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# Campus Influence on International Students' Perceptions of the United States

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Running Head: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

CAMPUS INFLUENCE ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS  
OF THE UNITED STATES

BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

International students not only have an economic impact on the United States in the billions of dollars, they culturally enrich college campuses and play a critical role in fostering U.S. foreign relations (NAFSA, 2006). Further understanding the factors that shape international students experiences and perceptions of U.S. culture, and understanding how to foster positive U.S. perceptions, is critical to ensure that the United States maintains the lead in serving as the top destination of choice for students studying outside their home countries. The purpose of this study was to examine international students' perceptions of the United States as a result of participating in a short-term ESL program at three campuses of a community college district in the Midwest, and to explore the influence of varying campus cultural attributes (diversity of the student body, breadth of support for international students, and setting) on these perceptions. This was a mixed-method study. Data was collected via a quantitative survey, four focus groups, and two case studies. The participants were sixty students from eight countries throughout East and Southeast Asia.

The findings suggest that the students' perceptions of U.S. culture were altered as a result of their eight-week stay in the United States for each of the five perception areas examined: diversity, friendliness, safety, wealth, and quality of American higher education. The findings also suggest that perceptions of U.S. culture differed because of the cultural attributes of each campus, particularly the construct of diversity. For example, students who attended the more diverse campuses gained a greater appreciation for the historical, social, and cultural issue of race relations in the United States. Yet an important finding was that students from all campuses expressed appreciation for the

open discussion and collaborative learning environment of their college classrooms. This class format contributed to increased perceptions of the quality of American higher education. Additionally, students from all three campuses were required to participate in a service learning project that connected academic and social experiences. This experience was integral in not only connecting students with their local communities, but also students reported a greater understanding of wealth stratification in the United States.

The attributes from each campus that contributed to positive perceptions and experiences are presented in a model titled S.C.A.L.E. This is an acronym for the five key factors that influenced perception formation: Staff, Culturally-relevant Curriculum, American Student Contact, Local/regional Exploration, and Experiential Learning. All components impact perceptions to various degrees, depending on the cultural attributes of the campuses. Implications and suggestions for international student programming, and suggestions for further research conclude the study.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Boku is a college student from Mongolia who participated in the Community College English Language Institute (CCELI), a U.S. Department of State sponsored short-term program meant to provide an academic and cultural experience for sixty students from eight countries in East and Southeast Asia. Boku, like most of the CCELI students, had never visited the United States. After his experience participating in the CCELI Boku doubted that for financial reasons, he would ever have the chance to visit the United States again. The eight-week institute was his opportunity to experience American culture, interact with Americans, and decide for himself if America really was like he had perceived it to be. At the end of his experience in the United States, Boku and the rest of the CCELI students were given a program evaluation and survey about their experiences and perceptions of U.S. culture. One section of the survey allowed students to provide additional comments. Boku took special care to write within the confines of this section, in carefully practiced English, to state, "I never can explain the wonder of this experience. I am a different person who sees the world through new eyes. If I explore my feelings I'll need lots of papers and more time."

The U.S. Department of State has continued to sponsor this program, bringing students from regions of the world to study for eight-weeks in various locations across the United States. Those targeted are like Boku in that students are selected who do not have the financial means or English academic preparation to attend college in the U.S. on their own accord. Part of the rationale for this program has been to foster positive international relations with countries of specific interest to the United States government.

Higher education has long been used by the federal government to cultivate such international goodwill (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). However in a modern context, international students increasingly are assuming a more important role in American higher education, and the relationship between governmental and higher education institutional interests has become much more complex, and therefore in greater need of critical examination.

The National Association of International Educators (NAFSA, 2006) identified five reasons why attracting international students to the U.S. and optimizing their experience is critical: educational exchange promotes foreign policy and goodwill; international students enhance the country's knowledge economy; American students benefit from the diversity international students represent; the economic impact for colleges and universities amounts to \$13.3 billion annually; and finally, educational exchange enhances U.S. security by fostering such goodwill. These reasons coincide with an escalating global student market. As of 2005, there were 2.5 million students pursuing higher education outside their home countries (OECD, 2009). By 2025, this number is estimated to increase to 8 million (Altbach, 2004).

The United States has traditionally been the destination of choice for students seeking to study outside their home country. During the 2007-2008 academic year, the United States captured 20% of the global educational market (Open Doors, 2008). The United Kingdom ranked second, attracting 13%; France 8%; and Germany, Australia, and China each attracted 7% (Open Doors, 2008). These countries, among others, are serious competition for the United States. The United Kingdom (Douglass, 2006; NAFSA, 2006), China, India (Florida, 2005), Australia, France, and Japan (Shenoy, 2002) have

created successful initiatives specifically for the purpose of attracting and supporting international students, in addition to increasing the quality of higher education for these students. In 1999, the United Kingdom launched an international student recruitment strategy that by 2006 increased its foreign student enrollments to 118,000, and a second initiative seeks to increase enrollments by another 100,000 by 2011 (NAFSA, 2006). In China, educational institutions are integrating effective practices from American institutions because political leaders are savvy to the already present, increasingly competitive knowledge economy. Aware of this growing international competition, Yale University President Richard Levin has repeatedly reiterated the importance of recruiting quality international students and fostering a positive environment for them to succeed – and has stressed that the federal government should take a more active role in such initiatives. Levin observed “It’s a sad fact that China’s leaders have a more sophisticated understanding of the decisive advantages of U.S. universities than our own political leaders” (2008, para 31).

The case for both the U.S. government and higher education institutions to assume a competitive, pro-active role to remain competitive for international students is critical for the future global position of the United States (Levin 2008; Douglass, 2006; NAFSA, 2006; Altbach, 2004). Despite the increased foreign competition, the United States has rebounded from drops in enrollment that occurred after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on America, indicating that the country has not, as some scholars were predicting, lost its attractiveness for international students (NAFSA, 2006; Altbach, 2004). These students now comprise 3.5% of the total U.S. higher education enrollment, or 671,616 students in the academic year 2008-2009, an increase of approximately 8% from the

2007-2008 academic year (Open Doors, 2009). This was the third consecutive year of enrollment growth and the highest increase since the early 1980's (Open Doors, 2009). Chow and Marcus (2008) credit part of the enrollment growth in previous years to efforts by both individual institutions and the U.S. Department of State. Colleges and universities have increased recruitment initiatives and altered admission policies and procedures to reflect visa approval deadlines. Concurrently, the U.S. Department of State has attempted to restructure the visa process and endorse the United States as a welcoming destination for international students.

The increase however does not indicate that the United States is necessarily maintaining its lead in educating the global elite (Fisher, 2009). An examination of the statistics regarding the international student population illustrates troubling, emerging trends. Growth occurred almost exclusively at the undergraduate level and was disproportionately characterized by students from China, at a 60% increase (Open Doors, 2009). Debra Stewart of the Council of Graduate Schools expresses concern with stagnant numbers at the graduate level, and questions how much longer the United States can expect international students to represent a significant portion of graduate enrollment. (as cited in Fisher, 2009).

Additionally, barriers and negative perceptions continue to hamper international recruitment and the United States still lags behind other countries in terms of creating formalized policy to attract and support international students (Starobin, 2006; Douglass, 2006; Altbach, 2004). Expressing the urgency of this situation, a senior advisor at NAFSA stated, “We don’t want to wake up one day and find out that, because we have not adopted a national policy, we’re no longer competitive... We need to respond before

it's too late to do something'" (Fisher, 2009, p. A20). From a federal policy perspective, the United States still is very much in the stage of working to decrease barriers, as opposed to other countries that are openly poised to accept and support international students (Chow & Marcus, 2008; Altbach, 2004). The U.S. visa process has garnered much criticism for "pushing" international students to other countries. Altbach (2004) likens the visa process to an "obstacle course...(with) stringent, changing, arbitrary, and sometimes inconsistent government regulations" (p. 5). Scholars from specific areas and levels of study, such as the sciences and graduate programs, report on persistent visa barriers preventing talented students from attending, despite recent U.S. Department of State changes (Nature, Inc., 2009; Urias & Yeakey, 2009). Additionally, negative perceptions of the United States persist around the globe, characterizing the country as an unsafe, unwelcoming place for international visitors (Altbach, 2004; Anderson, n.d.). International students are finding less expensive and less restrictive requirements in those developed nations that have embraced and acted upon economic globalization (Starobin, 2006).

Even for international students studying in the United States, many issues taint their educational experience (Anderson et al., 2009). Despite volumes of literature illustrating that international students are generally satisfied with their decision to attend college in the United States, their experiences are characterized by numerous academic, psychological, and cultural issues (Anderson, et al., 2009; Terkla, Etish-Andrews, & Roscoe, 2007). Students report instances of discrimination and at times, a sense of unfriendliness from Americans especially in a post-9/11 climate (NAFSA, 2006; Anderson, n.d.). However, little research addresses the influence of various institutional



attributes (demographics of the student body, for example) on international students' experiences and more specifically, the effect of these attributes on perceptions about America and Americans. What cultural attributes of a campus make a difference in how international students shape their perceptions of U.S. culture? This question highlights the importance of researching not only international students' experiences, but how their perceptions are constructed while studying in the United States.

Anthropologist Ina Corrina Brown articulated the importance of addressing how the student experience is constructed when she observed, "Merely sending our students abroad or bringing students from other countries are practices that may be considered useful preludes to understanding but are not in themselves any guarantee that international understanding or good-will will be furthered" (as quoted in Bevis & Lucas, 2007, p.2).

It cannot automatically be assumed that international students will have a positive experience in the United States regardless of where they attend college, and yet programs such as the CCELI State Department sponsored experience assign visiting students to various colleges and universities with an apparent assumption that the visitors will respond similarly to each – or with little concern about the nature and quality of the experience. As this study suggests, this is not the case. There are cultural attributes about the campuses these students attend that impacted their perceptions of U.S. culture in different ways.

In their book, *International Students in American Colleges and Universities*, Bevis and Lucas (2007) provide an extensive historical analysis of international students' experiences at U.S. colleges and universities and how their experiences shaped

perceptions, subsequent pursuits in their home countries, and generations of international relationships. Many cautionary tales of negative experiences are present, yet what is most powerful in the Bevis and Lucas text is the positive impact that comes from international students' splendid experiences interacting with American culture; not only for their own benefit, but for American college students and citizens as well. The authors observe, "The most effective corrective for narrow parochialism...claimed by those who speak from personal experience, is exposure to people unlike ourselves. So, too, the best antidote to ethnocentricity is getting to know those whose backgrounds are instructively dissimilar from our own" (Bevis & Lucas, 2007, p.10)

Providing international students positive experience is critical to ensuring that the U.S. maintains its global lead in higher education, and more importantly the country's global economic and political prominence (Bevis & Lucas, 2007; Douglass, 2006; Altbach, 2004; NAFSA, 2006; etc.). What characterizes the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not the competition for goods and services as in the past, but the fierce competition for people and global talent (Florida, 2005). It is therefore both a national and local interest and responsibility that international students develop positive attitudes about the United States for the duration of their study and beyond. In a 2008 speech titled "The American University and the Global Agenda," Yale University president Richard Levin addressed the particular responsibility and obligation of U.S. higher education institutions to the role of foreign relations:

America's universities are highly effective instruments of U.S. foreign policy because they give America decisive leadership in science, educate students with the capacity to innovate, educate international students who strengthen our nation

by staying here or by serving as ambassadors when they return home...prepare international leaders to tackle the global agenda, and demonstrate solutions to global problems (2008, p.9).

### **Background of the Study**

In the spring of 2009 the U.S. Department of State sponsored for the first time the Undergraduate Intensive English Language Project (UIELP). The purpose of this program was twofold: to promote goodwill in various countries of interest in addition to providing international students an academic and cultural experience. Two hundred students from countries of special interest to the State Department were selected to participate. The target demographic included students who had never visited the United States and did not have the means to pursue higher education in America because of financial constraints and/or academic barriers (e.g. lower Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam scores than normally required for college admission in the United States). The students were selected by the U.S. embassies or their designees in each country, and spent two months in the United States studying academic English and participating in cultural events to introduce them to American culture.

The researcher worked directly with sixty of the UIELP students from East and Southeast Asia who were selected to attend three campuses of a multi-campus community college system in the Midwest. Eight countries were represented in the Midwest program, which was referred to specifically as the Community College English Language Institute (CCELI): Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. For a majority of students, this was their first time in the United States. It was a profound experience for the researcher to watch the students

excitedly soak in the culture that they had only heard about from others or seen on television. At the onset of the program, several CCELI participants expressed the perception to the researcher that the United States was the land of opportunity and that studying in the country would serve as a means to achieve their dreams and goals. They expressed the desire to make their studies a priority, and daily expressed appreciation for the experience.

It was not until one of the program participants from Mongolia returned to the United States a few months after the CCELI experience to participate in a different program that the researcher realized just how profound this brief exposure was for CCELI students. In the midst of a causal discussion about the program with the researcher, the student suddenly turned very serious and poignantly stated that this program changed his life in ways he could never fully articulate. Since his return home, he had been awarded “student of the year” at his home university and had appeared on television programs and spoken to groups of students regarding education opportunities in the United States. Before this program he continued, he had a good life by his country’s standards, but now his life was suddenly richer in unfathomable ways. He now sees no limits or bounds to what he can accomplish and seeks to encourage others in his country to pursue similar experiences. It was sobering to consider that had he, or a majority of the students in the UIELP program departed the United States with negative perceptions of the country, the program would not have been successful, and this student would have been conveying a completely different message to his peers about educational opportunities abroad and about U.S. culture.

There were however, variations in the students' experiences. During the students' CCELI experience in the United States, the researcher observed that the nature of students' experiences differed markedly depending upon the campus to which they were assigned. The sixty students were evenly distributed among three campuses so that twenty students attended each of three participating sites. The campuses will be referred to in this study as Campus A, B, and C. Students were divided with the only purposeful action being an effort to ensure that each campus had as close as possible to the same numbers of students from each country. The college campuses are within the same geographic location and within the same community college district in the Midwest, so each campus had the same mission, governance structure and institutional control.

Additionally, each campus had to adhere to the specific grant requirements of planning a wide array of events and activities to introduce students to American culture, and many were held in common. Yet each of the three campuses is markedly different. Therefore "campus attended" becomes a marker for the culture variations among the campuses. These variations for the purpose of this study can be understood as demographics of the student body, breadth of support for international students, and the setting of the campus and surrounding area. Figure 1 below represents a conceptualized model of the campuses differences and similarities. A brief narrative descriptive of each variation follows.

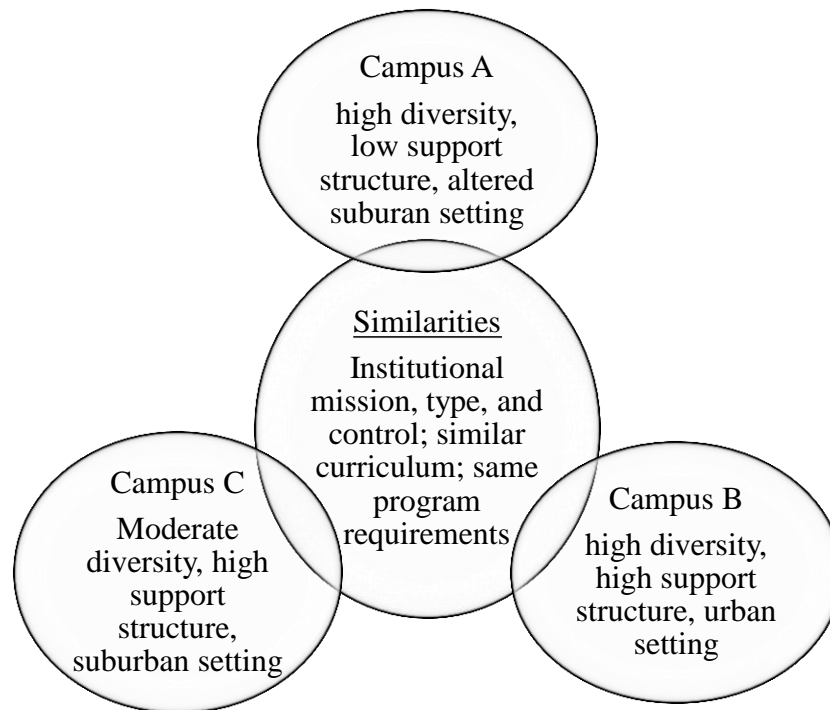


Figure 1. *CCELI Campus Differences and Similarities*

Diversity of the student body is the first variable that distinguished the three campuses. Campus A and Campus B can be characterized as high diversity campuses. At both campuses, over 50% of the student population is Black non-Hispanic while the non-minority population, White non-Hispanic, is under 40%. In contrast, 80% of the student body at Campus C is White non-Hispanic and only 5% of the student body is Black non-Hispanic.

The breadth of support for the international students in the CCELI program, the next variation in campus attended, can be characterized as high at Campuses B and C, yet limited at Campus A. Campus A has three adjunct English as a Second Language instructors (ESL) and just over 200 international students; relatively modest numbers compared to the other campuses. Campus B hosts the most international students in the

district at 700, and has 10 ESL faculty. Campus C enrolls 400 international students and has five ESL faculty.

Finally, the three campuses differ greatly in terms of setting. Campus A is located in a section of the greater metropolitan area that was at one time suburban, and though it remains separately incorporated, it has been absorbed into the city as urban sprawl has occurred. It has experienced significant change in ethnicity, as greater numbers of African Americans have moved into neighborhoods around the college that were once predominately white. Campus B, however, is characterized as the “urban” campus of the district and is situated within the geographic limits of the major city. While Campus A has the appearance of a college that was built to fit into a suburban environment with green space throughout, Campus B has a much more “institutional” appearance, with a labyrinth of interconnected brick buildings separated by brick and concrete courtyards. Campus C, by contrast, is located in an incorporated community that has also become indistinguishable from the major city as urban growth has occurred, but the suburban area surrounding it is one of the relatively affluent areas of the greater metropolis.

The campuses were different in the above ways, yet one requirement of the CCELI program at all three campuses was that all students engage in a service learning project. Because the results of the study suggested that the service learning opportunity was integral to the students' educational experience and understanding of wealth in America, it is important to detail the nature of the activities. According to the community college district involved in this study, service learning connects students' academic experiences with community needs via a multitude of projects. Engaging in such activities allows students to interact with, and ideally understand, community-wide

issues. An integral component to service learning, according to the community college district represented in this study, is that students must reflect on a project and/or interaction, and as a consequence become civically engaged. This civic engagement should result in the understanding of the importance of life-long learning and becoming active participants in communities. The campuses collaborated on the service-learning component of the CCELI, and engaged in multiple projects. Below is a bulleted list of the service learning activities:

- Students from Campuses A and B spent several hours with the on-campus daycare centers, reading stories and sharing cultural attributes with American children.
- Students from Campus B volunteered at the region's humane society, providing care for a variety of animals.
- Students from all campuses assisted at a local food bank that plays a critical role in feeding low-income populations throughout the region. Students worked as volunteers participating in such activities as sorting and repacking donated food items or building food boxes for low-income elderly individuals.
- Students from Campus A created a promotional video for the website [freerice.com](http://freerice.com). FreeRice is a non-profit website sponsored by the United Nations World Food Program. The site is open to users who may engage in multiple-choice quiz games on various subjects, e.g. grammar, spelling, foreign languages, chemistry, algebra, etc. Ten grains of rice for every correct answer are donated to a participating third-world country.



- Students from Campus C worked at another local non-profit organization that provides an array of assistance for low-income families. Students assisted by helping to collect donations, and bag and distribute food items.

As the researcher watched the CCELI program unfold, she was struck by what an ideal research opportunity the program presented. Sixty international students were divided into three groups of twenty, with consideration given to equalizing as much as possible the representation from each country in each sub-group. The students were in the same community in the United States, sharing in a number of commonly planned experiences. Forty of the students lived together in university housing at a nearby university, adding to the commonality of their experience. The primary difference in acculturation to the United States the students experienced came from the time they spent on the campus to which they were assigned. How differently might they view key elements of American culture, based on that campus exposure, and how might it affect their overall perceptions of the United States? This study provided the beginning of this inquiry with results that suggest certain campus cultural attributes impact perceptions of U.S. culture.

### **Statement of the Problem**

International students comprise 3.5% of the college student population in American higher education (Open Doors, 2009). They bring fiscal contributions to the United States in the billions of dollars and play a critical role in fostering foreign relations (NAFSA, 2006). Other countries such as China, India, Australia, and the United Kingdom have already created national initiatives to capture a larger share of global talent, while the United States still struggles to make the visa application process slightly

less burdensome for international students (Chow & Marcus, 2008; Douglass, 2006). While the experiences of international students studying in the United States generally are positive, they can still be characterized by troublesome academic, social, and psychological issues (Anderson, et al., 2009). Considering the significant number of international students at U.S. institutions (Open Doors, 2009), the role these students play in fostering international goodwill (NAFSA, 2006), and the increased competition for global educational exchange (Douglass, 2006), it is critical to understand how international students perceive the United States and how their campus experience, while studying in this country, affects these attitudes. The history of international students has shown that these perceptions will influence not only their experiences in the United States, but attitudes toward America and Americans once they return home (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). Yet virtually nothing is known about how cultural variations or attributes of campus attended shape international students' perceptions of the United States, and ultimately global attitudes in general toward America and its relationship with the rest of the world.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to ascertain if certain attributes of campus attended influenced international students' perceptions of the United States across five areas: diversity, friendliness, quality of higher education, safety, and wealth. These five perception areas were chosen after examining the research literature that suggests international students' experiences with, and perceptions of, the United States often change related to these five attributes of culture. The aforementioned "attributes of campus attended" in this study specifically focus on demographics of the student body

(specifically related to ethnicity and economic status), breadth of support for international students (characterized by ESL faculty and number of international students), and campus setting (urban or suburban). These three attributes were selected because they are the principal ways in which the three campuses involved in this study differ.

Two research questions were developed that examined the relationship between campus attended and perceptions of the United States. These questions guided the research method selected and the relationship of the findings to the theoretical framework that underpinned this study. The intention was to look specifically at how student perceptions changed concerning diversity and race relations in America; friendliness of Americans towards international people; safety of America as place to live and study; wealth and wealth distribution in America; and the quality of American higher education. The questions are designed to explore how campus attended interacts with the five perception areas, and are stated as follows:

1. Did international students' perceptions of the United States across the five areas of safety, diversity, wealth, friendliness, and quality of American higher education, change as a result of studying in the United States?
  - a. What were their perceptions before their stay in the United States?
  - b. What were their perceptions after their stay in the United States?
2. Did the campus attended have an impact on these perceptions? If so, how and why did it have an impact?
  - a. What are the perceptions by campus attended?
  - b. Are there differences among the campuses?

These questions were explored using a mixed methods approach of both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The quantitative review included descriptive analysis of data gathered through administration of a survey at the end of the students' sojourn in the United States. Quantitative data often describe what has happened, yet offers little insight into why. In this study, the quantitative data informed the next stages of data collection, and provided the researcher a context for understanding if perceptions of U.S. culture changed at all as a result of students' experience in the CCELI. The qualitative analysis utilized data gathered using four focus groups with selected students and two comprehensive case analyses. This qualitative data became the crux of the study, and provided the means to understand how and why perceptions changed; and how perceptions of U.S. culture across the five perception areas differed by campus attended.

### **Hypotheses**

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky has provided what is generally viewed as the foundational work in social constructivist theory (Atherton, 2009). Vygotsky's theories emerged from the broader school of constructivist theory and were based on the concept that cognitive development relies heavily on social interaction, and therefore "students need socially rich environments in which to explore" (Briner, 1999). According to what has become referred to as Vygotsky's social-cultural constructivism, which serves as the guiding theoretical framework for this study, the student participants constructed their experiences as a consequence of interactions with others within certain environments during their time in the United States. The researcher hypothesized first that based on these interactions that students' perceptions would change across the five key perception areas as a result of their experiences in the United States in general. Second, the

researcher hypothesized that perception changes would also be influenced by the nature of interactions attributed to campus attended, and would therefore differ as a result of these unique interactions. These hypotheses are stated as follows:

1. Students will express changes in their perceptions about the United States across the five key areas, as a result of their experiences in the United States:
  - a. Students will say that they found the United States to be a safer place to live than previously thought.
  - b. Student responses will illustrate the perception that the United States is comprised of many different ethnicities, yet racial differences and conflicts are not as widespread as they thought before coming.
  - c. After their stay in the United States, international students' will perceive Americans to be friendlier than they had thought.
  - d. After their stay in the United States, international students' will have observed stratification in wealth to be greater than they anticipated.
  - e. After their stay in the United States, international students' will perceive American higher education to be of higher quality than previously thought.
2. Students' perceptions of the United States will differ by campus attended.

The first "set" of hypotheses states the direction in which the researcher expects each perception area to move, based on the students' shared experience in the United States. The second hypothesis postulates that there is a difference in students' perceptions of the United States that is a reflection of campus attended.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The researcher was specifically interested in exploring how perceptions of international students changed as a result of cultural variations in campus attended. This assumes that students enter the United States with preconceived notions of U.S. culture that are somehow altered to varying degrees as a result of environment and interactions with others within that environment. Knowledge in this case is constructed based upon experience and interaction, and therefore an assumption is made that different perceptions of the United States become a part of a student's knowledge base, based upon different experiences. Constructivism in general is a theory of cognition with philosophical roots in the workings of philosophers writing in the beginning of the twentieth century (Glaserfeld, 1996), and is based on the idea that, "what we see, hear, and feel – that is our sensory world – is a result of our own perpetual activities and therefore specific to our ways of perceiving and conceiving" (Glaserfeld, 1996, p. 4).

Constructivism is widely applicable to the social sciences, especially to education and learning theory (Fosnot, 1996), yet is broad enough that five discernable versions, still broad in themselves, have emerged: constructive psychology, constructive and materialistic theory of culture, subjective and constructive psychology, radical constructivism, and social and cultural constructivism (Reich, 2009). Within each of these sub-groups is wide variation in thought reflecting the work of many theorists, each contributing a new dimension to the construct. Social cultural constructivism is used in this study because of the rich cross-cultural contexts of the educational environment and of the participants – contexts that other versions of constructivism tend to downplay (Reich, 2009). More particularly, the work of Lev Vygotsky underpins the methodology, results, and discussion as a means to understanding how the complex interplay of social

interaction and cultural variation between the students and the United States impacted experiences and perceptions.

