A Generic Qualitative Study of the Experiences of International Students Participating in the Cultural Connections Program at the University of Mississippi

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A GENERIC QUALITATIVE STUDY
OF THE EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS
PARTICIPATING IN THE
CULTURAL CONNECTIONS PROGRAM
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Leadership and Counselor Education
The University of Mississippi

by
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of international students participating in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of Mississippi. A generic qualitative design was utilized using purposeful criterion sampling. The data was collected from two focus group interviews with 11 participants in focus group 1 and 10 participants in focus group 2. Using a generic qualitative approach, eight initial themes were identified after focus group 1 and eight clarifying questions were developed based on these themes. During focus group 2, these clarifying questions were utilized to further explore the eight initial themes in more depth and detail. As a result of this exploration, six major themes emerged.

Consistent with a generic qualitative approach, the report of findings with supporting quotes described participants’ experiences within the six major themes. Discussion of these themes provides understanding about international students experiences related to adjustment and acculturation. Additionally it sheds the light on their experiences of participation in a holistic multifaceted program, such as the Cultural Connections Program. The results show that the experience of Connecting/Connections is the most fundamental for international students and that a sense of Belonging, Safety, Security, Confidence, Acceptance, Openness, and Opportunities to Learn, Grow, and Change seemed to emerge as a result of obtaining social support and connections.

Therefore, this research suggests that in order to assist international students in adjustment and acculturation, it is advisable to offer social support groups. Such social
interactions can contribute to the expansion of social circles and create opportunities to learn and succeed while studying abroad. The findings of this research also suggest that offering a holistic multifaceted approach can be an effective way to promote and teach help-seeking behavior and provide a variety of opportunities to attract international students to campus resources.

Additionally, the findings indicate the possibility of a sequential progression in the process of adjustment and acculturation in international students, based on the participants’ experiences. Such a developmental hierarchy would be valuable to assist planners and other service providers with a sequence of support services that could positively impact the adjustment and acculturation process. Further investigation in this area is recommended, as well as further development of an interactional model based on the six themes identified in this study. An interactional model may assist counseling professionals in improving services to international students, increasing retention rates and promoting academic success.
DEDICATION

To my Russian family: being away for 6 years, I could not have done it without your love and faith in me. Now I am the first one in the family that earned a Ph.D.

To my Mississippi family, especially Mama Betty (posthumously): your Love, Support, and Care indeed transformed, helped me through hard times, and resulted in this product.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The U.S. – the United States of America

The UM – The University of Mississippi

The CCP – The Cultural Connections Program

C3 – Cultural Connections Club

ILC – International Ladies Club

CCMP – Cultural Connections Mentor Program

ILEX – International Learning Exchange

DD – Diverse Diggers Volleyball Team (Club)
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completion of this degree and this manuscript would not be possible without the help, support, and inspiration of my professors, colleagues, family, and friends.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements in the 21st century have expanded the horizons for international business, education, and communication. Throughout the world people exchange knowledge, pursue higher learning, and travel overseas. While this technology has allowed people to overcome the physical obstacles, the cultural obstacles can still be daunting. Over 720,000 international students were enrolled in universities in the United States during the 2010-2011 academic year, with an increase in the enrollment by 5% from the previous year (IIE, Open Doors, 2011). International students’ diverse perspectives have the potential to enrich the educational experience of the other students who attend U.S. universities. Intercultural exchange of knowledge and skills can enable collaboration across political and cultural borders (IIE, Open Doors, 2011). Additionally, the enrollment of international students in the American educational system contributes financially to these institutions as well as to the economy of the United States. The Department of Commerce reports that “international students contribute more than $21 billion to the U.S. economy, through their expenditures on tuition and living expenses” (IIE, Open Doors, 2011). Therefore, there are important economic, cultural, and educational reasons to address the needs of international students to aid in retention of these students as well as recruitment of future international students.

International students face unique and diverse challenges in adjusting to living and learning in their new environment. These challenges can cause problems ranging from mild
disruption to more severe psychological and emotional disturbances. Their adjustment problems can vary based on their country of origin and its culture, race and ethnicity, English language proficiency, religion, age, length of stay, personal adaptability, and many other factors (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005).

International students experience the same developmental and systemic issues that American students face during the move to college. Additionally, they may have stressors of adjustment and acculturation caused by transitioning to a foreign culture and environment (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Mori, 2000; Wendler & Nilsson, 2009). Because of those stressors, international students have unique needs as they adjust to living and learning in the U.S. These needs may include emotional and social support, education about American culture and academic system, interpretations of behaviors, verbal and nonverbal communication, and other social cues that are foreign to them. However, the majority of counseling and other support services nationwide are designed for the mainstream student population. Moreover, many international students come to study in the U.S. with their spouses and other family members and they go through various adjustment challenges that can be intensified by limited opportunities for socialization and support. Dependent visa status does not allow spouses to study or work; therefore, international spouses are excluded from the regular adjustment support process on campus because they are not enrolled as students. This creates additional challenges for international students who have to meet their academic demands and fulfill a supportive role for their spouses and/or family members.

