be auditions for everything and you
could only get chosen only if you did something where you are going to be good at it. If you never got a chance to do something, you were never going to be good at it.

Reema states that one of the best opportunities she took advantage of while at Eastern was being able to study abroad. She also recently started playing squash.

**Interview Three: Lena**

Lena is a South American female and is a junior at Eastern; she transferred to the University after spending her freshman year at another U.S. university. She is the only transfer student in this study. She is double majoring in Economics and International Development. Lena attended an international baccalaureate high school in South America and says she never thought of staying in her home nation for college: “I always saw myself here.” English is not her first language, and she recounts learning a difficult lesson about her communication abilities upon coming to the U.S.:

I was like, ‘I have been in the United States before. I have been able to communicate with people there. I’m a really good student in English back in high school and being able to understand everything with my professors. I don’t know why that can be an obstacle for me to go there. I know I’m going to be fine there because I’m able to communicate with people.’ When I came here I realized it wasn’t the same. My professors in high school were all American or from England. I would always understand them. I would always practice my English with them but I would not do it as frequently as I needed it to be here. That was a really big problem when I came here.

Lena decided to attend a U.S. university in part because of her uncle, who attended college in the U.S. and was a mentor to her throughout her childhood. She says this was the primary influence on her decision to come here.
**Interview Four: Assane**

Assane is a West African male who is in his senior year at Eastern. He is majoring in both Mathematics and Economics. He states that he came to the U.S. to learn things he cannot learn in his home nation, namely computer-related skills and social cues. He speaks of returning to his home nation and being driven by a sense of social responsibility because he was able to receive a high standard of education:

I grew up in a very crazy neighborhood where people ... don’t really care about school and all that stuff. It’s all about you growing up and quitting school at some point. Some don’t even finish high school. They go out and they want to get jobs and money all that stuff just drives you. You forget about school and hope is gone. Before you know it, you have a huge family and a pile of bills and you’re struggling to pay for it ... I’m trying to target young kids, try to give them the opportunity to use computers ... That for me is being successful – making that change, making that difference.

Assane maintains that he is committed to changing people’s lives in his home nation through innovation and entrepreneurship. His goal is to start a movement to help people have access to and learn how to use computers. He wants to inspire “people to take chances and try things that are not there, that someone has to bring. I want to be that someone that brings that new thing.”

**Interview Five: Cora**

Cora is a female senior and is one of only two interviewees whose first language is English. She reported on her demographics questionnaire that her nationality is Singaporean and her ethnicity is Chinese; however, she shared in her interview that she identifies as a third culture kid. Cora is the first of four interviewees who define themselves as a TCK. She lived in
Singapore until she was six, lived in Indonesia for the next seven years, and then moved to Thailand, where she lived for approximately five years. She argues that these experiences help her to be adaptive and make friends easily in unfamiliar environments, but also leave her with no sense of home; home is everywhere and home is nowhere. Throughout this period of transience, she studied at an international school with a Westernized curriculum. Her experiences there contributed to her desire to study at a U.S. university:

I thought about how my education had always been from a Western point of view and to think about me getting an education in Singapore scared me a little ... It is very textbook oriented. They don’t really encourage creativity and independent thought as much as the United States ... I wanted to be creative, be encouraged to be independent, all these things that I felt like I could get here in the United States, which is why I came here.

Cora also chose Eastern because it has a large international student population. She is very academically driven; she is double majoring in Communication and Culture and Geography and is working on an honors thesis.

**Interview Six: Asif**

Asif is a Pakistani male who reached out to me via email after being referred by his friend Soufiane. He is in his sophomore year at Eastern and is majoring in Economics. He says he was motivated to consider a U.S. university by fellow high school students who graduated before him and were accepted to ivy-league universities in the northeastern United States. He describes how his high school experience influenced his decision to come here:

When you go to a high school where you get to interact with people from all parts of the society, especially the elites of society back home, most people are doing well basically.
So you come across these kids that are around you that already have this Western impact on them like songs, movies, stuff like that.

Asif clarifies that he is a very strong student and is “not one of those international students that are here solely because they have too much money.” He comes from what he calls a middle-class family, is attending Eastern on a full academic scholarship, and considers himself highly privileged to have the opportunity to come to the U.S. He also credits his ability to come to the U.S. to his status as eldest son. He shares that his father values education and views it as the only way to for middle-class people to do well, but also that his father “always succumbed to my requests. Whatever I asked, he gave it to me, because I’m the eldest son.”

**Interview Seven: Alex**

Alex is the second of four TCKs I interviewed for this study and is in his second year at Eastern. Although he was raised in central Europe, his parents are Iranian; thus, his first languages are both French and Persian. He attended a private school in his home nation and spent the next two years in medical school in his hometown. He then began to question his decision to pursue medicine there:

I wanted to really change my environment, get out of a certain comfort zone that I had and really to have a broader, like I wasn't sure if I want to really to study medicine and I felt that coming to the United States would be the best choice for me, so I can try before really diving into medicine.

Alex’s Godmother lives in the U.S., and he credits her for pushing him to come here. He is now studying Biology at Eastern and is happy with his decision, although his course load can be quite stressful at times. His parents have very high expectations, and he places significant
pressure on himself to achieve: “...if you want to succeed in life, you have to be at 150% of abilities, basically.”

**Interview Eight: Michelle**

Michelle is an East Asian female whose first language is not English. She is a sophomore and is double majoring in Geography and Sociology. Michelle also identifies as a TCK; her family is from an East Asian nation but moved to Thailand, back to her home nation, and then to Bangladesh, where she attended an American international school and began learning English for the first time at age twelve. She describes the reason she only considered attending college in Canada or the U.S.:

I knew I wanted to continue studying in English because if I were to go back to [my home nation in East Asia], that would mean that I would quit studying in English and maybe I will continue speaking in English, but it wouldn’t be on an academic level.

Michelle notes that ideally, she wanted to attend university on the U.S. west coast because her family moved from Bangladesh back to her East Asian home nation while she was in boarding school; however, Eastern University offered her substantial financial assistance. She struggles with what to call “home:” “My parents don’t live in Bangladesh anymore, so I can’t really go back to where I used to live before Eastern even.” She recalls frustration with dorm life because, due to time differences, she had to find a place where she could telephone or Skype her parents in the middle of the night without disturbing other students.

**Interview Nine: Monica**

Monica is a female junior at Eastern and is the fourth interviewee who identifies as a TCK. She was born in Malaysia; her mother is Indian and her father is half Indian, half Malaysian. At the age of four, she moved to the Philippines; thus, she considers herself
culturally Indian and Filipino, despite holding a Malaysian passport. English is one of Monica’s two first languages; the other is Tamil. When describing how she responds to people who ask where she is from, she says:

I always feel a little bit self-conscious explaining it because I feel like people might ask but they don’t really want to know everything, you know? I never know whether to say all of it, or to say I grew up here, or to say this is what my passport is, or this is what I look like, and that’s what my ethnicity is. I never know whether I should say the whole thing or just pick.

Monica identifies strongly as a TCK, in that she does not associate herself with one specific culture; she says she looks Indian, but only knows some of the language. She practices Indian traditions and is a religious Hindu, but has been strongly influenced by her other cultural experiences. Choosing Psychology as a major has helped her interact primarily with American students, in that there are very few international students in this department.

Findings

Table 4 presents a visual representation of findings listed in order of the research questions they answer. These three sections are: a/ Undergraduate International Students’ Personal Constructions of Successful Adjustment, b/ The Nature of Everyday Cross-Cultural Interactions that Affected Adjustment, and c/ The Impact of Diversity Initiatives on Promoting Everyday Cross-Cultural Interactions. A total of eight primary themes have been identified that answer these questions. A ninth section, Additional Findings, has been included at the end of this chapter, but is not included in Table 4. Although this section does not directly answer the third research question of this study, it is considered relevant and noteworthy because it includes
participants’ recommendations for university diversity initiatives that they believe would encourage cross-cultural interactions in their everyday lives.

Table 4

*Summary of Findings*

1. **What are personal constructions of successful adjustment?**

   Readiness to Engage in a New Intercultural Environment
   
   - Being open-minded
   - Taking initiative
   - Responding with resilience
   - Interacting with confidence

   Achieving Balance

   Campus Community Feels Like Home

2. **What is the nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected adjustment?**

   Finding and Embracing Common Ground

   Managing Cultural Tension
   
   - Accommodating
   - Disengaging
   - Challenging cultural assumptions

3. **What is the impact of university diversity initiatives for promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions?**

   Creating an Us/Them Divide

   Promoting Solidarity

   Establishing a Cultural Presence

**Undergraduate International Students’ Personal Constructions of Successful Adjustment**

Three main themes were identified that capture undergraduate international students’ personal constructions of successful adjustment: a/ Readiness to Engage in a New Intercultural
Environment, b/ Achieving Balance, and c/ Campus Community Feels Like Home. Four properties were identified that represent distinct practices of the category Readiness to Engage in a New Intercultural Environment: Being open-minded, Taking initiative, Responding with resilience, and Interacting with confidence. The following thematic sections will describe undergraduate international students’ personal constructions of successful adjustment at Eastern University. This study defines personal constructions as the practices and interpretive frameworks used by people who are attempting to make sense of their everyday cross-cultural interactions. Select excerpts from interview transcripts will be included in each section to help elucidate each theme and/or property.

**Readiness to Engage in a New Intercultural Environment**

The first personal construction of successful adjustment is Readiness to Engage in a New Intercultural Environment. This is defined as the practice of mentally preparing to be flexible, adaptive, and take full advantage of new experiences. A pattern is evident among participants’ descriptions of how they oriented themselves to their new environment, both before and after they arrived at Eastern. Findings show that they practiced a process of mental preparation before coming to the University, and also once they arrived here. This process is dynamic in nature; participants describe a process of continually orienting themselves as they interpreted each new intercultural experience. Participants also describe experiences during their initial integration into their new intercultural environment in which they recognized the value of this mental preparation. That is, several participants recognized that not continually re-orienting their thinking became a barrier to their adjustment; those that did not interpret themselves to be adequately mentally prepared before coming here expressed regret. This category includes four
properties that represent distinct practices: Being open-minded, Taking initiative, Responding with resilience, and Interacting with confidence.

**Being open-minded.** The first property of participants’ personal constructions of successful adjustment in this category is Being open-minded. Being open-minded is defined as the practice of being receptive to new people, experiences, ideas, and opportunities. Findings show that practicing open-mindedness allows participants to interpret their experiences differently than they would if they were closed-minded. In some cases, students are orienting to their new environment before coming to the U.S. For example, students who recognize potential conflict upon their arrival to Eastern may practice mentally preparing themselves to be open-minded about such encounters before coming here. Soufiane remembers arriving aware that because he is an Arab and a Muslim, he might face conflict with Americans; however, he mentally prepared himself to listen to what culturally different others had to say and try to understand their perspective. He shares that the biggest shock he had at Eastern had nothing to do with the culture clash he had anticipated:

> Everyone likes to dress up differently ... Everyone's hair is a different color. People like to express themselves, something you don't really see back home. Like, I've never seen someone with blue hair, red hair, pink hair. Those things just don't happen back home.

Soufiane could have closed himself off and allowed surface differences to keep him from interacting; however, his pre-arrival practice of mental preparation to keep an open mind helped him embrace these differences instead. He also argues that because he made the choice to leave his home and come to a new nation, he is now in someone else’s home; thus, he must practice keeping an open mind about what he finds here. Otherwise, he should have stayed in North Africa. Asif supports this contention: “I think making friends, you cannot come to the U.S. and
be conservative, basically. It just doesn’t work. I think being open is one of the most important things.”

Unlike Soufiane and Asif, Reema did not mentally prepare to be open-minded before coming to the U.S.; however, she adopted this practice when presented with the opportunity to interact cross-culturally. Reema admits that she hoped to meet other students from her home nation when she first arrived at Eastern. However, she was assigned an American roommate and was surrounded by culturally diverse international students on her floor in the dormitory. She chose not to close herself off from these students of other cultures, and living with them made her realize quickly that although physical appearances varied, she shared more in common with them than she realized. Even though she had not practiced open-mindedness before coming to the U.S., she was surprised to find how open-minded she could be. Reema recalls, “I could connect with them right from the beginning. It was definitely different but it wasn’t as daunting as I used to think of in my mind.” Reema feels that deciding to practice open-mindedness after coming here and being willing to consider interactions with students outside her native culture helped her adjust to life at Eastern. Her description demonstrates the importance of continually re-orienting her thinking as she interprets new intercultural experiences.

Sometimes, participants’ personal constructions of successful adjustment include the practice of being open-minded because they found there was a lesser result when they were not open; lack of open-mindedness can present a barrier to successful adjustment. Participants describe learning the importance of practicing open-mindedness from experiences in which they may not have done so. For example, Lena made friends with several American students during her first year at Eastern, but did not agree with their open discussions about sexual experiences. She shares that even though she considered herself very open-minded at the time, it was difficult
to adapt to this cultural difference. This experience made her realize that she was not as open-minded as she had initially thought and, in hindsight, it would have been easier for her if she had been less judgmental and more mentally prepared for such differences. Cora also shares a lesson she learned about being open-minded as she faced challenging cultural differences: “I’ve learned that people here are very comfortable with expressing themselves … it’s not that I have to be the same way, but it’s that I need to accept what comes out of people’s mouths.” In other words, practicing open-mindedness does not necessarily mean changing oneself to adapt to cultural differences; it means accepting cultural differences without judgment. Alex interprets being open-minded as, “being tolerant and accept[ing] people’s views and beliefs.”

Michelle argues that the practice of keeping her mind and options open helped her adjust successfully at the University. She tried to get to know as many people as possible by being open to new experiences like peer advising. She states that being open to new opportunities “rather than sticking to your own lingual clique” is crucial. In my observation at International FETE, the widely attended annual music and dance show produced by AIS, diverse students – including some Americans – were observed performing within multiple national dance teams. These American students likely did not speak the language of the team with whom they were performing, and may not have been highly familiar with their culture. Participants in this show demonstrate the practice of being open-minded, in that they must be open to diversity to consider participating and attending.

According to Alex’s interpretation, being open-minded means that he made an effort to get to know American culture and not live as if he was still in his home nation. He contends that embracing American culture made him more open to American students, which aided his adjustment: “Just being open-minded and curious – that really helped me to adapt quickly here.”
Clearly, practicing open-mindedness is a salient part of participants’ personal constructions of successful adjustment; however, another important element of their constructions is taking action. Being open-minded is a precursor to taking risks, which is the second property of this category: Taking initiative.

