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YOUTH ACADEMY CAFÉ: INTERNATIONAL YOUTH VOICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This study utilized qualitative research methods to capture international youth voices regarding issues and concerns they face as students in the Midwestern US and the possible strategies to resolve such challenges. Graduate and undergraduate students representing 20 different countries participated in the study. Language, assimilation, support, religion, employment, and finances (LASREF), emerged as a fundamental six- factor precept that can be used in addressing international students' concerns. This six-factor precept was found to be consistent and interlinked with other challenges such as transportation, alienation, isolation, and skeptical and stereotyped assumptions. This study postulated that institutions should establish strategies that address these issues before, during and after the recruiting international students. Findings also highlighted the importance of developing programs to capture youth voices and safe use of social media to reveal better ways of providing a life of meaning to international students.

INTRODUCTION

Youth represent the future of any society. As Edginton, Kowalski and Randall (2005) have offered, they represent our hopes, aspirations and dreams for the future [they…] reflect and mirror many of our most cherished beliefs and ideals (Edginton *et al* 2005, p. 1). The voices of youth are important and should not be ignored (Mandel and Qazilbash, 2005); rather, an effort should be made to determine ways to engage them in meaningful dialogue and conversation. Young people need support in order to propel their creativeness, energy and resourceful behaviors. When young people are offered mentorship and relationship support of any kind, they benefit enormously and are inspired "socially, psychologically and in

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their academic outcomes" (Langhout, Rhodes, and Osborne, 2004). Thus, it is required that academic/institutional administrative leaders acquire knowledge about the needs and challenges of youth within their institutions. This will enable them to engage in the provision of relevant support, activities that best meet their expectations and needs. One can most likely identify such needs through conversation to explore and gain a proper understanding of the challenges young people are facing. Providing effective support to international students within a university community is very important (Trice, 2003). In other words, the voices of youth should be heard. The challenge is that, many universities have not prioritized the needs of youth to actively incorporate their voices in the decision making processes and have not utilized structured organized conversation avenues to explore challenges faced by international youth. Conversational avenues which allow for youth to feel the sense of freedom to engage in relevant dialogue within their learning and educational community can

provide rich, sincere and necessary information about that community. In addition, very few researchers have explored such conversational approaches to engage young growing professional students. The purpose of this research was to capture voices of international students in a Midwestern university regarding numerous issues and concerns related to their academic and extracurricular experiences. Exploring the voices of youth is a prevalent concept in today's contemporary discourse to help gain an appreciation of their challenges. In this research study, "Youth Voices" is defined as a systematic strategy that allows young individuals to engage in a process that is geared toward addressing issues and/or concerns that directly affect their lives. To gain the primary objectives of this research study, the World Café model (Brown, 2010) was employed. This model facilitates youth dialogue and conversation. This strategy provides an opportunity for youth to express their distinct ideas, opinions and attitudes as well as articulate priorities and determine possible ways of addressing those priorities. Bruce, Nicola and Menke (2006) asserted that listening to youth voices can provide resources and tools for educators to use when integrating important concepts into various programs. 'Youth Voices' can be considered as an active, distinct, and concentrated method or technique to enable young individuals to represent themselves throughout society (Fletcher, 2006).

Employing the World Café model, the research addressed the following six questions:

(1) What do you see as the challenges in achieving your goals at the university? What types of support services should the university provide to international students to assist them in overcoming their challenges and achieving their goals?

(2) What specific concerns living in the community do you feel international students face? What can the community do to help overcome such concerns?

(3) What can the university do to assist international students to gain employment and be placed in internships? What are the barriers or constraints you are experiencing in locating internships? Mentorships?

(4) Can you discuss the ways in which you think the university can enhance the voices of international students?

(5) How can the university assist international students in living a life which enhances meaning and wellbeing? How can the community and the university help international students deal with the challenges that come with social and cultural isolation?

(6) In what ways do you think social media can be employed to assist in the understanding of issues concerning international students?