Vygotsky believed that every psychological function occurs twice, first outside the mind via social interaction, and second inside the mind as that interaction is given meaning (Wertch, 1985). More specifically, he observed how mental functions develop historically within particular cultural groups, as well as individually through social interactions. A person comes to learn the habits of his or her culture which in turn affect the construction of knowledge as he or she socially interacts within a given environment (Wertch, 1985). Because of Vygotsky's emphasis on culture and social interaction, his theories are especially applicable for this study. International students come to the United States with preconceived notions of American culture, as evidenced by the research literature explored in Chapter Two. Through the survey of perceptions, the CCELI students indicated that they also came to the United States with preconceived notions of American culture. Their social interactions with their environment, however, changed their knowledge of American culture as they interacted with that culture, complete with its unique historically constructed cultural norms; thus constructing new knowledge. To understand how their perceptions changed and were formed, this study utilized methodological triangulation that was a central element of the research design.

### **Methodology**

Methodological triangulation, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, was used to gather data about the students' perceptions of U.S. culture, which was then compared by campus to ascertain differences in perception among the students who attended Campuses A, B, and C. This triangulation served to strengthen validity of

findings, eliminate bias, and demonstrate preference over rival explanations. As Mathison observes, triangulation provides a basis in data “such that a truthful proposition about some social phenomenon can be made” (1988, p.13). Methodological triangulation is one of four types of triangulation, and is characterized by a process in which more than two research methods are utilized to gather data about a phenomenon (Bryman, 2009; Mathison, 1988; Dezin, 1978). Dezin (1970) presented two approaches to methodological triangulation; with-in method and between-method. Between-method involves contrasting research methods, most frequently quantitative and qualitative (Bryman, 2009; Duffy, 1987), and is often considered to have greater applicability. This strategy was especially applicable and useful for this study since “the flaws of one method are often the strengths of another,” (Dezin, 1978, p. 302). Thus by conjoining methods, the researcher is better poised to extract the best qualities of each method while compensating for the weaknesses of each method as well.

The first point of data collection was the acquisition of pre-existing data from the U.S. State Department. These quantitative data were gathered from a survey conducted of the CCELI students immediately after their experience in the United States for the purpose of understanding both their satisfaction with the program, and how their views of American culture had changed, if at all. Descriptive statistics from this survey were used to address the research question: Did the students' perceptions of U.S. culture change as a result of studying in the United States?

In the qualitative phase of the study, which followed the quantitative phase over a period of approximately eighteen months, the researcher conducted focus group interviews asking open-ended questions pertaining to how the five perceptions areas



(friendliness, diversity, quality of American higher education, safety, and wealth) changed as a result of participating in the program, and why students believe differences existed among them based on campus attended, if differences were found.

The last point of data collection was two case studies. Originally, the researcher planned on conducting only one; however the opportunity arose to interview in-person a second student who had returned for a summer work-study program in the Southeast region of the United States. This student had also previously participated in one of the aforementioned focus groups, and therefore the researcher was able to explore her responses further, and juxtapose her responses with those of her peers. The richest data, however, came from the case study interview that the researcher had planned since the inception of this study. This student attended Campus B as a CCELI participant, yet returned of her own accord to attend Campus C for further study. This student was asked how her view of the United States was shaped by attending Campus B, why she chose to return to a different campus, and how her views have changed now that she has attended Campus C. The qualitative data were used to address the second research question: Did students' perceptions change because of the campus they attended?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study has significance on many levels. It begins to fill a research gap in the literature in that little is known about how different campus cultural attributes impact the international student experience. As a result, this information will be useful in determining the optimal locations for fostering positive cultural perceptions and to a larger extent, fostering global relations. Policy makers on the federal level can use this information in considering where to locate such programs as the CCELI. If students

depart the United States with positive perceptions of our culture – view the United States as friendly, safe, affluent, open to diversity, and the premier place to pursue higher education – then this positive message will spread among their peers and throughout their country, as Bevis and Lucas indicate has been the case historically (2007).

Finally, international students are increasingly of critical importance to the United States as ‘friend-makers’ and as contributors to our own economy and talent pool.

Marlene M. Johnson, executive director for the National Association of International Educators, in an opinion article regarding the importance of a foreign student strategy stated, “We urgently need a national strategy that ensures that the United States can attract the best talent from overseas and continue to lead the world... The time for complacency is past” (Johnson, 2006, p. B16).

### **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

This study was framed by a number of circumstantial limitations, not the least of which was the specific ethnicities, nationalities, and socioeconomic demographics of the CCELI students. The students in this study are from Southeast and East Asia and represent eight countries: Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. Four other UIELP groups were in the United States at the same time, and represented other regions of the world (the Middle East, Latin America, etc.) and representatives of the State Department who worked with the CCELI staff reported that each of these groups reacted quite differently to their educational experience in the United States.

The experience of the CCELI group was also shaped by the reality that U.S. relations with various countries in East Asia “have warmed in recent years, (yet) they

remain contentious,” (Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, 2009, para 1).

Kurlantzick (2008) wrote about a democracy backlash among governments in Southeast and East Asia, especially in Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and in countries where the military never relinquished power, such as Cambodia and Myanmar. This backlash reflects negative perceptions in the late 1990's of U.S. foreign policy and the growing disbelief in the ability of “America's democracy” to solve social problems in these regions of the world (Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, 2009; Kurlantzick, 2008). These global relations might have implications for how the CCELI students perceive the United States as opposed to international students from other countries.

Additionally, since part of the aim of the CCELI program was to select students who would otherwise not meet the requirements to study in the United States of their own accord because of financial restraints and/or English preparation, the students may differ somewhat from the typical international student who would otherwise come from their country. As part of the program requirements all expenses were paid, including a modest daily stipend. While the CCELI students were in the United States, money was not a concern for them as it might be for some international students (Anderson et al., 2009).

Besides not having to grapple with financial issues, other traditional stressors were diminished for these students. Loneliness, feelings of isolation, homesickness, and culture shock undoubtedly affected the students to varying degrees, but this group lived with peers who were attending their same campus and were required to participate in a large number of cultural events and activities – all of which were coordinated for them.

The students were rarely left by themselves. The length of stay was only two months, which may also have limited the effects of homesickness or isolation.

While the differences in the experiences of the 60 students were largely affected by campus attended, 20 of the 60 did have a different residential experience. The students attending Campuses A and B lived together in the same residence hall at a university near their campuses, since the community college does not provide for residential living. Those attending Campus C lived in residence halls at a seminary nearer their campus. Although there was minimal mixing among the CCELI students and university students and seminarians at the residential locations because of the nature of the housing arrangements, these two settings were quite different in and of themselves and influenced perceptions in some fashion. It could be argued, however, that housing arrangements should be thought of as part of “campus attended,” and are therefore not apart from other campus influences.

Finally, this study was framed by the intricate relationship of initiatives between the federal government and individual institutions in terms of attracting and supporting international students. Although guidelines for selection for the CCELI program specified that participants should be from backgrounds that provided little opportunity for the students to come to the United States without this opportunity, some of the participants clearly were from more advantaged circumstances. Several had been in the United States before, and several (particularly from Mongolia and from the Philippines) were from families of wealth and influence. Yet even with these mitigating circumstances, the individual institution is the provider of the actual experience and had a profound effect on student attitudes and perceptions (Levin, 2008).

## Definition of Terms

The following definitions are applied to commonly used terms in this study to insure uniform understanding and continuity of meaning:

1. International student: An international student is defined as one who is a citizen of another country, in the United States with the purpose and express intention of earning a post-secondary degree (Erisman & Looney, 2007). Foreign student may be used in reference to international students throughout this study.
2. Campus attended: Campus attended is not to be understood as institutional type or control. Instead campus attended for the purposes of this study refers to the cultural variations of three campuses in a multi-campus community college district in the Midwest. Campus attended was understood as variations in student body demographics, breadth of support for international students, and setting. Setting refers to either urban or suburban, and other physical descriptors of each campus.
3. Perceptions: Perceptions refers to the process of organizing and using information that is received through the senses (Coleman, 2009).
4. Wealth: For this study, wealth is not examined as net assets as traditionally understood in the field of economics, but is framed from a sociological perspective. "The wealthy can be defined as those who are privileged or advantaged relative to what is normal for the citizens of their society" (Scott & Marshall, 2009). In this case, it is hypothesized that international students will initially perceive Americans as wealthy in relative terms to what wealth means in their country.

5. Diversity: Diversity can be understood in this study as “heterogeneity of group members... also characterized by a divergence in backgrounds, values, attitudes, and experiences that presents individuals in the group with novel situations.” (Antonio, et. al., 2008, p. 507-508).
6. Quality of higher education: Quality of higher education will be characterized by the reasons why American higher education is viewed as the paramount system in the world: high-quality teaching, availability of advanced technological facilities, extensive support for basic and applied research, and open forum of individualized expression (Chow & Marcus, 2008).
7. Safety: International students experience multi-dimensional threats, including cultural threats, discrimination, anxiety, and realistic threats (Stephan & Stephan, 1996). However, safety in this study will be understood as realistic threats or fear for personal safety as presented by Maslow's hierarchy of needs (2005).
8. Friendliness: Friendliness is a complicated social construct involving a mutual relationship between a perceiver and an agent in a variety of contexts. The concept is best defined as, “a construct or dispositional tendency or attitude that implies kindness, cordiality, and goodwill” (Reisman, 1983, p. 405), and is used in that context in this study.

### **Organization of the Study**

Understanding how international students perceive the United States is important given a confluence of forces: the need for the United States to foster international goodwill in the midst of global backlash towards America; amplified competition for an increasing global student market; the need for the United States to maintain its global

lead in the quality of higher education; the preservation of diversity and resources these students bring to their U.S. campuses of attendance; and for the satisfaction and success of the students. However, little research exists that examines perceptions before and after the students' experiences in the United States or analyzes the influence of campus attended on the international students experience and perceptions. Further, no research provides a comparative analysis of campus attended and the influence on perceptions. This study began the process of closing that research gap.

The review of the literature that follows in Chapter Two provides a brief history of international students in the United States, addresses relevant research about international students' experiences, explores global perceptions of the United States, and finally sets a context for the study by establishing social-constructivism as the theoretical framework. It illustrates that a significant gap exists in this literature concerning how campus of attendance influences students; perceptions of the United States and of Americans. Chapter Three details the research methodology utilized in this study. It describes the research design, research setting, and how data were collected and analyzed. Further, Chapter Three provides a rationale for why a mixed methodology approach, utilizing methodical triangulation, is relevant.

Chapter Four provides the results and findings. Rich description is provided of both the students who participated in the study and of their perceptions and attitudes, especially those involved in the qualitative elements of this study. Each perception theme – diversity, wealth, safety, friendliness, and quality of American higher education – is analyzed in depth.

The final chapter, Chapter Five, summarizes the results in relation to the research questions. This chapter presents the S.C.A.L.E. model (Staff, Culturally-relevant curriculum, American college students, Local/regional exploration, and Experiential learning). This model illustrates what components of the CCELI contributed to positive students' perceptions of U.S. culture across the five perception areas of interest and this chapter describes how the model can be used to enhance the U.S. college experience for international students. Chapter Five also describes the limitations of the study, provides suggestions for shaping short-term international student programs that foster positive U.S. cultural perceptions, and suggests future research.



## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of the Literature**

International students are of increasing importance not just for the landscape of American higher education, but for the country's economic and political wellbeing (Douglass, 2006). This study serves to help colleges and universities, governmental agencies, and those working with international students to better understand their U.S. education experience by exploring how certain cultural attributes of the campus influence international students' perceptions of the United States. The perceptions specifically examined in this study include: diversity, friendliness, quality of American higher education, safety, and wealth. A sense of the importance of providing a positive experience for these students, and a selection of the five perception areas examined by this research, emerge from the literature related to international students and their views of American culture. That literature is reviewed in this chapter and is organized in four sections:

1. Scope and history of international students in the United States with an emphasis on the growing role of U.S. community colleges in the international student market
2. The paradigm of international students' experiences
3. International perceptions of the United States
4. Lev Vygotsky's social-cultural constructivism

The purpose of the chapter is to explore work that has already been done about international students and the international student experience, demonstrate that there still remains a need for further research about factors that shape that experience, and

demonstrate how social-cultural constructivism provides an ideal theoretic framework for this type of analysis.

### **Scope and History of International Students in the United States**

In 1970 a UNCESO cross-cultural survey stated, “Students have always been recognized as highly mobile... exchange continues to function in these ways: by individual enterprise, by government action inspired by selfish or altruistic motives or both, and by the activities of academic institutions and learned societies” (Marshall, p.10). Even though this report was published forty years ago in a very different context not yet characterized by the current scope of technological advancements and globalization, this statement is significant on two fronts. First, students from the earliest years of higher learning have been mobile, following the knowledge source – be that a person or place (Lucas, 1994). Second, modern governments and institutions have capitalized on this mobility because of altruistic and/or self-serving economic or political motives (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). The scope of international students in the United States is characterized by these two factors; the global prominence of the American higher education system and an evolving ebb and flow of federal actions and foreign relations and varying institutional efforts (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). It is important to first describe the scope of international students in the United States in terms of history and significance to better understand the depth and diversity that characterizes their experiences and perceptions.

Under what circumstances have international students come to study in the United States? American higher education has evolved into a unique, complex web of institutions tailored to the pursuits of research, teaching, and service. It is a system that is

revered internationally for its commitment to open inquiry and accessibility that is seen nowhere else in the world (Douglass, 2006). Yet, global educational exchange was already a problematic issue in early America when the higher education system was in its infancy. The institutions in post-revolution America had not yet earned the creditability to attract students from abroad and in turn, American leaders viewed the exporting of the nation's youth to study in other countries as an insult to the colleges that did exist in America, not to mention that such exchange would represent continued reliance on European institutions (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). Gradually however, throughout the 1800s the world began to take notice of the young and innovative higher education system in America as it incorporated ideals such as the Wisconsin Idea of service, the German model for research, and the creation of Land Grant colleges, which mandated equity in access and innovative curriculum to meet economic and societal needs (Rudolph, 1990).

The progressive social movement of the early 1900s, combined with booming industrialization, set the stage for dramatic expansion and national interest in higher education (Rudolph, 1990). America was becoming "increasingly irresistible to hopeful immigrants, students, and visitors from every region of the world" (Bevis & Lucas, 2007, p. 58). As a consequence, formal organizations were emerging to organize and facilitate international exchange, most notably the Institute for International Exchange (IIE) founded in 1917. The purpose of the IIE was to centralize and foster educational exchange programs, and the association continues to serve as a global leader in collaborating with governments and other organizations to facilitate international goodwill exchange programs (IIE, n.d.). Yet formalized large scale federal involvement

and specific efforts by higher education to attract and foster positive relations with international students were still on the horizon.

While international student enrollment did increase steadily between 1900 and 1930 (Bevis & Lucas, 2007), the post-World War II context changed the landscape of international student exchange programs because of increasingly higher levels of federal involvement. An innovative post-war spirit of internationalism coupled with new social, political, and economic challenges, created an unprecedented “geopolitical climate,” spurring a need for individuals that had the ability to work across international borders (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2005).

The U.S. government responded to this climate with a series of federal mandates and agencies. The first formal act, the Fulbright Act of 1946, was meant to form “bilateral relationships in which other countries and governments work with the United States to set joint priorities and shape the Program to meet shared needs” (Fulbright Program, n.d.). The Fulbright Program continues to be instrumental in promoting educational exchange as the largest U.S. program of its kind (Bevis & Lucas, 2007; Fulbright Program, n.d.). Another important organization born out of post war efforts was the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Signed in 1945 by thirty-seven countries (Bevis & Lucas, 2007, p. 112), its mission historically has been to “Promote higher education in the increasingly knowledge-based present-day society as a key factor for cultural, economic and political development, as an endogenous capacity-builder, as a promoter of human rights, sustainable development, democracy, peace and justice” (UNESCO, n.d.).

In the late 1950s and 1960s federal commitment to fostering international exchange expanded considerably through passage of the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961 which declared in its statement of purpose:

The purpose of this chapter is to enable the Government of the United States to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange; to strengthen the ties which unite us with other nations by demonstrating the educational and cultural interests, developments, and achievements of the people of the United States and other nations, and the contributions being made toward a peaceful and more fruitful life for people throughout the world; to promote international cooperation for educational and cultural advancement; and thus to assist in the development of friendly, sympathetic, and peaceful relations between the United States and the other countries of the world (Sec. 2451).

This Act established the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) under the umbrella of the U.S. Department of State. The function of ECA was, and still is, to foster “mutual understanding, international education and cultural exchange, and leadership development...to reflect the diversity of the United States and global society” (U.S. Department of State, 2010, para 2). ECA sponsors over 100 programs, such as the aforementioned Fulbright Program, and most recently the UIEP program that sponsored the students who were participants in this study.

During the 1960s another critical organization broadened its work to foster greater international exchange – the aforementioned IIE. IIE physically expanded overseas to provide information to students in growing segments of Africa, Asia and Latin America,

demonstrating one of the first formalized and organized efforts abroad to bring students to the United States (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). As a consequence of these governmental and organizational efforts, combined with the flourishing nature of American higher education during this time, America began to be seen as the premier place to pursue higher education (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). By 1962 the United States was the top host to international students, followed by France, the USSR, the United Kingdom, and Germany (McMahon, 1992). Over the next decade, international student enrollment in the United States climbed from 48,486 students in 1959-1960 to 144,708 in 1970-1971 (Open Doors, 2008).

In addition to a continuation of increasing international student enrollment, the 1960s and 1970s saw another era of change in the emerging role of community colleges in the American higher education landscape, a role in the international student market that is the context of this study. “Junior colleges” had served an integral role in American higher education since their inception in the early 1900’s, initially serving as preparation for upper division enrollment in universities.

It is important to note that community colleges evolved to address the specific needs of the communities they serve (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). In 1947 President Truman’s Commission on Higher Education published a report titled *Higher Education for Democracy*. The report called for expanding access to higher education via grades “thirteen and fourteen” at little to no cost to students (Kim & Rury, 2007). The report coined the name “community colleges” and was significant for the further development of these institutions in many ways; specifically because it identified two-year institutions as key to increasing access to higher education (Lucas, 1994). Community colleges began

with offering general education courses as a bridge to four-year institutions, yet as community and societal needs changed throughout the twentieth century, so did the role of community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). For example Joliet Junior College, the nation's first two-year institution, began in 1901 with the purpose of establishing a "junior college that academically paralleled the first two years of a four-year college or university" (Joliet Junior College, 2011, para 3). Changing social and political change in the 1920's and 1930's impacted all higher education institutions (Rudolph, 1990) but most two-year institutions, such as Joliet Junior College, met these challenges by incorporating occupational curriculum to meet societal and workforce needs (Joliet Junior College, 2011).

The community college, like higher education in general in the decades following World War II, experienced booms in enrollment and community support. Yet student enrollment at two-year institutions grew at much higher rates. By the mid-1970's these institutions could lay claim to 34% of the nation's college student population (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p.31). Currently, almost one-half of all undergraduate college students in the United States are enrolled at a community college, and the unprecedented college enrollment figures can be attributed to the dramatic growth in community college student enrollment (Fry, 2009).

International students became interested in community colleges for the same reasons that American students did - lower cost and accessibility. Bevis and Lucas (2007) note that it was not until 1969 that IIE first included the number of international students at community colleges in its yearly tracking of global exchange and by 1971, the organization reported that 15,363 international students were studying at community

colleges; 11% of the international student population (p. 167). By the early 1970's formal organizations and associations such as NAFSA and AACCC, then called the American Association for Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC), had developed divisions or committees focusing on global exchange and the community college. Today, 14% of all international students studying in the U.S. are enrolled in community colleges (Open Doors, 2008).

What then, is the role and benefit of international students at these institutions, and how has the historical development of community colleges evolved so that many two-year institutions find it inherent in their missions to internationalize their campuses? Numerous studies suggest that international students bring cultural awareness and global understanding to their U.S. institutions, and American students benefit in terms of increased global and cultural understanding (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Community colleges and their students are no exception to this benefit. Yet community colleges also have always had a specific mission to meet local needs, and focusing on globalization and recruiting international students is one way to meet evolving "community needs."

In "Internationalization Efforts in United States Community Colleges: A Comparative Analysis of Urban, Suburban, and Rural Institutions," Natalie Harder from Patrick Henry Community College argues for the internationalization of two-year institutions regardless of geographic setting. There is a growing demand for workers who have the ability to work in international contexts and community colleges, she argues, do their students a disservice when this exposure is absent or limited. Further, she states, for many community college students the only exposure or opportunities they will have to



learn and experience other cultures and global trends is their formal education at the institution.

While community colleges pursue a variety of strategies to “globalize” their students, such as focusing on internationalizing curriculum or hiring diverse faculty (Fischer, 2008; Harder, 2010), a major focus in recent years for many community colleges has been recruiting international students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2011). Harder (2008) found that institutional support – financial and administrative – was the largest predictor of whether or not a campus would be successful in international efforts. She also found that rural two-year institutions were less likely than their urban and suburban counterparts to embrace globalization efforts.

The three campuses in this study are classified as either urban or suburban, and all have, to varying degrees, specific strategies to internationalize their campuses. These colleges are also of the same community college district, yet have distinctly different personalities because each campus has evolved to meet the needs of its respective community. And yet, increasingly community colleges across the nation are expanding their scope to serve international student populations. The three campuses in this study provide a useful laboratory for examining how diverse campus environments can shape perceptions. This study is important because many community colleges walk this line; the line between serving the immediate needs of their community in the geographic sense, and also serving the needs of the new international reality. Global, after all, is the new local (Fischer, 2008).

The history of international students in the United States is complex, but provides a useful picture of how and why international students came to study in the United States.

An emerging trend is the increasing role that community colleges play in attracting and supporting these students from abroad. The next section addresses the academic, social, and psychological parameters of their experiences.

### **International Students' Experiences in the United States**

The international student experience comprises a sizable niche in the research literature of higher education (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). This research has found that overall, students report positive experiences despite problems with cultural adjustment both in and outside the classroom (Terkla, Roscoe, & Etish-Andres, 2007; Robertson, et al., 2000). While the international student experience is explored extensively throughout the literature, it has been problematic to present definitive conclusions about the nature of their experiences because of cultural and ethnic heterogeneity of the participants and the inherent complex nature of these experiences (Robertson et al., 2007). A number of elements, to varying degrees, affect each student's experience. (Robertson et al. 2000).

However, research about international students' experiences in the United States can be categorized into the following subgroups: academic challenges that may include English language struggles (Robertson, et. al, 2000; Galloway & Jenkins, 2005; Trice & Yoo, 2007; Le Ha, 2009; Anderson, et al., 2009); social adjustment, (Olivas & Li, 2006; Anderson, et. al, 2009; Klomegah, 2006; Poyrazli, et. al, 2004; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005; Lin & Betz, 2009; Bektas, Demir, & Bowden, 2009); and psychological issues (Anderson, et. al, 2009; Alazzi & Chido, 2006; Yakushko, Davidson, & Sandford-Martens, 2008; Poyrazli, 2003; Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007; Mitchell, Greenwood, & Guglielmi, 2007; Meifen, et. al, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007; Yang, et. al, 2006; Poyrazli &

Lopez, 2007). Each of these aspects – academic challenges, social adjustment issues, and psychological issues – frame international students' experiences studying in the United States.

**Academic challenges.** Academics is the primary reason international students pursue higher education in the United States and as a result their studies often take precedence over other issues, such as socialization and general psychological and physical well-being (Yi et al., 2003; Anderson et al., 2009). Anderson, et al. (2009) suggest several dimensions of the academic challenges common to students from abroad: communication barriers due to English language difficulty or cultural differences, adaptation problems related to studying in a vastly different educational culture, and problems adjusting to new types of information systems such as library services (p. 20-21). The first two dimensions presented by Anderson, academic challenges and variations in educational culture, have been explored fairly extensively in the literature and help to frame international students' academic-related experiences.

Language barriers can present a myriad of inter-related problems for international students (Anderson et al., 2009; Terkla, Roscoe, & Etish-Andrews, 2007). The Association for Institutional Research conducted a study of over 2550 international students from a variety of countries. The researchers found that, "Respondents whose language of instruction was not their native language were far more likely than native speakers to experience difficulty with a variety of language related issues, such as understanding slang, writing papers, becoming familiar with the host country culture, and making non-international friends" (Terkla, Roscoe, & Etish-Andrews, 2007, p. 4). As might be expected, the study found that there were variations in difficulty among these

challenges based on country of origin. Sixty percent of Asian students studying outside their home countries reported difficulty in writing papers and 49% reported difficulty understanding slang. These percentages were higher than groups from any other region of the world other than the Middle East, where 72% reported difficulties writing papers in English (p. 5).

Language barriers have also been linked to identity development. The lack of language proficiency and negative Western cultural stereotypes, particularly among Asian students, can negatively impact identity development for these students (Le Ha, 2009). Dao, Lee, and Chang (2007) found that perceived fluency in English influences a “cycle” of international student development. “One component of language difficulty is that it inhibits social interaction. The more international students avoid social interactions, the less their social and language skills develop. As a result, a negative cycle occurs in which a negative perception of English fluency continues to be reinforced” (p. 290).