Counseling and higher education professionals currently offer several resources for international students, such as individual counseling, support and counseling groups, peer mentoring and advising, outreach of services, and informational sessions related to culture shock
and adjustment (Engel, Insalaco, Singaravelu, & Kennon, 2007; Jacob, 2007; Johnson & Sandhu, 2007). However, there is still a need for improvement of services for international students and inclusion of services for international students’ spouses.

Counseling professionals in higher education offer traditional services, such as individual and group counseling, to help international students solve problems related to adjustment and acculturation. Unfortunately, such services are commonly perceived by the international student population as indicative of their personal inability to help themselves (Yoon & Portman, 2004). In some cultures, discussing personal issues with strangers can be considered as failure, shameful, or taboo (Engel et al., 2007). Therefore, one of the challenges of counseling professionals when working with international students is to develop culturally sensitive strategies to make them more attractive and less threatening to the international community.

Diversifying culturally sensitive services for international students can increase the possibility to establish rapport with counseling professionals on campus and increase the willingness of international students to turn to counselors to address their issues and concerns.

Many authors have stressed the importance of providing culturally sensitive services to meet international students’ needs as part of the social advocacy movement. In particular, Wendler and Nilsson (2009) assert that “counselors have an ethical and professional obligation to provide counseling services that are culturally sensitive” (p. 28). Such services could include culturally sensitive and accessible clinical and mental health services, as well as need-specific and culturally appropriate interventions and programs (Jacob, 2001; Mori, 2000; Smith, Reynolds, & Rovnak, 2009). Johnson and Sandhu (2007) suggest that culturally sensitive interventions can “alleviate the stress of acculturation and strengthen individuals’ capacity to cope with stressors associated with the adjustment process” (p. 31). Therefore, counseling
professionals within the system of higher education should acknowledge international students’ needs related to adjustment and acculturation and promote specific culturally sensitive services and interventions aimed to advocate for the international students’ population.

To provide additional culturally sensitive services for international students and to facilitate the process of adjustment and acculturation at The University of Mississippi (The UM), the researcher designed the Cultural Connections Program (CCP). This program is offered for international students, faculty, and staff, as well as their spouses, and their American friends. The CCP consists of five interconnected groups – the Cultural Connections Club (C3), the International Ladies Club (ILC), the Mentor Program, the Diverse Diggers Volleyball Team, and the International Learning Exchange (see definitions of these services below and fliers in Appendices). The program is supported and sponsored by the Office of International Programs, the UM Counseling Center, and the Department of Psychology.

The University of Mississippi is a mid-size public institution located in a small southern community. The international student population is approximately 600 students (3.4% of the total student body) who come from 79 different countries (OIP, Annual International Report, 2010). Because of the small town community and a small number of international students, there are limited opportunities for multicultural exchange and support for the unique needs of international community. Previous research found that peer relationships and networking with fellow international students and local American students can positively affect their adjustment and acculturation (Engel et al., 2007; Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007; Summers & Volet, 2008). Despite the reputation of Mississippi being a welcoming state (Study Abroad Newsletter, 2010), The University of Mississippi has a strong emphasis on belonging to sororities, fraternities, and specific religious organizations that may not be common in other countries. This can present a
challenge for the international population in establishing social networking and finding essential support.

The Cultural Connections Program plays an important role in integrating international students and their spouses into the local community and American culture, raising awareness and appreciation of different cultures, and advocating for the unique needs of the international community. The members of all the groups of the CCP communicate with one another during the meetings within each group and between all other groups during the events planned within the CCP. The members of the CCP are invited and encouraged to participate in campus wide events at The University of Mississippi by means of word of mouth advertisement as well as communication via email and Facebook. Therefore, the researcher believes that the Cultural Connections Program serves as an important link connecting international students at The UM to valuable emotional, social, academic, and government resources. Such resources are essential for positive adjustment and acculturation and can assist international students in completing their studies in a foreign country. Because the experiences of participants in the CCP had never been researched, the proposed study aimed to fill in this gap.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of international students participating in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of Mississippi. The data collected from focus groups with the participants was expected to give general ideas and descriptions about their experiences in the program. These descriptions can be instrumental in the future development of the CCP, and may be useful to university professionals to examine and develop their own resources to serve the needs of international students.
**Research Questions**

The grand research question for this study was developed according to the main idea of collecting descriptive data from the specific participants of a particular program: What are the experiences of the international students participating in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of Mississippi? To receive descriptive answers to this question, a broad open-ended question for the first focus group was developed. According to Kline (2008), “[t]he development of appropriate interview questions is crucial to obtaining credible data, especially during initial interviews” (p. 214). For the first focus group, the researcher asked the following question: How would you describe your experiences as an international student as you participate in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of Mississippi?