This research project and the model employed in the study expressively contributes to youth empowerment. Such inquiry in various forms brings fresh and new perspectives forward, that often result in significant changes in the ways in which culture unfolds, contributing to the building of a strong sense of community, commitment to civic action, and a passion for active learning. Undoubtedly, the techniques employed can assist in evaluating the quality and effectiveness of youths' experiences and its application. Mandel and Qazilbash (2005) explored the relevance of gaining Youth Voice in programming, planning and policy development. The authors posit that involving youth in the needs identification provides a

conducive environment for information sharing and meaningful feedback. Other scholars suggest that gaining the voice of youth serves as an avenue used by parents, teachers, youth workers, researchers, politicians, government officials, etc. to engage young people (Fletcher, 2006). Incorporating Youth Voice into national and community service programs is a critical and important process that takes time and is worth the effort, because it creates an unyielding confidence and positive potentials among young people (Beilenson, 1993). As many youth organizations and active community groups have suggested, Youth Voice is an important attribute to successful operations. Striving to inspire confidence and social engagement for young people (Fletcher, 2006; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas and Lerner, 2005) may be less of struggle if youth voices are incorporation in societal operations.

Changing Demographics in the Higher Education Systems in America: International Students: Academic institutions in the West, specifically the English-speaking parts of the world, have been compelled to accept the growing trend of internationalization in the rise related to the universal demand for higher education (Ryan and Zuber-Skerritt, 1999). Despite the decline in the U.S. market share of the world's mobile students over the past decade, a study conducted by IIE (2015) revealed the United States as the destination choice for highest number of globally mobile students. The total number of 1,043,839 international students reported to have studied at U.S. colleges and universities in 2015-2016 included undergraduate (40.9%), graduate (36.8%), non-degree (8.2%) students, and those enrolled in Optional Practical Training (14.1%) (IIE, 2016). The largest percentage of students come from, China (31.5%), followed by India (15.9%), Saudi Arabia (5.9%) and South Korea (5.8%) (IIE, 2016; Project Atlas). This compares with 564,766 international students in 2005/2006 (Project Atlas).

As one can see the number of international students, studying in the United States has nearly doubled in the past decades. The most popular fields of study include engineering (20.8%), business, and management (19.2%) (Project Atlas). Although the international students are a rapidly growing segment of the higher education population in the United States (Unruh, 2015), there is some indication that U.S colleges and universities could see a sharp decline in enrollment of international students in the future. Schools reported decline in undergraduate applications from the Middle East (39%), India (26%), and China (25%); a drop was noted in graduate applications too, notably the Middle East (31%), China (32%), and India (15%). This may be due to variation in experiences and acculturation of international students at American universities (Smith and Khawaja, 2011). Circumstances faced by international students often produce stress due to language barriers, educational difficulties, loneliness and practical problems associated with the changing environments. This can lead to issues of social isolation, the lack of understanding among faculty regarding international student's culture, limited awareness of cultural resources, lack of social support, and discrimination (Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Unruh, 2015; Wan, 1992).

Challenges and Struggles of International Student: Previous studies have revealed that international students are expose to a wide range of challenges (Tseng and Newton, 2002). Some of -these include: acculturation or adjustment (De Araujo's 2011; Lee, Koeske, and Sales, 2004; Misra, Crist, and Burant, 2003); English

Table 1. International students' Challenges

Problem Categorizes	Factors
General living adjustment	Food, living/housing environment, transportation, climate, financial problems, health care concerns
Academic adjustment	Lack of proficiency in the English language, lack of understanding of the American education system, lack of effective learning skills for gaining academic success
Socio-cultural adjustment	Culture shock, racial discrimination, new social/cultural customers, norms and regulations, differences in intercultural contacts/social activities, encountering conflicts between American host standards
Personal psychological adjustment	Homesickness, loneness, depression, frustration, feeling alienation, isolation, loss of status or identity, feelings of worthlessness
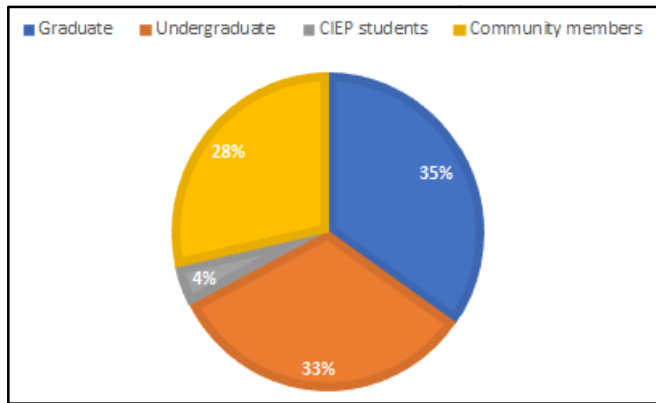
Figure 1. Participants of Youth Academy Café
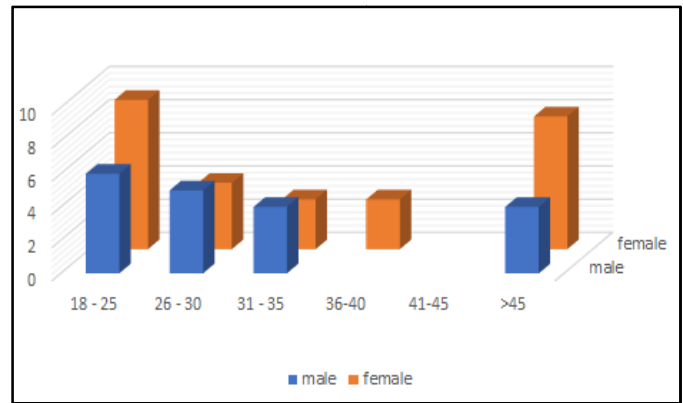
Figure 2. Distribution of Participants by Age and Gender