Another dimension of academic challenge is the vastly different educational environment of the United States compared to that of most international students' home countries. Burrell and Kim (2002) state, “The way that a student approaches learning is conditioned by the context of learning” (p. 85). Most international students attending a U.S. college or university are thrust into a very different learning environment than they previously have experience in terms of teaching styles, participation expectations, instructional methodologies, classroom behavior, and faculty-student interactions (Anderson, et al., 2009). For example, many international students are surprised that classroom discussions and questioning of the instructor are encouraged in the U.S,

whereas in many countries such as those in Asia, students are encouraged to be passive and quiet in the classroom; any action otherwise is a sign of disrespect (Burrell & Kim, 2002; Anderson et al., 2009). Differences in student-to-student interaction can also be problematic for international students. Scarcella (1990), as cited in Burrell and Kim (2002), recorded this observation about a conversation between an American and Vietnamese student:

In the course of a conversation, an American student asks one question after another, and a Vietnamese student responds with one brief answer after another. Each expresses frustration afterward, the American because the Vietnamese showed little interest in the conversation, and the Vietnamese because the American 'kept firing questions at her without giving her time to respond' (p. 86).

Even though the research supports the concept that language barriers can be extremely frustrating for international students, other research has found that colleges must provide a forum for these students to practice English as one of four central components to positive international student adjustment (Cundiff, 2009). The other three components to this "international student adjustment" model, as presented by Cundiff (2009), are exposure to campus-based programmatic offerings, the availability of cultural-specific efforts, and the availability of a strong support person. These latter three components relate to the important social and psychological issues that affect the student experience.

**Social adjustment.** Social adjustment issues, while related to academic challenges, can be characterized as another dimension that frames international students' experiences, including socialization and integration with campus attended. In his study of

approximately 100 students., Klomegah (2006) noted that “social contact or time spent by respondents with other students from any geographic region has the strongest and significant association with alienation....Students who have regular contact with other students...are less alienated from the college environment” (p.312).

Social integration of college students in general significantly impacts students' satisfaction and ultimately, persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). International students' social interaction with other international and American students, and integration into their campus cultures, is critical to fostering adaptation to their environment (Bektas, Demir, & Bowden, 2009; Anderson, et al., 2009; Klomegah, 2006; Zhao, Kuh, and Carini, 2005)

Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005) compared international and American student engagement using results from the National Survey of Student Engagement. They found that international students were more engaged during the first year of college in “educationally purposeful activities” than were their American counterparts (p. 1). As a consequence, international students benefited more than American students, growing in personal and social development, although interestingly the study found that Asian international students reported lower levels of satisfaction with their campus environment, and were “less engaged in active and collaborative learning and diversity related activities” (p. 12) compared to other international student ethnic groups. However, as the tenure of the international students' study in the United States progressed, their levels and nature of engagement began to closely reflect those of their American peers in terms of socializing and personal time.

Anderson et al. (2009) listed other “socio-cultural” challenges which included culture shock, racial discrimination, and difficulty adjusting to the parameters of a new culture, e.g. customs, eating habits, etc. Of these, “culture shock is the most obvious but least understood” (Anderson et al., 2009). Furnham and Bochner (1982) provide perhaps the most widely accepted exploration of culture shock for international students (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). They state that culture shock is more dramatic for international students, the further their own cultural norms are from that of the host country. As they strive to assimilate, they rely on their own cultural norms and communications and if these are not effective, the negative cycle of culture shock perpetuates (Furnham & Bochner, 1982).

Racial discrimination, another social challenge identified by Anderson et al. (2009) and others (Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007) can have detrimental effects on both the students’ experience and perceptions. In their qualitative study of 24 international students, Lee and Rice (2007) found that “difficulties run from students being ignored to verbal insults and confrontation” (p. 405). They also found that discrimination takes place both in and outside of the classroom and that the more culturally different an international is compared to American students, the more likely he or she is to experience threats and/or discrimination. Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) in a quantitative study of over 400 students also found that the more “different” an international student was culturally from the United States, the more likely he or she was to experience higher levels of discrimination. They also found that younger students with limited English proficiency were more susceptible. An interesting finding in the Poyrazli and Lopez study was that female students “may find it easier to establish relationships

and converse with others, therefore increasing their opportunity to practice English” and decreasing the likelihood of becoming a target for discrimination (p. 275).

Returning to Cundiff's (2009) model of international student adjustment, there are two factors that relate to positive social adjustment for international students: cultural specific efforts by the hosting institution, and campus based programmatic offerings. Both are important for international students to adjust to their campuses of attendance and aid with assimilation into the campus environment.

**Psychological Challenges.** The third dimension to the international students' experiences, and the most common, are psychological challenges (Anderson et al., 2009). Psychological issues include depression, anxiety, alienation, loss of identity, and homesickness (Anderson et al., 2009; Olivas & Li, 2006; Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007; Wei et al., 2007). The psychological issues may develop when either the student or the student's experience fails to meet high expectations. Anderson notes that, “Because many international students hold high expectations of their abilities and the quality of their lives in the United States, they may feel frustrated, indignant, and insufficient after they understand the realities and face difficulties and failures” (Anderson et al., 2009, p. 19).

Depression is a common, if not the most prevalent, psychological issue international students grapple with, often resulting from acculturative stress (Wei et al., 2007). Acculturative stress is a term utilized in lieu of culture shock and can be understood as reacting stressfully to life occurrences or events (Berry, 2007). In a study of over 100 Taiwanese college students studying in the United States, Dao, Lee, and Chang (2007) found that those most at risk for depression were female, were students characterized by lower levels of acculturation, and those possessing lower levels of



English proficiency. Wei et al. (2007), in a survey of just under 200 Chinese international students found a parallel between acculturative stress and depression. The researchers offered the following as an explanation for the link. "...when Chinese students experience acculturative stress, the possibility of losing face and embarrassment may prevent them from sharing their experience with their peers because these experiences may imply personal failures" (p. 9). Therefore, these emotions are internalized and can culminate in depression.

The final piece of Cundiff's (2009) four-part international student adjustment model is the presence of a strong support person. Other research also has shown that the quality of relationships can improve an international student's experience (Olivias & Li, 2006). However, Anderson et al. (2009) illustrate that assisting international students with psychological issues is problematic because the "most effective solution (socially interacting with other students or seeking counseling) is the least likely to happen." (p. 20). This is because often at the root of the challenge is an inability or lack of self-efficacy to communicate effectively.

International students, while reporting overall positive experiences with their time in the United States (Terkla, Roscoe, & Etish-Andrews, 2007), face academic, social, and psychological challenges (Anderson et al., 2009; Olivias & Li, 2006). All of these adjustment issues are intermingled throughout the literature, suggesting that academic, social, and psychological issues are related. Olivas and Li (2006) for example, outlined the common stressors for international students as language barriers, which in turn may hinder a student's social interaction, leading to isolation and depression. Research support for the prevalence of these acculturative stressors on international experience,

and the influences of campus environment of these stressors, highlight the need for further study that examines how students respond differently as campus environment differs.

### **International Perceptions of the United States**

Todd Gilton, in his review of the book, *What They Think of Us: International Perceptions of the U.S. since 9/11*, recounted the story of Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian who traveled to the United States to study education at what is now the University of Northern Colorado. Of America, Gilton writes, Qutb “was so freaked out by its soullessness, especially by the alluring women at a 1949 Greeley, Colorado dance (at a church), that on his return to Egypt he became a central inspiration to generations of Islamist murders” (p. 15-16). Perhaps the best known readers of his writings, who later formed a coalition based on his ideologies, are members of al Qaeda (Seigel, 2003) – the group responsible for the “9/11” terrorist attack in America on September 11, 2001 in which two of four hijacked airplanes crashed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, causing the towers to fold into the ground in piles of twisted metal. A third airplane crashed into the Pentagon, and the fourth into a field in Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people perished in what has been dubbed the worst attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor in the 1940’s. After 9/11, international student enrollment declined rapidly as federal student visa requirements became more stringent (Open Doors, 2003), and many prospective international students perceived that they were either unwelcome or unsafe in America due to backlash toward international visitors, especially those from predominantly Muslim countries (NAFSA, 2006).

This powerful example illustrates the profound importance of not only understanding international attitudes and perceptions toward the United States for the sake of preventing tragedy, but also understanding the power that the country's esteemed higher educational institutions have in terms of shaping these perceptions. What are these perceptions in a modern context, both from a global perspective and more specifically through the eyes of international students? The sections below explore global attitudes and perceptions of the United States and more specifically what is known about international students' perceptions.

**General perceptions from abroad.** A majority of the literature pertaining to global attitudes towards the United States has shown fluctuation toward the negative in the past several decades, although negative attitudes certainly have been apparent since the United States has grown in global dominance in the latter half of the twentieth century (Farber, 2007). The 2009 PEW Global Attitudes Project found, however, that global attitudes towards the United States improved over the previous year throughout Western Europe, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and to a lesser degree, the Middle East. Attitudes toward the United States improved the most in France, Germany, and Indonesia with a 33 point increase; Japan, South Korea, and China reported moderate increase (ranging from four to six point increases); while others such as Kenya and Turkey, reported no change. The report also suggests that part of the reason for the improved attitudes is due to the President Barrack Obama administration; however other factors such as concerns about U.S. military presence as a threat and the global economic crisis in which America is still viewed as having a negative impact continue to taint the image of the United States.

In *What They Think of Us: International Perceptions of the U.S. since 9/11*, David Farber explores in more depth global attitudes toward the United States from select countries. The essays he presents are bleaker than the PEW report, yet the overall message is that “They find much about the United States – and the American people – appealing, entertaining, and even worthy of emulation. But...that goodwill is at risk” (Farber, 2007, p. xi). Much of the criticism toward America throughout the text pertains to federal policies, yet there is mention of educational exchange as one of the positive aspects about America. For example, the chapter exploring Indonesian perceptions refers to the Fulbright-Hays program as fostering the education of “hundreds of top Indonesian students” (p. 44). The perceptions of international students, however, are often shaped much more specifically by their experience with the higher education setting they find themselves in while studying in the United States.

**International students’ perceptions.** In the NAFSA 2007 publication, “In America’s Interests: Welcoming International Students,” countering negative perceptions is one of several recommendations presented to increase international student interest in attending college in the U.S. The organization found four negative pre-conceived perceptions by international students that may hinder their enrollment: Americans are not welcoming to international students; higher education is too expensive in the United States; the higher education system is too complex and problematic to navigate; and Americans do not accept international students into their communities.

NAFSA also surveyed students (both those who had studied in the United States and those who had not), with open-ended questions pertaining to their views of the

United States. The findings of this survey were much more positive. Below is a sample of the responses:

“How do you see the U.S?”

- Big, developed country
- Country of universities – place to get an education
- Country of freedom, liberty, democracy, independence, wealth
- Movies, music, pop culture

“What are our stereotypes?”

- Better at sports
- Friendliness
- Robberies
- Hard work, innovation, patriotic

“Basic values of Americans?”

- Care for each other
- Individualism
- Equality/democracy/freedom
- Punctuality/Money/career
- “America is not just a country, it’s a style of life...country of dreams, desires and destiny.”

“What do you think about Americans?”

- Welcoming/friendly
- Unique

- Sense of humor
- Career and money orientated
- Consider time to be important value

Based on the above responses and the preceding section framing international students' experiences, several categories of perceptions can be observed: safety, especially in American cities; friendliness to strangers and international students; wealth of Americans; quality and accessibility of American higher education; and issues of racial discrimination and diversity.

Other literature addresses perceptions from various perspectives. Some focuses on students from specific countries of origin such as the work of Mutai (2008) who studied perceptions of students from Muslim Nations. Other research addresses educational level, such as that of Trice and Yoo (2007) who examined international graduate students' perceptions of their academic experience and found that while those students reported positive academic experiences, they found the curriculum to be lacking an international focus. Lee and Rice (2007) examined international students' perceptions of discrimination and found that these students experience racial discrimination to varying degrees dependent on their country of origin. Most important to this study were the findings that "point to a degree of institutional accountability for international student satisfaction and, ultimately, for positive relations with potential future students in the internationals' home countries" (p. 406). The institution has a huge responsibility and stake in providing a positive experience, yet little is known about how that experience might differ from one college setting to another.

What effect then, does institutional setting have on an international students' experience? Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) examined the needs of international students at a "semi-urban" campus and found adjustment barriers to include academic and social aspects in addition to transportation and discrimination. However, this study was not comparative with international students at other institutional settings. Research about how institutional setting impacts international students' perceptions of the United States is untapped, even though the implications of setting are critical, especially in determining the type of campus environment that best supports positive student experiences. It is first useful to explore how perceptions are formed, and a review of social-cultural constructivism provides an applicable "learning" model to use as a framework for this particular research.

### **Social-Cultural Constructivism**

**Emergence of constructivism as a theory.** Constructivism has its roots as a cognitive theory of development in which knowledge is not representative of an objective reality, but instead has an "adaptive function" (von Glasersfeld, 1996, p. 3). The concept of environment then becomes critical:

In the constructivist model, environment has two quite distinct meanings. On the one hand, when we speak of ourselves, environment refers to the totality of permanent objects and their relations that we have abstracted from the flow of our experience. On the other, whenever we focus our attention on a particular item, environment refers to the surrounding of the item we have isolated, and we tend to forget that both the item and its surroundings are parts of our own experiential field, not an observer-independent objective world (von Glaserfeld, 1996, p. 5).

Therefore meaning is constructed from the individual interaction with an environment and any changes to the environment can influence individual experience. Yet constructivism does not negate objectivity, because knowledge is constructed by a complex combination of the individual's response, or adaptation to, an environment and the social or cultural context in which the environment is embedded (Reich, 2009).

Constructivism has evolved to take multiple forms and modern applications, yet the commonality is the "premise that knowledge is a social product...the notion that knowledge evolves through a process of negotiation within discourse communities and that the products of this activity...are influenced by cultural and historical factors" (Prawat & Floden, 1994, p. 37). In total, six types of constructivism have been applied to the humanities and social sciences: constructive psychology, constructive and materialistic theory of culture, radical constructivism, subjective and constructive psychology, and social and cultural constructivism (Reich, 2009). Social and cultural theories are largely attributed to Lev Vygotsky (Reich, 2009).

**Vygotsky's social-cultural constructivism.** A central component to constructivism is the critical role that environment, or context, plays in cognitive development (Fosnot, 1996). Given the critical importance of context and to fully understand Vygotsky's postulations, it is important to first explore his own socio-cultural background (Van Der Deer, 2007). Vygotsky was born to Jewish parents in 1896 in northern Russia. Despite the outward discrimination against Jewish families in Russia at that time, he was well educated in his youth and was admitted to study at the university level by a chance win in a lottery admittance program for prospective Jewish students (Wink & Putney, 2002). His university graduation in the midst of the Russian Revolution



of 1917 established a context of “social upheavals... (and) an outburst of creativity in cultural life” in which he would begin his contributions to psychology (Van Der Deer, 2007).

His work broke from prevalent behaviorist approaches in psychology, and instead moved toward a “new psychology” based on consciousness (Wink & Putney, 2002). Vygotsky’s fundamental approach was that to understand cognitive processes, it is imperative to examine humans in a socio-cultural context. He believed that human behavior is a result of external living conditions and not the internal factors of the “depths of brain or the soul” (Van Der Deer, 2007, p. 21). Vygotsky maintained that to study mental processes – or to study human beings at all – one must explore the larger social conditions of that given society and the individuals’ interactions within their environment.

Three interrelated themes shape Vygotsky’s theoretical approach: the concept of mediation; the idea that higher cognitive functioning originates in the social process; and the idea that cognition can be understood only through tools and signs, i.e. language (Wertsch, 1985). The first concept, mediation, is central to Vygotsky’s work (Wertsch, 1985; Daniels, Cole, & Wertsch, 2007). Rio and Alvarez (2007) provide a visual representation of Vygotsky’s “mediated functional circle” which illustrates that human beings go beyond simply perceiving and acting on stimuli. Rather than just perceiving and responding, humans are constantly mediating and representing stimuli. “Perceiving and acting in the human cultural contexts – densely mediated – is impossible unless we learn to make at least minimal use of mediations. This *learning* is equivalent to the

development of the human functional system” (pgs. 185-186). For Vygotsky, language and interaction are the tools of mediation (Wink & Putney, 2002).

The second theme (that mental processes originate from social interaction) is most pertinent here given that the intent of this study was to strive to understand how environment and campus interactions shape perceptions. Of critical importance to understanding how social interaction shapes the individual, who in turn shapes the environment, Vygotsky wrote:

Formerly, psychologists tried to derive social behavior from individual behavior... They studied how the individual's responses change in the collective setting. Posing the question in such a way is, of course, quite legitimate; but genetically speaking, it deals with the second level in behavioral development.

The first problem is to show how the individual responses emerge from the forms of collective life (as quoted in Wertch, 1986, p. 59).

How then, does the individual response “emerge from collective life?” Vygotsky believed that cognitive functions are socially and culturally constructed and therefore, a person's mind is constructed solely from social interactions that have been mediated between the individual and the environment (Wink & Putney, 2002). This concept can be understood as internalization; the process of turning social phenomena into psychological phenomena (Wertch, 1986).

It is important to differentiate Vygotsky's social and culture constructs from other constructivists, particularly those of his contemporary Jean Piaget, because the two are often compared, yet have fundamental differences (Wink & Putney, 2002; Wertsch, 1985). Both theorists were interested in the interplay between the “cognitive construction

of the mind” and the surrounding environment, and both strayed from the then prominent thought that knowledge was objective – a set of concepts that must be acquired by the learner. Piaget was concerned with how knowledge is constructed (an internal process) while Vygotsky focused on the cultural-social influences on learning and development, thus postulating that knowledge is constructed outside the mind and through social interactions (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 25). Vygotsky used Piaget’s theories, and those of his contemporaries to delineate and improve his own work (John-Steiner, 2007).

Vygotsky’s theories, like Piaget’s and other constructivists, have been applied largely to educational psychology (Daniels, Cole, & Wertsch, 2007; Vygotsky, 2007). Wink and Putney (2007) list three reasons in particular why Vygotsky continues to be applicable to contemporary concerns: a) his “emphasis on the active contribution to the development of their own consciousness” (p. xvii), b) his belief that cognitive development depends on social interaction, and finally c) his recognition of the “meditational” function of language in the cognitive process. The applications of his work almost seem contemporary, and certainly were radical for his time. Like Piaget, he placed the student in the center of the educational process, believing that ultimately the student educated himself (Davidov, 1997). Yet he also believed that learning precedes development - as opposed to development preceding learning, the common view of his contemporaries in constructivism (Wink & Putney, 2002). The quotation below is indicative of Vygotsky’s philosophical approach to education:

Ultimately, only life educates, and the deeper that life, the real world, burrows into the school, the more dynamic and the more robust will be the educational process. That the school has been locked away and walled in as if by a tall fence

from life itself has been its greatest failing. Education is just as meaningless outside the real world as is a fire without oxygen, or as is breathing in a vacuum. The teacher's educational work, therefore, must inevitable be connected with his creative, social, and life work (1997, p. 345).

Vygotsky and his theories will be useful in the context of this study that seeks to explore how campus attended impacts international students' perceptions of the United States. International students' experiences in the United States are characterized by a complex set of social interactions that affect them academically, socially, and/or psychologically. Understanding their experiences in this context through the lens of Vygotsky's work would dictate that the students' social interactions shape their higher mental processes. If learning occurs outside the mind, as Vygotsky postulated, then the student mediated interactions with the social environment dictate what they believe that environment to be. In this context, then, a critical element of environment is the campus attended which, to a larger extent, represents the United States. Certainly, while in the United States part of their "higher learning" is about U.S. culture. Considering the different social environmentss of the three campuses involved in this study, according to Vygotsky's theories, it is quite probable that what students' learn about the United States would differ by campus because the social interactions they experience through this environment are different.

### **Summary**

International students in the United States have a rich history (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). Enrollments have increased to comprise four percent of all undergraduate students in American higher education (Open Doors, 2009), despite inconsistent initiatives over

the past century by federal and institutional entities to attract and retain this segment of the student population (Altbach, 2004). International students generally report a positive experience studying in the United States, although research illustrates that this cohort also faces specific academic, social, and psychological issues (Anderson, et al., 2009). Global perceptions of the United States are complex, yet recent surveys suggest that global attitudes are starting to recover from unprecedented lows during the first decade of the twenty-first century (Open Doors, 2009).

Additionally, prospective international students have generally positive perceptions of U.S. culture and Americans (NAFSA, 2007), yet research illustrates that international students may also have the perception that the United States is unsafe, unwelcoming of foreigners, and that Americans are generally “career and money orientated” (NAFSA, 2007). Although international students do experience racial discrimination to varying degrees on U.S. college campuses (Anderson, et al., 2007), the belief persists that the United States is the “place to get an education” (NAFSA, 2007). Vygotsky’s social-cultural constructivism provides an insightful framework for evaluating how knowledge and meaning are constructed, and will be used as the theoretical framework to understand how these perceptions are formed as a result of U.S. campus attended. Chapter three, methodology, explains the research design, setting, population and sample, instruments, and procedures utilized for this study.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

International students play an increasingly important role in the future of American higher education and in a larger sense, in the future of the United States (Altbach, 2004; Douglass, 2006; Levin, 2008). Research pertaining to international students is plentiful, yet limited in scope considering the contributions and impact these students have on American higher education and the communities where they reside (NAFSA, 2006). To add to that body of research and address gaps in areas specific to the impact of institutional environment on student perceptions of U.S. culture, this study seeks to understand how certain attributes of campus culture shape international students' perceptions of the United States. This chapter details the methodology utilized to explore this issue and details information regarding the research questions and hypotheses, research design, participants, setting, instruments, and procedures. It is important to note that the methodology has been shaped by Lev Vygotsky's social-cultural constructivism theory. According to Vygotsky, learning is situated in social contexts; it is not so much the product of learning, but the process that matters. How did the campus attributes in question impact perceptions of U.S. Culture? This study is concerned with how international students' perceptions were formed and how different social environments interacted with their cultural backgrounds to shape these perceptions.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to ascertain if campus attributes influenced international students' perceptions of the United States across five areas: diversity, friendliness, quality of higher education, safety, and wealth. These five perception areas

where selected in light of the research literature that analyzes key areas in which international students' perceptions of the United States may be modified by experience in the country.

Two research questions were developed to examine the relationship between “campus attended” and “perceptions of the United States.” Campus attended is characterized as breadth of support for international students (number of ESL faculty and number of international students), student demographics (multicultural and economic composition of the student body), and the physical attributes of the campus and surrounding neighborhood. Five key perception areas were examined: diversity, friendliness, safety, wealth, and quality of American higher education. The questions were designed to explore how campus attended interacts with the five perception areas, and are stated as follows:

1. Did international students' perceptions of the United States across the five areas of safety, diversity, wealth, friendliness, and quality of American higher education, change as a result of studying in the United States?
  - a. What were their perceptions before their stay in the United States?
  - b. What were their perceptions after their stay in the United States?
2. Did campus attended have an impact on these perceptions? If so, how and why did it have an impact?
  - a. What are the perceptions by campus attended?
  - b. Are there differences among the campuses?

The researcher used a mixed methods approach to study students who participated in a U.S. Department of State grant program through which 60 students from eight

countries in East and Southeast Asia spent two months in the United States for an academic and cultural experience. These students were assigned to study at three campuses of a multi-campus community college district in the Midwest. The grant program awarded to this community college was titled the Community College English Language Institute (CCELI).

At the conclusion of the experience, a quantitative survey was given to the students asking them about their perceptions of U.S. culture before and after their stay. Following the experience, four qualitative focus groups of four to eleven students were held with student groups from four of the participating countries, in addition to two case studies of students who had prolonged experience in the United States beyond the CCELI. The quantitative data enabled the researcher to determine if perceptions change as a result of the students' stay in the United States and formulate questions for the qualitative portion of the study, which explored how and why these changes occurred, and why they may have differed by campus attended.

A basic tenet to social-cultural constructivism is that knowledge is socially constructed within the context of the cultural environment (Wertch, 1985). It is the individual's experiences and adaptation with an environment that changes perceptions and knowledge. In this case, the researcher hypothesized that the international students entered the United States with certain perceptions of U.S. culture and of Americans, interacted with a culturally different environment and with other individuals, and left with an altered set of perceptions. Further, the researcher hypothesized about the influence of campus attended on their experiences and perceptions of U.S. culture. These hypotheses were:



1. Students will express changes in their perceptions about the United States across the five key areas, as a result of their experiences in the United States:
  - a. Students will say that they found the United States to be a safer place to live than previously thought.
  - b. Student responses will illustrate the perception that the United States is comprised of many different ethnicities, yet racial differences and conflicts are not as widespread as they thought before their stay in the United States.
  - c. After their stay in the United States, international students' will perceive Americans to be friendlier than they had thought.
  - d. After their stay in the United States, international students' will have observed stratification in wealth to be greater than they anticipated.
  - e. After their stay in the United States, international students' will perceive American higher education to be of higher quality than previously thought.
2. Students' perceptions of the United States will differ by campus attended.

### **Research Design**

**Mixed methods.** A number of considerations indicated that this research would be most successful and illuminating if conducted as a mixed methods study, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Creswell (2003) suggests that the mixed methods research study originated with Campbell and Fiske in a 1959 psychology study that relied on a "multimethod matrix" (p. 15). This initial departure from the traditional quantitative research method employed in the social sciences coincided with the emergence of a different way of thinking about the social sciences, beginning in the second half of the twentieth century. This revision in thinking

was manifested in the increased use of qualitative research; a type of understanding that is more socially and culturally sensitive (Tashakkori and Teddle, 2003) and conducive to understanding differences and similarities among individual and/or group lived experiences.

Tashakkori and Teddle (2003) state that there has been a “paradigm war” since the acceptance of qualitative research as a viable research method and in response, they refer to mixed methodology as a “third methodological movement” that has garnered increased attention as a manner to study phenomena utilizing the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research. Combining the methodologies allows the researcher to come to an increased understanding about the phenomenon in question. Creswell (2003) identified three ways to approach mixed methods: sequential, concurrent, and transformative. This study utilizes a sequential application, meaning that the researcher expands upon the findings gathered through one method via the other. Either quantitative or qualitative methods can be utilized as the “base” method, and the other fills in the gaps of the first.

The first step in this sequential process was collecting and analyzing quantitative data collected as part of a U.S. State Department post-experience questionnaire. The findings from these descriptive statistics were used to construct the qualitative portion of the study. The quantitative data provided the framework for understanding if and in what areas perceptions changed. The qualitative data was useful in understanding how and why those perceptions changed, and if campus attended influenced that changed.