After the first focus group, the researcher, in collaboration with the dissertation chair, developed a set of questions based on common patterns and themes, revealed during the first focus group discussion. These questions, narrower and more focused than the initial question, were designed to further clarify and understand more deeply the themes emerged from the first focus group discussion.

**Significance of the Study**

With the expansion of international borders and cultural boundaries, the promotion of diversity and multiculturalism has become an essential task of many communities. Hundreds of thousands of international students are enrolled in universities across the U.S. Some of them bring their spouses and children with them. Therefore, many American universities have a compelling interest in fostering international student programs and services to support them in the process of adjustment and acculturation. Professionals who have developed and/or
implemented effective programs may have valuable information to share with others who seek to
develop and/or improve the programs and services for international students.

Despite numerous efforts to address the needs of international students in adjustment and
acculturation, there is a lack of research exploring the experiences of participating in those
programs. By investigating the gaps in literature regarding the experiences of international
students, counseling professionals will be able to better understand this population. The
knowledge resulting from this study can potentially contribute to the literature about
international students and aid counselors and institutions in addressing their needs. The Cultural
Connections Program (the CCP) at The University of Mississippi (The UM) is developed to
assist international students with making the cultural transition to living and studying in the U. S.
By studying the experiences of participants of the CCP, professionals at The UM can better
understand the experiences of international students who chose to participate in such a
multifaceted program like the CCP.

The CCP is a unique program that was designed by the researcher and implemented only
at The UM. Few programs for international students nationwide encompass and integrate as
many different services within one program. The CCP offers opportunities for participation
according to the diverse needs and interests of international and American students, from basic
and practical to academic and recreational. Although many positive experiences have been
shared by participants with the researcher, the experiences of the CCP participants had not been
empirically explored. This generic qualitative study aimed to explore the experiences of
international students participating in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of
Mississippi.
Definition of Terms

The Cultural Connections Program (CCP) is a collaborative effort between The University of Mississippi (UM) Counseling Center, the Office of International Programs, and Psychological Services Center. It was developed based on a needs assessment of international students implemented by the Department of Psychology and the UM Counseling Center in 2004. Several areas of concern were identified, such as homesickness, alienation and isolation, culture shock, and language barriers. To address those concerns, the Conversation Group (renamed Cultural Connections Club, C3) and the International Ladies Club were developed and offered to international students in the same year of 2004. In 2006, the author joined both of the groups as a member and then became a co-facilitator of those groups shortly thereafter. Since then, the author has initiated an all-encompassing program that is currently referred to as the Cultural Connections Program (CCP) and consists of five interconnected groups: the Cultural Connections Club (C3), the International Ladies Club (ILC), the Cultural Connections Mentor Program (CCMP), the Diverse Diggers Volleyball Team, and International Learning Exchange. The CCP is sponsored by the Office of International Programs, the UM Counseling Center, and the Psychological Services Center.

The Cultural Connections Club (C3) is a social support group that aims to alleviate the stress of adjustment and acculturation. It is offered for international and American community. The C3 also serves as a counseling and psycho-educational group, allowing members to process their emotions and feelings and discuss challenges, strengths, and/or practical strategies for coping.

The International Ladies Club (ILC) has a similar format with the C3 but is offered only for female international students, faculty, staff, and community members, as well as Americans
acting as mentors for international members. This group is unique because it is also open to international students’ female spouses and female family members.

Both clubs meet on a weekly basis for two hours each. Meetings are held in a room with dim lights and comfortable couches and chairs. Members are provided with refreshments. In order to encourage cross-cultural learning and decrease the communication barrier, it is a common practice in both groups to use specific topics of discussion, games, music, dance, cooking food, and to organize conversations and presentations on traditional clothes and cultural practices. During stressful times, such as midterms and finals, specific stress-management techniques are also offered. They include deep breathing exercises, guided imagery meditation, Yoga, walks, and/or picnics in the park.

*The Cultural Connections Mentor Program (CCMP)* is designed to mentor international students in the process of their adjustment and acculturation. The members of this group are international and American students that are familiar with local culture and academic requirements, and aware of the process of adjustment and acculturation. The members meet their Mentees at the international students’ orientation. Mentors’ tasks are to assist international students’ in their transition and direct them to campus and community services. They act as ambassadors to The University of Mississippi and the U.S.

*The Cultural Connections Program Participants* are international students who attend The University of Mississippi as undergraduate or graduate degree seeking, non degree seeking, exchange, and IEP (Intensive English Program) and have participated in any of the groups or services offered within the Cultural Connections Program, including the International Ladies Club, the Cultural Connections Club (C3), the Cultural Connections Mentor Program, the Diverse Diggers Volleyball Team, and the International Learning Exchange (ILEX).
The Diverse Diggers, International Volleyball Team offers opportunities to engage in a team sport with fellow international students as well as American students. The team meets once or twice a week for volleyball practices during the semester time at the university sports center. It is a common practice for team members to go out to eat after practices and get together to celebrate birthdays and holidays.