language proficiency barriers (Andrade, 2006; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui, 2010; Yeh and Inose, 2003;); lack of or limited social support (Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Sawir *et al*. 2008); unwanted length of stay in the new environment; perceived discrimination or prejudice (Lee and Rice, 2007); homesickness; stress, financial constraints (Sherry, Thomas, and Chui, 2010); cultural change; identity shift (Tate, 2012); and transportation (Gautam, Lowery, Mays, and Durant, 2016). In Lee and Rice's (2007) study, students from Asia, India, the Middle East and Latin America reported experiencing different rates of discrimination. They argued that the nature of problems varied among people from different countries and cultures and emphasized that some were long-standing, such as hostility towards women wearing veils or sarees. In Sawir's (2005) study, students' lack of confidence in educational settings was attributed to inability to follow lectures in English and writing conventions; in fact, having to adjust to the teaching style of the host country can be difficult (Smithand Khawaja, 2011). Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005) explained that as academic institutions can be disappointing to these students in several ways, disappointments and frustrations increase immensely with their extended stay, which is likely to be shared with other international students. Therefore, common among international students is the stressful process of having to adjust in a new academic and social environment that trigger feelings of loneliness (Sherry *et al*., 2010; Sümer, Poyralzi, and Grahame, 2008). Smith, and Khawaja, (2011) stated that their ability to establish friendships could be obstructed by the cultural norms and the nature of relationships in the host country and resulting in loneliness. They point out that within the academic context; international students encounter numerous acculturative stressors, which can influence their adaptation process. Yeh and Inose's (2003) study revealed geographic region, English language fluency, social connectedness and social support network satisfaction to significantly contribute to acculturative distress. Table 1 presents a categorized summary of these challenges.

In all these challenges, it is without doubt that international students in the United States are mostly young and vibrant youth. This population represents avaluable asset to the higher educational system. Unruh (2015) found that, international students possessed "highly-prized attributes": they are motivated, committed, focused, goal-oriented, determined, conscientious, respectful, culturally competent, flexible, and adaptable. There is a need to capitalize on retaining the international students in any first-class tertiary university education (Gautam,*et al*., 2016), as this would assist in maintaining the goals of U.S. higher education system. Apparently, it is also important to encourage international student enrolment for academic, economic, and cultural purposes (Sümer, Poyralzi, and Grahame, 2008). Cross-cultural workshops have been suggested in previous works as a strategy to cope and identify solutions for the aforementioned challenges (Smith and Khawaja, 2011). According to these authors, understanding such challenges and seeking ways to intervene for foreign students, as well as developing supportive response patterns, can be realized through programs such as the one set up for this research study – the Youth Academy Café.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Youth Academy Café is a program designed to engage small groups into a dialogue using semi-structure open-ended interview questions. This approach is also known in the literature as focus group interview procedures and is widely used in qualitative research. The purpose of this approach was to: (1) empower youth voices and allow young people to be heard, (2) enable students to discuss challenges and issues and find solutions to problems both at their university and within the community they find themselves in, (3) explore proposed strategies to address concerns related to international students and, (4) Engage and interact with university and community members in a meaningful dialogue. Focus group approach is a recommended approach in qualitative study that provides rich

and quality information (Kaplan and Maxwell, 2005; McLafferty, 2004).

