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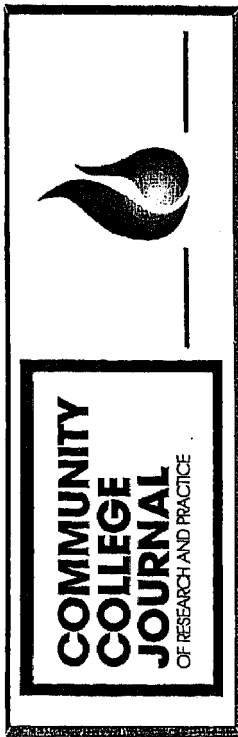
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**D. Barry Lumsden, Editor**  
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## IT'S A LONG WAY HOME: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ADJUSTMENT TO LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES

**SUSHAMA RAJAPAKSA**  
Temple University

**LAUREN DUNDES**  
McDaniel College, Westminster

### ABSTRACT

This study addresses the need for information helpful in retaining international college students studying in the United States. This research compares the adjustment of 182 international students to a comparison sample of American students to determine whether students coming to the United States from abroad have greater difficulty adjusting to college life. International students are more likely to feel lonely, homesick, and as if they had left part of themselves at home. In addition, this study confirms the importance of social network in the adjustment of international students (but not Americans) although the number of close friends does not predict whether an international student is satisfied with his or her social network. The implications for administrators working to retain international students are discussed.

With a significant number of international students coming to the United States for undergraduate study (3 percent of total enrollment in higher education [Shin & Abel, 1999]), it is important for college administrators to be aware of what factors play a major role in the retention of these students. In particular, we need to learn more about what differentiates well-adjusted international students from those who are homesick (Hammer, 1992). While various studies have documented adjustment difficulties of international students (Archer, Ireland, Amos, Broad,

## METHODS

In April 1999, 182 international students completed a two-page survey about their degree of adjustment to college life. Respondents were approached by 12 different Sri Lankan students attending 12 different colleges and universities primarily in the Maryland-Pennsylvania area. These students who collected the data asked international students whom they knew if they could complete an anonymous survey for a student at another school (the principal investigator) who was conducting a research project. Respondents returned the surveys to the data collector who mailed the surveys to the principal investigator. Although the sample was not random because the students distributing the survey were acquainted with the respondents, this sample bias did have the advantage of leading to a response rate that was nearly 100 percent.

In September 1999, 100 American college students completed a shorter, one-page version of the survey. Students in Introductory Sociology classes were given the opportunity to complete the survey by Sociology professors in three different sections of this course. Introductory Sociology attracts students who have a wide range of interests. In addition, the principal investigator was a Sociology major. Class members were told that a student was conducting a research project and that they would be able to complete the survey during the first 5 minutes of class, if they chose to participate. Although students had the opportunity to return a blank survey (without anyone knowing about their nonparticipation), all participated. This likely occurred because the institution where the data were collected is a small, liberal arts college where class size is usually 30 or fewer and professors know their students. Students feel like part of a community and generally are generous with time allotted to such endeavors as survey completion. This version of the survey included only those questions that were applicable to Americans and excluded such questions as whether Americans are open to other cultures. Drawing the comparison sample of Americans from only one institution versus querying the international students from 12 different institutions (in order to obtain a sizeable sample), raises the question of whether the 100 American students are representative of Americans in general. Although this bias is of concern, the same limitation exists with international student in that they are from only 12 different schools out of hundreds of institutions that enroll such students. Thus, this research must be interpreted with this limitation in mind.

The questions asked of Americans were those that applied to students living away from home, but still living in their native country. Both instruments were devised based on a homesickness scale by Archer, Ireland, Amos, Broad, and Currid (1998) and a homesickness and contentment scale developed for Asians— for whom such issues are often sensitive (Shin & Abell, 1999). Adjustment was measured by questions about loneliness, contentedness, leaving part of oneself at home, homesickness, and how much students think about home.