Focus Groups are “carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (Krueger and Casey, 2000, p. 5). Focus groups has been used in research for the past 80 years and were initially used as a marketing research tool and has been adopted by social sciences research, as we as psychology and counseling (Halcomb et al., 2007).

Generic qualitative study is an approach to inquiry that is “not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known qualitative methodologies” (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003, p. 4). McLeod (2001) proposes that qualitative approaches, such as grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, discourse analysis, and hermeneutics, are “variations on what is basically a single way of knowing” (p. 130). This approach encompasses multiple elements of qualitative approaches and methods of research.

The International Learning Exchange (ILEX) consists of five two-hour workshop series/round table discussions that are offered at the beginning of each semester. The discussion topics are related to challenges and specific strategies in adjusting and acculturating to new environments, academics, room-mates issues, a healthy life-style in Mississippi and in the U.S., and career development. These discussions provide hands-on information and a chance to network and practice English, as well as to promote other services and groups of the CCP and counseling services on campus.
International students are individuals that come from another country and enroll in higher education institution in the U.S. They are citizens of another country and temporarily reside in the U. S. while engage in education (Jacob, 2001).

Conclusion

Within this chapter the researcher introduced the reader to the topic of this generic qualitative study. The introduction was supported by the explanation of the purpose of this study and its significance. The study was based on interviews conducted in focus on focus groups with participants; therefore the author provided research questions for the study to explain in more detail what will be explored. The chapter is concluded with the descriptions of the terms and the Cultural Connections Program to provide a general idea about the program and the population of this study.

Organization of the Study

This research project consists of five chapters. Chapter I includes the introduction to the study, the explanations of the reasons and the purpose of this study, the general research questions, as well as the description of the significance of this study. Chapter II introduces the reader to the review of the literature related to the topic of the study. Chapter III describes the methodology, the participants, and the design of this research project, as well as limitations and delimitations. The analysis of this study is presented in Chapter IV. Chapter V includes the discussion of the results of the study, conclusion, and suggestions for future research and practice. Additional information related to the study is provided in Appendices.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There is a constant demand for the development of services and programs to meet the unique and diverse needs of international students. To provide support and assistance to international students as they adjust to their new environment, the Cultural Connections Program (CCP) was designed and implemented at The University of Mississippi (The UM). Therefore, the focus of this research is the experiences of international students participating in this program. This chapter includes a summary of the literature related to programs and services that assist international students in their adjustment and acculturation to the system of higher education in the U.S.

The review of the literature in this chapter is presented in the following sequence. First, a general description of the literature about the unique needs and challenges of adjustment and acculturation for international students is provided. Second, programs and services currently offered by colleges and universities in the U.S. to support international students are described. Third, suggestions drawn from current literature for the development of culturally sensitive and needs oriented services for international students are provided to support the significance of this research project.

International Students’ Unique Needs and Challenges

College life presents unique demands to any individual who begins to study at a college or university. Becoming a college student puts individuals in a process of transition that includes
the process of adjustment and acculturation to new environment and academic demands.

However, becoming a student overseas makes the process of adjustment and acculturation more challenging for a number of reasons. Arthur (2008) emphasized that international students are “people in cross cultural transition” and “due to their immigration status they are sojourners in a host country for the duration of their program” (p. 277). He pointed out several international students’ needs: academic, social, psychological, and career planning. These needs may occur as a result of culture shock and stresses related to transition and relocation.

Mori (2000) described common sources of distress and unique adjustment issues related to transition into a foreign environment. He mentioned that international students experience linguistic, academic, social, personal, intrapersonal, and sometimes physical difficulties. Mori stated that stress caused by adjustment can cause feeling of hopelessness, which can lead to depression. He also explained how differences in perceptions about mental health and counseling lead to underutilization of counseling services.

Ramsay, Jones, and Barker (2007) found that international students reported having greater unmet needs for emotional, practical, and informational support than American students. They stated that “international students are potentially faced with a greater risk of reduced opportunities for social companionship and emotional support” (p. 261). Because they are away from home, they have to establish new relationships that potentially can become their support system.

Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) described international students’ barriers to adjustment, such as finding living accommodations and transportation, learning about their new environment and academic culture, making new friends and developing a new support system, language proficiency and communication, and experiences with discrimination. They stressed that
“[t]hose experiences of adjustment may have an impact on students’ psychological well-being” (p. 29).

Johnson and Sandhu (2007) talked about isolation, adjustment, and acculturation issues of international students. They also pointed out that not addressing issues related to adjustment and acculturation can be associated with serious psychosomatic distress.

Jacob (2001) stated that because international students are removed from their families and familiar environment, they may feel lonely and homesick; sometimes even isolated and alienated. He emphasized the importance of social interactions between international and American students that would provide “a sense of belonging” (p. 79).

Despite calls for increased social interaction, Summers and Volet (2008) found that “the most typical pattern is one of minimal interaction between students from different cultural backgrounds” (p. 357). They specified that in cultural conversations, both international and American students can learn more about themselves and educate each other about other cultures; thus they build bridges of understanding and awareness of the specifics of multicultural communication. Interaction with American students is considered beneficial because they represent local culture and can provide information about local language differences, such as accents and slang words/phrases. Their study revealed that such interactions can substantially contribute to the process of adjustment and acculturation of international students.