Procedure

The setting of the event mimicked the World Café approach, which promotes and investigates dialogue. As Brown and Isaac (2002) have offered, the World Café is a simple yet powerful conversational process for fostering constructive dialogue, assessing collective intelligence, and creating innovative possibilities for action. Following the World Café guiding principles, the Youth Academy Café setup a focus group-driven conversation environment. The Youth Academy Café model (1) set the context, (2) created hospitable space, (3) explored questions that matter, (4) encouraged everyone's contribution, (5) connected diverse perspectives, (6) listened together for patterns and insights, and (7) shared collective discoveries (Brown, Isaacs, and Cafe Community, 2005; Brown and Isaacs, 2002). Participants were asked to comment on six research questions. The room was set with six tables each with a tabletop display of one research question. Six students were assigned to each table with a facilitator, recorder and community members. The questions were displayed on the tabletops for participants to clearly read. Each facilitator was responsible to engage the students at their table in a professional manner. Conversation and dialogue were solely directed to the question assigned. All facilitators were trained (IRB certified) to engage human subjects in professional conversation for the purpose of the research. Each table also had a designated recorder who focused on recording the participants' comments from which they collaboratively presented a hashtag report to the overall facilitators. Two overall facilitators were engaged in capturing summary conservations and hashtags – known as "The Harvest" (Brown, 2010; Brown and Isaacs, 2002). Conversation on a given question lasted for about 20 minutes. After this time, participants were asked to move to another table to explore other questions. Three table rotations were made during the event. Thus, students were able to explore at least three questions in total. Recording protocols were:

- No recording of identifiers or identification of individual names and responses; (2) all responses were recorded collectively for the entire group which was further factored into the development of overall themes.
- Interviewers were certified research professionals who understood protocols on human subject research.
- Professionals volunteered to facilitate and conduct the interviews for each group.

Participants of the Study:

Participants of the study were international students enrolled in a Midwestern university in the United States, as well as community members who served as facilitators and recorders. Participants were offered a consent form to participate in this research-oriented event. Students, facilitators, and several members outside the university were invited to voluntarily participate in the event. There was an open call for registration to participate.

Analysis:

Data was analyzed using Corbin and Strauss (1990; 2008) and Creswell's (2013) approach. The interview conversation at each table was recorded using a notepad – handwriting word-for-word transcriptions. Immediately after the event, the researchers transferred the handwritten data to electronic transcription. Data collected for each question were

organized and segmented into smaller units to form semi stories. As this process proceeded, the researchers were able to *"open code"* (Creswell, 2013) their data information. Thus, specific attributes emerged from each table transcription, presenting both challenges and suggested remedy strategies. The properties and adjectives were deliberated upon collectively, to identify the context in which attributes and objectives could be further categories. Finally, themes emerged which structured the findings as presented below.

FINDINGS

Language, Assimilation, Religion, Support, Employment and Finance (LARSEF)

Language : The first and most ubiquitous topic identified by all three groups that participated was consistently stated to be the barriers created by either not knowing any English or having limited knowledge of the English language (Gautam, *et al.*, 2016). The students expressed the difficulty that this issue posed in almost all aspects of their experiences while attending the university, sharing that the entire first year is spent struggling to become proficient in conversational English. This language barrier challenged the students in the classroom, social life, work settings, and everyday activities. They explained that the University has programs to aid in becoming more conversational, noting that first semester orientation, Culture and Intensive English Program (CIEP), and the host family program all assisted in gaining greater language comprehension. However, they felt that this significant challenge creates a disadvantage for them in both assimilation and academics, which unfairly elevates the domestic student's ability to be successful.

"Language barrier is one of the challenges that I am facing in securing an internship. Writing style is a barrier that might affect one's opportunity to secure an internship. Less American experience in the internship field can result to rejection when applying for an internship."

Assimilation: The second topic raised was Assimilation and is closely tied to students overcoming the language barrier (Bowman, 2012; Lordand Wu, 2013). This idea of making connections was addressed by all three groups but took differing approaches to addressing this challenge. Some of the students focused on the programs that the University has established to aid students in their quest to master the English language, such as, the international club and CIEP, which have become the means of explaining and bridging the American culture.