& Currid, 1998; Befus, 1988; Crittenden, Fugita, Bae, Lamug, & Lin, 1992; Dawoud, 1983; Hubbard, 1994; Loomis & Schuler, 1948; Luzzo, Henao, & Wilson, 1996; Oei & Notowidjojo, 1990; Parr, Bradley, & Bingi, 1992; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1991; Santos, 1959), this study assesses the degree of acculturation among international students especially as predicted by their satisfaction with their social network. This study also compares international students' survey responses regarding adjustment to college to a sample of American students. College administrators must know what proportion of international students have difficulty acculturating and if the commonly recommended remedy—helping them establish meaningful friendships (Hull, 1978)—has validity. To date, little research with sample sizes over 100 has been conducted in this area (e.g., Chen, 1998), despite the growing number of international students coming to the United States to earn college degrees.

This research focuses on the adjustment of international students to the United States rather than how Americans acculturate when they travel abroad. This study explores two interrelated subcomponents of acculturation previously identified, psychological adjustment (e.g., stress, depression) and sociocultural adaptation (e.g., learning cultural rules and norms) (Oberg, 1972; Ward & Kennedy, 1993, 1999). How the number of close friends and the perceived quality of social network impact acculturation are highlighted. Because international students are urged to participate in activities to broaden their social network (Vaz, 1984), it is often assumed that the greater the number of friends, the more at home students will feel. This study attempts to validate this seemingly logical assumption.

Some researchers have found a correlation between the number of good friends and general comfort with living in the United States (Hull, 1978). Other research (Weaver, 1986) has shown that having friendships with hosts (Americans in this case) were responsible for bringing students out of the emotional slump which follows the exciting honeymoon period often experienced when students first arrive at American universities (known as the u-curve [Ward et al., 1998]). Still others have corroborated the primacy of interpersonal relationships with so-called host nationals in promoting satisfaction with living abroad (Amoh, 1984; Hammer, Wiseman, Rasmussen, & Brusckhe, 1998). In all of these instances, friendships appear to be key. For example, Kagan and Cohen (1990) found that cultural adjustment is greatly aided by having friends (as well as if the student speaks the host language at home). This finding has been substantiated by Sandhu and Asrabadi (1991). It is important to note, however, that as a general rule, international students historically have defined friendship as a deep, meaningful, and long-lasting relationship (Morris, 1960). This article addresses the question of the importance of friendships and social networks and how understanding their correlation with acculturation might help guide programs aimed at improving the adjustment of international students and efforts to improve retention of this segment of college students.

## RESULTS

### Respondent Characteristics

Forty-five percent of international student respondents were male, 55 percent were female; 21 percent were aged 17-19, 53 percent were aged 20-22, 19 percent were aged 23-25, 7 percent were over age 25. Fifty-four percent said religion did not play an important role in their lives, while the remaining 46 percent felt this was an important aspect of their lives. Fifty-four percent were majoring in business/economics, 12 percent were majoring in the natural sciences, 11 percent were majoring in social sciences, 6 percent were majoring in computer sciences, 8 percent were majoring in the arts and humanities, 3 percent were majoring in languages, 3 percent were majoring in education, and 3 percent were undecided (American students were not asked about their major). Eight percent were from Hungary, 17 percent from India and Sri Lanka, 6 percent from areas formerly called the Soviet Union, 5 percent from Central and South America, 6 percent were from West Africa, 8 percent from East Africa, 14 percent from Asia (excluding India and Sri Lanka), 7 percent from the Middle East, 23 percent from Europe and Scandinavia, 5 percent from the West Indies, and 1 percent from Australia. Forty percent had spent less than one year in the United States, 26 percent were in the second year of their stay, 17 percent were in their third year, 9 percent were in their fourth year, and 8 percent were in at least their fifth year of residing in the United States. Thirty-eight percent lived in dorms, 1 percent with family, 39 percent lived off campus, and 22 percent lived in houses and apartments owned by their schools. While in college, 41 percent were supported by their parents, 18 percent were supporting themselves, 37 percent received support from both of the above, and 5 percent had other means of support (e.g., scholarships). Fifty-six percent of the international students were involved in a relationship. Thirty-four percent of those in a relationship had their partner on campus, 29 percent had their significant other back home, 28 percent had their partner elsewhere in the United States. Twelve percent were willing to date only those of the same nationality, 5 percent were willing to date only other international students, 83 percent were willing to date persons of any nationality (see Table 1).