**Taking initiative.** The second property of participants’ personal constructions of successful adjustment in this category is Taking initiative. Taking initiative is defined as the practice of being self-motivated and willing to move outside of one’s comfort zone by taking risks. Such action was evident during my observation at International FETE. According to the event’s promotional documents, web page, and my personal experience attending the show, over three hundred students performed multiple dance routines in front of an audience of over two thousand people in celebration of Eastern’s internationally diverse community. To me, their joy was obvious, as was the audience’s enthusiasm and enjoyment; loud cheers were heard throughout the show. Taking the risk to perform in such a large venue may prove difficult for any person; it is likely more challenging for an international student in a new environment to take this risk. However, no discomfort or fear was observable; in fact, participants in the show appeared to be proud and excited about this action they were taking. This suggests that participants recognize the benefits of taking risks and the practice of putting themselves “out there.”

Risk-taking and moving outside of one’s comfort zone involves intercultural communication, including asking questions and sharing one’s opinion. Assane speaks to the necessity of taking such action when he says that as an international student you must “take the chances, go to class, speak your mind.” Alex supports this contention, noting that success here depends on willingness to take chances without hesitation. He smiles broadly and says he is
quoting Americans when he argues, “People will not eat you. They will not bite you.” Soufiane maintains that people on campus know you are an international student, and if you take initiative by asking for help, people will be willing to help you. He stresses that the ownership to take initiative and put in effort to interact is on the international student. In addition to being willing to speak your mind, Michelle contends that you must be unafraid to ask questions about people of other cultures. For example, she shares that her freshman roommate and her roommate’s friends, who all lived on her floor, were Jewish. Michelle knew nothing about Jewish culture and was curious about the holidays for which they would travel home. She interpreted the acquisition of this cultural knowledge as a way to become more personal with her Jewish roommate, and as a way to become more acquainted with her roommate’s Jewish friends “on a friend’s level.” Like Soufiane, she sees the onus as hers to take the initiative to ask about her friends’ cultural celebrations. Gaining this cultural knowledge about students with whom she lives is part of Michelle’s personal construction of successful adjustment.

According to participants’ personal constructions, taking initiative is about the practice of taking risks and getting involved; these actions can result in relationships with people of other cultures. Monica states that taking initiative means putting yourself “out there” by, for example, joining a club that you are nervous about or is not a club you would normally consider. Taking initiative to join a club allows students with similar values or interests to develop friendships. This was apparent during my observation at a weekly AIS meeting. Students in attendance included both international and domestic students; although domestic students were far fewer in number, everyone at the meeting interacted in a jovial manner. Students were noticeably familiar with one another, and several male attendees took turns riding a scooter around the room. Cora notes that taking the first and sometimes hardest step by initiating club membership
and attending meetings pays dividends: “You’re in this club for an entire year and it’s hard not to strengthen bonds with them and get to know people over time so you develop relationships.” These relationships are interpreted as a reward for being ready and willing to take risks.

Taking initiative can initially be difficult, but, according to Reema, she knew it was essential to building relationships. She clarifies that by taking initiative, she does not mean simply going out and seeking connections haphazardly. She views initiative in the form of joining structured clubs or activities, for example, as the best way to develop new relationships:

Going out and looking for friends, it doesn’t work that way. You have to be involved in something where you meet people and that’s how it goes. Nobody’s going to go out and “Okay, I’m just going to go to the café and just sit with a random person and make friends with them.” That doesn’t happen. You need to be involved in doing something to get them. That kind of catalyses the process of making friends.

Reema’s interpretation illustrates the potential for developing relationships as a result of taking the risk to join cultural or shared interest clubs and activities. She asserts that these relationships helped her successfully adjust at Eastern.

Getting involved in clubs is also helpful for students who are struggling with newfound independence and time management. Cultural aspects of where participants lived before coming to the University may have created a sense of dependency in which participants did not have to take initiative to be successful. For example, in the boarding school he attended before coming to Eastern, Assane was used to being woken up, monitored for class attendance and grades, and did not learn to manage his own time. At Eastern, he has duties and is reminded by fellow club members to follow through with certain tasks; this has helped him practice time management skills. Moreover, he shares that he took the initiative to get involved in clubs “because I knew if
I did that, I would have a reason to leave my room, go to meetings, and also discuss things and talk.” Taking initiative was critical to Assane’s adjustment in that by joining clubs, he did not isolate himself in his room and was forced to interact with diverse students in meetings. Asif demonstrates how relevant taking the initiative to become involved is to his personal construction of successful adjustment. He measures his level of adjustment by how active he is in campus activities. When asked why he responded “4 – well adjusted” on the personal attribute questionnaire’s adjustment scale, he responded that he would have answered “5 – very well adjusted” but he did not feel he was involved enough in campus activities to do so:

I feel like I’m not as involved in campus activities as I could be ... I’m not in the student council and stuff like that. That’s one of the reasons that I just applied to be a resident advisor. If I do that, my level of satisfaction and involvement would increase and maybe get a five.

For Asif, taking the initiative to become more involved in campus activities and taking on a new leadership role is a crucial part of his personal construction of what it means to be successfully adjusted at Eastern. Arriving here ready to take such action has been beneficial to this process.

Responding with resilience. The third property of participants’ personal constructions of successful adjustment in this category is Responding with resilience. Responding with resilience is defined as the practice of overcoming academic, cultural, and social challenges. When faced with negative experiences, students have a choice as to how they respond. The internal process of interpreting experiences positively and focusing on one’s personal goals is an essential part of this practice. For example, Alex believes that in order to persevere when faced with obstacles, positivity is key. He argues that although it sounds simple, telling himself “‘It will be alright’” makes him “able to fight back and to come back on the right track.” Soufiane’s
state of mind before he came to Eastern prepared him to practice rejecting negativity upon his arrival. When people say things with which he does not agree or like, he does not dwell on it. He describes his philosophy on negativity:

I honestly don't really take to heart what people tell me, because it really isn't worth the stress. Once you keep things in your mind, it really has a negative impact on your life, so I've learned to just completely let things go ... I'll just go on through, graduate, and do what I'm going to do.

Overcoming challenges by “letting things go” and focusing on his goals is an important part of Soufiane’s personal construction of responding with resilience. Cora is also prepared to practice rejecting negativity by not allowing people to make her “feel inferior.” She does this by focusing on what she calls her “purpose” here and by trying to find ways to circumvent and/or resolve negative interactions. Like Soufiane, she demonstrates responding with resilience by focusing on what is important to her as opposed to the negativity of others. She credits her resilience, in part, to her background as a third culture kid; in traveling the world and living in several different nations, she learned to overcome social and cultural challenges by being flexible and adaptive. She contends that arriving to Eastern with these skills aided her adjustment to the University.

Emulating positive role models is another way students practice overcoming challenges, which is an essential part of responding with resilience. Reema shares a story about a friend who, she learned, had to flee his native Iraq during wartime. He spent time as a refugee in Syria before coming to the United States. This story inspired Reema; she marvels at how happy and funny he is, despite his traumatic background. She thinks of his story when she is having a bad day and compares her worries to his; she says this helps her focus on enjoying happy things
instead of focusing on worry. Like Reema, Soufiane found comfort in the experiences of a student from another culture. He describes a friend who looks Asian but is actually South American, and how hearing this friend constantly explain his background to people helped Soufiane overcome missing home:

If he can emotionally sustain himself through four years of Eastern University and through four years of explaining, "Yes, I'm from Chile, not Korea" ... then you should be able to do it yourself, because if another person can do it, then you should be able to.

Witnessing his friend patiently explain his uncommon cultural background to people helped Soufiane overcome feelings of loneliness when he arrived at Eastern and made him realize that as different as he felt he was as a North African international student at a U.S. university, other students might feel even more different or alone than he did. Reema and Soufiane may not have arrived here as resilient to worry or loneliness as they may have liked, but they quickly learned to be more so by learning about the challenging experiences of culturally different others. That is, they re-oriented their thinking based on their interpretations of new experiences. These learning experiences are salient parts of their personal constructions of successful adjustment.

Part of Assane and Asif’s personal construction of successful adjustment is overcoming the social challenge of “fitting in.” Responding with resilience can be demonstrated by the practice of mimicking speech and behavior and changing one’s accent in order to feel more comfortable in a new environment. For example, when Assane is in a new, unfamiliar environment, he observes people’s speech and behavior and emulates them. He states that, “In class, I interact with people and that’s how I learned to copy the way they talk and the way they behave.” Likewise, Asif found it helpful that he was able to take on an American accent quite easily and can now switch his accent from British to American as necessary when speaking
English. He viewed language to be the biggest potential barrier to his adjustment here, and once his “American accent” was acquired, his comfort level increased dramatically. He felt like he “fit in” at Eastern. Both participants arrived here ready to practice versatility; this skill is important for responding with resilience and successful adjustment.

Assane found time management to be a significant cultural challenge. During his interview, he reflected on his time at boarding school as a bridge between home and his experience in the U.S.; he recognized, with appreciation, that his boarding school experiences helped him prepare to be punctual and value time more at Eastern. In his home nation, punctuality was not valued; neither was efficiency. He was given extended periods of time to complete short examinations. Upon coming to the U.S., he quickly realized that practicing punctuality and efficiency were values he had to respect in order to succeed both academically and socially. He was thankful that his time in boarding school had prepared him for much shorter examination periods at Eastern. His experiences there were key in his process of adjusting to how time is valued in the U.S.

Food also presents a cultural challenge to students from other cultures. Asif remembers missing the spicy food from his native South Asia. He says that food was one of the factors that made him most homesick when he first arrived at Eastern. He shares how practicing flexibility enabled him to overcome this challenge: “All this bland food here just doesn’t go for me. Now of course I’ve grown accustomed to that. Since my first week, I have always been pouring buffalo sauce on everything I ate.” Although Asif misses the spicy food from his home nation, he does not focus on the fact that the food at Eastern does not taste exactly like his food at home. He demonstrates his ability to be respond with resilience and adapt to life in the U.S. by adding what spices he can based on what is available from Eastern’s dining service. During my observation
at the student center cafe, I saw a female Asian student offering a piece of sushi to her male
dining companion, who I believe to be American. I was within close enough proximity that I
could hear them speaking. He took a bite, they both laughed, and she said, “It’s okay” (referring
to the sushi); her facial expression suggested that she meant it was not bad, but was also not great
tasting. She then chose a piece from another part of the tray and tasted it. This observation
suggests that the Asian student, like Asif, may have been attempting to find a close substitute to
what familiar food tastes like to her. Overcoming the challenge of unfamiliar food is
demonstrated to be important for responding with resilience; this practice is shown to be an
integral component of participants’ personal constructions of successful adjustment.

**Interacting with confidence.** The fourth and final property of participants’ personal
constructions of successful adjustment in this category is Interacting with confidence.
Interacting with confidence is defined as the practice of believing that one has language,
academic, and socio-cultural skills necessary to participate in a new intercultural environment.
Findings show that participants interpret how effective they are at each of the three elements in
this skill set, both before and after coming to Eastern; recognizing that they have sufficient
abilities in these three areas allows them interact with confidence. Some participants questioned
their abilities in a specific skill, but interacted with confidence after “testing the waters” and
realizing that they were more proficient in this area than they thought. They allowed their
experiences to re-orient their thinking. For example, personal constructions of interacting with
confidence include a belief in effective English language skills. Speaking five languages,
including English, from an early age gave Alex the confidence to interact with both international
and American students at Eastern. These interactions helped him feel more comfortable here.
Both Monica and Cora are native English speakers; they found that this skill allowed them to
interact comfortably with diverse international and domestic students as soon as they arrived in the U.S. Monica states, “I think it was a little bit easier for me than it was for people who, maybe, came straight from Thailand and only spoke Thai, and barely speak English.” She views her confidence in speaking English as giving her an advantage over other international students who could not speak the language as well as she could; this confidence was central to her immediate participation in the University community.

Lack of confidence in language abilities made some participants aware of how important confidence in English language competency was to their personal constructions of successful adjustment. Lena and Asif questioned whether their English abilities would be as strong as they thought when they arrived in the United States. Lena recalls struggling to participate in conversations at the school from which she transferred, “even though I had all that knowledge in my head.” In other words, she knew English, but was afraid to use it due to insufficient practice. Lack of readiness in terms of confidence in this area became a barrier to her adjustment. After her freshman year, she went home for the summer and practiced English constantly. This fueled her with the confidence she needed to interact upon transferring to Eastern; she interpreted herself as ready to participate in her new intercultural environment. Asif worried about the “communication gap” when he left his native language behind and could only communicate in English; he recollects that “[coming here] was the first time I really got the chance to check out how well I can converse in English, and I found out that I was pretty good at it, so that was really comforting.” Knowing he was able to communicate effectively in English gave Asif the confidence he needed to feel comfortable interacting at Eastern, particularly with American students. Interacting with confidence is a salient part of his personal construction of successful adjustment.
In addition to confidence in effective English language skills, interpreting that one has the academic preparation necessary to succeed in the U.S. also plays a central role in personal constructions of interacting with confidence and readiness. Attending a secondary school that emulated an American school system and being taught by American teachers made Soufiane interpret himself as well prepared to attend a university in the United States. Likewise, Lena is the product of an international baccalaureate high school; she asserts that this program prepared her for the “American system” and made her interpret herself as ready to attend college in America. International schools like the one Cora attended in Singapore used American textbooks and English-speaking teachers from the U.S., Australia, and the U.K.; this “Westernized” education made her feel very comfortable interacting with American students as soon as she arrived at Eastern. For Asif, interacting with confidence stems from his history of academic success:

I've been a good student all my life. Even if I don’t study, I just somehow manage to get more marks than other people ... even if I do it at the last second I know that I'm not going to mess up. I will get a decent grade.

Having confidence in his ability to succeed academically is critical to Asif’s sense of adjustment at Eastern; he interpreted himself as ready to excel in this area before his arrival here. Knowing he has this area under control allows him to focus more readily on other aspects that may present challenges to his adjustment. Interpreting himself as academically successful allows him to interact with confidence.

Having the socio-cultural skills necessary to participate in Eastern’s diverse community is also part of participants’ personal constructions of interacting with confidence. Cora, Michelle, and Monica attended international schools with diverse student populations and had
already interacted with American students before coming here; this background made them feel confident – before arriving at Eastern – that they had the socio-cultural skills necessary to participate in their new environment. Monica views the diversity she grew up with in school as highly beneficial to her immediate participation in the campus community because she was able to interact with people of other cultures on a daily basis all her life. Being a TCK and an international student that has traveled the world, lived in several different nations, and has experienced an American-style educational system made it easier to adjust here, according to Cora. She finds it easy to integrate into new environments, particularly the U.S., in part because she understands Western humor and culture. She also notes that as a TCK, “I have met all sorts of people and so nothing really shocks me ... I’m very personable and even meeting a stranger for the first time, I will actually try and have a conversation with them and get to know them.”

