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# International Students' Transition to a Rural State Comprehensive University

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Global demand for internationalized education is increasing (Thompson & Cuseo, 2009). In the 2016-2017 academic year, there were 1,078,822 international students enrolled in U.S. colleges or universities who contributed \$36.9 billion in tuition (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, n.d.). The number of international students enrolled in the United States increased over the preceding decade through 2016-2017 (O'Connell, 2018); however, that number has been in decline since 2017-2018 (NAFSA, 2019). Though some research has indicated that international students have a series of cross-cultural difficulties adapting to the U.S. higher education system (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Hamamura & Laird, 2014), there is an exceptionally limited number of studies that have focused on the rural setting (Abdolalizadeh, 2014).

In this study, we investigated the transition of international students to a rural U.S. university to understand the concurrent stresses and ways that such institutions may better support the transition process. The research question was: how do international students perceive their transition from their home country to a rural university setting in the United States? For the purposes of this study, an international student was one studying at the main campus of Fort Hays State University (FHSU) using an F-1 or J-1 student visa.

## Theoretical Framework

To guide this inductive investigation, we used Nancy Schlossberg's transition theory, with special focus given to the 4Ss—situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012)—to understand how international students cope with their transition to rural America. Schlossberg. As the purpose of our study was to investigate the transition of international students from their native cultural setting to a new one in the U.S., this established theory, first proposed in 1984 and then continued to be refined over subsequent decades, gave us an existing model to look for in our investigation and illuminated opportunities for institutions to provide improved support.

In transition theory, situation is a detailed analysis of the transition phenomenon being considered. While transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) includes many factors such as the trigger for the transition and timing of it, most were predetermined before the part of the transition process we investigated. While we

do provide a brief discussion of all factors in the findings, our consideration of the situation focused on the sources of concurrent stress in the transition. These concurrent stresses were particularly relevant to our topic, as we sought to understand the stresses in the transition process that most impacted international students with an eye to how institutions could help ease those stresses.

Self is the individual's assets and liabilities that are brought to the transition (Anderson et al., 2012). It is further classified into demographic characteristics and psychological resources. Pendleton (2007) described support as mobilizing the resources necessary to share or eliminate stress. Schlossberg's transition theory describes this support in terms of type, function, and measurement. Specifically, there are four support sources: "intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions/communities" (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016, p. 39). Because international students are removed from their preexisting intimate relationships, families, and networks of friends, our consideration focused on institutional and community support. In this investigation, we found that, though these international students used technologies like Skype to connect with those back home, they found little comfort in that support during their immersion experience in the U.S.

Pearlin and Schooler (1978) argued that coping responses fall into three categories: those that modify the situation, those that control the meaning of the problem, and those that aid in managing the stress in the aftermath, which was adopted into the consideration of strategies in transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012). Individuals also adopt four coping styles for different goals reflected in these categories: information seeking, direct action, the inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behaviors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

### **Literature Review**

As international students transition into U.S. culture, they often struggle with the wide range of differences between their native and new cultural settings (Alghamdi & Otte, 2016). In examining the body of literature, we identified sociocultural and academic challenges in the transition of international students. There are additional challenges associated with their transition to a rural institution in the U.S., as opposed to one in an urban or suburban context. Thus, we situate our study among the literature on these areas of challenge faced by international students during their transition to rural U.S. higher education.

**Sociocultural Challenges.** Researchers have found that cultural factors have been rated as the most common challenges for international students (Malaklolu & Selan, 2011). Unfamiliarity with English appears to limit understanding of the new cultural setting (Jones & Kim, 2013) and leave non-native English speakers hesitant to express themselves (Sato & Hodge, 2009). Non-native English-speaking students may have difficulty understanding native speakers due to linguistic nuance (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). Edgeworth and Eiseman (2007) pointed out that other students' fast speech and frequent utilization of local expressions make it difficult for international students to fully understand others

and then express themselves. The interaction with faculty members is another barrier, as misinterpretation easily occurs during verbal exchanges between international students and their instructors (Baba & Hosoda, 2014).