### Adjustment Variables

Seventy-seven percent felt they had *not* been discriminated against by Americans. Sixty-eight percent agreed that Americans are open to their culture. Seventy-seven percent felt that Americans had tried to get to know them. Seventy-seven percent felt accepted by Americans (87 percent of males and 69 percent of females). Eighty-one percent were comfortable with their roommates, 72 percent were comfortable eating in the dining hall, 88 percent were comfortable participating in class discussions. Sixty-two percent found the American culture refreshing in its freedom, 41 percent believed that the American

culture has sufficient guidelines for formal behavior, and 53 percent believed that Americans properly control undisciplined conduct (see Table 2).

The students in our sample who had come from abroad to study in the United States seemed to have adjusted well: most (79 percent) were generally content (versus 92 percent among the American comparison sample), most (71 percent) did not feel lonely (versus 86 percent among Americans), most (70 percent) did not feel homesick (versus 91 percent among Americans), and just over half (54 percent) disagreed that they had left part of themselves at home (versus 70 percent among Americans). However, while the majority of international students appeared to be well-adjusted, the percentage of those who did have problems acculturating can be seen as substantial: 29 percent often felt lonely, 30 percent felt homesick frequently, and 46 percent felt they had left part of themselves at home. All of these feelings were more common among international students than among American college students. According to a two-tailed difference in proportions test, these differences were statistically significant at the  $p = .0000$  level (see Table 3). Female international students were more likely to feel homesick (36 percent of women versus 22 percent of men) and lonely (36 percent of women versus 20 percent of men).

### Friendship/Social Network Variables

Respondents were asked about friendships as follows: Approximately how many friends do you feel that you can share your personal thoughts with? (We did not provide a definition of friends.) Forty-two percent of international students had no friends from the United States while another 42 percent had between one to three friends from the United States. The remaining 16 percent had four or more friends from the United States. When asked about the number of friends who were fellow international students, 15 percent said they had none, 45 percent said one to three friends, 28 percent said four to five friends, 6 percent said six to seven friends, 1 percent said eight to nine friends. Four percent had 10 or more international friends. These results varied only slightly by sex.

In contrast, Americans reported having more friends than international students. One percent had no friends, 22 percent had one to three friends, 32 percent had four to five friends, 16 percent had six to seven friends, 6 percent had eight to nine friends, and a surprising 23 percent claimed to have ten or more close friends. Thus, 5 percent of international students had eight or more close friends, compared to 29 percent among Americans, almost a six-fold level of difference. According to a two-tailed difference in proportions test, all of these differences were statistically significant at the  $p = .0000$  level.

In addition, international students were more likely to be friends with other international students (with over 40 percent having no American close friends, as noted above) while American students were friends primarily with other

Table 1. Demographic and Background Characteristics of Sample of 182 International Students

International student respondent characteristics	Percentage
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	45
Female	55
<b>Age</b>	
17-19	21
20-22	53
23-25	19
Over 25	7
<b>Religion</b>	
Does not play an important role	54
Does play an important role	46
<b>Major</b>	
Business-Economics	54
Natural Science	12
Social Science	11
Computer Science	6
Arts and Humanities	8
Language	3
Education	3
Undecided	3
<b>Country of Origin</b>	
Hungary	8
India and Sri Lanka	17
Former Soviet Union	6
Central and South America	5
East Africa	8
West Africa	6
Asia (excluding India & Sri Lanka)	14
Middle East	7
Europe and Scandinavia	23
West Indies	5
Australia	1
<b>Time spent in the United States</b>	
Less than one year	40
In second year	26
In third year	17
In fourth year	9
In fifth year or more	8

Table 1. (Cont'd.)