**Methodological triangulation.** The mixed methods approach adds another element of research utility in that for validity and generalizability purposes, the

researcher benefits from methodological triangulation by gathering multiple data sources about the students' perceptions of U.S. culture. Triangulation is often used to improve validity and eliminate bias (Mathison, 1988). There are four types of triangulation: data (via several sampling strategies), investigator (using more than one researcher), theoretical (use of more than one theoretical approach), and methodological (gathering data through the use of more than one method) (Dezin, 2009). Methodological triangulation was employed for this study. Methodological triangulation seeks to characterize a research process in which more than two methods are utilized to gather data about a phenomenon (Dezin, 1978; Mathison, 1988; Bryman, 2009), in this case the quantitative method of surveying, accompanied by two qualitative applications; focus groups, and case studies. Dezin (1978) articulates the specific strength of methodological triangulation, stating that "The rationale for this strategy is that the flaws of one method are often the strengths of another: and by combining methods, observers can achieve the best of each while overcoming their unique deficiencies" (p. 302).

By utilizing these three methods, data triangulation was also achieved. The first point of data collection was a review and analysis of descriptive statistics from the quantitative survey. The survey was given to the 60 CCELI students after they departed the U.S. to ascertain their opinions about the program and the nature of their experiences in the United States. The second point of data collection was four qualitative focus group interviews of four to eleven students per group, done on a by-country basis. The focus groups took place approximately eighteen months after the students departed the United States, and therefore also eighteen months after the students took the quantitative survey. This delay was intentional, in that it was important to determine if perception changes

noted in the statistical analysis persisted over time, and were not just immediate, but transient reactions to the U.S. experience. The third point of data collection was two case study interviews; also taking place approximately eighteen months after the grant students departed the United States. For the case studies, the researcher interviewed two CCELI participants who returned to the United States for different reasons. One returned to attend one of the campuses in the same community college district of her own accord – a different campus than she had attended during the CCELI experience. The other had returned to participate in a summer work-study program in the Southeast region of the United States.

Below is a visual representation of the data collected, representing how each stage of data collection was both informed by the previous stage, and informed the next stage.

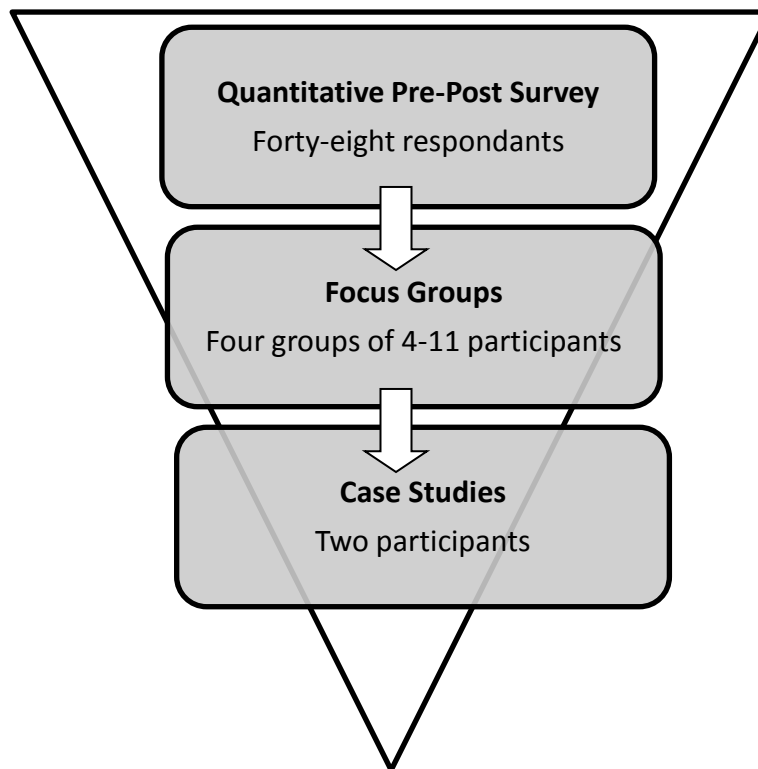


Figure 2. *Visual Representation of Research Design: Methodological Triangulation*

## Participants

**Population.** The population for this study was international students selected for participation in a short-term academic and cultural exchange program. Short-term educational exchanges, usually spanning five to eight weeks (Sindt & Pachmayer, n.d.), have increased in popularity over the past decade (Paige et al., 2009; Godbey et al., n.d.). While most of the programs, and also the related body of research, relate to American students studying abroad, studies suggest that short-term exchanges are just as effective as long-term experiences in predicting long-term global engagement (Paige et al., 2009).

While there is no research to support the effectiveness of short-term program in the United States for international students, the International Institute for Education (IIE) reported that for the academic year 2008-2009, 4.2% of international students studying in the United States were here for intensive English training; this is a 10.3% increase over the academic year 2007-2008 (Open Doors, 2009). IIE also reported that the U.S. government portion of funding for international students increased by 22.8% from 2007-2008 to 2008-2009 – although the increase still only represents 0.6% of the total funding of international students.

Given all of the above, there appears to be a trend toward short-term educational exchange programs and a slight increase in federal financial sponsorship of international students. Given the work of Paige, et al. (2009) and indications that these short-term experiences are important in shaping attitudes and perceptions, the two month CCELI program examined here provided a perfect laboratory for evaluating how changes might be affected by campus environment.

**Sample.** The sample consisted of sixty students who participated in this specific U.S. Department of State program to enhance English language skills and provide an American cultural experience, (referred to as CCELI participants throughout the study). These students applied to participate through the U.S. embassies in their home countries. The embassies selected the student participants based upon criteria established by the U.S. Department of State and favored students without the financial resources to study in the United States of their own accord, and students who held promising academic ability, yet still fell below typical scholarship and college admission TOEFL requirements. A score of 500 to 550 on the TOEFL is generally accepted for admission to many U.S. colleges and universities and most of the students in the sample scored below this level.

The CCELI students were from eight countries in East and Southeast Asia. The table which follows illustrates the participants by country, gender, and campus attended.

Table 1

*CCELI Students by Gender, Country of Origin, and Campus Attended*

Country	Number	Gender	Campus A	Campus B	Campus C
Myanmar	7	F=3 M=4	3	2	2
Cambodia	8	F=4 M=4	3	2	3
Laos	11	F=5 M=6	3	4	4
Malaysia	9	F=6 M=3	5	2	2
Mongolia	12	F=8 M=4	4	4	4
Philippines	4	F=1 M=3	1	1	2
Thailand	2	F=1 M=1	1	1	0
Vietnam	7	F=5 M=2	1	3	3
TOTAL	60	F=33 M=27	20	20	20

The students attended three campuses of a multi-campus two-year college in the Midwest. These campuses will be referred to as Campus A, B, and C. The sixty students were divided evenly among the campuses so that twenty students attended each campus. As Table 1 illustrates, the students from each country were divided as evenly as possible by country, through some consideration had to be given to the specific levels of English instruction available at each site. The result was a research model with three groups of twenty, and with each country represented in each group, with the exception of Thailand where there were only two student participants.

### **Setting**

The phenomenon in question – changes in perception as suggested by campus attended – occurred at the individual campuses between January-March 2009. Vygotsky postulated that social interactions with an environment construct knowledge. Therefore understanding the social and cultural environments of the campuses these students attended is critical to understanding how the students grew to shape knowledge and shape perceptions about American culture. For purposes of this study, campus attended may be understood as diversity of the student body, breadth of support for international students, and campus setting as a reflection of the surrounding neighborhood.

Campus A is the smallest of the three with approximately 6,000 students. It is situated in a suburban setting, yet socio-cultural and industrial changes in this part of the greater metropolitan area have changed the environment drastically during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The area has been overtaken by urban sprawl, and has grappled with challenges that often plague urban areas – higher proportion of residents from a lower socio-economic background and larger percentages of minority

populations compared to other suburban communities close by. The physical attributes of the campus, however, still reflect the suburban setting that existed when it was built; the campus is situated close to, but hidden from, a major highway and sits on over 100 acres of open, grassy and wooded land. While the physical aspects of the campus have maintained a suburban atmosphere, the current demographics of the campus reflect the altered demographics of the community. In the Fall of 2007, 52% of the student body were Black non-Hispanic, 38% White non-Hispanic, 1.7% Hispanic, 1.2% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 7% other/not-reported. Another aspect that is critical to environment for purposes of this study is the breadth of support for international students. The level of support at Campus A is lower when compared to Campus B and C, as measured by commitment to English as a Second Language, and numbers of international students. The campus has three adjunct English as a Second Language instructors (ESL) and 210 international students.

Campus B is the urban campus in the college system and like Campus A, the demographics reflect the surrounding urban area. For the same semester, Fall 2007, Campus B enrolled just over 7,200 students. The student body was comprised of 46% Black non-Hispanic, 37% White non-Hispanic, 2% Hispanic, 4.3% Asian/Pacific-Islander, and 10% other/not-reported. However, the breadth of support for international students is the highest at this campus, which enrolls over 700 international students and has ten ESL instructors. Campus B, like Campus A is also situated next to a major highway, yet the highway is visible from the college and vice versa. The campus has very little "green space," and instead is comprised of tall brick buildings connected with walkways both above and underground. The open space is also more characteristic of



urban areas with brick courtyards, enclosed trees, and concrete benches. The community surrounding the campus is a combination of commercial properties, small ethnic neighborhoods, and small businesses.

The largest campus, Campus C, enrolled 10,174 students in the Fall of 2007. This campus is in a suburban setting that is very much like that of Campus A, prior to being overtaken by urban sprawl, and is similar in physical description: rolling hills, plenty of open grassy areas, and buildings that are spread about the campus. However, even though both Campus A and Campus C have been absorbed by the expanding metroplex, the immediate area around Campus C is residential, as opposed to industrial for Campus A. Further, Campus C is situated in one of the more affluent areas of the metropolitan region. The student body reflects the demographics of the surrounding area. In 2007, five percent of the student body were Black non-Hispanic, 80% White non-Hispanic, 2.5% Hispanic, 3.5% Asian/Pacific-Islander, and 9% other/not-reported. In terms of breadth of support for international students, Campus C is comparable to Campus B, but does not employ as many ESL faculty or have as many international students: there are 500 international students and six ESL faculty.

### **Instruments**

Consistent with data triangulation, there were three points of data collection and several different instruments utilized to gather this data. These included a quantitative survey created using Flashlight Online, an interview guide that was used during the in-person focus groups and case studies, an online discussion board that was used to gather data for the online focus groups, and the researcher's notes and journal from the CCELI

experience period. The researcher also used a journal during the qualitative phase of data collection to record observations and relevant introspections.

**Quantitative Instrument.** The researcher worked with the CCELI grant in a professional capacity while the students were in the United States. For grant assessment purposes the researcher, the principal investigator on the grant, and the U.S. Department of State grant officer, were interested in the CCELI participants' cultural experience and overall evaluation of the program. More specifically, the question of interest was if there were changes in how the students viewed the United States as a result of time spent in the country. An online survey, created using Flashlight Online, was developed to assess students' opinions of the experience and asked questions pertaining to their perceptions across the key areas of interest: diversity, safety, friendliness, wealth, and quality of American higher education. Fifty questions were asked, in two identical sets of 25. The first set asked the students to answer the questions by recalling their perceptions of the United States before they attended college in the country. The second set presented the same 25 questions about their perceptions, but asked the students to answer while thinking about their opinions after their stay in the United States. The students were asked to respond on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1) strongly disagree to 5) strongly agree. The survey can be found in Appendix A.

Before the survey was sent to the CCELI students, the researcher tested the survey on a group of non-CCELI international students. ESL faculty at the three campuses who had instructed the CCELI students during their stay were asked to administer the survey to a range of non-grant international students who reflected the range of English language proficiency of the grant students. The researcher emailed the faculty the link to the survey

and asked them to discuss with the students any words or questions that were unclear. Both Campus A and C were able to administer the survey to eight students each, for a total of 16 test survey responses. In both test situations, the ESL faculty were present when they administered the survey – an ESL faculty at Campus A printed the survey and distributed it to two different classes, and an ESL faculty member at Campus C sat with a group of students from one class in the computer lab while students completed the survey online. In both situations, the ESL faculty reported that the students were confused by the term “racial conflict” that was present in one of the survey questions. In response, the question was changed from “There is racial conflict in the United States” to “People of different races do not get along well with each other in the United States.” Other than this issue, the students and faculty did not report any problems understanding the survey questions.

**Qualitative instruments.** The qualitative instruments used include an interview guide, researcher journal, and for two of the four focus groups, an online discussion board. An interview guide was used during the focus groups and was based on data gleaned from analysis of the CCELI student survey. The interview guide may be found in Appendix B. Four focus groups of four to eleven students were held and the same interview guide was used for each for consistency purpose. However, the researcher did alter the wording of questions somewhat for each subsequent group as she learned from student responses to the questions in the guide. The researcher had the opportunity to conduct two of the four planned focus groups face-to-face in the students' home countries: the Laotian and Vietnamese groups. Only the audio was recorded for these two groups since video recording was prohibitive, given travel circumstances.

The two online focus group meetings consisted of students from Mongolia and Malaysia. To conduct these meetings online, the researcher first inquired about meeting with the students via Skype or Illuminate. However, a student from Malaysia responded in a private message to the researcher that a majority of the CCELI students would not want to speak via webcam out of embarrassment over their “non-practiced” English. He also observed that the quality of web links would be uneven for students in different parts of the country. He suggested that the researcher create a discussion board format to present the questions so that the students could interactively write their responses instead, thus giving them more time to think about their answers – and to write in “correct” English. Other students stated that they would be more likely to participate in an online discussion if it were done on a popular social networking site that they frequent every day. The researcher created one discussion thread for each question on the interview guide, so that the discussion board would mirror the interview guide as closely as possible. The students were asked to not only respond to each question, but to respond to each other’s responses in order to simulate a discussion. Finally, an “open” thread was created at the end of the discussion board for students to post any additional comments or observations. Though the process was “experimental” in that the researcher had not seen focus groups conducted online in any of the literature, the results were both complete and satisfying, suggesting that online focus groups should be considered for future research when face-to-face availability is not possible.

Another instrument used in the qualitative phase of this study was a journal. The researcher kept an informal journal during the CCELI period, then began keeping a more formal journal after the first focus group meeting, and maintained the journal through the

final case study interviews. She specifically looked for emerging or continuing themes regarding student perceptions, and used the research journal to record observations, impressions, details about the setting of the interviews, and triumphs and tribulations. Reference to the journey was especially critical during data analysis. Corbin and Strauss articulate the importance of this practice during qualitative research by noting, "Journal keeping provides a record of the thoughts, actions, and feelings that are aroused during the research. An important part of analysis is reflecting back on who we are and how we are shaped and changed by the research" (2008, p. 85).

## **Procedures**

**Quantitative pre and post survey.** The first point of data collection was the results from the quantitative survey given to the students after they departed the United States. The steps for quantitative analysis followed those prescribed by Creswell (2003), with an initial assessment of the data for response bias. Creswell highlights the importance of considering response bias, the degree to which the responses from those who did not respond would impact the survey results. Checking for response bias is critical in this case given the small sample size of 60, and given the high number of respondent characteristics that exist within the sample size. For example, only 20 students attended each of the three campuses, and representation by country of origin ranged from two to 12. Therefore, since 11 students did not respond to the survey (survey response was  $n=49$ ), it was critical to consider the gaps and how they might bias results. The results of this analysis are discussed in Chapter Four.

Next, the researcher used SPSS to analyze descriptive statistics in terms of respondent demographics (gender and country of origin), and the number and percent of

respondents from each campus. The mean of each question was tabulated, as was the mean of the means for each perception area. The data were organized by “before and after,” as opposed to by campus attended, since early analysis revealed that the sample size was too small to organize the data by campus attended. As a result, the researcher did not conduct any inductive analysis of the data, and instead was interested in determining if the means of the responses suggested changes in perception. The quantitative data served as platform to understand if perceptions changed, and the qualitative data were then used to illuminate how perceptions changed by campus attended.

**Qualitative focus groups.** The second point of data collection was the focus groups from the following countries: Mongolia, Laos, Vietnam, and Malaysia. Consistent with Vygotsky’s sense that mental processes are constructed socially as a result of environment and individually mediated interactions with that environment, the researcher was interested in exploring how the students framed their experiences in the presence of others who attended different campuses. Focus groups enabled the students to revisit their “knowledge” about their experience, comparing and contrasting with the other students’ experiences, thus remapping or affirming their knowledge as they had given it meaning following their time in the United States.

The focus groups took place approximately eighteen months from the students’ stay in the United States. This time lag presented both disadvantages and advantages. One disadvantage to the time lag relates to accuracy of perceptions. It is possible that the students’ recollections of their experience may not be as “fresh” as if they were reflecting immediately after their U.S. departure. Time may either taint or romanticize their

experience, thus affecting their perceptions of the United States both negatively or positively. However, the time delay was viewed as being more advantageous than disadvantageous. If the students continue to report positive experiences and positive perceptions of U.S. culture as a result of the CCELI program, then the program was effective in that respect. If differences in perception among students who had attended different campuses remained, it validated the lasting effects of these differences, and demonstrated that they were not just transient attitudes that moderated immediately after leaving the country and interacting with those who had experienced the country differently. One goal of the program, like many international educational exchange programs, was to foster international goodwill and positive perceptions of America and Americans. If positive perceptions of the United States gained from a two month exchange program lasted over eighteen months, then there is evidence that such a program can accomplish its goals of fostering long-term international goodwill toward the United States. If differences in perception also remained after a year and a half, there is strong evidence that the effects of campus attended – positive or negative – are also lasting.

The focus groups were conducted on a country-by-country basis with an effort to ensure that each focus group was comprised of at least one student participant from each of the three campuses. As the focus group progressed, the researcher found that the students did compare and contrast their experiences with each other, and this helped to tease out issues or perceptions that may have been formed as a result of campus attended. The researcher specifically asked students from the following four countries to participate: Mongolia, Laos, Vietnam, and Malaysia. These countries represent the

geographic span of the area from which students were drawn; Mongolia being the northern most country, Laos and Vietnam in the center, and Malaysia as the southernmost country represented in the sample. Additionally, there were too few grant students from Thailand and the Philippines to conduct a focus group; two and four respectively. Students from Myanmar and Cambodia were located in more remote regions with limited access to a central meeting place or to the internet and therefore participation in a face-to-face or an online focus group was not feasible for these students.

The first focus group conducted included the group from Laos and was done face-to-face in their home country. The researcher invited all of the eleven Laotian CCELI students to attend the focus group meeting in Vientiane, Laos. The group meeting took place in a conference room on the campus of the Lao-American College. Ten of the 11 CCELI Laotian students were present, and one of the CCELI students from Thailand joined the Laos group because he lives along the Thailand-Laos border just south of Vientiane. This focus group was larger than planned or desired since the researcher did not expect such a high turnout, but she did not want to turn any students away. The researcher began the interview using the interview guide, recording the discussion, and taking notes. While the students talked, however, the researcher noticed that the note-taking seemed to be distracting the student conversation; students were watching the research take notes instead of openly engaging in a discussion about the question at hand. Therefore the researcher quickly stopped and did not engage in any note-taking in subsequent group meetings and interviews, but recorded thoughts and reactions in her journal immediately following the session. The focus group lasted approximately an hour and a half.



The Vietnamese focus group was also conducted in person. Four students attended this focus group meeting in Hanoi, Vietnam, and the meeting took place in a quiet room at a local hotel. The only deviations from the protocol of the first focus group meeting, other than the researcher not taking notes at all, was a request that each Vietnamese student describe each campus in a few words, even if he or she did not attend there. This was done to achieve a thorough understanding of the students' perceptions of the three campuses that the researcher did not feel was evident enough in the Laos focus group meeting. This focus group was also audio recorded and lasted approximately one hour.

Focus groups three and four were conducted online because the researcher was limited in time and funds to travel to other countries in the region, yet wanted to conduct focus groups that represented a geographic cross section of student participants in East and Southeast Asia. The two online focus groups included the CCELI students from Malaysia and Mongolia. The researcher set up two discussion groups, one for each country, on a social networking site where all students already had accounts and were quite active. Six students from Malaysia and nine students from Mongolia participated in the focus group meetings.

The researcher recognized that conducting a focus group online was groundbreaking in some respects, but visited with another researcher who had recently conducted similar groups and felt that the results were similar to, and as valid as those obtained through face-to-face dialogue. Students were responsive, thoughtful, played off of others' observations just as they had in the face-to-face sessions, and provided a written transcription of the proceedings at the same time. It is the researcher's belief, after

conducting and transcribing both kinds of focus groups, that groups using interactive media will become a common and very useful data collection tool.

As with the quantitative data, steps recommended by Creswell (2003) for analysis of qualitative data were used in this study. During data collection the researcher became aware of recurring themes and ideas and took time following each session to review the recordings and make pertinent journal entries. The initial step after data collection was to transcribe dialogue verbatim into a written record. While making this transcription, the researcher again attempted to gain a “general sense,” tone, and overall impression for the conversations as they took place, allowing for more fully developed understanding of sub-themes within each perception area to emerge as the process unfolded. Next, the transcripts were analyzed using open coding in order to “open up data to all potentials and possibilities” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 160) that the researcher might otherwise have missed. All data were uploaded to NiVO qualitative analysis software and coded within the system, allowing analysis by axial coding; looking for connections or relationships among themes and ideas. “Open coding and axial coding go hand in hand” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 198) and even though open coding is the start, the researcher is constantly making connections as the data is reviewed.

Although open and axial coding were critical in exploring and categorizing the concepts that emerge from the focus group dialogue, at the heart of the focus group phase of data collection was constant comparison; comparison with the results of the quantitative data and comparison both among and within the four focus groups. Boeije (2002, p. 396) specifically addresses five steps to the constant comparative method, although only the first three described are relevant here:

1. Comparison with a single focus group. The researcher transcribed and coded the transcription from the first focus group with two goals; first, to look for themes that related to the five perception areas being studied, and second, to note emerging sub-themes within each perception area.
2. Comparison between focus groups. After the each of the second, third, and fourth focus groups, the researcher conducted axial coding to search for subcategories –then refined the focus group questions to explore further or address any unanswered questions or gaps.
3. Comparison of dialogue from individuals with difference perspectives. In this case, the researcher compared the data from students among the three campuses attended to ascertain if differences in perception of the United States can be attributed to campus attended.

The constant comparative method allowed more effective exploration of the students' experiences and perceptions by continuously searching for and comparing student perceptions. The method also allows for triangulation by considering other data sources, e.g. the researcher's journal and other researcher observations that occurred outside of the focus group setting. Additionally, a research assistant was invited to read through the transcribed data to cross-check the researcher's interpretations of the student dialogue and themes. This inter-coder reliability was useful and had implications for the results. Although the research assistant concurred with the themes as the researcher delineated them, the research assistant impacted the presentations of the results in two ways. First, he suggested combining some of the themes to help with clarity, and second, he was able to help the researcher provide titles, or name, each theme. Further, to ensure

that there were not any cultural misinterpretations, the researcher asked one of the case study students to review the transcripts and analysis as well.

**Qualitative case studies.** The third and final point of data collection was two case studies. The research methodology is analogous to a funnel; the quantitative data is at the top, suggesting if perceptions changed. The qualitative focus groups then assist to further explore this information and attempt to understand how and why perceptions changed. Finally, the case studies are the final point and served as the most in-depth data. Case studies, in particular, are helpful in that they provide particularly rich data and can serve as a forum for the researcher to explore questions that may not have been addressed during the focus groups, or were answered incompletely.

One of the CCELI students from Mongolia who attended Campus B, returned to the United States on her own accord to attend Campus C. As part of the case study, the researcher asked this student the same questions asked during the focus groups, yet expanded on them to discover why she decided to attend a different campus upon her return, and what differences she noted between the campuses. The second case study student interviewed was another student from Mongolia who returned to the United States for a summer. The researcher had the opportunity to interview this student and took advantage of the rare chance that another CCELI student from Mongolia had returned to visit. Both interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and coded for themes using the same techniques used for the focus groups. Data from these extended interviews/case studies were used to triangulate with data from the other two assessment tools.

### **Limitations**

This research study has several limitations that affect the generalization of results. While the quantitative survey was created with an explicit purpose of assessing the students' cultural experience and was pre-tested for validity and readability, it is not an established instrument. The survey was written explicitly for the CCELI students and may not be relevant to assessing perceptions of culture for other international student groups without extensive modification and evaluation. Also, ideally the quantitative survey would have been given before the students visited the United States and then again after their departure. As it was administered, students were asked to recall what their perceptions of the United States were prior to coming, and it can only be assumed that these perceptions are accurately recalled. The survey however, was administered within a few months of their return, so the American experience was still fresh in their minds.

As noted earlier the qualitative components, (the focus groups and case studies) were conducted more than a year after the students' stay in the United States. The amount of time that passed undoubtedly impacted the "freshness" of their perceptions and memory of their experience. However, a majority of the students have remained connected with each other and program staff on social networking sites, having the advantage of keeping them connected to American culture in a small, but significant way. As was mentioned in the discussion of methodology, this limitation also served as an asset in that it allowed the study to measure perceptions that had lasted over a period of time, and were not just fleeting impressions immediately following the experience in the United States.

A similar limitation applies to the case study student who returned of her own accord to attend a different campus than the one she was previously assigned to. Not only had a year passed since the student participated in the CCELI program, but by the time she was interviewed, she had been in the United States longer as a non-program, traditional international student than she had as a CCELI participant. The CCELI student spent nine weeks in the United States with CCELI, whereas by the time the case study was conducted, the student had completed a full academic year at Campus C as a regular international student. The researcher knows there to be expressed rivalry among the campuses in this study, and the possibility exists that the case study student's perceptions of Campus B may have been colored by her extended time at Campus C.

The second case study also was conducted approximately a year following the CCELI experience, and therefore relied on accurate memory on the part of the student interviewed, with the possibility of some contamination of views from the new work-study experience in another part of the country.