Beyond language difficulties, international students may not be accustomed to other factors during their transition process, such as food (Alavi & Mansor, 2011; Li et al., 2017), climate (Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, & Ishak, 2010), religion (Ellis, Sawyer, Gill, Medlin, & Wilson, 2005), and transportation (Li et al., 2017; Malaklolunthu & Selan, 2011). Differing culture-based socialization practices also present significant challenges for international students (Sato & Hodge, 2009). Furthermore, international students may experience discrimination based on nationality, ethnicity, and/or race during interactions with others (Lee & Rice, 2007), creating an emotional burden.

**Academic Challenges.** At their new U.S. institution, academic differences pose a major challenge for international students (Choi, 2006; Malaklolunthu & Selan, 2011). While U.S. faculty members have generally positive perceptions of international students, they also struggle with accommodating their needs (Jin & Schneider, 2019). In U.S. classes, interactive teaching aims to motivate students to express themselves more (Li, Wang, Liu, Xu, & Cui, 2018), which is at odds with the instructor-centered format many international students are accustomed to (Edgeworth & Eiseman, 2007). Han (2007) noted that international students are less likely to participate in class discussions. Audio content from faculty members may be hard for international students to understand fully due to accent differences or being non-native English speakers (Ellis et al. 2005). Lengthy reading and writing assignments are difficult to efficiently navigate (Durkin, 2008; Kim, 2012).

**Rural Challenges.** Many international students have inadequate information about rural institutions before they make their enrollment decision. Rural institutions are an attractive option due to the relatively low cost (Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000) and more open admission requirements (Edgeworth & Eiseman, 2007). Kusek (2015) noted significant barriers for international students attending schools outside of urban settings, such as a lack of entertainment options, international food providers, and non-Christian religious institutions. Similarly, Dowda, Li, and Irby (2015) identified transportation problems, poor access to authentic ethnic foods, and living arrangements as difficulties faced by international students at a similar setting as we used in this study. Despite such challenges, rural institutions may be valued for perceived cleanliness, calmness, safety, small class size, and greater access to staff (Ellis et al., 2005), while those factors are not as commonly attributed to urban or suburban universities (Edgeworth & Eiseman, 2007; Ellis et al., 2005).

**Positioning This Study.** Until now, there has been limited research on international students at rural U.S. universities, with none identified as using Schlossberg's transition theory oriented toward producing student affairs interventions. We now extend the research of Kusek (2015) and Dowda et al. (2015) on international students by using Schlossberg's transition theory to identify transition barriers and appropriate student affairs interventions at rural institutions.

## Methodology

After receiving approval from the FHSU Institutional Review Board, we conducted an instrumental case study to understand the transition process of international students to a rural SCU. Case study is a qualitative methodology for the study of “the particularity and complexity of a single case” to “understand its activity within important circumstances” (Stake, 1995, p. xi). Stake further differentiated the instrumental case study as when a specific case is used to understand a phenomenon present in that case but extending beyond it and also described the necessity of a bounded system to define the case study. The bounded system for this study consisted of international residential students attending classes during the 2018-2019 academic year.

**Research Site and Participants.** FHSU is a state comprehensive university situated within central Kansas. In January 2019, the university reported an enrollment of 4,511 students on campus, 7,005 students online, and 3,570 students at China campuses (Fort Hays State University, 2019). In the spring semester of 2019, data from the Office of International Student Services (OISS) at FHSU indicated that there were 177 international students on F-1 student visas at the main campus in Hays, Kansas. The population of Hays was 21,500 in 2019, with only 7,500 other residents in the county (Hays Convention and Visitor Bureau, 2017). Hays is a hub of services for rural western Kansas, providing notable services such as tertiary medical care, lodging, and higher education.

Using email, we invited all prospective participants who met inclusion criteria during the spring 2019 semester to participate in the study, which included all international students who were studying at the main campus of FHSU using an F-1 or J-1 student visa. Sixteen international students volunteered to participate in this study, all of whom were full-time students attending the main campus of FHSU.

Due to concerns about the privacy of participants, we have limited the information included about participant demographics here to that which is non-identifiable. The participants in this study represented similar national origins as those of the broader international student population at FHSU, with most coming from East Asia but also including those from other continents. Their socioeconomic backgrounds were middle or upper class, and they lived in or with easy access to very large cities. All ages fell between 18 and 30 years old, including both undergraduate and graduate students. Male and female participants were evenly distributed.