Cora’s confidence in her diverse background and communication abilities allows her to initiate conversations with culturally diverse others; she tries to get to know them beyond a superficial level.

Having a strong American student population at her international boarding school allowed Michelle to interact frequently with Americans before coming here. Like Cora, she notes that this, coupled with her experiences as a TCK, put her at a social advantage before she arrived in the U.S., as opposed to students who grew up in their home nations and never interacted with American people before coming to Eastern. This practice of believing in their socio-cultural competency – interpreting themselves as ready to participate in a new intercultural environment – bolstered the confidence of these three women even before their arrival at the University. Interacting with confidence is central to their personal constructions of successful adjustment.
Achieving Balance

Another personal construction of successful adjustment is Achieving Balance. In my interviews with participants, a pattern emerged in which they described successful adjustment in terms of being able to meet competing demands from academic life, social life, and their own desire for independence. They also discuss successful adjustment in terms of their inner well-being; that is, they frame adjustment in part according to what they are able to handle without feeling overwhelmed, depressed, or losing confidence in their abilities. For example, Alex frames success in terms of academic achievement, social networks, and independence:

I want to study medicine, so for this I need the grades. I need to be successful in my schoolwork. Secondly, successful also in terms of ... being able to have a large network of friends, of people around me that I can always rely on. The third one, at the end of my curriculum here, I want to say to myself that I proved, first of all to myself and to other people, that I was able to come here far from home and adapt to a completely different environment to a country that doesn't speak my first language.

Alex maintains that his “inner well-being” is a direct consequence of keeping these criteria in balance. Coincidentally, due in part to Eastern’s small size, Alex was observed in three out of four of my field observations. First, I saw him at the AIS meeting, talking with fellow club members and riding a scooter around the room. Next, I observed him during my observation at the library’s common area. He was sitting alone at a table, quietly focused on reading a book, with a laptop in front of him. Finally, I recognized Alex performing in several dances at International FETE and carrying a student on his shoulders during the flag ceremony. Seeing him in these three different contexts illustrates his ability to maintain balance in his daily life.
Similarly to Alex, Cora contends that to be successfully adjusted, “That means where you are academically, where you are personally, socially, everything.” She voices pride that she challenged herself academically by double majoring and choosing to write an honors thesis; she also stresses her need for a circle of close friends and independence. To Cora, independence meant getting a job and adopting a dog of her own. Assane remarks that the best advice he could give international students arriving at Eastern would be to balance school life and social life: “open up to meet people and make friends as well as study hard. Basically balance the two.” He views this balance as the best way to adjust to a new culture.

In describing their personal constructions of successful adjustment, participants recognize a critical element in the effort to achieve and maintain balance: identifying what is most important to you among the three main competing demands. In other words, feeling balanced does not necessarily mean devoting 33.3% of one’s time to each demand; it means knowing when it is appropriate or necessary to one’s personal well being to devote more or less time to any one demand. Monica exemplifies this idea when she discusses her need to make lists, keep a planner, and create reminders on her computer so she doesn’t “drop the ball on things.” She argues that in order to keep the proverbial ball in the air, you need to know when to step back:

You’re in all of these classes and you’re doing all these other things [like social groups], and if you feel like you can’t handle it ... you need to know when to pull yourself back and just focus on what’s actually important.

When asked what she considered “actually important,” Monica responds, “Classes, because that’s why we’re here.” Clearly, her personal construction of Achieving Balance includes placing a premium on academic success. Assane agrees with her. He notes that balance is crucial, but the primary signal to him that he is well adjusted is the knowledge that the
requirements for his major are complete and he is almost finished writing his honors thesis. Because he is comforted by academic success, Assane, like Monica, would pull back from the social and independent elements of Achieving Balance in order to devote more time and effort to academic demands.

For some participants, feeling independent is the most important element in Achieving Balance. Lena describes the central component of successful balance for her as being able to live in the U.S. without her family, familiar food and language; she looks forward to one day looking back and marveling that she was able to overcome these obstacles by herself, in addition to achieving academic and social success. Asif greatly values academics and friendship networks; however, he values the independence he has achieved above all else. He remarks, “I’ve moved from someone who is totally dependent on his father, now I’m working two jobs along with four courses ... I’m a grown man basically. I take care of myself. I don’t have to be afraid and I don’t have to be dependent on anything.” Asif’s statement suggests that because he was raised to be dependent on his father, he feared independence before coming to Eastern. Realizing that he is able to successfully balance a job, his academic course load, and can live day-to-day without the assistance of others is central to his personal construction of what it means to be successfully adjusted here.

In addition to balancing academic and social demands and the desire for independence, participants also value balance within their social networks. In part, their personal constructions of successful adjustment include forming social networks of international and American friends and casual acquaintances. Monica describes a network in which she lives with Americans and spends a significant amount of time with international students as well. She asserts that this balanced network is a major way in which she measures her adjustment at Eastern. She opines,
“It’s important to me to be able to be in different groups and spend time with different people that have really different backgrounds ... and to fit in, in all those groups.” Like Monica, Cora values her circle of American and international friends. She finds comfort in being able to successfully “go back and forth between the two worlds.” “Fitting in” with and being accepted by both international and domestic students at Eastern is a key factor to Monica and Cora feeling successful here. Assane regards balanced friendships among international and domestic students as essential to the success of all students at Eastern “because we need to learn from them just like they need to learn from us.” Assane recognizes the value of every student at Eastern as having something to offer the campus’ intercultural community. Part of his construction of successful adjustment includes reciprocal learning experiences with students of other cultures within his balanced social network.

**Campus Community Feels Like Home**

The final personal construction of successful adjustment identified in this study is that participants’ Campus Community Feels Like Home. Interpreting this feeling of home in their campus community means they have a sense of intimacy and belonging engendered by a social network of strong friendships and casual acquaintances. Participants consistently note that although they do miss home – their home nation, family and friends – they also feel like they have a home at Eastern. For example, Asif states that when he misses his family, he calls them and talks to them regularly; however, he clarifies that he is not terribly homesick any more: “My life is here now.” Cora describes this feeling of home when she says, “For me, being well-adjusted meant that I felt like I had a life here – that I wasn’t here temporarily ... I have the right group of friends and the right people I met to really care for me and to be there for me.” Her statement illustrates the role of friendship networks in offering the care and emotional support
necessary for her to feel successfully adjusted.

A feeling of home is achieved in part by acquiring a group of friends that come to feel like family. Participants voice surprise about feeling so strongly about people they have known for only a short time and who are not “blood” family. Assane describes this bonding process as happening very quickly:

One day you meet two people. You start hanging out with them. All of a sudden, they just become part of your life and part of your family. You can’t picture your life without them ... To think that other people can be close to you just like family. It made me really feel like I was home.

Alex refers to his close group of international friends as brothers and sisters he knows he can rely on for support. He says they are “all here in the same boat” and argues, “If we can make each other feel like we are still at home – which is probably important for a lot of people who live far, far away – [we] would feel comfortable.” Asif echoes this sentiment when he states, “We all know that feeling [of loneliness] and we all hate it ... If we are not there for each other we can’t make it.” These remarks demonstrate a feeling of togetherness among international students who have all left home and family behind. They also suggest a sense of responsibility to other international students to help make them feel comfortable and at home here.

Participants demonstrate that an essential element of friends coming to feel like family is sharing food together. They consistently share stories about feeling comforted knowing they have someone with whom to eat. Sharing meals is a salient part of participants’ constructions of what it means to be successfully adjusted at Eastern. Reema says that she has her own group of friends, “which, I mean, you’ve been having dinners or lunches together since I don’t know when.” She frames her friendships in terms of with whom she shares meals. Alex realized how
important sharing meals is to his personal construction of successful adjustment only when opportunities to do so were no longer possible. He notes that one of his greatest periods of stress and unhappiness was when his classes were scheduled in such a way that he was unable to eat with his friends. He went so far as to say that there was nothing he disliked more than eating alone and he became unsettled by the situation. It was only when an American classmate visited him at the library and “ordered” him to come and eat with him did Alex start to feel better; he considered this classmate an acquaintance before this experience and a friend after. This suggests that in addition to helping Alex “feel better” – more adjusted – here, sharing food is a bridge that can bring together students of other cultures. In my observation at the student center cafe, I witnessed this meal sharing among diverse students at Eastern; no students were observed to be eating alone. Asif remarks that he has never eaten alone during his time at Eastern; he scans the cafeteria and is typically comforted to see at least a few tables at which he can sit with familiar people. This demonstrates the premium placed on meal times and comfort in familiarity; these values are part of how participants’ personally construct a feeling of home in their campus community.

In addition to having friends that feel like family, part of participants’ constructions of feeling like home is having a sense of community on campus. They describe a community feeling that is achieved by having a network of acquaintances or, at least, familiar people on campus who participate in mutual recognition. For example, Assane tells about a walk on campus on his birthday. He kept hearing “Happy birthday!” from various people throughout the day. This recognition was a signal to Assane that he was well adjusted, “because you have to have been here for a while to have people know your birthday in the first place and call out your name when they see you.” Participants contend that Eastern’s small campus size affords this
sense of intimacy and comfort. Michelle shares that “Eastern is such a small school and it’s so comfortable and you feel like you know everyone.” Knowing the majority of people on campus to some extent and not being able to walk to class without saying “Hello” to at least one person is comforting, according to Asif. Reema did not know how well-adjusted she was at Eastern until she studied abroad her junior year:

There were 200 people in most of my classes, or more. I barely knew one or two people in my classes. I missed the community feeling that I get at Eastern University when I’m walking down the street and I definitely recognize the person by face, if not by name. I feel very at ease [here] and when I went [abroad], I missed it [here] as I used to miss home when I came here at first. That’s saying a lot. I’m definitely well adjusted at my home, and if I feel at home here, I am definitely well adjusted.

Removing Reema from the sense of community and familiarity she felt at Eastern made her realize how important this feeling was to her personal construction of successful adjustment.

**Section Summary**

This section described three central themes of undergraduate international students’ personal constructions of successful adjustment: a/ Readiness to Engage in a New Intercultural Environment, b/ Achieving Balance, and c/ Campus Community Feels Like Home. The category Readiness to Engage in a New Intercultural Environment included four properties that represented distinct practices: Being open-minded, Taking initiative, Responding with resilience, and Interacting with confidence. Although these categories and properties are listed separately and do not conceptually overlap, they are by no means disconnected. For example, I found that in order for a student to take initiative, he/she is open-minded about opportunities, such as joining an unfamiliar club, and is confident enough in one’s language abilities, for
example, to initiate risk by attending a club meeting. Creating a friendship network that makes one’s campus community feel like home is a major element in achieving the social component of balance. The interdependent relationship of these themes demonstrates the complex nature of successful adjustment as it is constructed by participants.

The Nature of Everyday Cross-Cultural Interactions that Affected Adjustment

Two primary themes were identified that capture the nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students: a/ Finding and Embracing Common Ground, and b/ Managing Cultural Tension. The category “Managing Cultural Tension” includes three properties: Accommodating, Disengaging, and Challenging Cultural Assumptions. The following thematic sections will describe the nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students attending Eastern University. Relevant excerpts from interview transcripts will be included in each section to help illuminate each theme and/or property.

Finding and Embracing Common Ground

The nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected adjustment is characterized by Finding and Embracing Common Ground. This means that students seek commonalities to bridge cultural divides and build relationships with people of other cultures. Playing sports and video games was found to be a significant catalyst for intercultural interactions. According to Soufiane, sports helped him make a lot of American friends because “it didn’t matter where you’re from, as long as you can play the sport.” Signing up for club tennis forced Asif out of his comfort zone and provided an opportunity for him to interact with diverse students, both international and American; the majority of the people in the club are American. He argues that in order to bridge cultural gaps and make American friends, the most basic thing one can do is
“finding common things.” This suggests that focusing on a shared interest or purpose shifts the focus away from cultural differences and results in not only intercultural interaction but in friendship formation. Alex supports this contention in an experience he shares about a community service project in which he helped build a playground during his last spring break. He describes it thus:

There were a lot of American students, internationals, and we really had a good time. This was really one of the best experiences I had here ... You didn’t see divisions. We were here for a purpose. I couldn’t imagine myself working with all these people for five to seven days and not talk to anyone.

Working toward a common goal for an extended period of time shifted the focus away from differences and forced participants to interact cross-culturally in order to complete their task.

Participants cite their experiences with International FETE as a significant contributor to feeling valued and adjusted at Eastern. In my observation of FETE, it was clear that the performances required significant planning and rehearsal time. Music and costumes had to be carefully chosen, and dances had to be choreographed that authentically reflected the culture of each nation being represented. Seeing so many diverse students performing in the show made me pause to reflect on the amount of time they must have spent together in the weeks and months prior to the event. Their flawless performances demonstrate that although FETE celebrates cultural diversity, sharing the common goal of preparing for the show actually shifted participants’ attention away from cultural differences.

Participants share multiple examples of interactions with students from other cultures in which they were seeking common ground as a way to connect and feel more comfortable at Eastern. Lena describes trying to bond with her American roommate. She states that the first
thing they talked about at length was art and music; both paint, draw, and play the violin. Identifying these commonalities induced them to try to find more; they discovered that they “had the same guy experiences” and both spoke some French. Lena shares that because of this initial conversation, “We had this really strong connection and we were like best friends the first week of classes here ... We were really, really close. We never had problems being roomies.” Her use of the word “roomies” suggests both familiarity and affection. Lena is not the only student to find comfort in language as a commonality. Alex shares two experiences with students of other cultures in which they found common ground via language; one in particular speaks to the power of language as a bridge between cultures. During his first weeks here, a student of another culture approached Alex and began speaking French to him. When asked if he was fluent in the language, the student replied that he was not, and had only learned some simple phrases so he could share it with Alex; he then asked if Alex would help him improve his French. The two are now suite-mates, and Alex reports that this interaction “made me feel really, really good about being here.” The fact that this student chose language as the tool to initiate this interaction is a testament to its potential for reaching common ground in intercultural interactions. Moreover, Alex’s positive state of mind about being in the U.S. as a result of this everyday interaction supports its ability to affect adjustment.

Cross-cultural interactions that affect adjustment are characterized by shared interests, languages, and experiences. Participants also find common ground in shared struggles. For example, Reema describes early interactions with her West African boyfriend. He would invite her over for a movie, and shared interest in the film led her to connect with him initially. She goes on to say that they were both struggling with what major to choose:

We discussed how it was funny that we were interested in such diverse fields but we were
looking to get passionate about something. That’s where I think we found a common
ground. He was actually the second African I ever met in my life.