Mitchel, Greenwood, and Guglielmi (2007) studied and compared the utilization of counseling services between international and U.S. college students. They found that “international students experienced harassment more often than U.S. students did” (p. 127). They also found that international students reported being lost and lonely because of being far away from home and loved ones and “being in an unfamiliar cultural milieu” (p. 127).
International students often do not seek help until they get to the extreme point of their distress when it gets intolerable or dangerous. Their study also showed that international students were referred to crisis services and expressed suicidal thoughts more often than American students.

Yi, Jun-Chih Giseala Lin, and Kishimoto (2003) examined utilization of counseling services by international students and focused on subgroup differences and help-seeking behaviors among international students. They studied 516 international students who used counseling services in a major university in Texas and found that academics, anxiety, and depression were the most prominent challenges and concerns for undergraduate international students. For international graduate students, three major concerns were depression, time management, and romantic relationships.

At this point the main issues, concerns, and needs of international students related to adjustment and acculturation have been discussed. The research about programs and services for international students will be described in the paragraphs below.

**Programs and Services for International Students**

**Individual and Group Counseling**

As stated earlier, international students have unique needs and challenges. Counseling professionals commonly offer individual and group counseling. Several authors have stressed the importance of providing culturally competent services to international students (Mori, 2000; Wilton & Constantine, 2003; Yoon & Portman, 2004). Culturally competent approaches should include an understanding of common issues and challenges of international students. Such approaches should provide individual and group counseling services that would best address the needs of international students.
Engel, Insalaco, Singaravelu, and Kennon (2007) stated, however, that traditional ways to solve problems, such as receiving support through counseling services, are commonly perceived by the international student population as indicative of their personal inability to help themselves. Discussing personal issues with strangers can be considered as failure, shameful or taboo.

Wilton and Constantine (2003) found in their study that even when international students suffer from significant mental illnesses they might still be resistant to using university counseling centers because of cultural assumptions or language barriers, lack of trust, and/or having cultural dispositions or preferences for indigenous healers or shamans.

Yoon and Portman (2004) examined the literature on counseling international students and stated that international students are reluctant to use counseling services and often delay seeking professional help. Even if they do, quite often international students tend to not show for follow-up therapy.

Walker and Conyne (2007) suggested that “[r]ecognizing the fact that international students underutilize counseling services reinforces the need for creating ways of linking students with alternative forms of support” (p. 300). One of those forms can be support groups. Walker and Conyne defined group work as a specific intervention that helps group members solve their problems that would “enhance their functioning” through interpersonal interactions (p. 301). The authors stated that “[t]he specific skill training, practice, and feedback of skills…can concretely help international students become more confident in negotiating everyday demands of campus life in the United States” (p. 302). Thus, psycho-educational groups can facilitate their progress in achieving success academically and socially and at the same time assist in balancing international students’ well-being and improving their functioning.
Sumer, Poyrazli, and Grahame (2008) found that social support and proficiency in English predicted the level of depression and anxiety among international students. Authors specified that lack of social support can cause depression and anxiety among international students. Another important finding of their study was that “English proficiency is related to acculturation, adaptation, and adjustment of international students” (p. 435). The researchers made suggestions of ways to improve services for international students, such as offering social support groups as a “buffer against depression and anxiety” (p. 435), teaching international students stress reduction techniques, as well as offering mentor programs so that international students can expand their networking and practice English. Additionally, authors stressed the importance of including American students in social support and mentoring programs because interactions and social contacts with representatives of the local culture can provide international students with opportunities to improve English proficiency, a key factor in preventing depression and anxiety.

Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) suggested that counseling centers should offer “a semester-long, ongoing support group” with an open format that would allow international students to discuss their issues related to academic and psychological adjustment (p. 42). They also emphasized that social interactions with American students can positively affect international students’ experiences and at the same time help U.S. students expand their knowledge about the world and other cultures.

Ramsay, Jones and Barker (2007) examined the relationship between adjustment and support types, sources of support, and satisfaction with levels of support for young and mature local and international first year university students. They reported that “well adjusted students reported higher levels of social companionship support than the less adjusted group” (p. 247).
The authors emphasized that international students have reduced opportunities for social companionship and emotional support. They found that international students desired more practical, emotional, and informational support than did the other students. They asserted that “student support needs should be central in the evaluation and improvement of services to first year [international and American] students” (p. 262).

Wilton and Constantine (2003) studied cultural adjustment and psychological distress issues among Asian and Latin American international college students. Their study showed that “greater length of stay in US was associated with lower levels of psychological distress among Asian and Latin American international college students” (p. 183). Students arriving in the U.S. prior to beginning their college studies were able to develop relationships that provided necessary support. Social support groups can provide a great opportunity for building a network and meeting others that go through the same adjustment experiences. These groups can also provide the opportunity to meet other students who are at different points in the adjustment process and who can share their experiences as well as normalize similar experiences for others.