**Data Collection Procedures.** We began the process by engaging with three OISS staff members to identify common issues in transition that they saw international students encounter. They then provided the research team with a contact list of international students who met our inclusion criteria. Once an international student agreed to participate in the study, we scheduled a one-hour timeslot for a semi-structured interview, which was conducted in English. In addition to interviews, we triangulated data sources by reviewing archival data and observing campus programming for international students, their residence life setting, and their general presence on campus.

**Data Analysis Procedures.** We followed Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson, et al., 2012) to conduct the analysis, looking specifically for the 4S elements of situation, self, support, and strategies. To accomplish that, interviews were audio recorded in Zoom, which provided a preliminary transcript via an automatic transcription engine. A member of our research team then made manual corrections to the transcripts to keep an accurate record of the conversations, after which identifiable information was removed from that transcript. We then utilized Dedoose as a software program to code the data according to Schlossberg's transition theory. After completing the manuscript, we shared it with the international student participants and OISS staff member to review as a form of quality control for the trustworthiness of the study.

## **Findings**

We have organized the findings according to Schlossberg's transition theory. The four major sections here mirror the four theoretical factors that influence an individual's ability to manage transition: situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson et al., 2012).

### **Situation.**

Our focus in this study regarding situation was to identify areas of concurrent stress within the situation. Thus, while we focus on those stressors in greater detail, we also briefly detail other factors of the situation. The participants in this study came to the United States largely due to the recommendations of their home institutions. In many cases, relationships between FHSU and those institutions created financial incentives to attend FHSU rather than another U.S. institution. For those from non-Western and non-English speaking cultures, the desire to study in the United States was driven by a desire to learn English from native speakers and understand U.S. culture. The international students had chosen to study at this time, leaving them in control of the timing and the transition itself. Understanding the visa process, each student knew this was a temporary transition terminated by the completion of their academic plan.

**Concurrent stress— isolation.** Though Hays is a city of only 21,500 residents, it is the hub of the rural areas in central Kansas. Due to the influx of capital from the university and surrounding petroleum production, there is a large hospital, a variety of options for dining, and much more social activity than the small towns elsewhere in its region of the state. It is home to an airport with daily flights through United Airlines to Denver and Chicago, and Interstate 70 runs through the city.

Despite these factors of relative strength, Hays is still just a city of 21,500 residents. The food and cultural activities are what one would expect in catering to the Caucasian population of the U.S. Midwest, with some options also representing the growing Latinx community. Once one has exhausted the small number of things to eat and do in Hays, it is difficult to get elsewhere. By car, Salina, Kansas, is one and a half hours away; Wichita, Kansas, is almost three hours; and Denver, Colorado, is a five-hour drive. The limited flight options are also expensive and

inconvenient when compared to the high-speed railways familiar to many international students.

International students at FHSU predominantly come from inside and around large cities, such as London, Tokyo, or Nairobi. In such venues, there is easy access to both familiar and varied options for food and social activities. The rurality in which Hays is situated stood in stark contrast to the participants' backgrounds, and they were further surprised by how difficult it was to get from Hays to other places.

"[Getting around in my home country] is very convenient with bus, trains, airports," opined one participant. Another noted how their home country made available "high-speed railway and public bus and subways—and the price is cheap and [the] surrounding [areas are] better than Hays." Whereas access to public transportation in their country might be as simple as swiping a national identification card, systems in Hays were seen as slow, expensive, poorly scheduled, and difficult to access. Such efficient systems in their home countries readily connected the students to a network of large and small cities.

"I think everyone needs a car," another stated. Indeed, the most convenient form of transportation in Hays is a car; however, this was not a viable option for most international students. Buying a car would be a significant expense, and they often did not feel comfortable with U.S. driving laws. The convenience of a car was only relative compared to other transportation options in Hays; however, it was inconvenient in comparison to their familiar public transportation, as it required personal effort and attention to drive the vehicle rather than just riding. One student recounted a previous trip to Orlando, Florida—a much larger U.S. city—noting that transportation was "convenient; it's a big city." The small city of Hays simply could not compare in the ease of getting around town. Thus, the international students had to take the public shuttle bus, which was described as infrequent and inconvenient, or walking—and many simply did not feel comfortable walking around in such a foreign place. This severely limited getting to even the limited food and entertainment options in Hays. As one noted, "Because the transportation limitation, I almost just go to Walmart bi-weekly." Even then, another pointed out that, "it's really hard to get even [to] Walmart."