Use of the three data sources served to compensate from some of these deficiencies, and as the data will show, changes in perception were consistent across the data sources and were supported over time as data collection progressed throughout the year.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to assess the influence of campus cultural attributes on international students' perceptions of the United States. Five research questions were developed to assess the influence of these attributes on perceptions of diversity, friendliness, safety, wealth, and quality of American higher education. The participants

were sixty students who were part of a U.S. Department of State program meant to enhance English language skills and provide an American cultural experience. These students were divided so that twenty attended each of three campuses of a multi-campus community college in the Midwest. The research design is mixed methods; quantitative data were analyzed to assess if there was a change in perception due to the experience and if there was difference in perceptions by campus attended. The qualitative data were used to assess the nature of that difference. Methodological triangulation, a process in which more than two methods are utilized to gather data about a phenomenon, allowed the researcher to evaluate data from each source for validity using three points of data collection: a) a quantitative survey distributed to the students as part of the grant evaluation, b) four qualitative focus groups of two to seven students, and c) two case study of students who returned to the United States. There were limitations that may affect the generalization of the results, such as having to assume that the students' recollections of their U.S. perceptions before their visit to the United States are accurate.

The remaining chapters of the study provide the results from the quantitative survey data, the focus groups, and case studies, followed by an analysis of what these findings mean, implications of the study for future international student experiences in the United States, and recommendations for practice and further research.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Research Findings**

The purpose of this study was twofold: to examine if international students' perceptions of U.S. culture changed as a result of their experience in the United States, and to explore if those perceptions differed by varying attributes of the campus attended. The three campus attributes set as a parameter in this study were: breadth of support for international students; multicultural composition of the student body and campus; and campus setting – urban vs. suburban. The perception areas studied were friendliness, diversity, wealth, safety, and quality of American higher education. Vygotsky's social cultural constructivism served as the theoretical framework, allowing the researcher a lens through which to view and understand how perceptions changed. Two research questions guided this study:

1. Did international students' perceptions of the United States across the five areas of safety, diversity, wealth, friendliness, and quality of American higher education, change as a result of studying in the United States?
  - a. What were their perceptions before their stay in the United States?
  - b. What were their perceptions after their stay in the United States?
2. Did campus attended have an impact on these perceptions? If so, how and why did it have an impact?
  - a. What are the perceptions by campus attended?
  - b. Are there differences among the campuses?

In the spring of 2008, a U.S. Department of State sponsored program brought sixty students from East and Southeast Asia to study at three campuses of a multi-district



community college in the Midwest. These student participants served as the sample for the study, and were divided so that twenty each attended three of the district's campuses. Each of these campuses differs in the selected campus attributes for this study. Campus A can be characterized as suburban, with a majority of students identifying themselves as African-American. This campus also has the fewest international students and the fewest ESL instructors, and therefore a relatively low breadth of organized support for international students. Campus B is the urban campus in this study, and is also characterized by a high minority enrollments: over fifty-percent African American. This campus has the highest international student enrollment among the three, the most ESL instructors, and a relatively robust activity program for international students. Finally, like Campus A, Campus C is suburban but is located in a more affluent area of the metroplex. The student body in Campus C is 80% Caucasian, yet the international student enrollment is significant and there are five ESL instructors.

This mixed methods study employed methodological triangulation: a quantitative survey, four focus groups, and two case study interviews. Methodological triangulation allowed for the strengths of each methodology to compensate for the weaknesses of the others and is characterized by the use of more than one methodology and more than two data sources to explore phenomena (Dezin, 1970). This chapter presents the results and findings from the quantitative and qualitative data, organized according to the five aforementioned perceptions areas. First however, a more complete description of participants is provided.

### **Description of Participants**

**Quantitative survey participants.** Sixty students participated in the CCELI and served as the sample for this study. Of these 60, 48 responded to the quantitative survey for an 80% response rate. The number of students who responded by country and gender are representative of the makeup of the CCELI program participants. For example, the response rate by country ranged from 70% to 90%, with the exception of Thailand and the Philippines. Thailand had a 100% response rate but there were only two students of this nationality in the CCELI. The Philippines had a 25% response rate, but there were only four students from this country. An approximate equal percentage of CCELI participants by campus responded as well. Fifteen out of the 20 students from Campus C responded, for a 75% response rate. Seventeen out of the 20 students who attended Campus A responded, translating to an 85% response rate. Of the 20 students who attended Campus B, 16 responded for an 80% response rate. Table 2 represents the demographics of those that responded to the quantitative survey, listing the participants by country of origin, gender, and campus attended. Response bias did not appear to be an issue because of the high response rate, and because survey respondents represented the composition of the CCELI group.

Table 2.

*Survey Respondents by Country, Gender, and Campus Attended*

Country	Number of respondents	Gender	Campus attended
Myanmar	5	Male: 2 Female: 3	C: 1 B: 2 A: 2
Cambodia	9	Male: 4 Female: 5	C: 4 B: 2 A: 3
Laos	8	Male: 2 Female: 6	C: 2 B: 4 A: 2
Malaysia	9	Male: 5 Female: 4	C: 2 B: 2 A: 5
Mongolia	8	Male: 2 Female: 6	A: 3 B: 2 C: 3
Philippines	1	Male: 1 Female: 0	A: 0 B: 0 C: 1
Thailand	2	Male: 1 Female: 1	A: 1 B: 1 C: 0
Vietnam	6	Male: 3 Female: 3	A: 1 B: 3 C: 2
TOTAL	48	Male: 20 Female: 28	A: 17 B: 16 C: 15

**Focus groups participants.** For the focus group portion of this study, a total of thirty students participated in four country-specific focus group meetings. These meetings ranged from four to eleven participants, and the table below presents demographics of each focus group.

Table 3.

*Focus Group Participants by Gender, Country of Origin, and Campus Attended*

Laos Focus Group 11 participants		Vietnam Focus Group 4 participants		Mongolia Focus Group 9 participants		Malaysia Focus Group 6 participants	
Gender	Campus Attended	Gender	Campus Attended	Gender	Campus Attended	Gender	Campus Attended
Female: 7 Male: 4	A: 2 B: 5 <sup>1</sup> C: 4	Female: 3 Male: 1	A: 1 B: 1 C: 2	Female: 6 Male: 3	A: 3 B: 2 C: 4	Female: 2 Male: 4	A: 3 B: 1 C: 2
Notes: <sup>1</sup> Only four students from Laos attended Campus B. However, one of the CCELI students from Thailand lives along the Thailand-Laos border and he participated in the focus group with the Laos students.							

**Case study participants.** Two case study interviews were conducted after completion of the focus groups. The case studies provided a deeper understanding of the phenomena being explored in this study in ways that the quantitative survey and focus group meetings could not. While the survey and focus groups were especially useful in exploring how perceptions changed, they only provided general suggestions as to why they changed and how those perceptions differed by campus. The case studies became extremely instrumental in exploring how perceptions differed by campus – revelations that will be explained in the results section of this chapter. Below is a detailed description of each case study participant.

***Bolomora.*** The first case study student was a female student from Mongolia, Bolomora, who attended Campus C for the CCELI program at the age of eighteen. Approximately a year and a half after completion of the CCELI program, she returned to the United States to participate in a summer work-study program in the Southeast portion of the country. The researcher had the opportunity to meet and conduct an in-person

interview with this student while she was in the United States during that time. She had previously participated in the Mongolian online focus group meeting, and meeting with her also provided the opportunity to ask her to elaborate on the focus group conversation.

Bolorma plans to become a history teacher in her country. Her fascination with history came from her love of books and inquiry into how world history has shaped the way societies around the globe live today. In her CCELI application essay she stated, "Reading books is one of the most important parts of my life, I can't imagine my life without books." She was motivated to study English in the United States because of her interest not just in Mongolian history, but in the history of the world. She observed, "First most study or history books are written by foreign languages, especially English. Those books help to know about past, now and future of history of world and human kind." Bolorma went on to state in her application that while she is proud of her Mongolian heritage and history, many in her society do not think of history from other, non-Mongolian perspectives. This sort of insight and desire to open her mind to histories and cultures other than her own made her unique in her culture, an observation she supported during our discussion. During her individual interview, Bolomora stated that she learned much about teaching while participating in the CCELI, and plans to model her own teaching approach after the teachers she had while in the United States.

***Chimka.*** The second case study student, Chimka from Mongolia, was assigned to attend Campus B for the CCELI program. She was nineteen years of age at the time and returned to the United States following the CCELI experience to further her higher education at the same multi-campus community college district, but elected to attend Campus C upon her return. She began her CCELI application essay by stating, "I'm a 19

years old girl who loves my family, friends, and motherland.” Chimka, like Bolomora and many other students, expressed a great deal of patriotism, but also was able to see how pursuing education outside her home country would broaden her opportunities, and in turn allow for opportunities to make positive changes in her native society. In Mongolia, Chimka completed special secondary school coursework for students talented in mathematics and subsequently participated in several international mathematics competitions. However, her desire at the time of the CCELI was to work in Business, specializing in International Relations. Her interest in this field came from her father who worked as a driver for the American Embassy in Mongolia; through him she was exposed to people from many different cultures. Her motivation to study English was to more effectively communicate in the realm of international commerce and relations, and to enable her to instigate positive change in Mongolia, “As I’m planning to develop my motherland and myself, being fluently in English is the key to my every goal in the future.”

Chimka’s application essay was very similar to other CCELI participants, both in terms of her level of English proficiency and in her expressed career goals and belief that learning English could help her accomplish those goals. Virtually all students acknowledged the significant opportunities that learning English would provide for their futures. However during the interview, the researcher observed that Chimka had not only made great strides in English proficiency, assisted by her return as a “regular” international student to the United States, but also seemed to understand that education and career choice is a complex process. She is still interested in international relations,

but is currently undecided as to a career because her coursework in the United States has opened her mind to other possibilities and interests.

In the discussion that follows of both the case studies and the focus group results, some student names and personal information are mentioned. However to ensure anonymity, the students who participated in the quantitative survey were not asked to provide their names. Therefore there is no way to ascertain if students who participated in the survey also participated in the qualitative elements of the study.

## **Results**

This mixed methods study yielded complex results, with some themes that did not seem significant in the quantitative data receiving much greater attention during the focus groups and case studies. Before presenting the study results, it is critical to examine how the researcher negotiated issues related to validity and reliability. In mixed methods studies, Creswell (2003) highlights the importance of considering and explaining validity and reliability issues that arise with the quantitative component, the qualitative component, and any other issues related to the mixed-methods methodology. The researcher selected methodological triangulation because this type of triangulation is especially applicable to ensure that the strengths in one methodology make up for the weaknesses in others.

The sample size from the quantitative data was small (N=48). If this survey were to be administered to the students again it is uncertain if the results would be similar, and thus the small sample size threatened reliability. In terms of validity however, the qualitative results suggest that the survey did indeed measure what it intended: changes in

perception pertaining to U.S. culture as a result of the students' participation in the CCELI.

The qualitative data was more illustrative of the students' experiences, perceptions of U.S. culture, and most critically differences by campus attended. As Creswell further states, "The value of qualitative research lies in the particular description and themes developed in context of a specific site. Particularity rather than generalization is the hallmark of qualitative research" (2003, p. 193). The intent of the qualitative research results was not generalization of results, but rather to explore students' experience and perceptions within the context of Vygotsky's social-cultural constructivism. To what extent were students' perceptions formed by cultural-mediated social interactions with their campuses of attendance?

It was within this consideration that researcher sought ways to ensure "validity" and "reliability" in the qualitative component. The researcher kept a journal throughout the qualitative data collection process, and asked two assistants to read through the qualitative data to cross-check interpretation of results. One of these individuals was a research assistant who did not have any interaction with the CCELI students, and knew little about the program. The second assistant was Chimka, one of the case study participants. Chimka's input was especially critical to ensure that the researcher's interpretations – the particularity – of the focus groups and case study interviews were accurate because she personally knew and had interacted with a majority of the participants, in addition to being from a similar culture.

The results are presented below by perception area, with the raw descriptive data from the quantitative results discussed first, followed by the qualitative data, beginning



with focus group responses. Table Four provides a summary and overview of the results, followed by a narrative description of data concerning each of the perception areas.

Table 4.

*Overview of Results by Perception Area*

Perception Area	Raw Data from the Quantitative Survey pre- and post-CCELI experience, indicating perception change	Themes Derived from the Qualitative Focus Group and Case Study Results
Diversity	0.45 difference*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-campus interactions with multicultural populations</li> <li>• Observations of racial segregation</li> <li>• Impact of curriculum concerning race in America</li> </ul>
Friendliness	0.86 difference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preconceived notions of friendliness</li> <li>• “Openness” of strangers</li> <li>• Friendliness of CCELI staff and instructors</li> </ul>
Safety	0.43 difference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transportation</li> <li>• Housing</li> <li>• Community interactions</li> </ul>
Wealth	0.30 difference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wealth stratification</li> <li>• Impact of service learning</li> </ul>
Quality of American higher education	0.15 difference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations: rigor vs. resources</li> <li>• The classroom environment</li> </ul>
*The raw difference between the diversity before and after questions was 0.22. Two of the five diversity questions were in the opposite direction as the other three. After adjusting for direction, the before and after difference is 0.45.		

**Diversity.** Diversity can be understood in this study as “heterogeneity of group members... also characterized by a divergence in backgrounds, values, attitudes, and experiences that presents individuals in the group with novel situations.” (Antonio, et. al.,

2008, p. 507-508). Prospective international students tend to view the United States as a multicultural country (NAFSA, 2007), yet many who study in the U.S. often experience or witness racial discrimination (Lee & Rice, 2007). Therefore international students' views of diversity and race relations in the United States are an important perception that impacts their experiences in the U.S. and their perceptions about and understanding of U.S. culture.

***Survey results.*** The quantitative survey was broken down into two components. The first asked students to recall what they thought about a particular element of American society before the CCELI experience, and the second part presented the identical questions, but asked students to answer them with consideration of what they perceived after their stay in the United States. The students were asked to report their answers on a five-point Likert scale ranging from one representing strongly disagree to five representing strongly agree. The letters DB refer to the questions that asked students to think about their perceptions concerning diversity before visiting the United States. DA refers to the diversity questions that asked the students their perceptions after spending several months in the United States. The DB question mean for all student respondents was 3.25 and the DA mean was 3.47, or a 0.22 difference between the DB and DA responses. However this difference does not necessarily indicate directional change in perceptions one way or the other because the questions vary in direction. Before any assumption could be made regarding how the students' perceptions changed, each question had to be analyzed to determine how each response indicates direction. The table below illustrates this difference by question:

Table 5.

*Overall Diversity Question Means*

Question Number	Question	Mean Before coming to the United States (DB)	Mean After coming to the United States (DA)
1	Americans enjoy people of different race and culture	3.23	3.99
2	There is racial tension in America	3.25	2.9
3	People of all races are treated equally in America	3.00	3.66
4	The American government has tried to fix racial discrimination	3.71	3.98
5	A person's race will affect how successful they are in America	3.06	2.83
	Mean of the questions	3.25	3.47

It is noteworthy here that two of the DB responses that showed a lower mean following the CCELI experience (the DB responses for questions two and five) indicated by that lower score a positive change in perception. In fact, as a result of the study experience, student perceptions of diversity issues in the United States shifted in a positive direction in each of the investigated areas. If the scores on questions DB 2 and DB 5 were reversed to indicate movement in a positive direction, the change in the mean for the DB questions overall would be 0.45, as opposed to 0.22 without this consideration.

As aforementioned, there was no inductive analysis to determine differences in perceptions by campus attended because the sample size per campus was too small (15

survey respondents from Campus A, 16 from Campus B, and 17 from Campus C). The researcher conducted a very general statistical review of the raw data to help to inform the qualitative phase of the study.

**Qualitative results.** The qualitative data support these cursory quantitative survey findings in that the students expressed positive changes in how they view diversity and race relations in the United States. The diversity questions illustrate, however, the value of a qualitative element to the research, since although student perceptions did change in a positive direction, students were disappointed and occasionally disturbed by some diversity-related issues. Many students during the focus group meetings stated that their perception of how different races interacted in America changed as a result of living in the country, yet those perceptions differed between the largely minority populated campuses (A and C) and the mainly homogenous Campus C. Both the two case studies and the focus groups were integral in exploring campus differences.

Three themes emerged in the qualitative portion of this study regarding the students' perceptions concerning diversity in America, and among these themes, there are differences by campus attended. The three themes were:

1. On-campus interactions with multicultural populations changed international students' perceptions of diversity and race relations;
2. Students noticed racial segregation outside of the classroom
3. Curriculum and purposeful activities that focused on the history and current state of discrimination and race relations in America were helpful for students in understanding race relations in the United States.

Student perceptions varied by campus in that, related to Theme 1, students attending campuses A and B had much greater opportunities for multicultural interaction and showed positive change in perceptions related to diversity and race. For example, students from all campuses felt more strongly that Americans were friendly to people of various cultures and races. Yet, several students from Campuses A and B alluded to specific interactions with other multicultural populations, expressing pleasant surprise at their friendliness. Further, the qualitative data illustrated that students did perceive the high degree of racial tension in America but interestingly, several noticed self-imposed racial segregation in public places or at sporting events. Those that mentioned this, found it curious and odd, because they had friendly interactions with other cultures and races, and did not observe racial tension per se.

Theme 2, however, pointed out one of the negative perceptions that developed concerning race and diversity. Students from all campuses noticed racial segregation outside of the classroom, yet the students from Campus C (the most homogeneous campus) were more sensitive to segregation of white students from all other races, not just the divide between white and black students. The campus programs and curricular discussion on the history and current state of race relations in the United States appeared equally helpful and appreciated by students attending all campuses, although the students from the high-diversity campuses (A and C) indicated that this curriculum provided an anchor of understanding for the socio-cultural context of their campus environments.

It is important to note that throughout the presentation of qualitative results that follow, the researcher took great care to maintain the integrity of the students' voices. Direct student quotes are used often throughout the representation of this, with only

minor edits where necessary to assist with readability. Whenever possible the student quotes that follow are exactly what the student stated or wrote, depending on the format of the focus group (in-person or online).

*On-campus interactions with multicultural populations.* The perceptions of two Vietnamese students reflect those of the group as a whole concerning race and diversity in the United States. These students stated that prior to coming to the United States, their perceptions regarding “black America” were similar to what they read about or saw in the movies, thus instilling a sense of nervousness about interacting with African Americans. But this perception quickly diminished due to positive on-campus interactions. One student Hieu, who attended Campus A stated:

Before coming to the United States, I found some stories about black Americans. They are my age, but scary, they carry big guns. When I came to the United States many black people I met they have been kind and nice also help me a lot...I interact with a black woman on campus and she is very nice....my impression about black people is that they are good people. They are equal to everyone.

Another Vietnamese student, who attended Campus B, responded to that statement with a personal account:

Before coming to the U.S. I never interacted, never talk, never get close to any black people. I was really curious about them...because I mean I read books about them...They from what I observed while in the U.S. they are very hard working people. They are very friendly, very nice, very humorous. They are not serious like some whites...I met acquaintance with a black student. He is an artist, a

painter. He looked real big, a little bit scary, big, a football player, but he's very quiet, he's very nice. I mean when you talk to him he has a really smooth voice.

Campus interactions with multicultural populations repeatedly were cited as valuable to the students in terms of altering perceptions concerning African Americans. A third Vietnamese student who attended Campus C conversely responded that he did not have the opportunity to interact with African-Americans on his campus, but stated that other program initiatives and the academic curriculum were critical to his understanding – an issue to be addressed momentarily.

Nora, a student from Laos who attended Campus B, stated that before coming to the United States she expected all Americans to be blond and blue-eyed. After spending time at her highly diverse campus, she stated that she learned much about how “Americans really look.” While Nora participated in the face-to-face focus groups, she later shared with the researcher a picture of her dolls with which she had growing up; they were indeed all blond and blue-eyed. It is interesting to note, that upon reviewing the researcher's journal after all focus groups were completed, the Laotian students did not seem as willing to discuss issues pertaining to race or any other controversial issue. Perhaps because the group was so large (11 students), they chose to focus on fond memories despite the researcher following the interview guide. It is also possible that since Laos is one of the more restrictive countries represented in the student groups in terms of personal expression, these students felt uncomfortable being too open when interviewed in their home country.

One case study interview of a Mongolian student, however, supported preconceived notions similar to those expressed by the Vietnamese students and Nora

from Laos, and further highlight the campus differences. Bolomora from Mongolia who attended Campus C, stated that prior to coming to American, “My imagination of America is just like the movies,” echoing the perception expressed during the Vietnamese focus group meeting. After attending Campus C however, she stated that she thought America actually lacked diversity, “But I thought in American there’s no diversity or poor or other people and I felt like this in American when I first time came here. There is no diversity.” By the “first time” she is referring to her participation in the CCELI program. She went on to state that her experiences working in a different region of the United States provided greater exposure to different cultures. While she had similar expectations and perceptions as other students regarding diversity and race in America and while her perceptions did change, they changed in a different manner because of the demographic makeup of her campus attended, and the environment in which she was housed.

*Observations of racial segregation.* A second theme emerged regarding race and diversity: students from all campuses took note of racial segregation, specifically on their campuses of attendance. The students mentioned this observation because they were surprised that such segregation did not occur in the classroom, but in social situations outside of class on campus. Jonathan, a Malaysian student from Campus C, articulated the divide. “In class, I noticed that everyone, regardless of race or culture getting along well during group discussions....However, outside of class, I noticed that people always hang out together with others from the same race and culture.” Another Malaysian student who attended Campus A concurred, “Totally agree with you, Jon!” However, the students from Campus C were more likely to observe that Asian and white students



segregated themselves into their own groups, as opposed to Campuses A and B where the observations related to black and white segregation. Regarding relations on the largely minority Campuses A and B, Boku, a Mongolian student from Campus B, noted:

Americans don't discriminate black Americans. Before I came to U.S. I saw very rare circumstances that kind of discriminations. Usually, Americans don't discriminate black Americans on communications (via spoken words). I mean, they indicate their discriminations on the outside. So they express their discriminations by their movement. For example, when I watch the college's basketball game, American divided by 2 sides of the field, white and black.

This perception about white and black segregation was also expressed during the Vietnamese focus group by a student who also attended Campus B. He noted, "But there is just something that I noticed like black people they have a tendency to have a group...they still have some hesitation some separation between whites and black culture."

The Mongolian students from Campus C noted that Asian students also were segregated; an observation consistent with Jonathan's statement that all races segregated themselves. A conversation occurred amongst two Mongolians who attended Campus C during their focus group in response to the question "Did you observe that people of different races get along in America?" This conversation, presented below, indicates that the students' perception of racial segregation – and to a larger extent, race issues in general in America – can be dependent on the racial makeup of the campus. When the campus is largely African-American, as with campuses A and B, the students were more likely to notice white vs. black segregation. Yet, when the campus was more

homogenous, such as is the case in Campus C, the students' perceptions about race and race relations became more introspective.

Degima: Yes, they do (different races get along), but I saw quite frequently that Asians only go with Asians, whites only go with whites, black people only go with blacks. They do get along with each other, but mostly they are separate.

Namuun: I agree with Degi. I talked to the people of different races. They were nice to me. But based on my experience, I found out that I could talk to Asian people easier.

Degima: On campus, you would see bunch of Asians sitting near each others and whites are sitting together. Even though, things are getting better and better, there is still some racism going around here.

Namuun: I love Degi's honest comments. She sounds very realistic. Americans made a stereotype of Asians that we wear glasses and do nothing but study. And the Asians settled in America later than Africans so Asians are not treated equally. African Americans are little bit too overrated sometimes.

During the case study interview with Bolomora, she indicated that Namuun was "different than the rest of them" because of her outspoken nature and that her chosen profession as a journalist meant that she liked to stir up controversy. In a sense then, Namuun may be considered somewhat of an "outlier" in this study, yet as an attendee of Campus C, her last comment about "African Americans are little bit too overrated sometimes" may have larger implications for how the students' perceptions differed by campus attended.

*Curriculum.* The CCELI had two components: activities that were meant to expose the students to U.S. culture, and academic coursework to increase English language proficiency. To fulfill the latter, all students were enrolled in ESL coursework, although more advanced English language students were also enrolled in additional college courses that provided further learning opportunities in the English language and U.S. culture (e.g. oral communication, U.S. history, etc.). Each academic year, the ESL faculty of the community college district used in this research decide on a theme for the ESL series of courses. During the CCELI students' stay in the U.S., that theme was, appropriately, race in U.S. culture and history. This curriculum was mentioned by students from each campus as an important ingredient in understanding issues of race and diversity in America.

For example, Hieu a Campus A student from Vietnam explained during the focus group meeting that while she found African-American students to be very welcoming on her campus, learning about Black history in the classroom helped her understand the social-cultural situations that many of her African-American fellow students came from:

They didn't have basic rights like the white people. So they have long history of struggle to fight ...I also understand that they have something like vicious circle. Something with a circle of poverty because of their history background. So it can cause them to say we cannot find good jobs, at least get their offspring and their following generation would go into same circles.

Chimka, one of the case study students expressed a similar sentiment. The curriculum, she stated, changed her perception about how people of different races interact in America and why:

I thought it (America) was like very peaceful, like as you said, harmonic. Like when we got here it didn't seem like that because the classes we took, like they mostly concentrated on how race, like for example, I have this book, *How Race is Lived in America*. The whole book talks about diversity and race, racism, and it's about discrimination. And also the classes we took, I think they really impacted on me my point of view that how discrimination has been in America.

Both Chimka and Hieu attended highly diverse campuses, Campus B and A respectively and yet while they reported that interactions with diverse races on their campuses enriched their experiences, they also indicated that the formal curriculum regarding issues of race in America was instrumental in impacting their perceptions regarding the issue.

Fuoung, a Campus C student from Vietnam stated that although he was not exposed to much racial diversity while in the U.S., he found that specific programmatic cultural activities meant to enhance the academic curriculum made an impact on him. Students from Campus C visited the Abraham Lincoln homestead in Illinois, which inspired Fuoung to write a research essay about "the issues of slavery" during the Civil War. He stated that the visit, "made our experience wonderful and more insightful about American history." The researcher asked all four students from the Vietnamese group meeting, "Do you think learning about black history or being around black people in your campuses made your experience better or richer? Do you think it added to your experience?" All students responded with a collaborative, excited, "Yes!" Hieu went on to state, "I was in classes with many black students. And there was only one white guy. He always leave and he was the one that was late. I also can learn and listen many painful

stories and listen about their thinking about oppression, and they showed many emotions.”