Lee, Park, and Kim (2009) compared gender differences in international students’ adjustment. They found that Korean women had a higher level of adjustment compared to Korean men. The authors attributed this to an increased willingness of females to seek professional help and social support. They also suggested that “contacts with host culture peers and multicultural ties” can positively influence the process of adjustment (p. 1225).

Suh and Lee (2006) explored the implications of group work for Korean expatriate women in the United States to understand their concerns and challenges, as well as possible ways to address those issues. The results of their study indicated that “group intervention may be an
effective way to help women in similar situations to improve their self-concept and internal locus of control” (p. 366).

To summarize, numerous researchers identified that one of the issues related to providing services to international students is resistance to seeking counseling and support services. In particular, social support and mentoring programs can be effective in supporting international students in the process of adjustment and acculturation. Other suggestions regarding programs and services for international students are described in the paragraphs below.

**Additional Programs and Services**

On university campuses in the United States, individual and group counseling are generally offered for all students. Johnson and Sandhu (2007) noted that in addition to these traditional counseling services, culturally competent individual and group counseling are necessary to alleviate the stress of adjustment and acculturation for international students. They also suggested that outreach and information sessions should be adjusted to provide international students with information about “cross-cultural adjustment, acculturative stress, and the benefits of an integration strategy” (p. 31). Therefore, needs-specific services for international students should include ambassadors, mentoring, orientation programs, tutorials, and workshops beyond regular counseling services.

Johnson and Sandhu (2007) emphasized that stresses related to adjustment and acculturation can cause serious psychological and physical damage and they recommended that support groups and peer mentoring programs be offered to support international students in their adjustment and acculturation. Moreover, as stated by Johnson and Sandhu, alternative programs focused on the unique needs of international students should also be offered, such as peer
mentoring, coffee hours, and nationality clubs that support international students, their spouses and families.

Mori (2000) made specific suggestions about how counseling services can be adjusted and modified to meet these unique needs. For example, special attention should be paid to service organization and delivery, paying particular attention to utilizing proactive and educational approaches when developing and implementing services for international students.

Arthur (2008) suggested that counselors take the initiative in developing and designing “innovative service approaches that include options such as marketing counseling through video and information delivered online, health education to international students to debunk myths about counseling and mental health” (p. 284). Therefore, among other services offered for international students, counseling professionals should take active part in organizing lectures, workshops, information sessions, and round table discussions for international students about common adjustment problems, solutions to overcome them, and resources available for international students on campus.

According to Jacob (2001), “providing international students with an understanding of the process of cultural adjustment can help alleviate uncertainty and boost the student's transition to an unfamiliar environment” (p. 78). As a result of providing information about culture shock and typical reactions on transition and adjustment, international students’ anxiety can be decreased by normalizing the feelings that otherwise might be perceived as abnormal, wrong, and shameful. Jacob proposed that explaining and normalizing culture shock symptoms and experiences can substantially increase the likelihood of utilizing counseling and other support services by international students on university campuses.
Jacob (2001) made suggestions to develop activities that would help international students build their social and academic networks so that they can gain a sense of community and belonging, thus, reducing feelings of isolation and homesickness. For example, offering cultural exchange programs between international students and students in counseling programs can be an effective strategy in bridging cultural gaps and building network systems.

Olivas and Li (2006) reviewed the literature related to the international student population to learn about unique stressors of international students in higher education and how those stressors are addressed by counseling professionals. They found that the majority of the literature stressed the importance of offering psycho-educational groups and mentoring programs, as well as providing referral services and preventive measures. They emphasized that if counseling professionals could build positive rapport, then international students would be more likely to seek counseling services. They also stated that research had shown positive outcomes from offering practical and informational support at the point of international students’ orientation.

Engel, Insalaco, Singaravelu, and Kennon (2007) offered suggestions for programs and outreach for international students. They stated that offering a wide range of programs for international students can help tremendously in reducing some of the initial stressors and long-term challenges of this population. Improving English conversation skills, establishing a system of social support, and facilitating contacts with representatives of the local culture can lead to more satisfaction among international students and their families.

Jacob (2001) stated that “opportunities for international students to interact socially with other students at institutions of higher education are important resources toward providing a sense of belonging” (p. 79). This presents a very important point, because research consistently
shows that international students experience grief and loss related to relocating and transitioning
to a new geographical area and foreign culture. Jacob (2001) suggested that using counselor
education programs and collaborative programming strategies can help in working with
international students. Jacob insisted that “counselor training programs and institutions of higher
education must be prepared to build a campus climate that fosters meaningful academic and
support programs for international students in the transition to global learning” (p. 79).