"Universities should provide a platform to become more involved, improve communication skills and establish connections. Although the university have the Cultural Intensive English Program (CIEP) that helps to improve English language for international students that are non-English speakers, I still feel that the program creates isolation. I believe that university can play a vital role in addressing this isolation factor."

Support: Participants in this study acknowledged that there are student groups, but these groups however, are generally filled with mostly international students, with no domestic student membership or involvement. International students expect support from the domestic students and perceived that such

students would provide opportunities to integrate. Participants expressed that international students' events or clubs seem to be restricted only to them. This is because invited domestic students don't show up during such events. Some of the students expressed feelings that domestic students were not interested in meeting international students. It is by stepping outside of their comfort zone or their educational experience from their countries of origin and joining clubs not focused on the international experience that they begin to more fully assimilate into the new environment and university culture. The international youth also reported inappropriate experiences in building class consensus and integrating for group work/projects.

"I never had a chance to be in a group work with Americans".
"I think Americans are not willing to work with international students".
"I feel like I am lacking behind in terms of academics"

American student's reluctance to work with internationals in classes makes academic learning difficult, which might further affect their academic goals and achievement. The dilemmas from such interactions might not affect the international youth only but the domestic youth in these class settings too.

Religion: Integration is a two-way process andinternational youth cannot integrate in a society if other members refuse to accept them (Parekh, 2005).The report here explained that the struggle to integrate into a new society is by definition the quest to make closer associates and friends. Religion was discussed as an obstacle to meeting new friends. It was expressed that many of the domestic students use clubs and bars as meeting places, wanting to go and get a beer. This is not an activity in some cases that they can participate in because of religious beliefs, which removes a very common opportunity and social setting. Religion is a barrier and has created intolerance (De Kadt, 2013) for multicultural integration. Individuals must be aware and cautious about their religion in social settings, as it requires youth to adjust and compromise to effectively integrate.

Employment: The third topic was the difficulty in finding and obtaining gainful employment with the University. They expressed frustration with the structure of the hiring program and elements that they knew were not controlled entirely by the University. However, they wished that the Universities could advocate for them on topicssuch aswork-studyexperiences and the ineligibility for international students to be employed. They felt that there were not enough resources to aid them in locating open positions. Specifically, they explained that international students generally do not come to campus more than a week before the semester is to begin and by that time the majority of the campus jobs are filled with domestic students. The student felt there are much greater opportunities for domestic students to seek out positions on campus because most placements are complete before international students are even able to see what is available. One student commented that by the time we arrive, "all of the desk jobs, the good jobs, are already taken."

"Recently, I applied for an internship in Department of Defense. I was qualified for the internship opportunity but I was told that I can't get into the internship position because I am an international student. I think University should look deeply into the immigration policies in place for international

students. The university should collaborate with other agencies to address these concerns and provide opportunities that will accommodate international students. It is also difficult to get an internship opportunity in your field. If the university can collaborate and explore these resources that will assist international students in securing an internship, that will be helpful."

Finances: The fourth topic that was covered by the students was related to financial challenges that are faced in addition to employment. There was a strong frustration with regard to the cost of education in relation to the domestic students. They expressed that the burden is twice heavier when compared to domestic students. This difference is always present and adds a great deal of stress in their academic pursuits as they feel the strong need to deliver results. Students expressed frustrations with class offerings especially in the senior year or as graduate students. They felt that the cost of their education was so high that they should not have to struggle to find classes to complete their programs. They also explained that they felt they should be provided more opportunities for internships based on cost of education.

The LARSEF factors emerged strongly in the discussion as in previous research works (De Araujo, 2011; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui, 2010; Tseng and Newton, 2002; Yeh and Inose, 2003). These factors seem evident with international students irrespective of the academic environment in which they find themselves. These seemed to be established fundamental challenges and an evident base theory, which needs to be addressed ahead of time by academic institutions. Accommodating international students would imply the importance of setting up strategies to address these problems. Remedies for the LASREF theory include active domestic students and peers as support teams, creating more opportunities to intension and equal opportunities and faculty/administrative employment support for job placements even out of the university and enforce diversity within the university operational systems (Sawir *et al*., 2008; Smith and Khawaja, 2011). It should be noted that international students add significant cash fuel to USA higher institutions and the USA economy at large (Bauer and Picciotto, 2013).