**Friendliness.** Friendliness, for purposes of this study, can be understood as a complicated social construct involving a mutual relationship between a perceiver and an agent in a variety of contexts. The concept is best defined as, “a construct or dispositional tendency or attitude that implies kindness, cordiality, and goodwill” (Reisman, 1983, p. 405). Friendliness was an integral concept that shaped the students' perceptions of U.S. culture, and was the perception area that garnered the most excitement from the students during the interviews. In each focus group meeting and case study interview, the students mentioned friendliness of Americans as an important element that made their experience in the United States positive and memorable.

**Survey results.** The quantitative survey results illustrate that friendliness is the construct that changed the most, comparing the before questions to the after. FB represents the mean of the student responses to questions about friendliness when asked to think about their perceptions before coming to the United States. FA represents the responses after the CCELI experience. The mean of the FB responses is 3.47, while the mean of the FA responses is 4.33. This translates to a 0.86 change toward believing Americans turned out to be friendlier than anticipated. Clearly, students found Americans to be friendlier than previously thought. The table below represents these results broken down by question.

Table 6.

*Overall Friendliness Question Means*

Question Number	Question	Mean Before coming to the United States (FB)	Mean After coming to the United States (FA)
1	Americans care about each other.	3.25	4.04
2	Americans easily make friends.	3.56	4.23
3	Americans welcome international students.	3.75	4.58
4	Americans are friendly.	3.55	4.59
5	Americans are helpful to strangers.	3.25	4.19
	Mean of the question means	3.47	4.33

***Qualitative results.*** The qualitative data echoed the quantitative evidence that the students' experience in the United States led them to view Americans as more friendly than anticipated. When asked to briefly describe their experiences in the United States during the Mongolian focus group, Boloroma stated, "I had a wonderful experience when I was in US...I meet with nice Americans there, who help to open my mind of the world. I love this memory of my life." Degi, also a Campus C student from Mongolia concurred, "I was surprised about how every people were smiling and respecting each other." These statements were made at the beginning of the interview before the researcher specifically addressed the friendliness construct.

Three themes also emerged in the friendliness perception area, and differences by campus were evident in that students who attended Campuses A and B appeared to perceive Americans as more welcoming and open. The themes are:

1. Preconceived (before U.S. arrival) perceptions of friendliness and Americans were consistent with the research literature regarding what international students think about Americans: that while they think Americans would be friendly, there is some apprehension due to portrayals of American life in the media (e.g. movies), and peers' experiences in large urban areas, etc. There did not appear to be any difference between campus attended in preconceived perceptions.
2. Many students mentioned that the "openness" and propensity of Americans to "talk freely" to them, especially as strangers, not only conveyed a perception of friendliness, but also "opened" their minds as well.
3. Friendliness of CCELI staff and the nature of the campus climate impacted perceptions of friendliness as well.

It is noteworthy that theme two of openness and willingness to talk freely was mentioned by students who attended Campuses A and C, but not Campus B. This was also the case with Theme 3 concerning friendliness of staff members and general campus climate. Here again, the case studies served to cast light on these response differences. In her case study interview, Chimka reported that a feeling of unfriendliness while she was at Campus B was one reason she decided to attend Campus C upon her return to the United States. Her sense was that her peers who had attended campus C had experienced a much "friendlier" environment.

*Preconceived perceptions.* The students' preconceived views were a much more thoroughly discussed theme for this perception than were preconceptions of other areas

because the students spent a great deal of time discussing how surprised they were at how friendly Americans were, even though they did not necessarily perceive Americans to be unfriendly before their stay in the United States. This “surprise” was mentioned even when the researcher was not specifically inquiring about the friendliness construct, and again when the question of friendliness arose. At the beginning of the Vietnamese focus group meeting Hieu, a Campus A student, responded to the researcher’s first interview question, “What were your general impressions of the United States? What impressed you the most?” by stating, “Before coming to the United States I also know that many American’s are very friendly. They are also happy, kind, and nice.” During the Mongolia meeting, Anji, a student from Campus C expressed a similar sentiment in response to the same question, “When I was applying for this scholarship I didn’t know I would have such a great experience. I met many wonderful people there. And I traveled a lot of places with them. This program open my eyes.” Degi, another student from Campus C concurred, “I was surprised about how every people were smiling and respecting each other.”

During the Malaysian focus group meeting, this same question asked by the researcher garnered this conversation:

Thai (Campus A student): The readiness of people to interact with each other!!!

They can really communicate well with any strangers they meet in trains, buses, or even ticket counters. They can start off with a topic and talk to each other from when they get in the train until they can get off. I think that impressed me the most.

Eric (Campus A student): I agree.



Jonathan (Campus C student): What impressed me the most was the excellent customer service given in almost every shop that I went to. The people working in the shops were very friendly, helpful, and well mannered. I particular like their smiles!

Zhuan (Campus A student): The people are very polite, especially with strangers. The hugging is also different from our culture

Thai: Agree.

Eric: Yes! Hugging!

Wai Mun (Campus C student): Agree with all of them! Love those hugs from all of you! Like the way people communicate, everywhere and anywhere.

This conversation highlights the other two themes in the friendliness construct; openness of strangers and the friendliness of staff and campus climate. However because these comments were unsolicited, it also highlights how friendliness was the perception that was most likely to appear when students were asked about their memories of American culture. It is important to note however that no students from Campus B mentioned friendliness as an initial impression of U.S. culture. These students were more likely to address diversity or wealth, as evident in the response of May Leng, a Campus B student from Malaysia, to the above prompt during the Malaysian discussion.

There are a lot of female bus and train drivers, which we seldom have. They tax everything even in grocery shops and cafeteria. The shopping malls are less crowded...And most Americans have dishwasher in their house...(and) a lot of Americans think Tabasco sauce is very spicy but it's really mild and merely sour sauce for us.

Her initial thoughts pertained to gender roles and wealth, and not to an overwhelming sense of friendliness, as was the case for Campus A and C students.

*Openness/friendliness of strangers.* As Thai and Zhuan expressed above, the openness and friendliness of strangers was impressive to them as they navigated American society. Many students elaborated that this openness and friendliness of strangers helped them grow as individuals in many ways as well. In response to the question “Did you find that Americans were friendly?” this conversation took place during the Malaysian focus group.

MayLeng (Campus B student). Yes. Most of them are friendly and many of them like to talk to foreigners like us. However, I found that people from big city, like Chicago are comparatively not as friendly as people from suburbs like the city where we stayed.

Eric (Campus A student): Yes, most of them. I guess it's because we're not in the city and Americans are not afraid of talking to strangers. I like that!

Zhuan (Campus A student): Yes, I'd say almost all of them are friendly. Besides that, they are very helpful too. I got lost once and one guy helped me with the directions.

Thai (Campus A student): Yes, can't agree more! Not to mention about (program staff names), because you all are very kind. Even the shopkeepers, librarians, waiters out there, they all tend to be very friendly and try to help you....They always do greeting when you see them, enter a store, paying at the counter, etc.

The Campus A students during the Malaysian focus group, as illustrated by the above conversation, were more likely to express sentiments, or provide specific examples

of friendliness as they navigated the community. The exception was MayLeng (a Campus B student) who stated that compared to Chicago, her U.S. city of residence appeared to be friendly.

Campus C students expressed similar perceptions, as evidenced in the Mongolian focus group. In response to the same question, Degi (a Campus C student) stated:

Yeah! Absolutely. They start from smiling and let people feel pleasant. They are open people, so it was easy to talk with them...I felt like I could learn to be more open, emotional and friendly person by staying with them.

Namy, a Campus A student, responded, "They are welcoming and hospitable.

They can listen and understand people no matter what kind of behavior who has.

When people need help or advice, I'm really sure that Americans always ready to it."

As Degi's comment above expresses, the perceived openness of Americans helped her to develop the self-perceived positive personal attributes of openness and emotion; that expressing one's thoughts and emotions can assist with positive interactions. Perhaps Fuong, a Campus C student from Vietnam, best articulated this concept when he stated that before coming to the U.S., he was a very closed person and did not interact with many people. After his experiences in the United States he learned to "let people in" and is now better at making friendships and overall a happier person because of the people and interactions he experienced while in the United States.

*Friendliness of CCELI staff and campus climate.* It is important to note that when discussing the concept of friendliness, students thought about friendliness in two settings: off and on-campus. It was the on-campus experiences of friendliness and interactions

with program staff and other students that were strongest in shaping perceptions. Of course program staff at all campuses had significant off-campus interaction with the students as well. Yet even while interacting off campus, staff members were ultimately affiliated with the campus of attendance. While overall, the students found on-campus interactions to be mostly positive, there were still negative perceptions. As was the case in off-campus perceptions explored above, students from Campuses A and C were more likely to express positive perceptions of on-campus friendliness – although even in these cases there were instances of unfriendliness.

During the focus group with the students from Laos, the researcher asked, “Did you perceive Americans to be friendlier than you had anticipated?” The students began to excitedly all talk at once about how surprised they were by this friendliness and acceptance, but it was the campus and program staff that appeared to impact this perception the most. Malisa, a Campus C student from Laos stated, “I felt very cared for...everyone everywhere so was nice to me that fond memories are what I carry with me of friendly Americans.”

In regards to this same question Jonathan, a Campus C student from Malaysia stated:

My experience in the U.S. was truly a great one because of several factors. One of them definitely the great hospitably and care showed by (program staff names), along with their family members during the course of our stay. All of us have gotten so close to the both of them, we actually called them Daddy and Mom!

Eric, a Campus A student, concurred:

Personally, I think (program staff name) is a very very very good mother.

Sometimes she even take us out to see more of what's going on. For example, the pawn shop, the clothes donation, the Lions club, the post office, and all sorts. All these visits were not included in the schedule yet she's willing to do all that extra work. I'm glad that I get to visit these places because it's something that's more American than the museum and capitol. These are what most Americans are doing in their everyday life. It completes my American experience.

Similar sentiments about program staff were express in the Mongolian focus group meeting as well. Anji, a Campus C student stated, "My American Mommy, Daddy, teachers, and all others I met. That was made me to open myself." These comments from Jonathan, Eric, and Anji allude to the importance of positive interactions with program staff to construct the perception that Americans are welcoming and friendly. What can be gleamed from Eric's comment however, is that the more program staff bridge the on and off campus connection through exposure to both tourist attractions and elements of every day American life – the more they address the totality of the students' experience – then the more fulfilled students are in terms of feeling like they have experienced American culture.

In the quote above, Jonathan (Campus C) articulated the importance of program staff as the foremost factor in making his experience in the United States, "great." He also mentioned that he found the American students at his campus to be unfriendly, "However, my American classmates were not friendly and I spend a lot of my time being alone in the college. They were not very approachable and would give little chance for any interaction to take place." Jonathan was a unique student in that he tested out of ESL

coursework, and subsequently was placed into regular college courses, removing him from some of the special attention and structured classroom interaction that accompanied most of the ESL coursework.

However there were several other students, specifically at Campus B, who were placed in non-ESL coursework as well, and none of them mentioned unfriendliness as being a problem with their American college student peers. Conversely, these students alluded to how friendly their fellow classmates were. Yet a majority of these students' classmates were African-American, whereas at Campus C, a majority of Jonathan's classmates were white. The presumption is not that African-American students were perceived to be friendlier than white students, but perhaps that the international students' preconceived notions about race and friendliness were different. Students expressed apprehension and/or curiosity in terms of interacting with African-American students, and found friendliness to be unexpected. It may also be that African-American students, who are accustomed to being "the minority," were more open to interacting with new minority students.

Because none of the students from Campus B contributed very much to the friendliness discussion, the researcher purposely asked Chimka about her perspective during the case study interviews, since she had experiences with Campus B and C. Of her experience with the CCELI program, Chimka expressed positive friendliness perceptions overall:

People were extremely nice to us and we had like great times and we had this impression like super great impression about Americans when we went back. But when I came back here, it's quite different...At (Campus B) I didn't interact with

a lot of American student...and now I can see a lot of different perspective of America.

It is not that Chimka found Americans to be unfriendly upon her return to Campus C, she simply broadened her perceptions of American life to understand it as being more complex. Upon her return, she began to experience the traditional academic, psychological, and social challenges that international students often experience when they are on an individual sojourn, as opposed to a group program. Chimka stated:

When we were as a group, I didn't get lonely at all in two months and two months were such a short time and we didn't even want to go back home...And we were, like Mongolian students, stayed in the exact same situation as we worked and that's why I think I made such good friends from the program. Like we had the same purpose, let's say English level was the same...so I felt very comfortable in the group, but when I get back here on my own...it was harder. I would get lonely and because over here even though they're friendly...they wouldn't become as good friend as the other people from the group because we weren't sharing the situations. I don't know how long it takes to really adjust and feel at home. But I feel at home here...You know I was telling you like its (Campus C) a very friendly environment in general, but it takes your effort to feel good there because I still kind of struggle like every day.

Chimka's struggles now that she has returned to Campus C can likely be attributed to the fact that she is on her own, as a typical international student, and therefore is experiencing traditional international student stressors. When asked however why she elected to attend Campus C instead of Campus B, she stated that she made her

decision based off the perception that Campus C was a friendlier place for international students:

And like people (other CCELI students) from (Campus C) were telling us, like, they have, you know, they went to an International Club and made some friends and they like even became friends afterwards...(Campus B) didn't seem like too friendly. It was kind of hard to just randomly meet with people and make friends from there...at (Campus B) they (the students) don't seem like making a lot of friends...but at (Campus C) it's very easy to make friends. Well, I wouldn't say it's very easy, but it really depends on you. If you are willing to make friends, definitely, (Campus C) is better.

Chimka went on to relay an experience she had trying to join a student club at Campus B, "I tried to connect with them and left a message and I called them, but I never like get replies from them."

Overall, students from Campus A expressed the most delight in how friendly American were, yet suggested through their comments that this was largely due to particularly outgoing and helpful program staff. Yet a few students, Hieu for example, stated how friendly students were to her at Campus A. Students from Campus C also found Americans to be very friendly, yet again this was in many respects a reflection of the friendliness of program staff. Jonathan's comments indicate this complexity; he found his American classmates unwilling to interact with him, but found program staff and people throughout the community to be friendly.

Campus B yielded particularly complex results. On one hand, several students stated that they found their African American peers to be very friendly, but through



Chimka's case study, it was revealed that the institution and program staff were perceived to be not as welcoming to international students compared to the other campuses. This suggests that no matter how friendly and outgoing others in the campus community might be, the primary influence on perceptions of friendliness are those who work most directly and regularly with the student visitors.

**Safety.** Safety, for the purposes of this study, was understood as realistic threats or fear for personal safety. It is important to make this distinction because often international students experience multi-dimensional threats, including cultural threats, discrimination, anxiety, and realistic threats (Stephan & Stephan, 1996). Realistic threats refer to those that may cause bodily harm or injury, and may refer to any other act of violence or aggression.

**Survey results.** The survey results illustrate change in perceptions regarding safety of America, college campuses, residence, and transportation. SB represents student responses about perceptions before coming to the United States. SA represents student responses after living in the United States. There was a 0.43 difference between the SB and SA questions, indicating that the students felt safer than they had anticipated before arriving in the United States. The table below illustrates these means by question.

Table 7.

*Overall Safety Question Means*

Question Number	Question	Mean Before coming to the United States (SB)	Mean After coming to the United States (SA)
1	I would not need to worry about my personal safety in America.	3.42	3.90
2	There is little violence in American cities.	3.21	3.35
3	I would feel safe living in the dormitories and would not have to worry about theft.	3.50	4.31
4	American college campuses are safe places.	3.75	4.23
5	Public transportation is safe in America.	3.69	3.94
	Mean of the question means	3.51	3.95

It is noteworthy from these responses that a perception of general violence in America received the greatest level of agreement. Students felt very safe on the college campuses and in the residence halls, but indicated lower feelings of security as they ventured off campus – though all responses concerning safety averaged above a 3.

***Qualitative results.*** Safety was an interesting construct in that none of the students mentioned feeling safe, or unsafe, until the researcher specifically asked about safety. As expressed in the research literature about international students' perceptions of the United States, some of the CCCELI students voiced concern about violence in

America before their arrival when the researcher asked about safety. Two Vietnamese students had this conversation concerning their apprehension:

Paige (Campus B student): My perception before going to the U.S. just through television and movie...I also watch CNN...so my first perception was a little bit about violence. Because there are so many they often announce or inform us about the school shooting, in 2006, and another high school shotgun that killed many student.

Trang (Campus C student): I was a little bit hesitated when I received the news that I am going to go to the U.S. but the whole truth is that it totally changed my point-of-view. American society is materialistic but, on the other hand, they are very realistic, and not really about appearance and car, clothes and other things...They are very friendly.

It is evident in this conversation that the perception areas begin to overlap, especially as noted in Trang's comment.

Within the discussions related to safety, the researcher found three themes that impacted students' perceptions. Again, within most of these themes, there is variation in campus attended. The themes revolved around safety as it related to:

1. Transportation
2. Neighborhoods and housing
3. Other interactions within the community that impacted feelings of safety.

The first two will be combined in the explanation below since there was a great deal of similarity and overlap among them. Students from Campuses A and B reported

feeling uncomfortable at times in situations as they navigated their relative communities, while Campus C students expressed comfort with exploring their neighborhood.

*Transportation, neighborhoods, and housing.* These themes were most evident in the Malaysian focus group meeting. When asked, “Did you feel safe while you were in the United States?” the students presented mixed responses:

Eric (Campus A student): Yes. There were campus police patrolling 24/7. Some of the bus and train drivers are friendly, especially one of the female bus driver that picked us up to take us to campus occasionally. So, I feel safe. And we were told to stay out of certain places!

MayLeng (Campus B student): Eric, do you remember where we do our grocery shopping? The people there made us feel a bit uncomfortable. And I remember there were some random guys came to talk to us not in a very good way.

Thai (Campus A student): I do feel the same way as MayLeng, like once, I was surrounded by all African-American in a bus. Even though they did nothing, I still felt uncomfortable and couldn't wait to reach my destination. Maybe they look too strong to me.

Jonathan: I never had to worry about safety...The transportation system as well as in the college gave me good assurance that it was safe.

Zhuan (Campus A student): Yes, I felt safe. But there was once where some random guy just started swearing at me at one of the train stations.

Wai Mun (Campus C student): I feel very safe...even the public transportations are very punctual and I do not need to worry.

As evident in this conversation, while students overall felt safe in the United States while navigating transportation and their relative communities, perhaps safer than they had expected, Malaysian students from Campuses A and B recounted instances when they felt uncomfortable or worried for their safety. No students from Campus C mentioned any such instances. Further, no Mongolian student mentioned instance of feeling unsafe, while the Malaysian students did. This could be because Mongolian students responding to this question attended Campus C, or because of the relative cultural differences. Chimka expressed in her case study interview, that the major city in Mongolia (where most of the CCELI students came from) is very unsafe and one has to constantly guard his or her self and possessions while out in public, especially on public transportation. In comparison to Mongolia, the United States was perceived to be much safer in terms of navigating throughout the community.

All students reported feeling safe in their residences regardless of campus of attendance. Annie, a Mongolian student who attended Campus A and lived on the campus of a nearby university with students from Campus B, stated, "We had key of outside door and inside door. No one can enter the dorm except us." Anji, another Mongolian student who attended Campus C concurred, "I felt safe in everywhere. I knew it from my experience when in my residence fire alarm alerting 911 was coming very quickly" (one of the students accidentally triggered the fire alarm and was impressed and surprised at the local firefighter's response). Wai Mun, a Malaysian student from Campus C represented the Malaysian Campus C sentiments about safety when she stated, "I feel very safe...I even try once walking alone to (another close by university's library) in the midnight. I met a couple of strangers and do not feel afraid or unsafe."

It was when moving about the immediate neighborhood that slight differences in campus attended were evident. As suggested by Wai Mun's statement, she, like most Campus C students, felt safe exploring the neighborhood surrounding her residence. Eric, who attended Campus A, stated that while he felt very safe at his residence, he obeyed program staff when they told him not to venture into certain areas surrounding the university residence hall where the Campus A and B students were staying. Chimka, who lived in the same residence hall, stated in her case study interview that she always felt safe during her participation with the CCELI, and did not witness instances to make them think otherwise,

I heard an area around (the university at which we were living) not too good neighborhood. But when we were there, nothing happened. And we felt very safe and we would go by Metro all the time and there would be guards and people would be looking and watching. I just had flashbacks that I thought the city was very bright city.

**Wealth.** For the purposes of this study, wealth is not examined as net assets as traditionally understood in the field of economics, but is framed from a sociological perspective. "The wealthy can be defined as those who are privileged or advantaged relative to what is normal for the citizens of their society" (Scott & Marshall, 2009).

**Survey results.** The survey results illustrated very little change in perceptions, though there was a consistent movement toward what might be called a "more realistic view" of wealth in the United States among CCELI participants. Here again the qualitative data shed more light on this perception area. Table 8 below illustrates the means of the wealth questions from the survey. WB represents the students' responses

regarding wealth before they visited the United States and the WA represents their responses pertaining to the perception questions after their visit to the United States. The difference between WB and WA is 0.30, and in this case perceptions of wealth declined in each question area after the student experience.

Table 8.

*Overall Wealth Question Means*

Question Number	Question	Mean Before coming to the United States (WB)	Mean After coming to the United States (WA)
1	Americans spend a lot of money.	3.85	3.35
2	It is easy to make money in America.	3.31	3.04
3	Americans spend too much money on unimportant things.	2.81	2.69
4	Money is highly valued in American society.	3.52	3.48
5	Americans are wealthy.	4.00	3.46
	Mean of the question means	3.50	3.20

***Qualitative results.*** Wealth was a difficult construct to explore with the students because no one mentioned any issues related to wealth or money in America until the researcher specifically asked about their related observations. Even then, the students' answers were not as extensive as the other perception areas. In response to the question, "While in America, did you observe that all Americans are wealthy? Why or why not?" Degi responded, "hard one. I don't know. It is really hard to know someone's background

just by seeing them.” Additionally, some of the students may have viewed wealth as related to safety. For example, when asked about her perceptions of wealth and if or how they changed as a result of her attendance at the two campuses, Chimka responded that she viewed the concepts to be inextricably linked; if there is less wealth, then an area will be less safe. Overall, however there were two themes that emerged within the wealth construct, albeit briefly. First, most of the students noticed stratification in wealth, especially the students from Campuses A and B. Second, service learning experiences and/or discussions with program staff regarding wealth in America were especially helpful for students from Campus C to educate them about socioeconomic issues in America.

*Wealth stratification.* The students from Campuses A and B mentioned that they were surprised to see poverty surrounding the areas where they lived and attended classes. Eric and Zhuan, both Campus A students, and May Leng, a Campus C student are all from Malaysia. In response to the wealth question, they all stated that they observed poor people around their campuses and residences. However it is interesting that even though the students observed poor people in America, they still believed that relative to their own countries, these individuals had the opportunity not to be abjectly poor because of government assistance programs. The following conversation took place during their focus group discussion:

Zhuan: They're wealthy in a sufficient way. For example, education is free, food is cheap, and everyone get to go to school.



May Leng: I agree. Not all are wealthy as some still need help from the food pantries. However, I agreed that they're wealthy in a sufficient way. At least they got to get help.

Interestingly Chimka mentioned the same concept during her interview, "I think even though there are poor people, or lower than middle class people, they can easily get government help." These observations reinforce the notion that concepts of wealth and poverty are culturally relative, and students who come from countries where they see people with no resources, and no means other than begging by which they can obtain them, are less inclined to label someone as "poor," if they have public access to food, shelter and education.

Campus A and B students did observe that they saw individuals who appeared to be from a lower economic class. However, students from Campus C did not report seeing these people. The one exception was Wai Mun, who stated, "I saw some of the videos and photos from the other students while they were traveling by train. They are some places that the houses are burnt down and not many people live there." The train into the city from the university where students attending Campuses A and B resided passes through some of the city's poorest neighborhoods. Students attending Campus C may not have been exposed to these neighborhoods.

*Service learning.* Wai Mun's contribution to the wealth perception discussion suggested that several campus activities had shaped attitudes about poverty and wealth. "Our lecturer takes us to the food bank and I realize that they are still many people need help." As mentioned in Chapter One, students in the CCELI program at all campuses were required to participate in a service learning project. For students who attended

Campus C, this project was helpful in understanding poverty in the United States. For students from Campuses A and B, they did not indicate that the service learning opportunities had the same meaning as they did for Wai Mun, but instead instilled a sense of actively participating in American culture.

The students' perceptions following their time in the United States did indicate that they came to see the U.S. economy as much more stratified and with less conspicuous consumption than they had anticipated.

**Quality of American higher education.** The central reason the United States attracts more international students than any other country is because of the tradition of excellence in higher education (Altach, 2004; Bevis & Lucas, 2007). Quality of higher education for the purposes of this study is characterized by factors that traditionally have contributed to this view that American higher education is the premier system in the world: high-quality teaching, availability of advanced technological facilities, extensive support for basic and applied research, and open forum of individualized expression (Chow & Marcus, 2008).

**Survey results.** The survey results indicate a small change in a positive direction in how students perceive the quality of American higher education with one exception: students found their classes less challenging than they had anticipated. Since the students already perceived American higher education to be of high quality, the results had little room to increase. HEQB refers to students' perceptions of American higher education before visiting the United States. HEQA represents students' responses regarding the quality of American higher education after their visit to the United States. The HEQB questions averaged 4.15 and the HEQA questions averaged 4.30, for a 0.15 difference.

Table 9.