International student respondent characteristics	Percentage
<b>Living Accommodations</b>	
Dorms	38
With family	1
Off campus	39
Houses and apartments owned by the college/university	22
<b>Means of Support</b>	
Parents	41
Self	18
Both	37
Other (e.g., scholarships)	5
<b>Romantic relations (of 56 percent involved in such a relationship)</b>	
Partner on campus	34
Partner back home	29
Partner elsewhere in United States	28
Other	9
<b>Dating preferences</b>	
Willing to date only those of same nationality	12
Willing to date only other international students	5
Willing to date persons of any nationality	83

Americans; 83 percent of Americans had no international students with whom they could share their personal thoughts (see Table 4).

The number of friends of international students and American students did not correlate with how well adjusted they were (contentedness, loneliness, and feeling like they had left part of themselves at home), with the exception of those who claimed there was no one they felt close to. In addition, the number of close friends was not a good predictor of respondents' assessment of social network. Thirty-six percent of those with no close friends were satisfied with their social network, while for all the other categories of number of close friends, there was a narrow range of satisfaction with social network—between 58 percent and 67 percent. The number of close friends was not only a poor predictor of satisfaction with social network, but it also had poor predictive power for other measures of adjustment. It is important to note that with a sample size of 182 international students, and the division of six categories designating number of close friends, small cell size was a limitation. Yet even among those with no close friends in the United States, over one-third claimed to be satisfied with their social network. Further research should perhaps focus on the nature of friendships

Table 2. International Students' Comfort Level and Extent of Feeling Accepted

Characteristic	Percentage
Those who felt they had not been discriminated against	77
Those who felt Americans are open to their culture	68
Those who felt Americans had tried to get to know them	77
Those who felt accepted by Americans	77
Those who felt comfortable with their roommates	81
Those who felt comfortable eating in the dining hall	72
Those who felt comfortable participating in class discussion	88
Those who found the American culture refreshing in its freedom	62
Those who believed that the American culture has sufficient guidelines for formal behavior	41
Those who believed that Americans properly control undisciplined conduct	53

among international students, what kinds of friendships lead to social fulfillment, as well as what other factors lead to a healthy social network (an interesting question for American students, too). It may be that social contacts (i.e., contacts through recreational activities, residence halls, dining halls) as opposed to close friendships, play a major role in determining a student's assessment of social network (Vaz, 1984).

The concept of social network satisfaction is particularly intriguing because it correlates so well with adjustment variables—yet in this study it does not seem to be determined by the number of close friends. Perhaps it might have been correlated with the number of friends, rather than close friends. In contrast, those who were satisfied with their social network clearly were more likely to be content and less likely to feel lonely, or like they had left part of themselves at home. Among those not satisfied with their social network, 67 percent felt lonely, for those moderately satisfied, 40 percent felt lonely, for those satisfied or very satisfied, 18 percent were lonely. For those who were not satisfied with their social network, 72 percent felt content, for those moderately satisfied, it was 62 percent, for those who were satisfied it was 90 percent, and those very satisfied, it was 96 percent.

Table 3. Extent of Adjustment of International Students Compared to Comparison Sample of Americans as Measured by Feeling Content, Lonely, Homesick, and Leaving Part of Oneself at Home<sup>a</sup>

Characteristic	Percentage	
	International	American
Proportion who were content	79	92
Proportion who were not lonely	71	86
Proportion who were not homesick	70	91
Proportion who had not left part of themselves at home	54	70

<sup>a</sup>All differences between American and international students were statistically significant at the  $p = .0000$  level according to a two-tailed difference of proportions test.

For those not satisfied with their social network, 67 percent felt they had left part of themselves at home, for those moderately satisfied, it was 63 percent, for those satisfied, it was 36 percent, and for those very satisfied, it was 25 percent. According to a Chi-Square test, all these differences were statistically significant at the  $p = .000$  level (see Table 5).