They offered multiple suggestions that might aid international student in obtaining work such as having each campus department holding a position or multiple positions for this group of students or a requirement that there is a percentage of diversity required in each area. Additionally, there was an expression of overall need for more advisors that are dedicated to helping with just employment related questions and placement in jobs. There was also a call for a support structure whereby other students and peers can be an active part of their support team. International students expressed that they would love to have their peers from different colleges of the university, be staged in the common spaces like the library to answer topic based questions, help with editing, or just to have someone to talk to about the challenges of being a college student. They expressed willingness to have domestic students attend club meetings and create friendships outside the classroom. They saw that relationships which were developed from interactions in the very beginning of semester or year were the most effective in helping them to enjoy their university experience as they provided the opportunities that helped them relate to their new culture.

Race and Ethnicity Stereotypies Leading Prompting Discrimination: Participants had the following concerns with regard to larger community in which they find themselves. International students felt they are tormented with stereotyping with regard to gender, religion and ethnicity. The situation is mainly faced by Muslim women who, by wearing scarf (hijab), feel isolated, rejected and discriminated against. It is argued that there are different problems for people from different cultures and nations, however it is evident that some of these problems are long-standing (such as hostility to women who wear hijab) and are more evident based on student's country of origin or other independent factors (Lee and Rice, 2007). Lee and Rice (2007) found that students from different countries reported different rates of discrimination. The participants in this study noted that *stereotyping experience* was also felt in terms of language. Since English is a second language to most international students, the US domestic students look down on them and regard them as being inferior or people who cannot perform in class due to language inefficiency. This stereotyping is clearly stated in the literature that Lee and Rice (2007) identified as neo-racism, or "new racism," - a form of discrimination which is based on culture and national order. Literature supports that Language barriers are one of the major challenges for non-English speaking international students in English speaking countries (Andrade, 2006; Tidwell and Hanassab, 2007; Wright and Schartner, 2013), and it was revealed that this influences discrimination.

"It is high time the Americans regarded the international students as equals who, given the opportunity, can perform equally well like the domestic students."

Impediment in Exchanging Ideas Due to Isolation

Isolation was another concern expressed by the participants. The international students participating in the study noted that because of the individualistic tendencies of the Americans, most international students feel isolated. The differences in culture between the domestic and the international students, make international students suffer from cultural shock. In their respective countries, most international students value family bonding which is quite different with the American culture. Again, according to McClure (2007), Sawir, *et al*. (2008), and Chui and Johnson (2009), studies have demonstrated that international students are lonely in their new environment because of not having familiar friends and social networks, as well as the exposure to a new culture, and being challenged by the linguistic and cultural nuances of language. The participants also felt that international students do not easily mix up with the domestic students. So too is the case with domestic students who do not open up to international students. Because of this, there is a gap in the exchange of ideas between the two groups of students. Students suggested the revival of the international Friday dinner program which would act as a platform where the domestic students and international students would interact with each other, and the scaling up of the "Host Family" program.

Mobility within the Larger Community – out of the university boundaries: Another major concern expressed was that of mobility within the community. It was expressed that going to town using the local bus services is problematic. They suggested that a solution to this issue would be a university bus service that would take international students to town for shopping on designated days and times just like it does when it picks up students around the campus. In their study, Gautam, *et al*. (2016), noted that transport was a challenge that international; students cited. The participants revealed that even though the university has a transportation system, it does not adequately meet the needs of individual international students. In addition to the overarching consistent themes addressed above the students also expressed these concerns. Furthermore, Gautam *et al*. (2016) concluded in their study that transportation was one of the challenges of international students in American institutions of higher learning. Overall, lack of transportation options to city centers and shopping areas in small town university campuses featured as a strong concern to the participants.

Alienation: Aligning with Lee and Rice's (2007) study of students from 15 countries studying in a university located in the Southwest region of the U.S., found that inadequacies hospitality friendliness from the society contributed to the challenges faced by the students. According to the participants, inhospitality and confrontation on the part of U.S. students posed a major challenge to international students. The students reported that;

"I live on campus which I think that is the worst thing because I am always on campus and always not at rest. I am currently working on a thesis about alienation of international students. I wonder how it is for single people?"