*Overall Quality of Higher Education Question Means*

Question Number	Question	Mean Before coming to the United States (HEQB)	Mean After coming to the United States (HEQA)
1	American higher education is challenging.	4.46	4.32
2	American higher education is the best in the world.	4.00	4.10
3	American higher education will help me get a better job someday.	4.38	4.60
4	American higher education will improve my quality of life.	4.44	4.60
5	Pursuing higher education in America is something I can do.	3.46	3.89
	Mean of the question means	4.15	4.30

***Qualitative results.*** The students in the focus groups and case studies were asked the following question, “After studying here, did you find that American higher education was of less or more quality than you previously thought?” The responses can be organized into two themes:

1. Rigor and resources
2. Unique classroom interaction/course delivery enhanced the academic experience.

This second theme supported the reasons Chow and Marcus (2008) presented as to why American higher education is highly revered in a global sense.

*Rigor and resources.* The research literature regarding international student perceptions of the United States supports that many prospective, current, and former international students believe that American higher education is the best in the world. These students were no exception. All but one who responded to the question articulated this perception and that this perception of quality was either elevated or maintained as a consequence of the program. This one exception was Eric, a Campus A student from Malaysia. He stated that, "I also thought that American higher education has high quality, and I didn't change my mind after studying here. However, I got to know that there are lower quality ones too."

When asked what he meant by this statement, he told the researcher that he was pleased with the quality of education he received at Campus A, but found the ESL coursework to be very easy to him, and he observed that students attending other campuses were challenged more in their coursework. This expression is consistent with the reality that Campus A is the campus characterized by low breadth of support for international students and with a fully adjunct, and less experienced ESL staff. The Campus did not offer the upper level ESL courses, due to human and fiscal constraints, and therefore students assigned to this campus were automatically placed in the introductory or mid-level ESL curriculum that the district offers. Eric is from Malaysia, and overall the Malaysian students had higher levels of English-speaking proficiency, as evident to the researcher both when working with the students, and throughout the process of conducting this research. Eric was no exception, and his higher level of

English proficiency compared to that of the Mongolian students for example, might explain why he expressed this perception.

Interestingly Zhuan, another Campus C student from Malaysia, stated that he did find American higher education to be of higher quality than he previously thought, but this was because the “lectures” were more student-centered and the campus had modern and clean accommodations and resources. Eric then was connecting quality with academic rigor, and Zhuan with teacher-student interaction and resources. The other student responses to this question were similar to Zhuan and, regardless of which campus they attended and country of origin, appeared to be influenced by interaction and resources in this particular perception area.

For example, the Mongolian students from each campus articulated just how much more an American higher education was revered in their countries, and after studying here, they found good reason for this reputation. Bolomora stated, “Most of Mongolians want to study in America. It’s like our dream....I think the American higher education system was so wonderful after in (Campus C) for two months.” Chimka echoed Bolomora’s sentiments, “In Mongolia, every student...wants to go to American and study at the universities, but it very hard because we don’t have good environments to practice our English.” Bubu, a Campus A student from Mongolia added:

I love the educational system like the United States. Because they prefer reality than theories. In Mongolia, educational system got more focus on theories. In U.S., during one semester we just focus on specific topic and discuss it. Maybe it seems like not learning too much, but it gives chance to think, speak, also debating skills.

*The classroom.* Bubu's statement above is a good segue into the second theme to emerge regarding perceptions of American higher education. This theme related to both teacher-student relationship and to course content (practicality of skills). One student referred to this applied learning as "soft skills." Jonathan, a Campus C student, found that "the classes I attended did not just impart my knowledge of the particular subject but trained me in other areas as well such as speaking out, and reading and finding information for a particular topic by yourself." Zhuan concurred this was the case for him at Campus A, "I want to point out that they have a greater emphasis on soft skills than just on the academic side. We get to learn about public speaking, communication skills."

Another classroom-related finding was that most of the students were surprised at the informal nature of the teacher-student relationship compared to that in their home countries – and all who mentioned this element suggested that this contributed to their belief that American higher education is of the highest quality in the world. Again, this is no surprise given the research literature regarding how international students adjust academically to American higher education. There were no apparent differences among the campuses, as all student respondents expressed pleasant surprise at the student-centered nature of their community college classrooms. Bolomora found the student-centered approach to teaching she experienced at Campus C to be the reason why she is pursuing a future as a teacher; and she hopes to bring that type of pedagogy to her teaching in her home country. Wai Mun, another Campus C student stated "we do not have ordinary and dry lectures in America." Instead the discussion format of her classes, and teacher encouragement of diverse student opinions and perspectives were fundamental. "I

believe that is the education system that make us react differently” in the world, Wai Mun stated.

Paige, a female Campus B student from Vietnam, found there to be more gender equity in the American classroom. She stated, “I really like the ‘new girl American society,’ because to me the first time I got some ideas....you can go against your teachers to prove your point and....you have to stand up for your point-of-view.” She went on to state that she did not view American society as male-centric, like she perceives her home country educational system to be. She found a liberated voice that was not only equal to that of her male peers, but that of her instructors – male or female.

**Americans and punctuality.** An unexpected finding that could be considered an additional theme, even though it is not directly related to the five perception areas, was the perceived American concern about time. Throughout the focus groups, the students repeatedly articulated this unexpected observation. For example, during the Mongolian focus group, Annie and Bolmorra had this exchange:

Annie (Campus A student): Everything is on time. We can't late even 30 seconds. It's maybe an advantage, but for me its bit difficult to always on time, and there is no alternative choice. If I can't catch bus on time, even I late only 1 min, bus is gone and there is no alternative choice to go school. Finally I have to wait another 45 minutes.

Bolomorra (Campus C student): Yeah, everything is on their own time and schedule.

Yet, this concern could contribute to students feeling of safety and security. Wai Mun, a Campus C student from Malaysia stated, "I feel very safe...even the public transportations are very punctual and I do not need to worry. Thai, a Campus A student concurred, "I like the punctuality part of Americans, like the buses and trains schedule, which makes things easier to be planned. Always reach and depart on time."

Regardless of the positive or negative perceptions about Americans and punctuality, this is an important consideration for those working with international students. Initial discussions about the importance of punctuality in American culture may have curbed some the frustrations, as articulated during the Mongolian focus group, that result from being late. On the other hand, this may help some students to feel safe, as was the case for Wai Mun.

### **Summary**

In his work, *Thought and Language*, Lev Vygotsky states that any study that attempts to examine thought and speech as separate entities is doomed to fail before it begins. The two, he argues, are inextricably linked and any researcher examining thought cannot do so without consideration of language and the symbolic meaning of words. This study certainly attempted to examine students' thoughts, or more specifically perceptions of U.S. culture by recording and analyzing the students' reflections regarding their experiences in the United States. These thoughts were manifested in the language they choose, and the researcher has made attempts to maintain the authenticity of student voices.

Further, the researcher attempted to explore how such perceptions were formed and if certain attributes of the different campuses these students attended shaped these



perceptions. Consistent with Vygotsky's observation, language was very much a part of this evaluation. The quantitative survey proved to be invaluable to the study in that it illustrated that perceptions did change in five areas: diversity, friendliness, safety, wealth, and quality of American higher education. But it was the spoken expression of student attitudes that gave meaning to these changes. The qualitative data provided more insight into how the students' perceptions changed, and how and why those perceptions differed by campus.

The quantitative data suggests that there were changes in students' perceptions across the five areas from before their stay compared to after their stay. The construct that showed the most difference from before to after was the friendliness construct, where there was a 0.86 difference. This suggests that international students found America and Americans to be much friendlier than previously thought. After adjusting for direction in two of the diversity-related questions, it is apparent that the diversity construct showed the second largest change, at 0.45. This indicates that after their stay in the United States, these international students reported a greater understanding of diversity and race relations in the United States.

Safety was third, showing a 0.43 difference, indicating that these international students found the United States to be a safer environment than previously thought. Wealth was a complicated construct, because as the qualitative data illustrates students observed greater stratification in wealth. This explains why the construct only changed by 0.30. Finally, quality of American higher education was the construct to show the least change between before and after at 0.15. This is most likely because students believed

that American higher education was of high quality before their stay. Yet, as the qualitative data illustrate, some students found there was less rigor than expected.

The qualitative data revealed the complexities behind the quantitative data and illustrated how and why perceptions differed among campus attended. The focus groups and case study interviews suggest that students left the United States believing that:

- The United States was more racially diverse, but experienced less racial tension than they had anticipated. Students from Campuses A and B had direct contact with racial minorities in the United States, and partly because of a curriculum centered on the historical analysis of race in America, these students gained a greater understanding of race relations.
- Americans were friendlier and more helpful to foreigners than they had anticipated. Students from Campuses A and C expressed this sentiment more than students from Campus B. This was due primarily to interactions with program and college staff.
- American cities, campuses and transportation were safer than the students had anticipated. All students reported feeling generally safe while in the United States. However not surprisingly, students from Campus C reported feeling safer than those attending Campuses A and B. Students who attended Campus C lived in a more affluent part of the geographic region, whereas students from Campuses A and B lived – and attended class – in areas with higher crime rates.
- There is greater disparity in wealth than anticipated, but the poor in America have an important public safety net. Students who attended

Campuses A and B observed and interacted with populations of lower socioeconomic levels compared to those who attended Campus C. As per the CCELI grant requirements, the students at each campus had to participate in a service learning opportunities. This allowed those students who attended Campus C an opportunity to understand wealth stratification and countered the preconceived notion not all Americans are wealthy.

This was especially important for students from this campus because they lived and attended college in a more affluent area. However, all students expressed the observation that all stages of American government – local, state, and national – have systems in place to help those of lesser means.

- American high education met their expectations in terms of quality, but quality was defined in terms of institutional resources, the open expression of ideas, and encouragement to grow personally as speakers and presenters. This perception of what determines quality is consistent with the research literature that explains why international students are attracted to American higher education. Yet, at the campus with the least support for international students, Campus A, students tended to observe that the academic expectations were lower than both what they had expected and what they observed their peers at other campuses experiencing.

Clearly, the students' stay in the United States had an impact on their cultural perceptions and those perceptions differed by campus attended. There were two specific aspects to the students' academic experience that stood out during the focus groups and case studies that are of particular interest – and these two aspects were consistent among

the three campuses. First, students from each focus group mentioned the service learning project, and how this project helped them to better understand issues of poverty and wealth in America. The service learning projects were carefully crafted at the students' colleges of attendance to connect social and academic experiences.

The second aspect related to the format of the students' courses. The students were mostly enrolled in ESL coursework, and were taught by instructors who employed collaborative learning strategies and encouraged class discussion. The students in this study, at all focus groups, mentioned to some degree how this class format was beneficial to their learning. If the students had enrolled in non-ESL general education courses, it is possible that the instructional method would have primarily been lecture and consequently, their classroom experiences may not have been as rich or provided the forums for expression that the students reported they enjoyed.

The following chapter, Chapter Five, presents a discussion about the meaning of the results presented in Chapter Four, along with an examination of limitations, implications, and suggestions for further research.

## Chapter Five

### Discussion

One of the questions asked during the focus group meetings was, “Did you enjoy your experience in the United States? Why or why not?” Always one to make a grand attempt at expressing his feelings, Boku, a Campus B student from Mongolia stated:

I'd like to say definitely!!! Because for me that was first time in USA which is a dream of teenagers and those the same age as me have. Actually before to go to USA, I thought I knew much about American's lifestyle, culture, just as in movies. As soon as I get there, everything was different from my home city such as weather, food, culture, communication, accommodations....Most important thing was I had good friendship during two months stay. Since that time still now we're keeping in touch.....I liked USA very very much. Two months living in USA is always in my heart. I'll never throw it from my heart. Finally, I'd say just by one word all of my experience: fabulous.

This sort of sentiment is consistent with other students who participated in the focus groups and case studies. Certainly the CCELI experience was a profound and memorable one for the participants. As Boku articulated above during the focus group discussion (which was 18 months after his departure from the United States), the students not only maintained communication with each other and with some of the CCELI staff, but continue to express positive perceptions of U.S. culture.

Originally, the researcher had some concerns about interviewing the students a year and half after their experience in the United States. Would the students remember their experience with enough clarity to answer the questions? Would they even respond

and volunteer to participate? It is difficult to ascertain to what degree students romanticized their experiences, or to what degree the memory of their experiences was “accurate.” However the students responded with much more positive perceptions about U.S. culture than the researcher had anticipated. This suggests perhaps that it is not the accuracy of their perceptions that matters, but instead that the students continued to maintain and communicate positive perceptions about their experiences. One might expect that had the perceptions been negative, they may have modified to the same degree, but would have remained negative.

This chapter is a discussion of the results. The results suggested that the students' perceptions of U.S. culture certainly changed as a result of their study in the United States, and that those perceptions were shaped by the attributes of the relative campuses the students attended. This chapter addresses how the results answered the research questions; presents a model titled S.C.A.L.E. (Staff, Culturally-relevant curriculum, American college students, Local/regional exploration, Experiential learning) that illustrates how the CCELI contributed to the creation of U.S. perceptions for the student participants; discusses how this model might be useful to other institutions bringing students to the United States; outlines some of the limitations inherent in this study; and provides suggestions future research.

### **The Simple Answer is “Yes”**

Two research questions guided this study. First, did international students' perceptions change as a result of studying in the United States? Second, did the different campuses attended have an impact on these perceptions? The simple answer to both of these questions is “yes,” but an in-depth analysis of the results indicate a much more

complex answer about how students' perceptions were shaped and the impact that campus attended had on the formation of those perceptions.

**Did international students' perceptions change?** Without question, the friendliness construct changed the most as suggested by the quantitative data, with further support from the qualitative data. Students who attended Campus A, more so than the other two campuses, indicated during the focus groups that they found Americans to be friendlier than anticipated. This was attributed not only to friendly program and campus staff and faculty, but also to the experiences this group had as they engaged with other students and with local civic groups who had an interest in learning more about the students' cultures.

Conversely, the students' perceptions that American higher education is of high quality was the variable that changed the least. This is perhaps because most of the students believed that American higher education was of very higher quality to begin with, but also perhaps because a number of the students who attended Campus A were more academically prepared than others and may not have been challenged academically as much as they anticipated. It is also important to note that the majority of these students had prior university experience in their home countries, and rather than being thrown into the rigors of a standard curriculum at an American university, were enrolled in a highly supported ESL curriculum at a community college. The major measure of rigor for these students was not the pressures of academic coursework as much as pressures to improve their English language proficiency.

From the onset of this study however, the researcher was very interested in Chimka's responses. What made her decide to attend Campus C, when her previous

experience was with Campus B? Why did she not consider Campus A? She perceived Campus C to be a friendlier, more welcoming environment for international students. She acquired this perception from interactions with Campus C students during the CCELI. However, once she was situated at Campus C for some time, her perceptions of friendliness became more complicated, and akin to those of Jonathan's, a CCELI Campus C student from Malaysia. Jonathan, who tested out of ESL courses because his English proficiency was high, was placed into general education courses with American students. He felt that while Americans in general were friendlier than he had anticipated, he was surprised that American college students did not seem interested in socializing with him. Chimka expressed this same concern after she was "mainstreamed" into the campus.

Chimka, like other international students, was also attracted to Campus C because of the seemingly more advanced academic resources, e.g. the larger library, but not necessarily the breadth of ESL course offerings or support for international students. Her CCELI campus of attendance, Campus B, actually has the highest number of full-time ESL faculty and is noted in the community college district for a history of serving greater numbers of international students and non-native speakers.

She did not attend Campus A because she was seeking a large campus, one that was specifically "friendly" for international students. Additionally, she stated that the academic offerings at Campus A did not match her career and academic goals.

**Did campus attended impact how perceptions were formed?** Social-cultural constructivism is built on the postulation that knowledge is socially constructed within the context of a cultural environment (Wertch, 1985). Lev Vygotsky believed that knowledge is socially constructed via interactions that have been mediated by the



individual and his or her environment (Wink & Putney, 2002). According to Vygotsky, learning is situated in social contexts; it is not so much the product of learning, but the process that matters. Further, Vygotsky focused on the cultural-social influences on learning and development, thus postulating that knowledge is constructed outside the mind and through social interactions.

Because of these views, Vygotsky and his theories were useful in the context of this study. International students' experiences in the United States are characterized by a complex set of social interactions that affect them academically, socially, and/or psychologically – concepts supported in the research literature regarding international students' experiences in the United States. Understanding their experiences in the new social context through the lens of Vygotsky's work would dictate that the students' social interactions shape their higher mental processes. If learning initially occurs outside the mind, as Vygotsky postulated, then the student-mediated interactions with the social environment dictate what they believe that environment to be. In this context, then, environment is the campus attended, the living arrangement or the students, the off-campus cultural experiences arranged for the students, and to a larger extent the United States.

Considering the different social environments of the three campuses involved in this study, according to Vygotsky's theories one would expect that how students perceive the United States would differ by campus because the social interactions they experience through this environment are different. What does this mean in terms of the second research question - did the different campuses attended have an impact on these perceptions? Below is discussion of each perception theme with emphasis on how

perceptions were different by campus attended, and the implications those changes have for policy decisions affecting placement of international students.

In terms of diversity, the quantitative data suggested that students found the United States to be a more racially harmonious place than thought, whereas the qualitative data uncovered three themes: on-campus interaction with multicultural populations provided positive experiences about racial diversity in America; students observed, and were puzzled by, voluntary racial segregation on their campuses; and curriculum centered upon issues of race in America was helpful for the students to understand historical and current issues of race. Students who attended Campuses A and B (the campuses with higher proportion of minority students) were more likely to appreciate the interaction with diversity that those campuses provided. For all students, but especially those who attended Campus C (the mainly homogenous campus), a curriculum that educated students on race in America helped situate them in a context to better understand America's multi-ethnic culture.

One of the implications of the demonstrated differences in response between the Campus A/B attendees and campus C attendees is that learning differs for those who have "experience with" racial diversity rather than just "information about" diversity as a subject of study. This difference is a perfect illustration of Vygotsky's contention that learning and knowledge will be shaped by social interactions, and for those for whom these interactions were limited, the learning was both different and perhaps less complete.

The friendliness construct indicated the most significant change as a result of the CCELI program. The students generally perceived Americans to be friendly before they visited the United States (3.47 on a 5 point Likert scale), but quantitatively, that

perception grew by 0.86 for the post-visit response. The qualitative data expanded on this, revealing three themes:

1. Students had strong preconceived notions of friendliness, and the fact that these notions only increased (they found Americans to be even friendlier than they had thought) was a discovery that students talked excitedly about – even when the researcher was not specifically asking about friendliness.
2. The students found the “openness” of strangers to be a surprise and it encouraged them to be more open and friendly as well.
3. The friendliness of CCELI staff and instructors was paramount to perceiving America and Americans as friendlier than they had thought.

In terms of differences by campus however, students from Campus A talked more readily about how friendly Americans and program staff were. Campus C students were not far behind. Students from Campus B however, did not volunteer any information about their perceptions of friendliness in America and found staff less outgoing and accommodating. Although nothing was done to formally assess the involvement of CCELI staff with students at the three campuses, it was the judgment of the researcher, who served as a participant/observer during the CCELI experience, that the staff at Campus A were most actively and intimately involved with their student group, followed closely by Campus C. The staff members at Campus B were friendly, efficient and “business-like,” but did not exhibit the personal interest in the students, nor commit the extra time to non-prescribed activities that was evident at the other locations. This and the student responses indicate that students’ perceptions of friendliness are more closely tied

to the friendliness of those with whom they most closely associate than with their general interactions with the broader college or surrounding community.

The students also found America to be a safer place than they had thought. This is evident in the difference in the quantitative data, but more so in the qualitative observations. Concerning safety, students' discussions focused on three interrelated themes: transportation, housing, and interactions with the community surrounding their campuses of attendance and/or residences. Students reported feeling safe in their housing arrangements, but students from Campuses A and B reported instances of feeling uneasy on public transportation and while interacting with the community (e.g. while grocery shopping, at train stations, etc.). Here again the data support Vygotsky's theories of social-cultural constructivism. Campus C is surrounded by an affluent, upscale suburban community and students attending Campus C lived in residence halls at a private seminary within a similar suburban community. Unless they visited students at the other campuses by train, they had little experience with the more diverse parts of the city. Students attending Campuses A and B rode public transportation through some of the poorest parts of the city daily as they commuted to school, and had regular exposure to a greater police presence and occasional spats at a train station or bus platform. They were warned not to go unaccompanied into parts of the city that surrounded them, while the students at Campus C received no such warnings.

Though none of the students actually witnessed a crime, those attending Campuses A and B had a greater sense of the possibility of crime than did those in the Campus C environment, and exhibited this understanding in their responses. While it was not the purpose of this study to determine the accuracy of perceptions, one might

conjecture based on student observations that students attending Campus C had a more limited view of general safety and security issues in urban America, and therefore developed a knowledge base that was less complete.

Perhaps wealth was the most complex construct to examine. The quantitative data showed a small downward difference of 0.30, suggesting that students do not view Americans as being as wealthy and as given to consumption as they had preconceived, or as the research literature suggests the outside world views America and wealth. However, the qualitative data show that students observed that there is a greater stratification of wealth in America than expected – especially the students from Campuses A and B. Several students from these two campuses reported observing poor people both on their campuses and in the communities where their campuses and residences were located. Interestingly however students from both Campuses A and B mentioned that even though they observed poor people, they also noted that they had heard that the government provides enough assistance for those people to live adequate lifestyles and even to pursue higher education. For students from Campus C, a service learning component at a soup kitchen was important in terms of exposing these students to populations of lower socioeconomic classes. Otherwise, as one of the case study students suggested, there would be the perception that all Americans are wealthy. Data from both the survey and from the focus groups and case study interviews suggest that the CCELI experience provided students with a more realistic view of the American economy and the stratification that exists within it. Students also were less inclined to see Americans as exorbitant in their consumption as they had been prior to coming.

Finally, this study explored the students' perceptions about the quality of American higher education. Like the friendliness construct, students had high preconceived notions and initially provided a mean question score of 4.15 on the education quality questions. The quantitative data showed a 0.15 point increase, suggesting that student believed American higher education was not only of higher quality than they had thought, but also that pursuing American higher education is something within their grasp and capability. Two themes emerged from the qualitative portion. First, there was a difference in the way students determined exactly what constituted "quality" - rigor or resources. The majority of the students perceived American higher education to be of high quality due to the modern resources and collaborative learning classroom environments, compared to institutions in their countries. Less was said about academic rigor than might have been expected following a full semester or year in a more traditional academic program, since this was purely an English language enhancement experience and course expectations were undoubtedly viewed differently. Students who were enrolled in several mainstream courses were more inclined to comment on academic rigor, and one in particular expressed mild disappointment.

The second theme related to the classroom in terms of the student-centered approach to pedagogy and the focus on practical, "soft skills." Students were impressed that they were encouraged to participate, could discuss and debate openly with teachers, and were expected to play an active role in their learning as presenters and discussion leaders. For many of them, this was an important element of "quality."

It is also important to consider the issues of gender as it relates to students' classroom experiences. Paige made a comment during the Vietnamese focus group that she found the American college classroom to be "liberating" for her as a female student. Some of this reaction to the openness of higher education to discussion and debate may be reflections that these international students came largely from cultures where education is purely lecture-based, where student-teacher relationships are very formal, and where women play a much less visible role in both education and public discussion. The responses do, however, reinforce the notion that one of the reasons higher education in the United States is so highly regarded is that it encouraged critical thinking, open debate, personal expression, and the freedom to challenge ideas.

### **The S.C.A.L.E. Model**

This study has many implications on the federal level in terms of policies and programs geared toward international students, and for institutions of higher learning committed to fostering positive experiences for international students. The U.S. government should not only continue to sponsor the UIELP, but expand the breadth of similar programs if the government is interested in fostering positive perceptions of U.S. culture through international educational exchange. Currently, a majority of federally-sponsored international exchange programs focus on the world's intellectual elite. While that aspect is critical for the United States to maintain a high quality, world-class higher education experience for students who may become future leaders in their countries, American higher education has much to offer in terms of also educating students who are low-income and/or perhaps less academically prepared than the typical international student. This is why community colleges specifically are poised to work with such

programs as UIELP because these institutions have the inherent mission to provide opportunities for higher education attainment for students with similar demographics in the United States. Expanding this reach to a broader base of international students would not only assist these students and foster international goodwill, but also culturally enrich the community college campuses that the students attend.

The study confirms the research that demonstrates that relatively short term immersion experiences in the United States (eight weeks or more) can have a profound and lasting impact on the visitors' positive impressions of America and its culture. In terms of return on investment, this short term program involving 60 students may pay much greater dividends in terms of international good will than might a longer term experience involving only a few exchange scholars.

In terms of relevance to higher education institutions, this study has two implications. First, it reinforces the impact of the service learning projects and collaborative learning and discussion classroom formats. The students were impressed by American higher education because of campus resources, but they did not expect the course delivery to differ in this manner.

Secondly, this study can provide useful components to consider when building or refining international student programs. Several components emerged from the students' responses and discussions regarding their experience that point to key elements of a rich, cultural learning opportunity while in the United States. Figure 3 below, the S.C.A.L.E. Model for building positive U.S. cultural perceptions for international students, is a visual representation of the major components found in this study to have enhanced positive U.S. cultural perceptions pertaining to diversity, friendliness, safety, wealth, and quality



of American higher education. S.C.A.L.E. represents Staff, Culturally-relevant Curriculum, American Student Contact, Local/regional Exploration, and Experiential Learning.