"Hays is quiet, and it doesn't have a lot of places for us to have fun." Another similarly described Hays as "boring" and perceived it as having "not so much people and not much place to play." Thus, somewhat marooned within the small town of Hays, there was too little to do, especially in comparison to the large international cities they had come from. One participant described how they had enjoyed the nightlife in their home city, specifically karaoke, but in Hays, all there seemed to be available to do was to "just play card games with other friends or just talk or go to [a] house party [or a] bar."

**Concurrent stress—food.** "I miss specific noodles in my hometown, which I can't really [get] here. Probably, I can get [them in] New York, but not Hays." Another significant stressor for international students was the lack of familiar food. In addition to U.S. cuisine—which many described as too sweet and greasy to eat—the city of Hays and food service at FHSU offer selections of Central American,

Asian, and other world cuisines; however, the international students from those locations found the options to be inauthentic and disappointing, more tailored to U.S. students seeking a U.S. version of international cuisine. Another option for these students to access authentic food would be to cook it themselves. Still, this was not a particularly easy option as the FHSU residential facilities provided limited cooking spaces, with three floors of the largest residential facility each having one sink, microwave, and electric range.

Again, many of the international students had come to FHSU to immerse themselves in the language and culture of America, but they found that difficult to do in Hays. One noted their desire “to know the culture” and “to taste different [U.S.] foods;” however, Hays had few options, and its isolation made accessing other U.S. cuisine difficult.

The participants found Hays restaurants serving food associated with their home countries to be poor. One Chinese student described their frustration with Chinese restaurants in Hays: “this should be sweet, but here is salty.” Indeed, most of the students, especially those from Asia, described how attempts by restaurants in Hays to serve their home country’s cuisine were consistently off: sweet when it should be spicy, salty when it should be sweet, etc. The greasiness of food prepared in America was the one consistency. What would normally be boiled in water in their home country would be fried here. What might use a small amount of oil to keep food from sticking to the pan was instead saturated in it. Similarly, others reported that the fish and fries sold by Hays restaurants did not compare well to any “little hole-in-the-wall fish and chips shop.”

“Last semester, I ate food in [the residence hall’s cafeteria], but this semester, I cook by myself.” This was a common pattern among the participants. Though the residence hall cafeteria offered a wide selection of cuisines, one student from China described how the food labeled there as “Chinese” was really “American Chinese” food, appealing more to domestic students than international students looking for authenticity. So, faced with limited options of food seen as unpleasant, many cancelled their meal plans after their first semester and cooked for themselves. The greatest barrier was locating authentic ingredients beyond the easily-shipped seasonings. The Walmart in Hays was the main source, but it still did not have many of the specific ingredients students sought. Online shopping expanded options, though many vegetables and animal proteins could not be acquired this way due to shipping issues. For authentic vegetables and animal proteins, the Asian markets in Salina and Wichita were the only viable sources, but they were far away and difficult to access as detailed in the previous stressor of isolation.

**Concurrent stress—safety.** “It’s better than I expected. Like, you always hear bad news [about America], I think. So that’s why I was also kind of afraid.” Consistently, the participants had come with a degree of trepidation about what they would find in America, but they were pleasantly surprised when what they actually experienced did not meet those negative expectations.

For international students coming from countries where only law enforcement or military members have firearms, knowledge of the private ownership of guns



was a significant worry. The exterior doors of FHSU buildings display signs banning the open carry—but not concealed carry—of firearms, further reinforcing this perception after arrival. One student described their evolution of feelings related to guns in this way:

In my home country, the government doesn't allow the people to have a gun, but here American law includes that people have the gun to protect themselves. So, my parents and my other family members, they are concerned about the safety. Actually, I've been here for one and half year; I feel safety and comfortable. So, it's not a problem anymore.

Participants often chose FHSU due to its location in a small town, which was perceived to be safer than a large city, like Los Angeles. Indeed, Hays has a low incidence of violent crime, and the visible presence of campus police helped students feel safer. While there were certainly privately-owned firearms invisible around them, their fears faded quickly when the anticipated violence did not materialize.