Reema feels the need to share that her boyfriend was only the second African she had ever met.
This suggests that interacting with an African was significant for her. It also suggests that if
common ground had not been identified, their interactions might not have occurred and Reema
would not have found comfort in their shared struggle. Participants overwhelmingly agree that
identifying similarities in everyday interactions with other students, both international and
American, is key to successfully adjusting.

**Managing Cultural Tension**

A defining characteristic of the nature of cross-cultural interactions that affected
adjustment is Managing Cultural Tension. I saw a pattern among participants, in which they had
to decide what actions to take when faced with cultural conflict. In making these choices, they
were able to maintain a feeling of adjustment and deter potential threats to adjustment. This
category includes the properties Accommodating, Disengaging, and Challenging Cultural
Assumptions. Knowing when to change, when to withdraw, and when to question one’s
presuppositions in everyday cross-cultural interactions is a key factor in successful adjustment.

**Accommodating.** The first way participants Manage Cultural Tension is by
Accommodating. This means they decide to change their behavior in response to cultural
conflict. I found that in the everyday course of interacting and living together, culturally diverse
students become involved in cultural misunderstandings; these misunderstandings often prompt
participants to alter their future behavior in order to help their adjustment process. Assane shares
two relevant experiences in which he chose to modify his behavior to accommodate culturally
different others. In one instance, he initiated a conversation with his Indian girlfriend about
culture and politics – his two favorite subjects. He brought up the topic of conspiracies in her country; she got extremely angry and would not talk to him for a few days. Assane recalls, “She didn’t take it lightly ... I don’t think I’m ever going to talk about conspiracies again.” He decided to alter his future behavior to avoid another cultural misunderstanding; such interactions could pose a threat to his feeling of adjustment and were deemed better off avoided. Assane follows this story with an experience he had with his freshman roommate, who was also African but was of a different culture. He declined food that his roommate offered, and the roommate became deeply offended. Assane explains:

He got upset and explained to me that in their culture it’s rude to not at least try when someone asks you to try. I apologized ... From then on, every time he has food, everyone tries it now. He puts it on the table, everyone takes a pick, then he can eat his food.

Again, Assane modified his behavior to accommodate the values of a culturally different other; he did so in order to continue living comfortably with his roommate. In both of these situations, he accommodated for people he cared very much about and spent a significant amount of time with on a daily basis.

Participants also describe interactions in which they chose to modify their behavior to accommodate the diverse population at Eastern. For example, Soufiane was raised in a culture in which one religion is pervasive; however, he learned quickly that religious diversity is prevalent here. He states that in interactions at Eastern, he cannot bring up religion like he did in his homenation; if he does, he will likely induce conflict. Such conflict could pose a threat to adjustment. Soufiane also learned a valuable lesson because of an intercultural interaction during freshman orientation. His roommate made a general statement about “The poor Hispanics that live here and it’s very scary,” because Eastern is situated in a culturally diverse, low-income
neighborhood. Their American peer-advisor was of Hispanic heritage and got extremely angry with him. Soufiane argues that his roommate did not mean to be offensive; however, they both learned to be careful about what they said from then on: “When you come to Eastern, everything that’s far away is right next door to you, and so it really changes the way you express yourself, the way you talk about people, the way you talk to people, the words you use.” This interaction caused Soufiane to be mindful of his word choice in future intercultural interactions. His willingness to change his behavior was essential in order to avoid future conflict – and feel adjusted – on Eastern’s culturally diverse campus.

In order to feel more adjusted and part of the American cultural community, participants describe modeling common behaviors they experience in everyday interactions. For example, Asif was struck by how polite people were when he went to eat at the campus cafe. He states that in his home nation, you tell the attendant what you want, take the item, and leave. Here, you and your server exchange greetings, ask about each other’s days, and say “‘Have a nice day, bye!’” when leaving. Such “polite” interactions between students and attendants were observed during my observation at said cafe. In order to feel more comfortable in American cultural situations, Asif decided to say more “nice stuff.”

Some participants share experiences in which they were uncomfortable with specific facets of American culture at first, but decided to change once they recognized the personal benefit in doing so. At first, Michelle was surprised by her American friends’ open discussions about sex; however, she came to like the openness these women had with one another. She remarks, “When one person really opens up to you, you’re more willing to open up to the other person and be more comfortable talking about your issues or situations.” Michelle interpreted this openness as genuine concern, worry, and interest; it made her feel closer to her American
friends and much more comfortable at Eastern. Monica is still bothered by what she considers the rudeness of American students who act too boldly in class – interrupting, shouting out answers, and being contentious. However, being a part of these types of interactions in class has made her feel more comfortable raising her hand, even if she is not sure she knows the answer: “I really feel more comfortable in asking clarifying questions or just saying I don’t understand something, whereas before I was never able to do that.” I found that making the choice to accommodate by taking on what participants deem to be beneficial or attractive aspects of American culture helps participants feel more at home, and, in turn, more adjusted, at the University.

**Disengaging.** The second way students Manage Cultural Tension is by Disengaging. Disengaging means withdrawing in the face of cultural conflict. When interacting and living with culturally diverse students on a day-to-day basis, participants describe facing ignorance in the form of racism, cultural stereotypes, and lack of general knowledge about their geographic and/or cultural origins. I found that removing themselves physically and/or mentally from such conflict is one way in which participants manage cultural tension and foster or maintain a feeling of adjustment. They also make decisions about what to reject when faced with pressure to conform to values incongruent with their own. Soufiane, for example, was asked by American students if he has camels, if his parents have monkeys, if he has internet and roads in his home nation, and if he knows what Facebook is. As rude as he found these questions, he found it easier to walk away as opposed to engaging what he considers inexcusable ignorance. When describing an experience in class in which an American student became confrontational with him, he said, “I’m not going to burst out in a fight in class, so I let it go.” He then tried to rationalize the students’ behavior by arguing:
I realized that the person I was talking to is very, very conservative and had very conservative beliefs about immigration, didn’t know much about the world except for the United States, probably hasn’t left his home state ... You don’t really blame him, but then you really can’t not hold him accountable for what he’s saying.

Although Soufiane says he “let it go,” he describes thinking about the interaction with the student afterwards. He may have disengaged by not arguing with the student in class; however, the fact that he still personally struggled with the interaction after class makes one question whether the nature of this interaction had a more positive or negative affect on his adjustment.

Assane shares an incident in which he experienced overt racism from a female South Asian student he considers a close friend. His friend told him how unfortunate his combination of being both Black and Muslim was, because in her culture, they don’t know Black people or interact with Muslims. She went on to tell Assane that she would never tell her family she associated with him, because they had instructed her not to get close to a Black or a Muslim.

When asked how he handled this situation, he said, “I’m Black and I grew up with this idea that I’m supposed to be discriminated against. I understand when someone is racist toward me.” Like Soufiane, he disengaged but also attempted rationalize his friend’s behavior: “I’ve actually pushed myself to understand a little bit where she’s coming from ... maybe in their culture they don’t really have that much power as kids.” Assane contends with resignation that you cannot think about such experiences all the time because they are just part of life. By expecting racism and ignorance about his religion, he is able to disengage readily and reject these potentially negative influences to his adjustment.

Participants also describe intercultural interactions in which they have been frustrated by their interactants’ lack of geographic, cultural, and what they consider “general” knowledge.
Participants either briefly attempt to educate their interactants before withdrawing or disengage immediately. For example, during his first week at Eastern, two students from other cultures – one American and one Southeast Asian – insisted on separate occasions that Alex experienced many months of darkness and bad weather in his home nation. Alex tried to explain to these students that they were thinking of another European country; when each student persisted, he walked away. These two separate experiences, both in his first week here, made Alex briefly question if he had a better cache of general knowledge than most of the people he would meet at Eastern, and caused him to ask, if so, “How will I be able to interact with them or just talk to them?” Asif shares Alex’s concern, and argues that he is put off by interactions with “White people” due to their ignorance of world cultures and geography:

Many White people I’ve come across might not be able to point out where India is or maybe where Pakistan is on the map. I just feel that, yeah, sometimes that Americans can be ignorant and they maybe need to step up their general knowledge a little ... sometimes that really pushes people away.

Asif interprets “White people” to be Americans, and uses these terms interchangeably. Although he withdrew from these interactions, they caused him, like Alex, to briefly question his decision to come to the U.S. He wondered whether these students were making fun of him, being sarcastic, or if they were dared to ask certain questions. Both Asif and Alex chose to ignore these potentially negative influences on their adjustment to life at Eastern, despite briefly questioning their choices to come here.

In their intercultural interactions at Eastern, participants also face pressure to conform to cultural values incongruent with their own. Lena, for example, had two close American friends who gossiped and talked about sex frequently during conversations with her. She shares that
religion plays a major role in her culture and pre-marital sex is not considered appropriate. Lena decided that this was something she could no longer tolerate, and decided to seek other friends whose values were more similar to her own. This choice was important to her sense of comfort and adjustment here. Participants also describe experiences in which they were tempted or put off by American students’ frequent overuse of alcohol. Reema states that,

There were a lot of temptations when I came in. I could have been drinking a lot more and been a lot more reckless. My grades could have suffered. It was difficult to keep my focus and not get distracted because everybody around me was doing it ... Definitely, there was peer pressure, but I didn’t give in to it.

She notes that it was difficult for her to resist the allurement when other students were partying, but she managed this cultural tension by focusing on what she came here to do: succeed academically. By withdrawing from what she perceived to be momentary gratification, Reema continued to do well academically. In that she views success here largely in terms of academic achievement, this choice helped her feel more adjusted in the long term.

**Challenging cultural assumptions.** The third way students Manage Cultural Tension is by Challenging Cultural Assumptions. This means that participants are caused to question what they have been taught or believe about other cultural groups. Some participants say they were taught to dislike or even fear certain cultural groups with whom they had never interacted. Asif asserts that he had never seen a Jewish person before coming to the U.S., and that in his home nation, “there’s a very strong hostility against Jews, but ninety-nine percent of the people have never met a Jew actually. I’ve been brought up in that culture, but I did talk to [some Jews here]. I saw they’re okay.” Coming to realize that Jews are “okay” made Asif feel much more comfortable at Eastern; his fears were alleviated. He argues that the reason many people in his
culture dislike Jews is because they fear the unknown. The realization that he can not only interact with Jews, but also be friends with Jewish people translates as a source of pride for Asif. Additionally, he is proud of the fact that he was hired, by an American supervisor, “over six Americans” for an on-campus job. This experience helped Asif overcome a long-held cultural assumption:

When I got the job that gave me a sense that, okay, these people do not care that I’m not American or that I’m not white. If they see that I am talented, he will give me the job. It removed one of those stereotypes from my brain ... Because you hear a lot back home that no matter what you do, no matter how many years you stay in the U.S., you will always be a second-grade citizen.

By challenging and overcoming these cultural assumptions, Asif is no longer fearful and feels more at home in the U.S. This level of comfort was observed among diverse students at both the AIS meeting and at FETE. Students with various skin colors and religions (as evidenced by their disclosure to me during interviews or obvious covering practices) participated in the meeting and danced side-by-side in the show.

Other participants describe fear as an obstacle to their adjustment at Eastern; however, once these fears were challenged and found to be groundless, their comfort level increased. For example, Assane arrived at Eastern afraid that the “whole going out and party lifestyle” was an American cultural attribute that would corrupt him to the point of making him totally irresponsible. His family had warned him of this danger his whole life. After sharing experiences with his roommate of another culture in which they each drank too much yet cared for and cleaned up after one another, Assane realized that his family had told him these tales just to scare him:
The reality is you can still be responsible on your own, and you can have friends who will be there for you. When I go home sometimes I tell my sisters and they teach you to be scared of things. Here, you learn to face things that are scary.

He argues that overcoming this fear taught him to be more open about learning new things in general at Eastern. Moreover, he learned that he is not a passive participant in his experience here; that is, he can actively make choices to have fun, but also to be responsible. The nature of this interaction helped him gain knowledge that aided his adjustment.

When participants arrived at Eastern, many used the term “American” to describe a person’s culture. However, interactions with American people soon challenged this assumption and made them recognize how culturally diverse Americans can be. Just in his interactions with people from the northeastern U.S., Soufiane has experienced many different cultures and lifestyles. He contends,

California is not Massachusetts, Maryland is not Florida, it’s not Washington. People think all Americans are the same, but I’ve come to realize that it’s completely different.

Yes, maybe everyone talks the same language, but then it’s another lifestyle on this side of the world.

An American friend helped Monica come to the same realization by asking her to describe her unique cultural background as a third culture kid. Her friend reciprocated by describing her equally unique background as an American. Monica opines that this interaction “helped me break down that barrier of thinking just because you’re American doesn’t mean that’s it, and understanding California versus Boston is completely different.” She states that she is able to appreciate differences in others more readily as a result of this experience. Engaging in everyday interactions with American students helped participants recognize that a person’s culture is not
defined by his/her nationality. I found that these interactions facilitated an understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity among American students at Eastern. Participants note that Americans are international students, too; according to Assane and Soufiane, the term “international” does not mean everybody but Americans.

**Section Summary**

This section described two themes that capture the nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected adjustment: a/ Finding and Embracing Common Ground, and b/ Managing Cultural Tension. The category Managing Cultural Tension included three properties: Accommodating, Disengaging, and Challenging Cultural Assumptions. Findings showed that participants who identified shared interests, beliefs, backgrounds, languages, and experiences with students of other cultures used these commonalities to bridge cultural divides and build relationships. Participants indicated that these relationships helped them feel more adjusted here. As participants interacted with people of other cultures in their everyday lives, they were forced to manage cultural tension. Findings suggested that in order to feel successfully adjusted, participants made choices about what to retain from their familiar cultures and what to take on from different cultures. They identified what was important to both them and the people with whom they were interacting and used this understanding to decide where to make compromises; they found places where they were willing to adapt, and they also decided what to reject. Data shows that this process helped students recognize ways they might handle similar culturally tense situations in the future. Finally, participants described how they overcame fear and cultural stereotypes by challenging their own cultural assumptions.

**The Impact of Diversity Initiatives on Promoting Everyday Cross-Cultural Interactions**

Three central themes were identified that illustrate the impact of diversity initiatives on
promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions: a/ Creating an Us/Them Divide, b/ Promoting Solidarity, and c/ Establishing a Cultural Presence. A fourth section, d/ Additional Findings, includes participants’ recommendations for improving existing diversity initiatives and suggestions for new programs that they believe would foster intercultural interactions in a daily context. The following thematic sections will describe undergraduate international students’ perspectives on the impact of diversity initiatives on promoting day-to-day intercultural interactions at Eastern University. Representative excerpts from interview transcripts will be included in each section to help describe each theme.