Yoon and Portman (2004) found that international students refrain from participation in
campus activities and therefore have limited exposure to campus culture. Thus, authors suggest
that using international students’ strengths and resourcefulness can be another way of
encouraging them to participate in seeking help. For example, encourage international students
to take upon leadership and/or mentoring roles and participate in organizing workshops and/or
cultural events and activities. Ramsay, Jones, and Barker (2007) suggested that “[a]ccess to a
wide range of important information support and interaction experiences with teachers, tutorials,
and classmates can offer students the opportunity to form peer relationships that can extend
outside the classroom” (p. 261).

Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) reviewed the literature on the international students’
experiences related to initial transition, academic and social life, and psychological experiences.
They identified student mentoring and peer network as effective strategies to help address
international students needs and adjustment issues. Mentors and peers can share their
psychological experiences, as well as information necessary for initial transition and successful
academic and social integration. The authors insisted that mentoring programs could “promote
greater psychological and academic achievement among international students and also increase
the retention rate of these students for the institution” (p. 47).
Mitchel, Greenwood, and Guglielmi (2007) suggested that “different types of efforts should be made based on sex, academic status, and religion” (p. 128). They stressed the importance of recognizing the fact that women have different roles and statuses overseas. Discussions about differences in gender roles, women’s rights, and family traditions can be empowering in understanding their roles and rights as women while living in the U.S.

Yi, Jun-Chih Giseala Lin, and Kishimoto (2003) provided suggestions for culturally sensitive services for international students, including programs for international graduate students’ spouses as well as workshops on time and stress management.

Yoh (2009) studied motivational attitudes toward participating in physical activity among international students attending colleges in the United States. The results of the study showed that international students who participated in sports found it important to take care of their health and physical functioning. They also appeared to develop life-long skills outside of the classroom. However, the number of international students that engaged in sports was lower than the number of their U.S. counterparts. Yoh summarized the current literature about numerous benefits of regular physical activities for psychological and psychological health, such as preventing from diseases and illnesses, as well as depression, stress, and anxiety. Because the stress related to English language proficiency can be replaced by communication through sports and physical activities, engaging in sports can help international students recharge and relax and feel more comfortable to establish support relationships. Thus, the research suggests that counseling and other university professionals should offer sports activities that can provide additional and alternative support for international students in the process of adjustment and acculturation.
Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) examined various barriers to adjustment and described the needs of international students within a semi-urban campus community. Their study revealed that international students experience multiple barriers to participation in activities that offer support in adjustment. They proposed “interventions that facilitate meeting those needs in the specific context” (p. 39). The results of their study showed the importance of taking an ecological perspective in improving the well-being of international students, taking into consideration their personality traits, physical functioning, and the environment in which they live.

**Conclusion**

In summary, in order to serve the unique and diverse needs of international students, the literature suggests that a combination of ways to aid in adjustment and acculturation should be offered, along with providing culturally sensitive individual and group counseling. Thus, the previous research suggests that international students would benefit the most from a holistic, all-inclusive, multifaceted approach that would include individual and group counseling, mentoring and support groups, workshops, orientation programs, and well as recreational and sports activities.

The researcher believes that the Cultural Connections Program, with all the groups and services mentioned above, presents a multifaceted, ecological approach to serving unique and diverse needs of international students. Within CCP international students are offered a wide variety of needs-specific services. In collaboration with other resources available on campus, the CCP serves as an important link connecting international students at The University of Mississippi to valuable resources that can help them in their adjustment and acculturation, thus increasing the likelihood for completing their studies in a foreign country.
A multifaceted, ecological approach to serving international students has been suggested and supported by prior research; however there is lack of research about the experiences of participating in such programs. While there is ample anecdotal evidence about their experiences, received from communication with the CCP participants, there was no empirical data to describe these experiences. Thus, studying international students exposed to this variety of services would contribute to our knowledge in this area.

This chapter included a review of the literature about the topic of the research. The review included the summary of the literature regarding international students’ unique needs and challenges, programs and services that are currently offered for international students in higher education, and suggestions for alternative ways of serving international students. This literature review contains a wealth of information about programs and services for international students, but also a lack of information about international students’ actual experiences as participants in these programs. This data is needed because only by clearly exploring and describing the phenomenon of participating in support programs for international students can we more fully understand and address these needs. This study aimed to fill in this gap in the literature and perhaps, by more fully describing this phenomenon, the field will be able to more effectively address the needs of this population. In the next chapter, the methods of this study are explained, including the design, the population and sample, the data collection and selection procedures, and the data analysis process.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

This chapter includes the explanation of the design of the proposed qualitative study with the description of the population and sample, the qualitative data collection, analysis, and participant recruitment procedures. The design and data collection aimed to answer the following question: What are the experiences of the international students involved in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of Mississippi? Consequently, the following paragraph explains the purpose of this study and the rationale for selecting a qualitative approach.

Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of the international students involved in the Cultural Connections Program (the CCP) at The University of Mississippi (The UM). To meet the purpose of this study and to answer the grand research question mentioned above, the researcher has chosen to use a qualitative method of inquiry. The rationale for choosing a qualitative approach will be provided in the following paragraphs.