Driven by what they had seen in the news, there were also fears of rampant racism in the United States. One participant did perceive subtle racism after coming to the United States: "Some people, unfortunately, don't like some race specifically. But you try to be nice because you are the representative of your race to other races." Despite their perception of racial preferences among some, that participant did not note experiencing any overt racism, such as discrimination or violence. Outside of this one instance, no others noted any such perception; in fact, they were very impressed with how different their experiences were from what they had expected based on mass media. Some from Asia noted observing far less racism in Hays than in their own countries. Rather than racial strife, they described FHSU and the community of Hays as "peaceful" and "very friendly." One described how people they did not know would "smile to every people and say hi. But I think students in my home country are more individual[istic] than here; they don't say hi or smile." The small-town atmosphere of Hays and the tight-knit campus were not perfect, but they were not the hotbeds of hate that many had feared.

### **Self.**

As much of the content associated with Schlossberg's "self" is located in the Methodology section, our focus in this section of the Findings is on Schlossberg's concept of psychological resources.

While exposure to the language and culture was the predominant motivation for international students coming to FHSU, they also noted feelings of shyness within their new cultural setting. Many came with apprehension due to their perception of what it would be like, mostly informed "from the movies" or the news. Dominic Toretto, the character played by Vin Diesel in the *Fast and Furious* line of movies, might be cast as an archetype of their prior perception of the United States (Fandom, n.d.). Oozing machismo and living a wildly dangerous life, such a character would not be a welcoming host. Of course, language was a major point of concern for many, as they feared their conversational English skills would be a barrier to

socialization. However, as they realized the *Fast and Furious* stereotype was not reality and as their English skills improved, the feelings of shyness abated. As one participant in their first semester anticipated, “[I] don’t worry; it just needs time.” Another noted that, “This is my second semester. Everything is just beginning to...I feel good; it’s much better.”

These international students chose to study in America despite fears of what it would be like and knowing they would struggle with a new language. The apparent apprehension and lack of self-confidence were but a thin veneer on top of pioneering spirits, as they had been willing to leave systems of comfort for discomfort, familiarity for the foreign. When asked about the challenges they faced, one participant illustrated this spirit with particular clarity: “Everything is different from my home country...food, culture, dress, language. So, I’ve been trying to discover something new every day.”

### **Support.**

The nature of their transition from another country to the United States left the international students without familiar supports. They were thus left only with what FHSU provided.

**Types.** With friends and family located thousands of miles away, only the institutional support of FHSU was proximate. Certainly, modern technological means allowed for some connections to the familiar through videoconferencing systems like Skype, but this ultimately provided little comfort and no real aid to the realities the students faced in rural America. OISS became their primary source of institutional aid.

**Functions.** Even before leaving their home countries, the participants described how OISS sent them detailed information to aid them. Upon arrival, OISS personnel greeted them and helped them get to campus. OISS personnel also taught an orientation course for international students, and FHSU provided English-as-a-Second-Language courses if they were needed. OISS, and more broadly the Division of Student Affairs, provided limited programming for the international students, such as bus trips to nearby larger cities for U.S. cultural experiences and to acquire more authentic foods. Though operating with limited resources, OISS provided aid, however they could, to the international student population on campus.

**Measurement.** In their new role as international students, they found themselves subject to changing supports. Whereas they had been familiar with their local language, cuisine, family, friends, and customs, they were now alone and attempting to navigate unfamiliar systems. Things that might be taken for granted as being known by domestic college freshman, such as the U.S. style of pedagogy or the cultural prominence of U.S. football, were unfamiliar to the international students. The move to rural America had caused their level of support to decline in a way inversely proportional to their needs for support, leaving them isolated and dependent on FHSU—primarily OISS—to thrive.

## Strategies

**Categories.** Those going through a transition process may attempt to cope by modifying the situation, controlling the meaning of the transition, and managing stress in the aftermath of the initial transition. The international students involved in this study had little they could do to modify the situation, aside from quitting and moving back to their home countries or switching to an urban U.S. institution (both of which would remove them from the scope of this study); similarly, the meaning of the transition was defined by the educational purpose. In this study then, we found participants most focused upon managing their stress after the transition began.