Creating an Us/Them Divide

Participants describe the impact of diversity initiatives on promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions in terms of Creating an Us/Them Divide. In other words, diversity initiatives establish the idea of two distinct student groups: international students and domestic students. I found that this divide is established during first-year students’ initial introduction to the Eastern community; undergraduate international students arrive for their freshman orientation three days before domestic students. Reema and Michelle contend that during these three days, participants form “comfort groups” with students who are all experiencing the same abrupt loss of propinquity to family, friends, familiar cultures, and home nations. By the time American students arrived for orientation, these safe, comfortable groups present a potential barrier to interactions among international and domestic students. Soufiane’s perspective on his orientation experience is typical of participants and is as follows:

[International students show] up to Eastern University three days before everyone else for International orientation ... By the time all the Americans showed up, I already had a group of like ten friends. At that point, you're already in your comfort zone ... When you
put us all together for a few days and then you add 300% more students that are all not international, it really sets a barrier, because by the time they show up, they're friends and then it's us and we are already friends because we're all international students. We've been together already ... I think it's a shame to completely separate Americans from internationals, because that makes the barrier even more solid.

Reema argues that because she already formed a comfort group of international students during the three-day international student orientation (ISO), she never ventured out to meet Americans. In fact, she believes that ISO prevented her from getting close to her American roommate: “I already had my group of friends that I felt comfortable with already. I guess I would have been much closer with my roommate if that hadn’t happened, because she came in later. She was American.” Reema describes already having a dinner or lunch partner by the time her American roommate arrived, which forced her roommate to find her own friends with whom to eat. Reema reflects, “You would expect roommates to at least go out for dinner.”

Participants describe an unintended sense of exclusivity that transmits to American students when they arrive at orientation. Michelle explains that international students spend three days getting comfortable and bonding with each other, but “it doesn’t mean we’re being exclusive.” She acknowledges that American students get this feeling, however, and “They feel like it’s hard for them to get into those groups and make connections.” Likewise, Monica contends that international students “see it as ‘us versus them.’ We’re international and you’re not.” She argues that this perspective stems from the feeling that American students cannot understand what it’s like to be so far from home, speak other languages, and eat other food. I found that this view is exacerbated from the start by the intentionally separate orientations for international and domestic students.
After orientation, other diversity initiatives are shown to continue contributing to the The Us/Them Divide. For example, the Association of International Students (AIS) is the largest club at Eastern. Participants argue that American students view AIS as a highly exclusive club for international students who do not want to “hang out” with American students; in fact, AIS membership is open to all students at the University. The name “Association of International Students,” however, does not communicate this inclusivity. Moreover, the initial divide established at orientation was found to promote this ongoing sense of exclusivity among international undergraduates.

Another event put on by AIS, which will be referred to as “International FETE,” celebrates Eastern’s international diversity via a music and dance performance. It is Eastern’s largest student-run event and with an average audience of over two thousand people, it is the most widely attended cultural event of the year. I attended this event and can attest to its grandeur. Participation is open to all students at the University; however, because the event is put on by AIS, Michelle argues that international students have an advantage over American students in this regard. For example, each dance team must include at least one student from the nation being represented, and, according to Michelle, “You kind of have to know people to get into the dances, and a lot of the time it’s very competitive.” This suggests that American students who have been influenced by The Us/Them Divide since their first week at Eastern would be less likely to know international students in a familiar enough capacity to be invited to participate. Again, Michelle supports this suggestion:

As a first-year international student, I think it was a lot easier for me to get involved in [FETE] and international events that were on campus because I knew more people who were international and were already involved in those things. As opposed to my
[American] roommate, who didn’t really know other upper classmen who were involved in those international things so it was hard, therefore, for her to join.

Michelle’s statement illustrates how American students may be at a disadvantage when it comes to participating in FETE. The event is designed to celebrate Eastern’s international diversity; American students contribute to this diversity. Thus, The Us/Them Divide may actually be preventing FETE from being a true celebration of Eastern’s diversity; it may not be as inclusive in practice as it is designed to be. For example, according to a promotional letter that was emailed to faculty, the event began “in 2002 to bring together [Eastern’s] community to celebrate the diversity it represents.” This diverse community includes culturally diverse American students. As Soufiane and Assane previously note, the term “international” does not mean everyone except Americans.

Rehearsals for FETE occur throughout spring semester; thus, regular interactions among students who are participating in the performance increase during this time. Monica shares that heightened involvement with her international friends during this time period strains relationships with her American suite mates. She points out that there is no tension with her American friends when she spends more time with her dance troupe (unrelated to FETE) before they have major performances; she believes this is so because the majority of people in the dance troupe are American, not international. Monica explains that relationships with her American suite mates get tense during preparation for FETE “because I am not just hanging out with other friends, but I’m hanging out with international students.” Her description clearly illustrates an “us vs. them” mentality.

Finally, I found that professors, particularly those who have low numbers of international students in their classes, can unintentionally contribute to The Us/Them Divide. For example,
participants share that professors at Eastern are generally very good at creating culturally respectful atmospheres and typically try to include diverse cultural perspectives in their courses. However, according to participants, singling out an international student in an attempt to bring his/her unique perspective into class discussion actually draws attention to the student’s difference from the rest of the group. Michelle notes that she often feels pressure to represent her culture in class, and feels uncomfortable when she is unsure of an answer when put on the spot as the “resident East Asian” in the class. I found that although professors’ intentions may be to be culturally inclusive, singling out an international student based on his/her culture exacerbates The Us/Them Divide.

**Promoting Solidarity**

Participants also describe the impact of diversity initiatives on promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions in terms of Promoting Solidarity. That is, diversity initiatives are shown to induce a feeling of togetherness among both the international student community and among freshmen. The same cultural events that create The Us/Them Divide also contribute to this feeling among international students who are all experiencing the same challenges as they transition to life here and who are working toward a common goal. For example, participants who are involved in producing FETE during each spring semester develop strong bonds as they prepare for the show. In that this event is produced by AIS, primarily international students are involved. Monica shares that although her best friends are Americans who are not in AIS, her involvement in FETE made her realize that AIS “was going to be my family away from home.” She opines that spending a significant amount of time together rehearsing and then watching their efforts come to fruition “was probably the moment I was like, ‘Eastern is where I’m meant to be, and these are the people I am meant to be with.’” I found that a feeling of solidarity
among international freshmen is particularly profound; I attended a weekly AIS meeting at the start of the spring semester, and approximately half of the students in attendance were first-year students. Moreover, they all sat in a cluster in the center of the room and voiced collective disappointment at being excluded from this study.

By having international freshmen arrive at Eastern three days before American freshman, international freshmen are afforded the opportunity to identify common ground and bond amongst themselves in a small group setting. Reema states:

> When I came in I found the international students … no matter where they were from, going through the same thing initially as me, as compared to the rest of the American students. There was this initial affiliation amongst international students.

In fact, the majority of participants state that the close friends they have now are people they met during ISO. Two students, Cora and Monica, share that they are still friends with students they met at ISO, but are close friends or even roommates with American students they met during the whole-class orientation following ISO. These two participants are the only two native English speakers in the group I interviewed. This suggests that their comfort with the English language played a major role in their ability to achieve solidarity and build relationships with American freshmen in addition to international freshmen.

After the initial three-day ISO, American students arrive for a whole-class orientation. Freshmen are placed in groups of approximately twelve culturally diverse students and assigned a peer-advisor for each group. Peer-advisors conduct “ice-breakers” and other activities in an attempt to generate interaction and a feeling of togetherness among each group. Asif states, “Peer-advisors basically held the group together. Plus, they were confident, they were jolly, they were enthusiastic definitely.” Games like Simon Says, for example, are used to break tension.
Assane enjoyed the opportunity to share information about his culture with American students. He remarks that the icebreakers “were very affective at promoting cross-cultural interactions because they allow people to know more about each other. I still talk to almost everyone who was in that group.” I found that composing groups of culturally diverse freshmen during whole-class orientation is important, but the role of peer advisors in creating a feeling of solidarity and sameness as freshmen who are all embarking on a new collegiate experience is crucial. Peer advisors are significant not just to fostering intercultural interactions among international and domestic students during orientation, but also to facilitating the development of lasting friendships among them. Both domestic and international students stand to benefit from diverse interactions and relationships potentially resulting from them.

Finally, I found that first-year housing placements strongly influence with whom a feeling of lasting solidarity is formed. In other words, propinquity is key. Cora shares that she has the same friends she has had since her freshman year, and that closeness in the dorm was a huge influence on with whom she chose to develop relationships: “All but one friend were placed right around me my freshman year.” All of the students she speaks of are American. Contrarily, Soufiane, who is in his second year at Eastern, states, “I live in the dorms with five other international students. We all lived in the same area our first semester here, so we were all put together somehow.” Such statements are typical among participants. This suggests that the students one lives with or near during the initial integration into their university community – international and/or domestic – are the students they are likely to be friends, if not roommates, with throughout their years of study.

**Establishing a Cultural Presence**

The third impact of diversity initiatives on promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions
is Establishing a Cultural Presence. Participants describe becoming recognizable to the campus community by way of culturally authentic events. Although the events themselves occur only on an intermittent or annual basis, they are found to impact participants’ everyday interactions in several ways. For example, Cora and Alex describe the Office of Intercultural Affairs’ (OIA) efforts to organize celebrations of different cultures that coincide with the Asian New Year and Muslim New Year (Eid). Both participants note that these events draw diverse international and American students. Alex observes, “Everyone, like American students were coming. They were having a good time. They were getting to know what the celebration was about, the different culture that celebrates these festivities.” Alex makes a point to note that American students attend these events, suggesting that to him, the measure of a successful cultural event is whether it draws American students. Cora echoes Alex’s story and remarks that the monetary and time investments made by OIA demonstrate a value of international students: “Just showing that they are willing to spend the time and money to put on an event like this to appreciate people of different cultures means a lot.” In addition to being afforded opportunities to cross-culturally interact at the events, participants contend that feeling valued on campus translates into increased pride and confidence. Bolstering participants’ pride and confidence was found to make them more open to intercultural interactions outside the context of the event.

The largest cultural event at Eastern is International FETE. All nine participants describe this event – at length – as an exciting, culturally authentic function that establishes a strong, positive international student presence on campus. Soufiane describes the show as follows:

The dance [show] really is just an explosion of cultures. You know 100% that you're going to get an accurate representation of what the country is like, at least culturally, through their music, through the dancing ... how authentic the show is, that's the one
thing that really keeps it going ... there's nothing generic about the show.

I attended International FETE and was struck by the high caliber and cultural authenticity of this three-hour show. It is obvious that a significant amount of time and money was invested in its production, and participants in the event exuded happiness and confidence. Their enthusiasm was evident. Moreover, many attendees were American students who cheered and yelled, “Go, Vietnam!” or “Costa Rica! Costa Rica!” when national teams were announced. Support was voiced loudly again during and after every national team’s performance, without fail. Many attendees arrived in cultural attire to support specific national teams and celebrate their own cultural heritages. What I witnessed – and felt a part of – at this show suggests that it has implications for everyday intercultural interactions beyond its once per year occurrence.

Eastern is a small university; thus, it is not possible for some nations to have a dance team that includes only students from that nation. Michelle notes that as a result, international students from underrepresented nations must recruit people of other cultures to dance with them for the show. She argues that this makes the event more inclusive of other cultures and contributes to establishing a cultural presence among people who might not have known much about the show otherwise. In order to maintain cultural authenticity, each team has to include at least one student from the nation being represented; these students seek students of other cultures if needed, who are typically people they know. This suggests that although Michelle’s argument of inclusivity and establishment of cultural presence is valid, one must still know an international student in the event in a familiar enough capacity for him/her to be invited to participate.

Being an international student at Eastern is found to be a source of pride for participants. Assane articulates his experience as an international student in relation to cultural events like International FETE:
It is a huge thing to be international on a campus. We have this whole [music and dance] performance of students from different countries. Every time it happens it makes me realize ... it’s a good thing to be a minority sometimes because people will get to appreciate you more. You don’t get boring.

This statement illustrates Assane’s confidence as a result of the event; he feels appreciated and special, in contrast to the negative connotations commonly associated with being a minority. Monica contends that FETE is an opportunity for international students to showcase pride in where they are from; however, she does not believe that cultural events like FETE are designed specifically to get people to interact cross-culturally. She argues that because Eastern is so diverse, intercultural interactions are assumed to happen by default: “I think [these events are more for] awareness and discussion around it, but not necessarily with the sole purpose of getting people to interact.” I found, though, that students do not find it necessary nor ideal to have diversity initiatives that try to force or artificially induce interactions with students of other cultures. Participants share that in addition to being a part of a structurally diverse campus community, knowing one is recognized, respected, and valued creates an atmosphere conducive to cross-cultural interactions that occur naturally in everyday contexts.

Additional Findings

This section does not directly answer the third research question of this study; however, it is considered relevant and noteworthy because it includes participants’ recommendations for university diversity initiatives that they believe would encourage intercultural interactions in their everyday lives. These recommendations elucidate themes identified for the three research questions used to guide this study. They also offer insight into what participants perceive to be the ideal role the University would play in promoting day-to-day cross-cultural interactions. A
recurring theme in participants’ suggestions is programs or events centered on shared interests or goals. More specifically, they argue that food is an incentive that easily bridges cultural divides. Cora states, “I think food is something that everyone can relate to and that always brings people together.” According to Asif, the ideal program would include an idea that can easily be tied to multiple cultures, it would be creative and fun, and food would be offered. Alex agrees, noting that the ideal way to get intercultural interactions to happen would be to have lots of food and a fun outdoor activity “that all the participants will have in common basically. I think that would be the key that would be the kind of bridge between them.” Assane offers a more specific suggestion that includes Eastern’s Dining Service:

Sometimes [Dining Services has] students submit menus and recipes from their own country. They make food pretty much every week that the [different] students request. They put the name of the student and the country ... That teaches people not just that their friend is from country “Y” but that this person is sharing their culture. If we can do that every week, that would make people a lot more comfortable where they’re from and that would make them even more comfortable to share their culture, their food, their dance moves ... That would make people feel like they’re appreciated.

Assane’s idea is one of the only suggestions made by participants that would occur on an ongoing basis; it also ties directly to Establishing a Cultural Presence.

Participants suggest other activities centering on common ground. Cora proposes bringing different cultural groups together for dialogue sessions with a concern or question that pertains to all of them. In order to get students from different cultures to interact beyond a superficial level, they should plan something like an event or workshop, make decisions, and work together to see it to fruition, according to Monica. She contends:
You’re not really going to interact deeply with someone if you are just hanging out and just socializing. If you have the opportunity to work with them, then you’ll see what their differences are and what your differences are but you’ll also find similarities probably, and you’ll learn how to work with it.