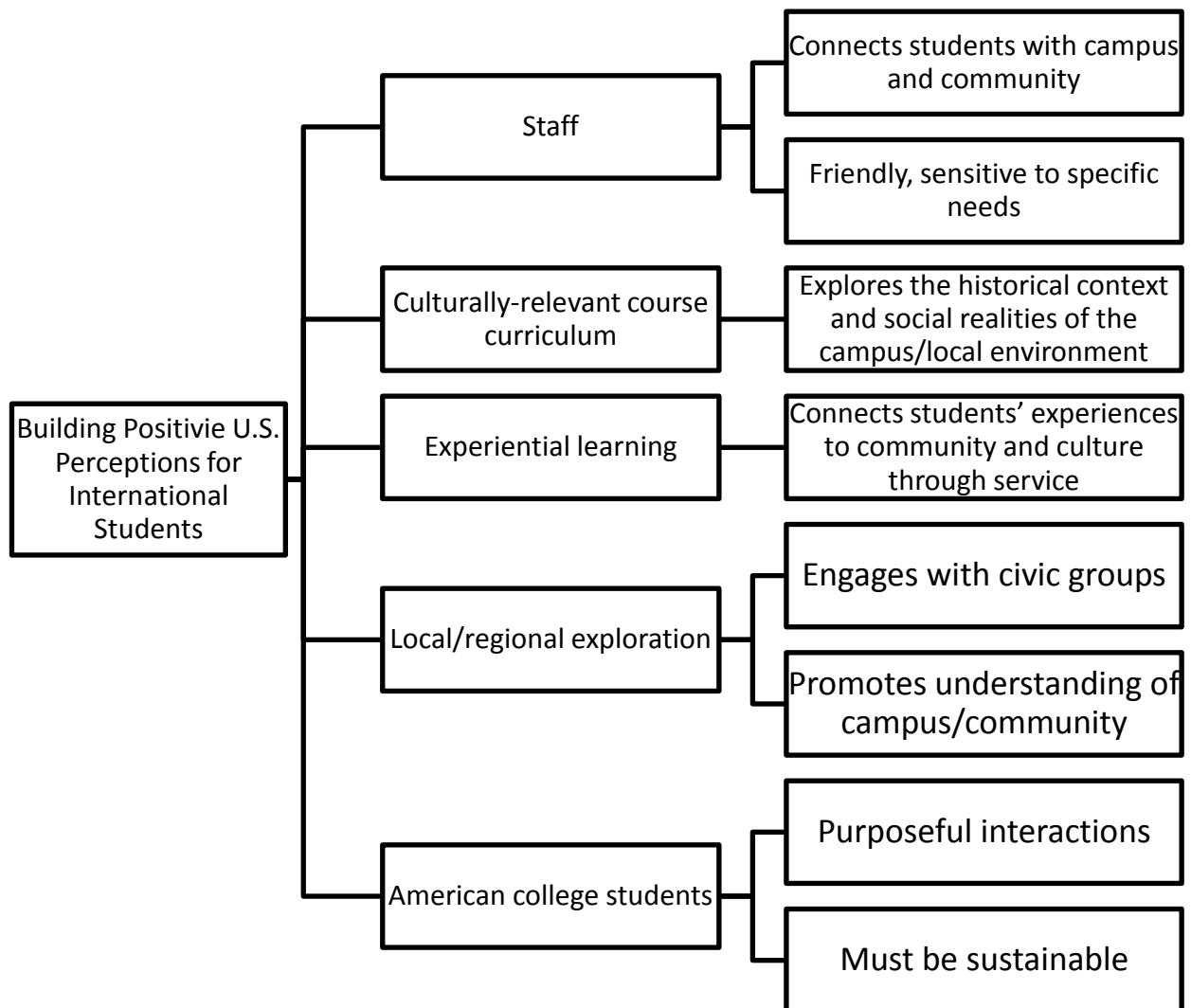


Figure 3. *The S.C.A.L.E. Model for building positive U.S. cultural perceptions for international students*

According to this research, the most critical among the five elements is Staff. Participant responses indicated repeatedly that the friendliness and personal attention of key staff members were the most important contributors to attitudes about Americans and

American culture, particularly when these staff personnel were willing to spend extra time exposing students to day-to-day elements of local life.

A culturally-relevant curriculum gave meaning to these experiences, helping students interpret what they say, heard and studied. This curriculum element proved to be particularly important to students whose lived experience did not include some attributes of culture that others were experiencing first-hand. Institutions were able to compensate for limited student exposures in important cultural areas by including related topics in a specially designed course. In the case of this study, the course addressed diversity, and proved to be important in helping students better understand race relations in the United States, and to some degree differences in socio-economic status.

The study revealed that although international students value opportunities to mix with their American counterparts and found American students generally to be friendly, close contact and association did not occur naturally. The program would have been strengthened by intentional, carefully planned, social interactions with American college students. It is important to note that this association did not occur naturally and therefore program staff could have enhanced the students' experiences with well-designed interaction with American college students. This would also serve to enhance the educational experience of the American students as well. These interactions also must be sustained. A few students during the focus groups did mention American students they had met on their own and because they maintained contact via social networking, this prolonged the American experience in a sense.

Eric, a Campus A student from Malaysia, mentioned during the focus group interviews that he appreciated a program staff member who took him to shop at a local

pawn shop, and asked him to present to the local Lion's Club about his country. Students from this campus, more so than the others, engaged with civic groups and the local culture. Eric, like others from his campus, appeared to appreciate the authentic American experience. On the other end of the spectrum, students from Campus B participated in large-scale events; for example the group took a weekend trip to another metropolitan area – a more cosmopolitan and well-known city internationally – during their stay. Surprisingly this trip was only mentioned in passing by one Campus C student. Upon reviewing the focus group transcripts, it is evident that students were much more likely to express fond memories of exploring the local neighborhoods and culture as opposed to the large-scale events.

The idea that students' appreciation for the U.S. appeared greater when they were encouraged and allowed to see the country "as it really is," rather than filtered through carefully managed super-events, also applies to the next component of the S.C.A.L.E. model: Experiential Learning. Per the grant requirements, each campus had to coordinate a service-learning project for their CCELI students. This project impacted students at the three campuses in different ways; students at Campuses A and B realized that there are systems in place to help the less fortunate – a realization they may not have come across otherwise. Students from Campus C were able to not only observe the greater wealth stratification that students from Campuses A and B witnessed every day, but they were able to actively participate in helping those less fortunate. Yet, a service learning experience is not the crux of this S.C.A.L.E. model element per se. It was not enough for students to participate in service learning activities; they actually had to make meaning from their experiences, and new knowledge had to be gained (Merriam, Caffarella, &

Baumgartner, 2007). This concept is more aligned with the theoretical framework that guided this study. Meaning is constructed via social interactions that are framed within various cultural contexts. Connecting students this way to the cultural realities of their locality and region provided for a richer experience for the CCELI students.

**S.C.A.L.E. and campus attended.** The crux of this study was to examine the influence of campus attended on international students' perceptions of the United States. Therefore it is important to note that each component of the S.C.A.L.E. model worked to varying degrees at the different campuses in the study, depending on the social and cultural attributes of that campus.

For example, Campus A lacked in breadth of support for international students because of limited ELS faculty, upper level ESL course offerings, and lower enrollment of international students compared to Campuses B and C. However at Campus A, the students overwhelmingly reported that a friendly program and campus staff were integral to making their experiences positive ones. Yet, the students who attended Campus B did not show as much growth in the friendliness construct even though students attending here felt equally connected with their classmates. Campuses A and C were found to be friendlier places, largely because of program and campus staff.

Further, Campus B, like Campus A, has large enrollments of minority and low-income students. Students at these campuses reported that they felt that they benefited from this multicultural exposure and that because the ESL curriculum had a "Race in America" theme, they could better understand the historical, political, and social environments of their surroundings. Students at Campus C were not exposed to American minorities as much as those who attended Campuses A and B, but found value

in the ESL curriculum, especially because this group more actively participated in service learning and visiting local heritage sites.

Students at Campus C did not appear to have the same breadth of understanding about issues concerning race and diversity, since their experience were largely academic rather than “lived.” There was evidence, however, that the focused curriculum on race and diversity did compensate to a degree for this lack of exposure, and since students in all groups moderated their attitudes to more accurately reflect the realities of race relations in the United States, there is evidence that within the model, an institution can compensate to some degree for its weaknesses by its strengths in another.

It is also important to note that students tended to appreciate more “authentic” interactions with Americans and U.S. culture. For example Eric, a Campus A student from Malaysia, mentioned his appreciation for a program staff member taking him to a local pawn shop on one occasion and asking him to speak to the local Lion’s Club organization about his culture. Students who attended Campus C also reported enjoying going to barbeques and dinners with local residents and engaging with the local surroundings off campus. However, students from Campus B appeared to have limited interactions with community members and/or organizations, and instead these students participated in more “large scale” activities, such as traveling to one of America’s best known cities. These students also attended large concerts and sporting events, whereas the others did not. Interestingly despite these “grand” experiences, students were much more appreciative of local, small-scale community-based events and activities. As a consequence, it appeared that they gained a greater appreciation for Americans and

American culture through every day interactions with American life, rather than through 'display' activities.

One student criticism of the CCELI program was that there were few opportunities for purposeful engagement and interaction with American college students. Students expressed a desire for this interaction, yet on the few occasions when the CCELI students did engage with American college students (as in Chimka's and Jonathan's situations), they reported feeling somewhat isolated and unwelcome. Therefore, purposefully planned activities with selected American college students would fill students' requests to engage with American college students, and provide a more rewarding experience than would the casual exchanges that occur in classroom settings. There is no guarantee that the outcome would be positive unless the institution purposefully plans for such interaction and strives to sustain these relationships through an organized "buddy" or "peer mentor" program.

**Putting S.C.A.L.E. to work.** Based on the data provided by this research, it is possible to construct an "ideal" campus experience for international students, when the primary objective of that experience is to foster positive perceptions of the United States and American culture. Providing detail to the SCALE Model presented above, this experience would include:

1. Carefully selected staffers who engage with the students as friends, mentors, guides and confidants during the student experience.
2. Culturally-relevant curriculum that helps students make sense out of their surroundings, and/or serves to promote specific program goals.

3. Positive and purposeful American student contact. This association was highly desired by the international students in this study. From a programmatic perspective, this contact would need to be carefully planned to avoid negative experiences. This could take the form of the assignment of a student mentor who can help integrate the international student into other campus student groups, and serve as an American friend.
4. Expectation that program staff and/or American student mentors will serve as guides to local culture and assist the visiting student with an exploration of local and regional life. Engagement with civic groups is especially useful in this component.
5. Experiential learning with students provided with a framework to make sense out of their experiences and with the encouragement to form new ideas or have their preconceived notions challenged.

### **Limitations**

Several key limitations of this study highlight the need for further research regarding the experiences of international students, and how their perceptions of the United States are formed as a result of their study in the United States. This study involved students who were in the United States only for eight weeks, were here specifically for ESL training rather than for enrollment in standard curricula, and were enrolled at a community college, rather than in a university setting. Additionally, all of the students were from countries in East and Southeast Asia, lived together during their entire U.S. experience, and had a full-time staff member assigned to each group of twenty. These students were also given a modest stipend for food and personal expenses.

It is important to note that because of these factors, the students did not have the same experience as the “typical” international student who tends to travel to the United States individually and is likely to face a myriad of overlapping academic, social, and psychology barriers. During her interview, Chimka articulated feeling lonelier at Campus C (the campus she chose to attend when came back to the United States to study on her own accord), than she did at Campus B. She acknowledges that that was because she was on her own, had to grapple with financial worries, and was challenged by a non-ESL academic curriculum. Despite these new feelings, she still observed Campus C as a friendlier place for international students.

Though in many ways, the CCELI arrangement provided an ideal setting for a semi-controlled study of the influence of campus attended, each of these limiting characteristics suggests an opportunity for future research.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Additional research in elements that affect the experiences and perceptions of international students has the potential to provide justification for the creation and/or continuation of international programs that foster international goodwill and specifically target students who would otherwise not have the opportunity to study in the United States. However, and more importantly, such research would assist institutions of higher learning with efforts to craft programs appropriate to the specific campus culture. For example, this study suggested that for campuses with high populations of minority students and/or those from a lower socioeconomic status, a curriculum element that assists students in understanding the historical, political, and social parameters which explain the campus environment, will help international students make more sense of



their surroundings. Conversely for campuses that are largely homogenous in terms of student population, a similar curriculum is important, accompanied by purposeful initiatives such as service learning that engage students with community issues and needs. A list of suggestions for future research follows.

- Other needed research includes a strictly quantitative research study with a survey given at the onset of students' arrival in the United States, and then given again upon their departure. For purposes of this study, the students were asked to recall what their perceptions were before visiting the United States. Perhaps that data would look differently, or be considered more reliable, if students were reporting on their perceptions at the current moment in time.
- On the other side of the spectrum, a qualitative study using an approach such as grounded theory would also be helpful in ascertaining what perception areas arise and/or what campus attributes influence perceptions. This study began with specific variables, but perhaps there are other parameters that frame how international students' perceptions are formed – variables that this study did not address because they were outside of the scope and purpose.
- Further research pertaining to the issue of online versus face-to-face focus groups would be applicable to a wide variety of research studies. The researcher conducted two of the four focus groups online, but only briefly speculated about the implications that difference had on the study. When conducting focus groups from a distance the students preferred to write

their answers rather than talk because of their apprehensions about their English language proficiency. Also transcription was less problematic for the online focus groups because there was no confusion related to pronunciation as was the case occasionally during the face-to-face focus groups.

- Application of the S.C.A.L.E. model to other student populations or settings in higher education could yield interesting results. For example students who come from underserved populations who may tend exposure to diversity or other cultural opportunities may benefit from classes , programs, or institutions integrate each component of the model.

Future research should address the aforementioned limitations of the study:

- CCELI students were only in the United States for eight-weeks. Further research about such programs that incorporate longer stays would help to define the “optimal” length of experience in the United States that is necessary to foster goodwill.
- This study examined students enrolled at three two-year institutions in one district. Would the findings here be applicable to institutions that are not within the same district or geographic location? Further, the results of this study may or may not be different if conducted at a four-year institution.
- Even though eight countries were represented in this study, the students came from the same region of the world. Further research to assess how cultural attributes of campus attended impact students from other regions would be helpful in refining a model that spans nationality.

- A vast majority of the students who participated in the CCELI were enrolled in only ESL courses. Would there be a difference if students were enrolled in different curricula, or non-ESL courses? .

**Implications for staff.** Most of the research surrounding international students pertains to their experiences and development, and the impact that these students have on the institutions they attend and the American college students they intermingle with. This study is no exception. Yet there is nothing regarding the impact international students have on the staff who serve them. Even though the researcher worked with the CCELI in a professional capacity for the duration of their stay, there was an underlying sense throughout the program and beyond that the CCELI had more of an impact on her than it was having on the students. Immediately after the last case study interview, the researcher took time to write in her journal how she was changed because of the program. In this sense, she was put in the same situation as the students who participated in this study – reflecting upon an experience that took place eighteen months prior.

Consistent with Vygotsky's observations, the researcher realized that working with the CCELI students placed her in a new cultural context and broadened cultural understanding for her in profound ways. First and foremost, such an experience resulted in the realization of the true impact of international educational exchange. The research literature pertaining to the history and benefits of these exchanges provides justification for such programs; culturally enriching students and fostering international goodwill are among the benefits. Yet no amount of literature can substitute for experience. To personally experience the impact of interacting with other cultures, and to help those students navigate American culture, illustrated an ineffable component to international

exchange. This program both broadened minds and experience, but it also instilled the sense that it is not cultural differences that matter and foster international goodwill – it is similarities.

### **Summary/Conclusion**

Clearly, international students fill an important role in American higher education, and the nature of their experiences is of interest on a national level as well. This study sought to examine how certain cultural attributes at three different campuses, within the same district and geographic location of the United States, impacted students' perceptions of the United States in terms of diversity, friendliness, safety, wealth, and quality of higher education. There is much literature regarding the nature of international students' experiences in the United States in terms of identifying academic, psychological, and social issues, but no studies that examine how campus cultural attributes impact perceptions of America and Americans.

Methodological triangulation was especially useful, in that it allowed the researcher to gather data across different methodologies at three phases: a quantitative survey, focus groups, and case studies. The methodology changed slightly from the original research design as the researcher evaluated sample size of the quantitative data. Statistically, the sample size for survey respondents per campus was too small to ascertain anything conclusive by conducting an inductive analysis that compared perceptions by campus attended. However, examining just the descriptive statistics, in terms of perceptions before visiting the United States versus perceptions after visiting, suggested that perceptions did change in one direction or another as a result of the CCELI.

The qualitative research design changed slightly as well. The researcher had the opportunity to visit three of the countries represented in this study (Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam), and conduct face-to-face interviews with the case study participants in two of these locations. Yet financial and time constraints meant the researcher had to conduct two of the four focus groups in an online discussion board format. This discussion board format actually had advantages in that perhaps it gave the students more time to read their peers' responses and think about their own. It also provided a ready-made transcript of the discussion that was completely accurate, without need for transcription.

The results of the study suggest that students found America to be a more diverse place than previously thought and that specifically the media inaccurately portrays U.S. racial minorities. Students also found that they could better understand the nature of their campus and community environments when the course curriculum covered pertinent historical, political, and social issues. Students who attended Campuses A and B specifically felt enriched by being immersed, and understanding, the high degree of multicultural diversity at their campuses of attendance.

Friendliness was the construct that increased the most out of the five studied. Students by far were surprised and impressed with how friendly and welcoming Americans appeared to be. Students at Campuses A and C expressed the bulk of this surprise, whereas students from Campus B did not allude to friendliness to as high of a degree. Chimka explains during the case study interview, that it appeared that Campus A was friendly because of a specific grant staff member, and Campus C was overall a friendly place for international students. She had encountered with some individuals on Campus B that left her frustrated.

The safety construct ranked second in terms of change in perception. Overall, students found America to be safer than they thought it would be, and no students expressed any exposure to any realistic threats. This could be attributed to their housing assignments. Students from Campus C were assigned in a residence in an affluent, “safe” neighborhood, whereas students from Campuses A and B lived in a residence hall in a more part of the area that is characterized by relatively higher crime rates. However, the Campus A and B students said they felt safe regardless because the residence halls where they stayed had built in security measures and program staff were quick to caution the students on where not to venture.

The wealth construct was the most difficult to ascertain. Before coming to the United States, students tended to believe that all Americans were wealthy. At all three campuses, students observed a greater stratification in wealth. However, students from Campus C did not express this to the degree that students from the other campuses did. A very effective service learning project at Campus C was helpful in allowing some of the Campus C students to observe that not all Americans are as wealthy as previously thought.

Finally, the construct to change the least was the belief that American higher education is of high quality. Students believed American higher education to be of high quality before the onset of the CCELI, and still believed that to be the case after the program. That explains mostly why the construct did not change that much. However, students from Campuses B and C felt more academically challenged, and students from Campus C believed that they had the most impressive academic resources.

From the above results, several components were found to contribute to positive perceptions about U.S. culture that led to creation by the researcher of the S.C.A.L.E. Model: a friendly and knowledgeable staff; course curriculum that is relevant to local issues; positive, purposefully planned social integration with American students; local/regional exploration and engagement;; experiential learning that connects students' academic and social experiences to community needs.

Future research on how international students shape perceptions of the United States is necessary, but also this research should consider how campus cultural attributes shape those perceptions as opposed to focusing on institutional type or control.

As aforementioned, the researcher worked in a professional capacity with these students while they were in the United States. This experience taught the researcher that these students are both extraordinary and typical. They are typical in the sense that they have the same wants and needs as American college students, and that they are in a transitional stage as well, becoming the future leaders of a variety of occupation and fields. They are extraordinary however in the courage and willingness they exhibited to be thrust into a culture completely different from their own, and to throw themselves into this new environment with unbridled curiosity and enthusiasm.

Upon the students' departure, several wrote prose about their experiences in the United States, perhaps in attempt to make sense of these experiences, thoughts, and perceptions. This study will conclude with a piece written by Adlynn, a Campus B student from Malaysia. Her writing articulates what this study could not fully illuminate – the power and significance of international exchange.

So, here's a story,  
Of a journey to the west,  
8 countries, 8 weeks,  
100 hearts, 1 soul.

Winter, cold, we encountered,  
Put on your coats, wrap up your scarves,  
We now know better.  
Doesn't matter, doesn't bother,  
We're all in this together.

We started out as strangers,  
Who know nothing about each other.  
We turned into friends,  
Who now care for each other.

Writing, grammar, we studied all night,  
Speaking, listening, we keep it alright.  
We learned, we gained, we turned out all right,  
Who else? What else?  
The teachers! The mummies!  
First thing in mind,  
'Wow! The Americans are friendly!'  
Next thing in line,  
'Oh my god! I can't finish this food!'  
The third? the fourth?  
What can I say?  
We're settling, all good!  
Wal-lah!

Friends,  
Like a diamond it shines,  
Forever always, we value.  
For what it's worth it was worth,  
Before, after, eternity, infinity!

Ups and downs,  
We've been through all.  
We cried, we laughed,  
We had it all.

A shoulder to lean,  
A hand to hold.  
Wherever you are,  
Whenever you wish,  
Always have, always will,  
Available, reachable,  
Twenty-four-seven!

Diversities, differs, varieties,  
Cambodia, Malaysia, the list goes on,  
We're not the same,  
We beg to differ.

Even so, we carry the same,  
That's one for all,  
And all for one.

Soon, the time will come,  
It all will end.  
A new journey begins,  
The old one remains.  
Fun was had,  
Memories were kept.  
For all we knew,  
We shared the laughs,  
We spread the love.

Thank you, thank you,  
And thank you.  
To all who've helped,  
To all who've committed.  
Thousands of gratitude,  
Millions of appreciations.

No words can be put,  
Of how we feel.  
It's immensely large,  
That's our LOVE to you.

Thank you.



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**Appendix A: Quantitative Survey****CCELI FINAL PROGRAM SURVEY**

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**Student Information**

Country of Origin:

☐ Burma    ☐ Laos    ☐ Cambodia    ☐ Malaysia  
☐ Mongolia    ☐ Thailand    ☐ Philippines    ☐ Vietnam

Gender: ☐ Male    ☐ Female

Campus of STLCC Attended:

☐ Florissant Valley    ☐ Forest Park    ☐ Meramec

Have you visited the U.S. before participating in the CCELI program?

☐ Yes    ☐ No

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**Experience in the U.S.**

Please rate each question below about what you thought about America and Americans

**BEFORE** visiting the U.S.

<b>BEFORE coming to the U.S., I thought that.....</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
1. Americans enjoy people of different race and culture					
2. Americans care about each other					
3. I would not need to worry about my					

personal safety in America					
4. American higher education is challenging					
5. Americans easily make friends					
6. There is racial tension in America					
7. American higher education is the best in the world					
8. Americans spend a lot of money					
9. There is little violence in American cities					
10. It is easy to make money in America					
11. American higher education will help me get a job someday					
12. Americans spend too much money on unimportant things					
13. Americans welcome international students					
14. Money is highly valued in American society					
15. American higher education will improve my quality of life					
16. Americans are friendly					
17. People of all races are treated equally in America					
18. I would feel safe living in the dormitories and not have to worry about theft					
19. The American government has tried to fix racial discrimination					
20. Americans are helpful to strangers					
21. College campuses are					

safe places					
22. A person's race will affect how successful they are in America					
23. Americans are wealthy					
24. Pursuing higher education in America is something I can do					
25. Public transportation is safe in America					

Please rate the questions below based upon your experiences **AFTER** visiting the U.S.

<b>AFTER coming to the U.S., I noticed or felt that.....</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
1. American higher education will help me get a job someday					
2. Americans are wealthy					
3. College campuses are safe places					
4. Americans welcome international students					
5. I did not need to worry about my personal safety in America					
6. Money is highly valued in American society					
7. American higher education will improve my quality of life					
8. Public transportation is safe in America					
9. Pursuing higher education in America is something I can do					
10. Americans spend a lot of money					
11. Americans are friendly					
12. People of all races are treated equally in America					
13. I felt safe living in the					



dormitories and never worried about theft					
14. There is racial tension in America					
15. There is little violence in American cities					
16. It is easy to make money in America					
17. Americans enjoy people of different races and culture					
18. American higher education is challenging					
19. Americans spend too much money on unimportant things					
20. Americans easily make friends					
21. American higher education is the best in the world					
22. A person's race will affect how successful they are in America					
23. Americans care about each other					
24. Americans are helpful to strangers					
25. The American government has tried to fix racial discrimination					

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Please write any additional comments or suggestions you have here:

## **Appendix B: Interview Guide**

### CCELI Focus Group Interview Guide

1. Briefly describe your experience in the United States
2. Did you enjoy your experience? Why or why not?
3. What surprised you the most about U.S. culture?
4. What was your favorite thing about American culture?
5. What was your least favorite thing about American culture?
6. Did you find that Americans were friendly? Why or why not?
7. Did you feel safe while in the United States?
8. Did you observe that people of different races get along in American? Why or why not?
9. While in the U.S., did you observe that all Americans are wealthy? Why or why not?
10. After studying here, did you find that American higher education was of higher or lower quality than you previously thought? Why or why not?
11. In a few words, how would you describe the Meramec campus (everyone please answer even if you didn't attend Meramec)?
12. In a few words, how would you describe the Forest Park campus (everyone please answer even if you didn't attend Forest Park)?
13. In a few words, how would you describe the Flo Valley campus (everyone please answer even if you didn't attend Flo Valley)?

14. Do you think the CCELI students had different experiences based on which campus you attended (Meramec vs. Forest Park vs. Flo Valley)?
15. Finally, please add any comment below about your experience that you would like.

Appendix C: Human Subjects Committee Approval



**OFFICE OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION**

**Interdepartmental Correspondence**

Name: Mirra Anson


Title: Campus influence on International Students Perceptions of the United States

The chairperson of the Human Subjects Committee for UM-St. Louis has reviewed the above mentioned protocol for research involving human subjects and determined that the project qualifies for expedited review under Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations Part 46.110b. The time period for this approval expires one year from the date listed below. You must notify the Human Subjects Committee in advance of any proposed major changes in your approved protocol, e.g., addition of research sites or research instruments.

You must file an annual report with the committee. This report must indicate the starting date of the project and the number of subjects to date from start of project, or since last annual report, whichever is more recent.

Any consent or assent forms must be signed in duplicate and a copy provided to the subject. The principal investigator must retain the other copy of the signed consent form for at least three years following the completion of the research activity and they must be available for inspection if there is an official review of the UM-St. Louis human subjects research proceedings by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office for Protection from Research Risks.

This action is officially recorded in the minutes of the committee.

Protocol Number <b>091113A</b>	Date <b>11/19/09</b>	Signature - Chair 
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