The initial response to the stress was to withdraw from social engagement. While a college student moving from Maryland to Kansas might also experience transition stresses from moving and leaving one's parents, these common college stressors appeared to fade into the background for international students behind the prominence of stresses associated with the cultural transition. While the desire to be immersed in the English language and U.S. culture was a major draw for international students to FHSU, it was also immensely intimidating once they arrived. For many, the language barrier made isolation within one's living space feel like a welcome refuge from native English speakers talking too fast in slang and technical jargon. However, language was only one component leading to withdrawal. There was sociocultural otherness, very much feeling different than those around them. One participant noted, "In America, there's so much pressure to be this cool person." The withdrawal practice of international students would then leave them as not "cool" among their peers.

Withdrawal was, however, not effective at alleviating the stress; rather, the process of overcoming the desire to withdraw and socially engaging seemed to be the only curative remedy. One participant described the culmination of their process as going from looking for "many [of] my home country's people [to socially engage with]. But, when I come here, there are no[t] so many [of] my home country's people here. So, [I] very [much] appreciate this." When this international student took the step to socially engage, it was first overwhelming but then satisfying. Another noted their top piece of advice to incoming international students: "make more American friends!" This move from social withdrawal to social engagement was a key step in managing the stress associated with the transition.

**Coping modes.** Those transitioning may engage in information seeking, direct action, inhibition of their own actions, and intrapsychic behavior in order to cope. Information seeking occurred before the transition and immediately after arrival. Some took direct action, such as attending a game night in their residence hall for social engagement. Others were more reflective, engaging in intrapsychic behavior (ex. imagining) to manage. However, their primary coping mode was the inhibition of behavior.

The inhibition of behavior resulted from several sources. Many international students did not understand U.S. laws or customs, leaving them without confidence to do things. There were necessary and practical tasks that were inhibited, such as

needing a doctor's prescription to get certain medicines which was not the practice in that student's home country. There was a fear of trying to drive while not knowing traffic rules in the United States. One participant noted that, "I just take the school public bus go to mall or Walmart. So, I seldom go other places." Due to difficulty with transportation and a feeling of alienation, the student made only infrequent trips to the stores they needed for necessary items, such as toiletries, shirts, and cooking supplies. Another factor further inhibiting action was the language barrier within their academic content. While all had some grasp of conversational English, many found it difficult to adjust to the technical jargon used in their classes, such as U.S. accounting terminology. This forced them to spend almost all their time outside of class re-reading and translating or re-listening and translating recorded lectures, leaving little time to do anything else.

### **Discussion**

Schlossberg's transition theory was a useful framework for breaking down the elements of transition among international students at a rural U.S. university. While the concurrent stressors encountered we identified were similar to Kusek (2015) and Dowda et al.'s (2015) previous findings, transition theory provided us with a far more robust way to consider international student experiences within the isolated rural setting and identify ways for institutions to better support their international students.

In this section, we provide recommendations for institutional supports to alleviate the concurrent stresses in the situation of international students at a rural, state comprehensive university, which were developed with input from the participants. Based on our review of the literature, the stresses themselves were not unexpected; however, we found the participants' input on how to ease those stresses to be particularly valuable, which we now report here.

**Addressing isolation.** International students at FHSU were isolated on several levels: (1) on the campus due to linguistic and cultural barriers, and (2) within town and from larger cities due to transportation.

On the campus itself, international students expressed great interest in more social programming that would mix them with U.S. students, especially early in their first semester. Due to the simultaneous importance and fear of social engagement, consistent opportunities should then be made available to allow them to engage as they are comfortable. Institutional travel would be the most direct support for alleviating the isolation from other U.S. cities. Once or twice per semester, FHSU provides—at cost to students—a bus trip to Salina and Wichita. Once there, students can shop and eat, but their time is limited to hours. This did not afford the U.S. cultural experience many sought. One participant proposed a study abroad-type program for international students, except that it would occur in the United States:

I think maybe during the summer, or winter or spring or fall break, FHSU can get some [international] students together to organize the group to go to somewhere, maybe different groups to different places, and students can

choose one...I think maybe more about this like this also for more international students, they may want to go to the big city.

FHSU already operates study abroad options in countries such as Germany and Costa Rica. For international students, Hays and the rest of the United States is "being abroad." If isolated in Hays, international students could spend four years or more of their life in the country but never really experience it. Such trips could also be offered for credit as in existing international study abroad programs.