"I live on campus in the dorm with four other roommates. Sleep is very important to me. I think living on campus is the best decision to make because my roommates are kind of like my family here...it helps me cope with strength and the feeling of alienation"

Having a Host Family has been shown to be a major factor to helping integrate students to American culture. Previous studies indicated that international students adjustment with US experience require social support such as establishing relationships with the Americans and emphasized the significant and importance of establishing relationships with Americans(Araujo, 2011; Yeh and Inose, 2003; Zha, Kuh, and Carini, 2005). Social support are among the most significant factors related to international students' adjustment in the US. One international student stated,

"I enjoy living on campus because I can learn a lot about the American culture which is something I wanted in my experience here. Having a host family is also very meaningful...but not everyone gets a host family though."

Participants in this study reported that domestic students are reluctant to work with international students which makes academic learning difficult. This seems to arise from the stereotyping of international students which is perceived to be a part of the problem. This was manifest in the dialogue from the table discussion as quoted;

"American students form cliques. They don't think we know how to speak English. They don't care about international students."

"I don't think anything can change this problem...but accepting differences and willingness to learn--being able to understand would make the change…. I think the extra/added stress makes it too much to handle. We try to please everyone...but we don't get any responses back. There are general stereotypes that causes separation [among international and American students]."

Figure 3. "The Harvest" – International Youth Academy Café

Table 2. Summary of Proposed Solution and Strategies

Possible Solutions	Strategies to Realize Solution
Provision of Support	• Create more spaces and avenues for students to hang out • Explore other different groups on campus • Have Good English programs and a good exchange • Make classes more appealing; Credit course caucus would be helpful if the faculty members would communicate with students and within themselves and together provide more opportunities for support. • Advocate for social and leisure oriented events/activities • Demonstrate a welcoming attitude, specifically, faculty and domestic students). • The language is not perfect but universities can be /should be very helpful and be receptive to international students' needs. • Provide extra test time
Bridging Cultural Barrier and Becoming Culturally Competent	• Get an international aspect: Ask name, country, major • Promote cultural bridge building:offer credit diversity course, express issues, develop cultural competency • Create and promote avenues beyond the classroom and the university campus for students to professionally integrate with each other • Provide opportunities for more integration through study groups and assignments • Initiate a somewhat compulsory association between international students and domestic students • Encourage faculty to take interest in supervising both international students and domestics forum • Encourage University Department ofResidence to introduce social mixer events to bring diversity. Prompt more student organizations to integrate and reach out • Show openness to accepting and communicating with international students by appreciating languages other than English • Encourage Department of Residence to be more understanding towards international students • Faculty members should learn basic words in other languages to facilitate friendly communication e with other languages would create a friendly environment Burmese
Employment and Finances	• Create more opportunities for involvement within the community and also the university • Enforce job recruiting programs • Sustain good international recruitment strategies • Advocate for international student job placement during vacation and secure/facilitate work experiences. • Provide an active international advisor who is resourceful in providing employment opportunities and enhancing life on campus/community
Transportation Services	• Provide safe transportation campus services • Provide flexible and safe transportation services that help studentsto commute from campus to the city and vice versa.
Living Life of Meaning	• Create a dynamic multicultural environment. • Develop appropriate differentiation strategy and rules aiming to enhance goals of young people. • Provide international students opportunities to be in mixed classesBuild community engagement. • Promote Host Family event • Safe Community: Emotional, Psychological and Physical Support
Use Social Media	• Utilize social media as a powerful tool to capture youth voices • Reserve safe institutional space for students to share their voices

"Conversations between international students and domestic students does not include topics on emotions. Americans only talk about the surface level things but nothing deeper among international students."

Social Media as a Resourceful Tool for Community Building: Social media was viewed as a "powerful tool" for potential community building. Several participants believed that one way that social media is a very useful resource is that it creates opportunities to connect with others. Entering a new culture requires handling different value systems, communication patterns, sign and symbols of social contact, and interpersonal patterns (Wu, Garza, and Guzman, 2015). Using social media, international students in the present study found it purposeful to establish contacts with different community members who have had wider range of experiences including the older members. They reported that social media can avail the opportunity of learning about resources that they would have otherwise not known. Social media also enable and simplify learning local culture by immersing them in enriching experiences that help them engage in closer interaction with community members. In other words, there is a sense of community building as international students overcome cultural barriers through the support of social media. Research supports the use of social media for enhancing social and cultural understanding: Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, and LaRose (2011) revealed that use of Facebook contributed to international students' ability to participate socially and culturally in their new surroundings.