Monica argues that “hanging out” and socializing is important, but putting students from multiple cultures into situations in which they become aware of differences in each other and must find ways to work with or overcome these differences is when they “really interact.”

Another frequent theme in participants’ suggestions for diversity initiatives that would promote cross-cultural interactions in an everyday context is housing and residential life. One of the reasons Lena transferred from her previous university was because she felt her English language abilities were not as sound as she thought before she first came to the U.S. She states, “I wish my freshman year I would have roomed with somebody from the United States so that I would have improved my English a lot. By this time, I would be able to be much better.” Some participants in this study stated that they thought it was great how Eastern assigned every international student an American roommate. They were shocked to discover that, in fact, this is not the case; they suggested that it should be the norm. At the very least, says Soufiane, there should be a better mix of diverse international and domestic students all within close proximity to each other in the dorms. His freshman year, he was surrounded by eight international students and two Americans on his floor; on the second floor of his dorm, there were no internationals. He became friends with the students who lived closest to him, including the two Americans. Soufiane’s point is that if there is a more even distribution of international and domestic students throughout every floor of each freshman dorm, students will develop groups of friends with the more diverse group around them. He also reinforces the theme of Promoting Solidarity among
freshmen; he argues that by spreading out international students among the American students, “that's something that you would do once, because you do it to a freshman class, and then they'd move on. There would be the next freshman class, and they'd move on.” This suggests that the relationships formed during students’ initial integration into the campus community occur with students who are nearby, and these bonds remain throughout their years of study.

A final theme identified among participants’ suggestions for diversity initiatives relates to faculty and their classes. For example, Reema contends that in order to have a more personal experience with one’s education, learning should include experiences outside what is contained in books. She suggests that professors take an active role in making this happen:

You are taking a class in let’s say South Asian history ... There is an event on one of the South Asian festivals ... You ask your class to go and experience that to get a perspective of some kind. That would help [by] making it an out-of-class learning experience as well. There are a decent number of people from South Asia on campus and they are doing things on a daily basis that you’re missing out on.

Cora states that she would like to see faculty become involved in cross-cultural interactions with students. She argues that Eastern has a highly diverse group of international faculty, and hearing about their university experiences would be helpful to students: “We look up to our professors as role models and seeing how they adapted to this country – like why they chose to stay here, why they love this country, or why they can adapt to this environment – might be helpful.” Additionally, assigning more group projects in which culturally diverse groups of students must work together would help “enforce more mingling amongst students,” according to Michelle. This suggestion concurs with Monica’s contention that students of other cultures interact deeply – beyond a superficial level – when they are compelled to plan, decide, and work together toward
a common goal. Moreover, such group work offers opportunities to recognize both differences and similarities among culturally diverse students, both international and domestic.

Section Summary

The final section of this chapter presented findings on the impact of university diversity initiatives for promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions. Evidence demonstrated that diversity initiatives impact everyday cross-cultural interactions in the following ways: a/ Creating an Us/Them Divide, b/ Promoting Solidarity, and c/ Establishing a Cultural Presence. A fourth sub-section, d/ Additional Findings, presented participants’ recommendations for diversity initiatives that they believe would nurture intercultural interactions in a daily context. Findings showed that diversity initiatives targeting undergraduate international students during their first week at the University have lasting implications for their future cross-cultural interactions. Professors also play a central role in either helping integrate international students into culturally diverse classrooms or contributing to the Us/Them Divide. This divide was found to be particularly profound in classes with low numbers of international students. Finally, cultural events that showcase Eastern’s international diversity were shown to positively impact international students’ day-to-day intercultural interactions by bolstering their confidence and establishing an authentic cultural presence on campus. These events were also found to contribute to creating The Us/Them Divide and Promoting Solidarity.

Chapter Summary

This chapter four offered findings for the three research questions used to guide this basic qualitative study. One theme that threads throughout the findings is Readiness to Engage in a New Intercultural Environment, which will be referred to as “Readiness” in this summary. Undergraduate international students who participate in cross-cultural interactions and interpret a
feeling of successful adjustment at the University do so because they either arrive here practicing mental preparation to be flexible, adaptive, and take full advantage of new experiences, or they decide to embrace these practices shortly after their arrival. International students who are open-minded, take initiative, respond with resilience, and interact with confidence put themselves into situations in which common ground may be identified and embraced with culturally different others. Unless students put themselves “out there” and are willing to interact with students of other cultures, they will not have the opportunity to Manage Cultural Tension. Students with Readiness engage in this management process; they learn where they are willing to accommodate and where they choose to disengage and challenge their own cultural assumptions. Readiness also plays a role in how university diversity initiatives impact international students; diversity initiatives would not be effective at promoting intercultural interactions if students were not mentally prepared to consider the interactions in the first place.

Data presented in this chapter shows that in order to feel successfully adjusted here, international students not only practice mental preparation, but they achieve a sense of academic, social, and personal balance. Their campus community comes to feel like home. Additionally, data illustrates the nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students; interactions are characterized by Finding and Embracing Common Ground and Managing Cultural Tension. Data also shows the profound impact of university diversity initiatives for promoting cross-cultural interactions in an everyday context. Diversity initiatives are responsible for Creating an Us/Them Divide, Promoting Solidarity, and Establishing a Cultural Presence. Conclusions drawn from data, a discussion of the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research are included in the following Chapter Five.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study was to understand how everyday cross-cultural interactions affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students attending a private research university in the northeastern United States. Based on the intellectual goals, conceptual framework, and qualitative methodology of this study, three research questions were formulated as a foundation for this investigation:

1. What are undergraduate international students’ personal constructions of successful adjustment?

2. What is the nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students?

3. How do undergraduate international students describe the impact of university diversity initiatives for promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions?

This basic qualitative study explored the experiences, perspectives, and interpretive frameworks of undergraduate international students at Eastern University. Eastern is located in the northeastern United States and was chosen for this study based on its high persistence rate for undergraduate international students and convenience to sample. An eighty percent five-year persistence rate was the threshold for what was considered by this study to be a high persistence rate. The university exceeds this threshold for students overall, and the rate is even higher for international students. By studying a campus context in which the international student persistence rate is high, I was able to understand more about the role of formal university initiatives in facilitating student adjustment and how students were successfully adjusting in the context of their everyday lives. Moreover, because of Eastern’s international diversity, I was
able to recover students’ everyday experiences with cross-cultural interactions and understand the role of these interactions in affecting their individual adjustment processes.

The following chapter five will answer the question, “So what?” In other words, now that my study has been conducted, what conclusions may be drawn? How do these conclusions relate to existing research and the conceptual framework that guided this study? How are these conclusions relevant to educational practice? What future research is recommended to build on and expand these findings? This chapter will include three sections in an effort to answer these questions: a/ Conclusions and Discussion, b/ Implications for Practice, and c/ Recommendations for Future Research.

Conclusions and Discussion

This section offers conclusions and discussion for this basic qualitative study. Four salient conclusions were drawn from an analysis of the data: a/ Readiness to engage in a new intercultural environment – the practice of mentally preparing oneself to be flexible, adaptive, and take full advantage of new experiences – is the beginning of the student adjustment process; b/ Adjustment is a dynamic process that continues throughout undergraduate international students’ U.S. university experience; c/ Formal university events foster recognition of the campus diversity international students help provide, but their impact on everyday cross-cultural interactions is both positive and negative; and d/ The mode by which undergraduate international students are introduced to their U.S. campus affects their integration and future interaction patterns. The following four sections elucidate these conclusions and discuss how they relate to existing literature and the conceptual framework that guided this study.
Conclusion One: Readiness to Engage in a New Intercultural Environment – The Practice of Mentally Preparing Oneself to be Flexible, Adaptive, and Take Full Advantage of New Experiences – is the Beginning of the Student Adjustment Process

The first conclusion of this study is that readiness to engage in a new intercultural environment is the beginning of the student adjustment process. Participants describe the practice of mentally preparing themselves to be flexible, adaptive, and take full advantage of new experiences when they arrive at Eastern University. Before coming here, they consider ways in which they may be open-minded, which includes the practice of being receptive to new people, experiences ideas and opportunities. They also ready themselves to take initiative; this is the practice of being self-motivated and willing to move outside of their comfort zones. Making the choice to come here is also fueled, in part, by an interpretation that they are ready to interact with confidence; participants believe that they have academic, language, and socio-cultural skills necessary to participate in their new environment. Finally, readiness includes preparing to respond with resilience, or the practice of overcoming academic, cultural, and social challenges they may face at Eastern. Participants recounted this process of practicing mental preparation as they were asked questions about what motivated them to study here, what success means to them while they are here, what it takes to be successful here, the best ways to adjust to a new culture, and what ideally takes place for an international student to adjust successfully here. Interpreting themselves as ready to come to a U.S. university – that they have the background and preparation necessary to succeed in this new intercultural environment – made participants feel more at ease about their choice to come here. Arguably, this ease is the start of their adjustment process to life at an American university.
Research on adjustment demonstrates that psychological and physical health is positively affected by social support from peers and family (Okun et al., 1988). This may also contribute to readiness; international students who are socially supported before coming to the U.S. may anticipate a better quality of life upon their arrival. Russell and Petrie (1992) support this notion, contending that factors affecting students’ adjustment include “intrapersonal and social development” (p. 502). This does not necessarily mean development that occurs only in the context of a new environment, but could include development in the form of pre-arrival preparation. Peer and family social support are crucial during this period.

Although international and domestic students both transition into new educational environments when entering college, international students also face a new culture with customs, behaviors, and often a language very different from their own (Tochkov et al., 2010). Research shows that lack of English language fluency is one of the most critical challenges international students face (Anderson et al., 2009; Lee & Rice, 2007; Mori, 2000). It is both a predictor of homesickness and stress, and is a barrier to social interaction (Kegel, 2009; Tochkov et al., 2010). Lu and Hsu (2008) contend that how students perceive their own language capabilities more significantly predicts how students will cross-culturally adjust than actual linguistic proficiency. Thus, the more competent students perceive they are in a second language, the better their adjustment in a new culture is likely to be. Students who are self-confident about their ability to communicate effectively experience less discomfort in their host environments (Heggins III & Jackson, 2003). Increased confidence in speaking another language also raises chances that a student will initiate communication (Lu & Hsu, 2008; McCroskey et al., 2003; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). This confidence in language competence is part of the pre-arrival readiness process participants in the current study describe.
The literature includes salient examples of how adjustment is affected when international students do not feel ready—mentally prepared—to come to a U.S. university. Asian international students “protectively segregate themselves from other racial groups” (Smith et al., 2007) due, in part, to fear of prejudice. They also experience fear about comprehending and appropriately interpreting a new language in context (Mori, 2000) and of being excluded in their host environments if their peers cannot understand them (Tochkov et al., 2010). They regularly report higher acculturative stress levels than European students studying at American universities (Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli et al., 2004); homesickness, loneliness, and depression are pervasive (Heggins III & Jackson, 2003; Wehrly, 1988). Seemingly, it may be the fear of prejudice and failure in their new environment that negatively affects Asian international students’ adjustment as much as, or more so than, actual experience and insufficient abilities; their lack of mental readiness in terms of responding with resilience and interacting with confidence may negatively impact their adjustment. Findings show that this fear may also negatively affect readiness in terms of being open-minded and willing to initiate interactions with people who are deemed culturally different from them or do not speak their language.

Existing research on adjustment defines the process in terms of what happens from the point at which students arrive at a U.S. university. For example, once arriving here, international students may face discrimination, new customs, foods, and rules; it is at this time that they may also experience culture shock (Anderson et al., 2009; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Winkelman (1994) defines culture shock as, “a multifaceted experience resulting from numerous stressors occurring in contact with a different culture” (p. 121). Four phases of culture shock have been identified by researchers: (a) honeymoon, (b) crises, (c) adjustment, reorientation & gradual recovery, and (d) adaptation, resolution or acculturation (Ferraro, 1990). According to
Winkelman (1994), stage two, the crises stage, is when students become overwhelmed by frustration, begin to feel lonely and helpless, and want to return home. According to this framework, it is only after students have persisted through this second stage that they begin to adjust. Researchers argue that to help students persevere, institutional interventions ideally occur proactively to assist students during their initial community integration, before they become homesick, bewildered, and lonely (Lee & Rice, 2007; Anderson et al., 2009).

Findings from the current study extend this contention by showing that international students may begin their adjustment process and minimize or even avoid culture shock altogether by focusing on readiness before coming here; that is, by emphasizing preparation before their initial integration into the campus community, not just during. Likewise, institutional interventions that are truly proactive in facilitating adjustment will target international students before their arrival to campus. Traditional adjustment interventions target students once they arrive in the U.S.; in that this study provides evidence that adjustment is a dynamic process beginning before participants arrive and continuing throughout their university experience, such programs may be insufficient. This conclusion highlights the significance of recovering participants’ personal, individual constructions (Dixon et al., 2005) of successful adjustment, beyond the context of pre-given frameworks. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of these personal constructions to knowing when and how to best implement institutional interventions (Russell & Petrie, 1992) that will facilitate adjustment on both group and individual levels.

**Conclusion Two: Adjustment is a Dynamic Process That Continues Throughout Undergraduate International Students’ U.S. University Experience**

The second conclusion of this study is that adjustment is a dynamic process that continues throughout undergraduate international students’ U.S. university experience. As
discussed in the previous section, participants interpret their adjustment process as beginning before they come here. When asked what “well adjusted” or “very well adjusted” means to them (according to their responses on the recruitment questionnaire), the majority of participants said they interpreted themselves to be successfully adjusted when their campus community felt like home; that is, when they felt a sense of intimacy and belonging engendered by a social network of strong friendships and casual acquaintances. This feeling of home is not a static endpoint that one achieves and then simply enjoys. Rather, it requires continuous effort in the everyday to nurture, achieve, and maintain. Participants describe keeping balance in their everyday lives – continuing to meet competing demands from academic life, social life, and one’s own desire for independence – as critical to maintaining adjustment. Within this construct, participants value balanced social networks that include connections with international and domestic students; they measure their social success in terms of how fluidly they are able to interact with diverse students in both groups.

Research shows that the more opportunities diverse student groups have to learn about one another, the more students are able to challenge themselves to evaluate their own varying social identities and those of others; within these circumstances, it is likely that students will develop more pluralistic views (Engberg & Hurtado, 2011). Positive, meaningful interactions with diverse students are associated with such outcomes as heightened cultural awareness, interest in social issues, belief in the personal power to exact social change, and the ability to take another’s perspective (Hurtado, 2005). Such skills may empower international students and contribute to a feeling of investment and comfort in their diverse campus community as home. Establishing quality connections with fellow students, international and/or domestic, correlates negatively with homesickness and stress among international students (Kegel, 2009). This
supports the conclusion that maintaining balanced, diverse social networks fortifies the ongoing, everyday process of adjustment found here.