Among Americans, only 1 percent were not satisfied with their social network (versus 10 percent among international students), 28 percent were moderately satisfied (versus 32 percent among international students), 47 percent were satisfied (versus 43 percent among international students), and 23 percent were very satisfied (versus 14 percent among international students). Among Americans, neither their social network nor how many close friends they had predicted whether they felt lonely, content, and homesick or whether they left part of themselves at home. Neither the length of time spent in the United States, nor the country of origin predicted adjustment.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

International students appeared to be generally well adjusted to college life, as has been found previously, e.g., Church's (1982) review of the literature, which revealed that the most common difficulties among international students are shared by American students. Yet the results of this study do not corroborate previous research which touts the number of friends as a means to relieve college adjustment problems.

Further research should perhaps focus on the nature of friendships among international students, what kinds of friendships lead to social fulfillment, as

Table 4. Number of friends among International Students and Comparison Sample of Americans<sup>a</sup>

International Students	American Students
Friends	Friends
Proportion with no American close friends	1
Proportion with 1-3 American close friends	22
Proportion with 4+ American close friends	32
	16
Proportion with no international close friends	6
Proportion with 1-3 international close friends	1
Proportion with 4-5 international close friends	4
Proportion with 6-7 international close friends	
Proportion with 8-9 international close friends	
Proportion with 10+ international close friends	
American Students	American Students
Friends	Friends
Proportion with no close friends	1
Proportion with 1-3 close friends	22
Proportion with 4-5 close friends	32
Proportion with 6-7 close friends	16
Proportion with 8-9 close friends	6
Proportion with 10+ close friends	23
Proportion with no international close friends	83

<sup>a</sup>All differences between American and International students were statistically significant at the  $p = .0000$  level according to a two-tailed difference of proportions test.

well as what other factors contribute to a healthy social network (an interesting question for American students, too). It may be that social contacts (i.e., contacts through recreational activities, residence halls, dining halls) as opposed to close friendships, play a major role in determining a student's assessment of social network (Vaz, 1984).

The concept of social network satisfaction is particularly intriguing because among international students it is closely related to adjustment variables while the number of close friends is not. It is possible that this finding could be because international students may be independent, self-sufficient, as well as comfortable in social interactions (as reflected by their willingness to live far from home). Those who were satisfied with their social network clearly were more likely to be content and less likely to feel lonely, or like they had left part of themselves at home. Perhaps the numbers of friends, rather than close friends, might have been a better predictor of social network satisfaction.

Table 5. Satisfaction with Social Network and Its Relationship with Adjustment Variables among International Students<sup>a</sup>

Satisfaction with social network	American	International
Those not satisfied	1	10
Those moderately satisfied	28	32
Those satisfied	47	43
Those very satisfied	23	14

<sup>a</sup>All differences between American and International students were statistically significant at the  $p = .0000$  level according to a two-tailed difference of proportions test.

Relationship between Satisfaction with Social Network with Adjustment Variables among International Students	Lonely	Not lonely
Satisfaction with social network <sup>b</sup>		
Not satisfied	67	33
Moderately satisfied	40	60
Satisfied	18	82
Very satisfied	0	100
	100%	100%

<sup>b</sup>According to a Chi square test, differences in loneliness when stratified by degree of satisfaction with social network were significant at the  $p = .000$  level.

Satisfaction with social network <sup>c</sup>	Content	Not content
Not satisfied	72	28
Moderately satisfied	62	38
Satisfied	90	10
Very satisfied	96	4
	100%	100%

<sup>c</sup>According to a Chi square test, differences in contentedness when stratified by degree of satisfaction with social network were significant at the  $p = .000$  level.

Satisfaction with social network <sup>d</sup>	Left part of self at home	Doesn't feel like s/he left part of self at home
Not satisfied	67	33
Moderately satisfied	63	37
Satisfied	36	64
Very satisfied	25	75
	100%	100%

<sup>d</sup>According to a Chi square test, differences in whether students felt like they had left part of themselves at home when stratified by degree of satisfaction with social network were significant at the  $p = .000$  level.