On a smaller scale, bus trips of 1-2 days could be arranged to other cities than Salina and Wichita, such as Denver or Kansas City. A barrier to participation in such trips is the additional cost to students. The international students pay fees to the university, which covers student programming. However, the participants of this study severely underutilized those campus services, with the notable exception of the Wellness Center for exercise. While providing such trips at-cost to the institution would be expensive, it is aligned with the mission based on the needs of this specific population. The mission of the FHSU Division of Student Affairs (2019) is that it "stimulates diverse learning opportunities, reinforces student engagement, and motivates students to think globally, discover their potential, and develop their unique talents to become citizen-leaders through innovative programs, environments, services, and relationships" (para. 2). For a population of students who are unable to access or do not have interest in many of the services otherwise provided to the general campus population, investment must be made in the services that meet their unique needs.

For other rural U.S. institutions, we then recommend that they reverse their view of domestic-international when it comes to serving international students, seeing the United States as their study abroad, and ensure that the international students are immersed in U.S. culture beyond the rural venue in which the institution resides through careful planning and engagement, as would be done on a study abroad trip. Institutions should recognize that international students are a key target for mission fulfillment who have unique needs for programming investment and may benefit far less from other programming on campus designed to develop domestic students.

**Addressing food.** While FHSU does not control the restaurants in town, there is much that could be done on campus to support international students' food needs during transition. When ethnic cuisines are to be served in the cafeteria, they could utilize some of the international students from that area to consult on meals to be served and on specific recipes. Though the increased trips to larger cities would also address food issues in addition to isolation, the greatest opportunity to assist international students with food would be in the provision of ingredients and additional cooking spaces within their residential facilities.

Walmart and online shopping can only partially meet the needs of international students to access authentic ingredients. Based on this study, we propose that FHSU survey international students during each fall semester for key ingredients they are not able to access in one of those two ways. Then, where the institution's contracted food service provider already sells food in the Memorial Union, a cold produce

display case or other appropriate set-up could be provided to sell those ingredients at a small scale. The revenue from those sales may cover the entire cost; however, even if it does not, we recommend this course of action based on the previously expressed reasoning for investment in international students.

For other rural U.S. institutions, a similar path should be taken to support international students' food needs during transition. Seek to understand the specific challenges associated with food that international students face there and then provide simple access to the solutions. These students want to experience U.S. cuisine that is available on and around rural campuses, but they also need access to the cuisine that is familiar and comfortable for them.

**Addressing safety.** Unlike the isolation and food stressors, we believe that support for the safety stressor could be done at no cost and with minimal effort. This stressor primarily existed before arrival and then dissipated over the first semester at FHSU. Thus, the institution's marketing and recruitment of international students should include the words of the current international students explaining how their negative pre-conceived notions did not match with the pleasant reality they found in Hays. By using international students to communicate directly, there would be a foundation of trust for other potential international students.

### **Limitations**

An instrumental case study purports to utilize a single case to illuminate a broader issue (Stake, 1995); however, qualitative research does not lead to reliably generalizable findings. In studying something at the unit of one, it is all but certain that there are specific, inherent factors that affect the findings. Thus, it is incumbent upon the reader of this study to identify aspects of the findings and discussion that are resonant with their setting.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study is an extension of the line of research established by Kusek (2015) and Dowda et al. (2015). Based on the consistency of problems faced by international students in these exploratory qualitative studies, quantitative investigation is needed to establish the generalizability of these findings and test interventions.

Further, the interplay between rurality and international students in higher education has been given insufficient attention. Even where the numbers of students are comparatively small to major research universities, international students are important constituents of the institution for mission fulfillment and key pieces of financial stability for the rural institutions that serve them. Extending Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, international students both come from rural/suburban/urban settings and come to a college nestled in America in rural/suburban/urban context. This study indicates that the interplay between urban international students studying in a rural U.S. setting may be significant, needing

further investigation as a complicating factor to the already-difficult transition of international students to America.

### Conclusion

During their transition process, we found that international students attending a rural U.S. university faced three significant stressors that were associated with the rurality of the institution: isolation, food, and safety. Rurality appeared to be an unanticipated benefit with regard to the safety stressor, while it was the primary contributing factor to the problems associated with isolation and food. Rural institutions must study their specific local variations, and then they must invest in international students as key constituents of mission fulfillment.

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