Interacting cross-culturally in an everyday context is central to maintaining balance and, in turn, a sense of adjustment. Existing research partially supports this study's findings. For example, research shows that spending more time communicating with American students positively affects international students' psychological adjustment (Cigularova, 2005) and reduces homesickness (Tochkov et al., 2010). Mori’s (2000) study illustrates a need for interactions among homogeneous national/cultural groups; it is also argued that interacting with students from one’s host country is essential to international student experiences (Kegel, 2009) and more frequent interaction with host country students predicts healthier student adjustment (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Collectively, these findings (Cigularova, 2005; Kegel, 2009; Mori, 2000; Tochkov et al., 2010; Yeh & Inose, 2003) support the current study's conclusion that international students seek connections with diverse international and domestic students as part of creating and maintaining a balanced social network. However, Cigularova (2005) contends that international students show preference for interacting with students from their home countries first, other international students second, and, lastly, students from their host nation. Findings from the current study do not fully support this contention. In fact, out of nine participants, only Reema states that she was hoping to meet students from her home nation upon arriving here. The other eight participants demonstrate that they were interested in interacting with both international and domestic students. For example, Asif measures his adjustment by how involved he is in campus activities that bring him into contact with international and American students. Moreover, Michelle suggests that every international student should be assigned an American roommate in order to increase opportunities to interact with students from
the U.S. in a daily context. Other participants make similar statements, wishing that international students were distributed more equally among American students in dormitories in order to foster more balanced social networks and, in turn, increase opportunities for diverse intercultural interactions in their everyday lives. Participants place a premium on moving outside of their comfort zones, as opposed to seeking the comfort of culturally similar others.

It is worthy of note that the University’s international student orientation program appears to reinforce, in part, the progression of preference outlined by Cigularova (2005). By having international students arrive first for a separate orientation, an environment is created in which they are initially prohibited from interacting with fellow American freshmen, even if they came here wanting to. Findings show that the everyday social interaction patterns established during students’ initial introduction to the campus community are likely to last throughout their University experience. It behooves universities to take this knowledge into consideration when designing freshman orientation programs.

Research by Dixon et al. (2005) and Poyrazli et al. (2004) most closely aligns with this study's conclusion that nurturing and maintaining balance is part of the dynamic nature of adjustment. Dixon et al.’s (2005) perspective of intercultural contact stresses the importance of ordinary, everyday interactions among diverse groups. Moreover, Poyrazli et al. (2004) argue that acculturative stress levels increase among students who socialize primarily with other international students, as opposed to students who socialize with both domestic and international students more equally. Opening oneself up to diverse intercultural interactions affords participants with opportunities to manage cultural tension in their everyday lives; that is, experiences with people of other cultures in which they must decide what actions to take when faced with inevitable cultural conflict. Findings demonstrate that making the choice to
accommodate (change one's behavior), disengage (withdraw), or challenge one's cultural assumptions (question what one has been taught or believes about other cultural groups) is part of the ongoing nature of adjustment. This decision-making process is shown to include self-reflexivity; interactions cause participants to reflect on their own processes and behaviors. These reflections help participants recognize areas they may want to change or ways they might handle situations differently in the future. Additionally, managing cultural tension is shown to include trying to make sense of what are perceived to be negative cross-cultural interactions that pose threats to adjustment.

The current study's findings show that cross-cultural interactions – with both international and domestic students – that occur in an everyday context throughout participants’ undergraduate experiences foster a sense of balance and compel them to manage cultural tension. These factors help nurture and maintain a sense of campus community that feels like home; this feeling is regarded as a salient signal to participants that they are successfully adjusted. Moreover, the management and conflict resolution skills garnered during this day-to-day process not only help participants adjust at Eastern, but provide them with tools necessary to succeed in an increasingly diverse world. Again, this conclusion demonstrates the significance of retrieving participants' personal, individual constructions (Dixon et al., 2005) of successful adjustment.

Conclusion Three: Formal University Events Foster Recognition of the Campus Diversity
International Students Help Provide, but Impact Everyday Cross-Cultural Interactions
Both Positively and Negatively

The third conclusion of this study is that formal university events foster recognition of the campus diversity international students help provide, but their impact on everyday cross-cultural interactions is both positive and negative. The intention of cultural events at Eastern is to
promote cultural awareness and appreciation; they are not specifically designed to promote everyday intercultural interactions. However, Eastern is a structurally diverse campus, and the by-product of contributing to a campus culture that values and respects this diversity is an atmosphere conducive to diverse intercultural interactions in the everyday. When asked what programs or events the University has to promote communication among people of other cultures, participants' responses centered on university events, not programs designed to encourage interactions in an everyday context. Participants describe a sense of pride and confidence in their cultural backgrounds because they feel valued as a result of the events; this value stems from investments made by the university in the form of time and money. Everyday intercultural interactions do not necessarily result from an event itself; rather, they are shown to result, in part, from the increased sense of cultural authenticity, confidence, and familiarity the events help provide among internationally diverse students. When asked how they would design an ideal program for encouraging cross-cultural interactions in an everyday context, participants' suggestions still focused on events based on shared interests or goals (e.g., sports, food, dialogue sessions, event planning).

Existing literature shows that campus environment is critical to influencing frequent, quality interactions, which, in turn, generate benefits (Chang et al., 2006) such as social and academic development (Gurin et al., 2002). Evidence also shows that comprising a racially/ethnically diverse campus is connected with higher frequencies of cross-racial interactions among college students (Chang et al., 2004; Engberg, 2007). Heightened engagement is, however, relative to perceptions of a positive racial climate (Jayakumar, 2008). Participants describe cultural events at Eastern as fostering a culture that appreciates and respects diversity; thus, it makes sense that heightened intercultural engagement would result. This
conclusion is contrary to findings in Rose-Redwood’s (2010) study, which show that from a student’s perspective, formal cultural events may be viewed as superficial facades, in which a university does not know how to actually encourage interactions, but wants to present an appearance of diversity initiatives. In addition to focusing efforts on creating a structurally diverse campus, Eastern appears to recognize what intergroup contact researchers (Allport, 1954; Dixon et al., 2005; Pettigrew, 1998) maintain: dividends increase when intergroup contact occurs in a context of shared interests or goals.

International FETE is the cultural event most widely discussed by participants; it is a formal University event, but is produced by the Association of International Students (AIS). Participants describe planning and rehearsing throughout the spring semester as excitement builds toward the day of the event. During this time, intercultural interactions occur almost daily among culturally diverse international students who are involved. Although American students are involved as well, their number is far fewer. According to Michelle, American students must know an international student to participate, and the competition is quite stiff. As Monica reflects on her day-to-day involvement in producing FETE, she describes an extreme bonding experience in which she realizes that members of AIS are her family at Eastern. However, she also describes her everyday involvement in the event as negatively affecting relationships with her American roommates. Her American friends are keenly aware that she is not simply spending time with other friends; it is significant to them that these friends are international students. This implies that in addition to celebrating diversity, the event draws attention to international students as a separate group, whose members are somehow different than American students.

The current study’s conclusion that cultural events affect cross-cultural interactions both
positively and negatively is supported by the literature. For example, international students in Rose-Redwood’s (2010) study voice concern that although affinity clubs based on nationality offer support to international students, they may also isolate students by encouraging social segregation. In contrast, Harper and Quaye (2007) argue that ethnic student organizations are essential milieus for social involvement, racial and cultural identity development, and self-expression. Findings of the current study support both contentions; participants describe an us/them divide and a feeling of solidarity that stems from their involvement in cultural events.

The conceptual framework that guided this study includes exploring the significance of everyday interactions and recovering students’ personal, individual constructions of interactions (Dixon et al., 2005). By using a framework “that proceeds not from a top-down imposition of pregiven categories but from a detailed, bottom-up analysis of participants’ own frameworks of meaning as they are applied within particular social contexts” (p. 704), this study was able to show how students experience diversity initiatives in different ways (Engberg & Hurtado, 2011). By soliciting participants’ personal perspectives within the context of the event (e.g., FETE), I was able to consider participants’ everyday experiences as they related – or did not relate – to others (Connolly, 2000). In other words, only by asking participants about their experiences within the context of FETE was I able to uncover both positive and negative effects of the event on everyday intercultural interactions.

**Conclusion Four: The Mode by which Undergraduate International Students are Introduced to their U.S. Campus Affects their Integration and Future Interaction Patterns**

The fourth and final conclusion of this study is that the mode by which undergraduate international students are introduced to their U.S. campus affects their integration and future interaction patterns. Like the previous section, this conclusion was reached by using a “bottom-
up analysis of participants’ own frameworks of meaning as they are applied within particular social contexts” (Dixon et al., 2005, p. 704). When participants first arrived at Eastern, they participated in a three-day international student orientation (ISO). American freshmen then arrived, and all first-year students participated in a freshmen orientation for the remainder of the week. Participants recount their initial introduction to campus as an important time to bond with fellow international students during ISO; they articulate a feeling of solidarity among international students as the only other people who could understand what they were going through as foreign students so far from home. Participants describe the arrival of American students in terms of invading their private transition experience. They discuss an us/them divide that was created between the two student groups: international and American. In other words, their initial introduction to campus helped them integrate well with fellow international freshmen, but not nearly as well with fellow American freshmen. Participants share that the connections established during this initial introduction to campus have remained strong throughout their experience at Eastern. In fact, all participants are now living and/or close friends with people of other cultures whom they met during orientation.

Research shows that the absence, presence and frequency of cross-cultural interactions have notable influence on students and their potential for success, including establishing diverse social networks and healthy student adjustment. Diversity initiatives play a crucial role in this regard, as they may serve as interventions to facilitate success (Russell & Petrie, 1992). University initiatives are particularly potent when they commence early in students’ transition to U.S. campus life (Anderson et al., 2009; Lee & Rice, 2007; Scherer & Wygant, 1982), as evidenced by the current study’s findings. Abrupt loss of propinquity to friends and family is argued to be the primary reason for stress and homesickness among international students during
the transitional period from home to new environments (Fisher, 1989). According to Okun et al. (1988), social support from peers positively affects psychological and physical health. Consequently, it makes sense that the connections established during participants’ initial introduction to Eastern – when they have experienced abrupt loss of nearness to familiar culture, family, and friends – are bonds that last throughout their time here. Moreover, in order for international students to form connections with American students, physical proximity before what the current study calls the “social support void” has been filled is essential.

Dixon et al. (2005) argue that “ideal” or “artificial” conditions do not typically reflect everyday life and may be less effective at stimulating powerful interactions than everyday contacts. ISO exemplifies this contention. By introducing international students to Eastern via a segregated orientation, participants were forced to find immediate comfort in fellow international students. These initial contacts are shown to provide a foundation for segregated everyday social interaction patterns. However, this initial segregated environment only lasts three days; it does not reflect what life will be like at Eastern in a daily context. Research demonstrates that providing opportunities for students to interact with diverse peers contributes to numerous long-term advantages, including increased motivation, self-confidence, and cultural awareness (Chang et al., 2006; Gurin et al., 2002). Moreover, in that participants value balanced social networks that include both international and domestic students, one questions the long-term benefits of this segregated orientation strategy.

Chang et al. (2005) assert that a significant opportunity exists for American colleges and universities to capitalize on the “benefits of diversity” (p. 13) and consider what is and is not making international diversity effective in practice. In order to maximize the potential benefits a diverse environment can provide, HEIs must facilitate engagement (Anderson et al., 2009) by
fostering meaningful relationships among internationally diverse students. An institutional intervention that generates the idea of two distinct groups – international and domestic – from students’ first days at the University and fosters the development of segregated social interaction patterns in students’ everyday lives does not, arguably, capitalize on the benefits of Eastern’s diversity.

**Section Summary**

Four principal conclusions were drawn from an analysis of the data. First, readiness to engage in a new intercultural environment – the practice of mentally preparing oneself to be flexible, adaptive, and take full advantage of new experiences – is the beginning of the student adjustment process. Second, adjustment is a dynamic process that continues throughout undergraduate international students’ U.S. university experience. Third, formal university events foster recognition of the campus diversity international students help provide, but their impact on everyday cross-cultural interactions is both positive and negative. Fourth, the mode by which undergraduate international students are introduced to their U.S. campus affects their integration and future interaction patterns. These conclusions demonstrate that recovering participants’ personal, individual constructions of interactions and adjustment is critical to understanding how diversity initiatives affect students in practice. This chapter concludes with two sections: implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

**Implications for Practice**

Findings in this study are relevant to several areas of higher education practice, including student advisement, counseling, intercultural affairs, and student activities. Implications for practice are discussed in terms of their applicability to higher education institutions (HEIs) in general, since these areas are relevant to all internationally diverse HEIs.
The first recommendation of this study is that HEIs be proactive in their efforts to help international students mentally prepare for life at an American university. This study shows that undergraduate international students interpret the process of successful adjustment as beginning before they arrive here. They identify such practices as being open-minded, taking initiative, interacting with confidence, and responding with resilience as key ingredients to successful adjustment. It is incumbent on HEIs to share this information with international students whom they are recruiting in order to help this at-risk population prepare to succeed before coming here. For example, institutions might include a page on their websites that shares this list of ideal “ingredients for success,” noting that fellow international students who adjusted successfully here shared these practices. Testimonials from and photographs of diverse international students would add a human element to this list of readiness practices. Print materials could also be mailed to prospective international students, as not all may have reliable access to the Internet. Sharing this information with students in a variety of ways increases chances that it will garner attention; moreover, offering attention to this strategy communicates a premium placed on both international students and their healthy adjustment process.

The second implication is that HEIs offer group and individual support programs for students throughout their experience here. This study shows that adjustment is a dynamic process that continues without an endpoint. Not every student experiences diversity initiatives in the same way; likewise, no two students share the same adjustment process. Findings show that throughout their HEI experience, international students work in the everyday to nurture a sense of campus community that feels like home. Part of this process is maintaining balance among academic work, social life, and the desire for independence; balance is also valued within social networks. Additionally, findings demonstrate that international students must manage cultural
tension throughout their time here; they are pushed and pulled by what is culturally familiar and unfamiliar and must make choices about what to accept, what to reject, and where to challenge their own cultural assumptions. In short, this is a complex, dynamic process that occurs in a day-to-day context.