Neither number of friends nor perception of social network predict college adjustment for Americans. For international students, however, the perception of social network, but not the number of friends correlates with their adjustment. This is the case even though international students have fewer close friends (or use a different definition of closeness) and thus one might expect the quality to be predictive of adjustment. This study implies that part of student adjustment is their perception of their social network since it is so clearly correlated with loneliness, homesickness, and other measures of adjustment. Yet since the number of close friends does not predict either adjustment nor satisfaction with social network, we must study the nature of social relationships and how they affect international student adjustment. Thus, for the minority of international students struggling with acculturation, we must examine the qualitative aspects of their social network that can enrich it, and refrain from assuming that simply enlarging it or facilitating close friendships will serve to ease their adjustment. Further investigation of what international students feel contributes to their social network could allow development of programs that could have significant impact on them during their stays in the United States.

### Limitations

Although there was no indication in any of the completed surveys that any respondent had difficulty understanding the questions, it is possible that a lack of proficiency in English could have affected the validity of some of the data. In addition, the non-random samples raise questions about the external validity of the data. Furthermore, because the sample of American students was from only one college and completed a shorter version of the survey, it was in some ways not comparable to the sample of international students from 12 different institutions. An advantage, however, to the means of obtaining the samples is that the response rate was nearly 100 percent. Because of these limitations, our results should be viewed as preliminary until they can be corroborated.

Advisors of international students should try to focus on the 14 percent of international students who think about home all the time or the 8 percent of these students who have no one with whom to share their personal thoughts. Our finding that over 80 percent of international students were comfortable both with their roommates and participating in class indicates that advisers should focus their efforts on other major spheres comprising the college experience—namely what leads to students' satisfaction with social network. Since this question requires further study, advisers can at least estimate the proportion of students needing special attention and be attuned to some of the characteristics of those least acculturated and most likely to drop out. Homesick and lonely students were more likely to be female, less likely to be satisfied with their social network, and less likely to be in a romantic relationship with another student at the same campus. Yet it is also important to note that a sizeable minority of international students

queried—between one-fourth and one-third—noted feeling disconnected—a number that should not be ignored in the planning and implementation of programs targeted to the retention of international students.

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Direct reprint requests to:

Dr. Lauren Dundes  
 Assistant Professor of Sociology  
 McDaniel College  
 2 College Hill  
 Westminster, MD 21157-4390  
 e-mail: ldundes@wmdc.edu

## A COMPARISON OF COHORT AND NON-COHORT GRADUATE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE ETHICAL CLIMATE AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN RETENTION

LAURA E. SCHULTE, Ph.D.  
 University of Nebraska at Omaha

### ABSTRACT

This quantitative study compared 19 cohort and 27 non-cohort graduate students' perceptions of the ethical climate of an educational administration program at a midwestern metropolitan university using the Ethical Climate Index (ECI). In addition, the study investigated graduate student perceptions of the importance of the ethical climate in the retention of students within academic programs. The results of the study indicated that cohort students rated the ethical climate significantly more positive than non-cohort students on two of the three ECI subscales: *student to faculty* and *student to student*. Both cohort and non-cohort students perceived the ethical climate as an important factor in the retention of students within academic programs.

Graduate student cohort groups were used in educational administration preparation programs as early as the 1950s and saw a resurgence in the 1980s (Achilles, 1994). "A cohort consists of a group of students who begin and complete a program of studies together, engaging in a common set of courses, activities, and/or learning experiences" (Barnett & Muse, 1993, p. 401). In a recent study of 223 university educational administration programs, Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, and Norris (2000) found that 63 percent used graduate student cohort groups in their preparation programs.

Some of the reported benefits of graduate student cohort groups include positive student interactions and relationships, a sense of community and affiliation, and a strong student support system (Barnett et al., 2000; Bratlien, Genzer, Hoyle, &