Several participants expressed their own interest in belonging to self-created sub-communities in modes such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or cross-platform instant messaging applications like WhatsApp or messenger on Facebook, and Snapchat. They deemed online communities as support systems that they can rely on while studying in a foreign country. On the one hand, they claimed, belonging to a sub-community provides international students with a space to celebrate their holidays as well as sharing their firsthand experiences of culture shock. On the other, belonging to general communities serves as a space to welcome international students into the new culture and to demolish stereotypes. Although some participants within the group settings were quite skeptical about the use of social media. However, it was generally established that universities and the international students' office housed within these institutions can create "a private safe space or platform" and maintain its safety through internal management but not control the freedom of speech of the users. It should be noted that adjusting into the new academic/cultural environment during the first 6-12 months is difficult mainly because of the international students' previous expectations of the new environment which have been influenced by their previous educational experience and home country culture (McClure, 2007). Wu, *et al*. (2015) found that students mainly adopted resources derived from the university to address culturally different ways of thinking and doing in the US. They reported university resources as strategy for coping including student associations, writing center, counseling center, recreation, and various other student organizations. The potential of online social group or blog created by the university should be explored further.

Proposed Solution and Strategies to International Student's Challenges: According to participants discussions, local communities and higher institutions should collaborate to create programs that will introduce international students and their cultures into the existing social construct. Organizing games or activities such as intramural sports competitions is a simple way to help integrate international students more quickly. Relaxation, hanging out with friends, traveling – all help to cope with the stress of acclimation.

"Have a class about the world in general...bring them exposure to international culture and interaction [opportunities] I think this can be the university's responsibility to push for this. When the international students are being observed by the Americans, they could find out and understand things."

"Talk with friends. Hang out. Travel somewhere. Call home...sometimes it helps me relieve stress. There are many fun activities for many students...like yesterday...there was an event at Lang Hall...it was called BASIC...the event helped me relax. I use the gym a lot. I think international students do use the gym a lot. I spend a lot of time in school...from 9 a.m. - 10 p.m. International coffee hours help me unwind during the middle of the week and I get to meet other international students."

"I feel kind of stuck on campus. Sometimes I cannot go to many restaurants because of religious restrictions. Not many halal food that aren't offered on campus and in the food court."

Conclusion and Implications for Higher Education

The purpose of this study was to explore international youth voices to determine challenges facing international students in a Midwestern university setting and capture possible solutions and proposals for mitigation of those issues and concerns. This Youth AcademyCafé event was an avenue for international youth (students), who are the primary subjects exposed to these challenging experiences, to express their concerns in a safe environment and have their voices be heard. The above findings provide evidence supporting a pattern of challenges and experiences which fit into the LASREF theory model. This acronym defines the dimensions set forth in this paper and is supported from previous studies (Gautam, *et al*., 2016; Sawir, 2005; Unruh, 2015; Yeh and Inose, 2003) which must be critically examined by academic institutions interested in attracting international students. The study found that international institutions should address the LASREF dimensions within *the academic year but before, during, and after student enrolment* to ensure a satisfactory sustainable academic life for international students. The discussion revealed that the LASREF dimensions are key factors that interlinked to other limitations including jobs/finances, transportation, social isolation and identity misinterpretation, as students continue to survive as well as thrive in their educational journey in the United States (Gautam, *et al*., 2016; Lee and Rice, 2007; Sawir, 2005; Unruh, 2015; Yeh and Inose,2003). Bridging alienation through integrating programs and events is relevant to enhancing the wellbeing of international youth within academic institutions. Accessibility to services within the community and easy mobility (transportation) emerged as a need. Availability of such empowerment facilities/programs/service and resources suitable to accomplish life goals (e.g. employment/internship placement) will help to minimized and bridge challenges

directly and indirectly (Hechanova-Alampay *et al.*, 2002). Institutions cannot ignore the provision of such services. Lack of transportation does not only limit one's sense of wellbeing within the community but also presents a staged boundary between international youth and the local community. The study suggest that multicultural learning environments are important, however, it is important to sustain healthy academic climate which can aid in bridging isolation on campus. This study suggests a call for future research on providing more meaningful experiences and educational opportunities for international students. It also calls for reviewing the role of students (international and domestic) in capturing potential solutions and the implementation of new practicesto facilitate effective relationship and learning between international and domestic students through meaningful connectedness.

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