In that this study highlights the salient role of peer support in successful adjustment, it is recommended that an informal peer support program be established. International students who regard themselves as well or very well adjusted could be recruited and trained to offer group or individual support sessions for international students who are struggling to adjust to their university. Findings from this study could be used as a training tool to show peer supporters how undergraduate international students personally construct what it means to successfully adjust here. For example, being open-minded and taking initiative were shown to be essential to participants’ success, as was finding and embracing common ground. As part of their training, peer supporters could be asked to reflect on their own adjustment experiences and consider them in conjunction with this study’s findings; this would not only help them better understand what facilitated their own successful adjustment processes, but how to best offer support and guidance to students who may be struggling in the everyday with their personal, individual adjustment processes. This initiative would further demonstrate a value of international student success, and would also empower peer supporters as role models in their student communities. Moreover, it would provide volunteers with a service learning opportunity and would allow HEIs to focus efforts on at-risk students without allocating an immense amount of funds to the effort.

The third recommendation for HEIs is to provide opportunities for American students to take active roles in events designed to foster cultural awareness and appreciation. As participants in this study state, the term “international” does not mean everyone but Americans.
Events that are more inclusive of all cultures, including the dominant culture, would afford international and domestic students with everyday opportunities to interact in a context of shared interests and goals. Such interactions are shown to yield the most long-term dividends. Moreover, promoting a campus culture in which diverse students in general are involved in cultural events – as opposed to events designed specifically for international students and American students are only invited to attend as guests – would ameliorate the us/them divide discussed in this study. Students would still be able to showcase their cultural pride, and involving American students in this process would likely increase cultural awareness and sensitivity on a personal level. Such experiences could result in authentic friendship formation as opposed to simply a performer/guest dynamic.

The fourth and final implication of this study is to consider the effects of segregating international and domestic freshmen during their initial introduction to their HEI campus. When students abruptly lose propinquity to familiar culture, family, and friends, they experience a social support void. In order for international and domestic students to form lasting bonds with one another, they must experience the filling of this void together. In other words, this study shows that by having international freshmen spend three days together before American freshmen arrive, international students form comfort groups of fellow international students. By the time American freshmen arrive, there may be little, if any, room left in the void; a peer support group has already been established. Largely, participants in this study note that while they wish they had made more American contacts during orientation, they appreciated the comfort ISO provided. In other words, they regard us/them divide as a price willingly paid for the solidarity gained during this transition period.
One recommendation to ameliorate this divide without negating the beneficial affects of solidarity among students who have all left home and family far behind would be for HEIs to hold a small-group orientation for international students, but also include American students who live beyond a specific distance from campus. That way, all students in this initial orientation would share the commonality of abruptly losing nearness to familiar friends and family; however, it would lesson the us/them divide by integrating international and domestic students more effectively. Moreover, as participants in this study realized, regional cultures differ within the United States, and students who come to a northeastern campus from the American southwest, for example, would likely face the same loss of cultural familiarity. American contacts made during this initial bonding experience could provide essential gateways to other everyday interactions with American students. Further, assigning each international student an American roommate and distributing international students among domestic students in campus housing would force students to cross-culturally interact – to live closely together – in a day-to-day context from the start.

**Looking Back and Moving Forward**

Traversing the bridge from practitioner to scholar has been a challenging and rewarding process. The primary goals of this research were to: a/ ameliorate the gap between what higher education institutions think stimulates cross-cultural interactions and what actually encourages them in international students daily lives, b/ contribute to the body of qualitative research that explores the social experiences of undergraduate international students attending U.S. HEIs, c/ explore participants’ cross-cultural interactions and adjustment processes in natural, everyday contexts, and d/ recover participants’ personal, individual constructions of successful adjustment. I have spent a significant amount of time answering the “So what?” question; that is, drawing
conclusions as a result of my research and offering implications for higher education practice. As a new member of the research community, the question now is what do I, personally, plan to do with the results of my research?

I have a plan to disseminate my research in order to maximize its potential benefit to the higher education community and to me as a practitioner. First, I will initiate a conversation with the University in order to understand how others process my findings. As a faculty member, it will be enriching to hear the perspectives of administrators. I plan to talk locally about my process and findings; in fact, I have already been invited to engage in a discussion with the University’s Teaching and Learning Center this fall. This discussion will likely center on how my findings might affect faculty and administrator’s orientation to international students, their potential roles in encouraging cross-cultural interactions among international and domestic students, and how to best facilitate adjustment. Such enriching conversations will benefit the larger university community in addition to extending my own learning. Second, I plan to start a conversation in the field via conferences and publishing. I will use my research to co-author – with my faculty advisor – at least two articles that will be submitted to peer-reviewed journals. I will also submit proposals to present my research at conferences. Finally, I plan to build on this study by conducting more research in specific areas included in the following section, “Recommendations for Future Research.”

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study’s findings ameliorate the disconnect between what HEIs think stimulates cross-cultural interactions and facilitates healthy student adjustment and what actually nurtures interactions and adjustment in international students’ everyday lives. Moreover, findings extend contact and adjustment research by elucidating the nature of international students’ experiences
with everyday cross-cultural interactions and students’ personal, individual constructions of successful adjustment. There are, however, several recommendations for future research that could further bridge this disconnect and extend both contact and adjustment research.

1. One of the most surprising findings of this study was that four out of nine participants self-identified as “third culture kids.” Prior to this study, I was not familiar with this epithet, and a section was added to the literature review in response to this finding. A study designed to explore the interaction and adjustment experiences of TCKs attending U.S. HEIs would be a significant addition to the dearth of literature on this student group. Findings would allow institutions to design more effective intervention programs that target the needs of specific student groups, as opposed to viewing students as members of larger, less differentiated groups (e.g., international students, domestic students).

2. This study was conducted at one small, private research university in the northeastern United States. Therefore, it is impossible to know if these findings extend beyond this context. Conducting a similar study in another university similar to Eastern would produce more information about how this study’s findings are representative of international students’ experiences at small, private research universities or if their experiences vary in different settings.

3. This study used a small sample of nine undergraduate international students. A larger scale quantitative study to see how participants’ experiences may generalize to a larger population is suggested.

4. The purpose of this study was to explore successful adjustment, thus it included students who reported being “well adjusted” or “very well adjusted” at the University. Another study that explored the experiences and personal constructions of students who consider
themselves to be either “not adjusted” or “somewhat adjusted” would be valuable for knowing what factors contribute to unsuccessful adjustment.

5. The focus of this study was, in part, on select factors from Russell and Petrie’s (1992) Academic Adjustment and Success Organizing Model. The study centered on social/environmental factors that affected cross-cultural interactions, specifically social support and campus environment, social adjustment, and program/institutional interventions. A study that explores and evaluates each of the domains, factors, and categories in their model would help achieve a more holistic view of elements that influence the academic adjustment process of undergraduate international students.

6. This study was conducted over a period of three months and included one interview per participant. A longitudinal study that collected the personal experiences and constructions of undergraduate international students commencing while they are preparing to come here and following them throughout their experience at a U.S. university would be invaluable to HEIs in the United States. Findings would facilitate a better understanding of students’ experiences with both cross-cultural interactions and adjustment over time. Knowing how their experiences evolve, change, and are affected by social and environmental factors at various stages would help HEIs develop initiatives that are more effective for students at specific stages in their social development.

7. A general recommendation for future research is made that includes the cross-cultural interaction and adjustment experiences of both international and domestic students studying at U.S. HEIs. Ideally, future studies would include both qualitative and quantitative elements in order to yield results that generalize to a larger population.
Moreover, by soliciting the perspectives of both international and domestic students, a more holistic view of the undergraduate student experience would be achieved.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Princeton University president, William Bowen argues: “when individuals are exposed to differences in others, they are ‘stimulate[d]...to reexamine even their most deeply held assumptions about themselves and their world’...it is in this reexamination process...that indifference is shed and truth and shared values are discovered” (as cited in Chang et al., 2005, p. 11). This study attempted to help fill a knowledge gap about the cross-cultural interaction and adjustment experiences of undergraduate international students. By recovering students' personal, individual constructions of successful adjustment and their experiences with “mundane” interactions in the course of their everyday lives, this study was able to identify several extensions to the fields of contact and adjustment research. Moreover, this knowledge led to recommendations for additions to and/or changes in everyday educational practice that may help universities better serve the needs of international students. In keeping with William Bowen’s focus on the power of exposing oneself to differences in others, it is my hope that this study’s findings will induce a reexamination of what is and is not working in higher education practice to maximize the benefits of today’s internationally diverse campuses.
References


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Appendix A

January X, 2013

Dear students,

My name is Joan Burkhardt and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am preparing to conduct research for my dissertation and am recruiting second, third, and fourth year undergraduate international students who might be interested in participating in my study. The purpose of the study is to understand how everyday cross-cultural interactions affect the adjustment of undergraduate international students.

Selected participants will engage in one audio-recorded interview, approximately seventy minutes in length. Identities will be kept completely confidential. Participation in this study is voluntary and participation or non-participation will not affect your status at the university in any way. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without penalty. Once all interviews are concluded and findings have been prepared, participants will be given the opportunity to review these findings for accuracy. Findings, including interview excerpts (without identifying information), will be published in my dissertation and other publications. Participants must feel comfortable communicating and participating in the informed consent process in English.

If you are comfortable with the nature and purpose of this study, are interested in reflecting on your experiences, and would like to participate in research that hopes to help universities better serve the unique needs of undergraduate international students, please return the following demographics questionnaire to (email address removed to protect confidentiality) by January X, 2013.

Thank you in advance for your interest!

Joan Burkhardt
xxx-xxx-xxxx
(email address)
Appendix B

Confidential Questionnaire

Name:

Preferred contact information:

Gender:

Please circle your age range:

18-24 years old

25 years or older

Nationality:

Race and/or ethnicity:

Year of study:

freshman  sophomore  junior  senior

Major(s):

First language(s):

Have you met the university’s minimum score on any of the following: TOEFL, IELTS, or PTE?

Are you comfortable conversing in English?

On the following scale, how adjusted do you feel you are at this university? __________

1  2  3  4  5
not adjusted  somewhat adjusted  adjusted  well adjusted  very well adjusted

Have you had any prior contact with me in any context?

Please return to (email address removed to protect confidentiality) by January X, 2013 if you are interested in participating in this study. Thank you!
Appendix C

Interview Guide

Introduction/Warm-up
The purpose of this study is to understand how everyday interactions with people of other cultures affect the adjustment of undergraduate international students.

1. Do you know what I mean when I say “everyday interactions with people of other cultures?”

   **Follow-up:** I mean, a communication or experience with someone you consider to be of a different culture that occurs in an average, day-to-day context

2. What motivated you to study in the U.S.?

3. Tell me about your life as a college student here.

   **Follow-up:** Describe an average day. Where might you go? With whom might you interact? What do you think about as you reflect on this day?

4. What are your expectations for a university to help you transition to life here?

RQ1: What are undergraduate international students’ personal constructions of successful adjustment?

5. What is important for you to achieve here?

6. What does it mean for you to be successful as an international student?

7. If I were a student from your home country, what would you tell me about what it takes to be successful at this university?

8. What is the best way for you to adjust to a new culture?

   **Follow-up:** By this, I mean what would ideally take place for an international student to adjust successfully?

9. Tell me about a time when you felt particularly connected to another student of a different culture.

RQ2: What is the nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students?

10. Tell me about an experience you had with a person of another culture that impacted you.

11. Tell me about a time when a cross-cultural interaction helped you adjust.
Follow-up: What other cross-cultural interactions helped you adjust?

12. What was not helpful about these interactions?

13. Tell me about an interaction with someone of another culture that hindered your adjustment here.

Follow-up: Can you think of any other times when a cross-cultural interaction hindered your adjustment?

14. What difficult lessons did you learn as you adapted here?

Follow-up: How did these experiences change your opinions? How did they cause you to reflect?

RQ3: How do undergraduate international students perceive the impact of the university’s diversity initiatives at promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions?

15. What programs does the university have to promote communication with people of different cultures?

Follow-up: Have you participated in any of these programs or events? Tell me about your experiences.

16. What made these programs successful?

17. How could these programs be more effective?

18. How does your department encourage cross-cultural interactions?

Follow-up: Is your department effective at this? Why or why not?

19. Suppose you were designing a program intended to encourage cross-cultural interactions on campus. How would you design that?

Follow-up: What would the program include?

Closing
We are basically at the end of the interview, but before I finish, I have one last question for you.

20. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak candidly with me about your thoughts and experiences. Once I have finished my interviews, I will contact you so you may review a draft of my findings and give any recommendations for improvement.
Appendix D

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Education Department
Joan Burkhardt
“A Qualitative Study of Undergraduate International Students’ Everyday Experiences with Cross-Cultural Interactions and the Student Adjustment Process”

Dear Participant,

You are invited to take part in a research study that I am conducting under the direction of my doctoral dissertation advisor, Dr. Elisabeth Bennett. This form will tell you about the study, but I will explain it to you first. You may ask me any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell me if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an undergraduate international student. There will be approximately 8-12 students involved in this study. The purpose of this research is to understand how everyday cross-cultural interactions affect the adjustment of undergraduate international students. If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in one interview that should last approximately seventy minutes. Ten of those minutes will be spent going over this informed consent form. You will be interviewed in your own home or at a time and place that is convenient for you. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Once all participant interviews are finished and I have written my findings, I will email you a copy of my findings to review. You will be asked to provide feedback via email or telephone.

There are no foreseeable risks and/or discomforts associated with this study. I will be certain to keep interviews at seventy minutes or under in order to avoid inconvenience to you. There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, I am a highly interested listener who cares deeply about your stories. Participation will provide you with an opportunity to reflect on your experiences. Information learned from this study may help improve conditions for fellow international students.

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only I will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that will identify you in any way. I will review interview transcripts and remove all identifying information, including the names of people and places. I will replace these identifiers with code names. All data will be kept in a locked file cabinet. This form will be maintained in a locked drawer for three years after completion of the study. All other data will be destroyed within one year of completion of this study. In rare cases, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in
this study. This is done to make sure the research is done properly. I will only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment of treatment solely because of your participation in this research. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you start the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student at Eastern University.

If you have questions or problems, please contact me at 508-xxx-xxxx (home), 774-xxx-xxxx (cell), or via email at (address removed to protect confidentiality). You may also contact Dr. Elisabeth Bennett at (email address removed for confidentiality). If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617-xxx-xxxx, Email: (email address removed to protect confidentiality). You may call anonymously if you wish.

There are no known costs associated with participation in this study. You must be between the ages of 18-24 years old to participate and must feel comfortable communicating in English. All written and verbal communications will be in English. You cannot have had any prior contact with me before the initiation of this study.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part                      Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent                      Date

Joan Burkhardt
Printed name of person above