One major rationale for choosing a qualitative study is that it supports the basic tenets of constructivism with the notion that “reality is an interpretive phenomenon, and that meaning is constructed by participants as they go about their everyday life” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 65). The philosophical underpinnings of constructivism are based on the assumption that there is no absolute truth and that reality is a product of individual interpretations. Qualitative research
studies those interpretations in the “real-world settings where phenomenon of interest unfold naturally” (Patton, 2001, p. 39). According to Pugsley (2003), “[q]ualitative research is exhilarating, providing a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts” (p. 333). This study aims to collect rich descriptions of the experiences of participants of the CCP at The UM.

Another rationale for a qualitative inquiry was that predefining hypotheses and parameters would defeat the purpose of collecting descriptions. Quantitative research is based on assumptions or hypotheses made prior to a study, while qualitative research aims to understand complex paradigms without identifying specific parameters beforehand. In the case of this study, the researcher did not have preconceived notions about this topic. Moreover, developing hypotheses did not seem possible because of the paucity of research about the experiences of individuals in support programs developed for international students (e.g., the Cultural Connections Program). Therefore, the researcher was approaching this study with an open mind to look for emerging descriptions of this phenomenon.

The qualitative approach emphasizes the importance of multiple perspectives of the same case. Multiple perspectives and diverse opinions will be gathered by means of focus groups. This study included two focus groups, toward the end of fall semester. The first focus group included one broad initial question. These initial inquiries provided a foundation for a narrower set of questions for the second focus group. The second focus group allowed the participants to share more specific insights and understanding about their experiences of participation in the CCP.

Because international students have diverse worldviews and multiple perspectives, the qualitative method of research may be a better fit to study the experiences of the multicultural
international population. Merchant and Dupuy (1996) emphasize that “although the positivistic-reductive methods of quantitative research may fit the European conceptual system, they may be lacking in investigations on the basis of more holistic and nonlinear worldviews” (p. 538). Because the majority of international students have backgrounds different from the mainstream student population in the U.S., the standardized tests and questionnaires that are used in quantitative research may not reflect accurate information. Thus, the validity or credibility of the research with international students may be weakened. Moreover, international students’ lives are affected by multiple factors on several levels of functioning as they study abroad. The researcher anticipated that a qualitative approach can assist to better understand these experiences by examining the multiple descriptions received from participants during the focus groups.

To conclude, the researcher chose a qualitative study methodology for several reasons. First, an assumption that reality is constructed based on individual interpretations and that all interpretations may be valid. Second, because the experiences of international students participating in the CCP had not been previously studied, the researcher could not and did not have preconceived notions about parameters and hypotheses for the research. Third, because qualitative methods are best suited to obtain multiple perspectives, a qualitative approach is the best way to understand the diverse experiences of international students holistically. Now that the reasons of choosing a qualitative approach to this study have been provided, the researcher will explain the rationale for choosing the specific design of this qualitative research.

**Research Design**

There are various qualitative methodologies that aim to explore constructed realities, each with a specific focus. For example, grounded theory focuses on the meanings through which
people construct their realities (McLeod, 2001, p. 2). As a result, a new theory is developed, grounded in the data collected (Maxwell, 2005, p. 33). This approach is particularly appropriate for “discovery-oriented research in areas that are under-theorized” (Burck, 2005, p. 244).

Phenomenology focuses on finding a deep meaning of a person’s experiences while being part of that experience. Rossman and Rallis (2003) explain that the purpose of phenomenological inquiry is in drawing descriptions, interpretations, and critical self-reflections of study experiences (p. 98). Ethnography focuses on the perceptions, knowledge, and classification of the world as reflected in their use of language, in other words, on the “construction of words through actions, such as ritual and social practices” (McLeod, 2001, p. 2). Discourse and narrative analysis focus on making sense of how reality is constructed through talk and the use of language. According to Burck (2005), “a basic tenet of discourse analysis is that people use language to construct versions of the social world” (p. 248). Hermeneutic research helps uncover historical and cultural layers of meaning through which the world is experienced (McLeod, 2001, p. 2). All the methods of qualitative study mentioned above have a specific focus of inquiry and aim to study the topic from a certain angle of interpretation.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher did not aim to develop a theory of the experience or to discover deep meaning or interpretations of a phenomenon. Nor did she plan to identify the meaning of existence through language, culture or history constructs. Therefore this study employed a generic qualitative approach. Merriam (1998) explains that a generic approach aims to “simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (p. 11). McLeod (2001) asserts that all of the aforementioned approaches are “variations of what is basically a single way of knowing” (p. 130). The generic qualitative approach allows the researcher to interview study participants and
generate descriptions in the form of a report of findings. Such a report does not require any
theory and allows for freedom to describe a phenomenon as it is, not as it should be. Because of
the absence of any prior knowledge of the experiences of international students who participate
in the CCP, this study represents an initial exploration of the experiences of these individuals
with a goal of developing descriptions of this phenomenon.

To address possible biases in data analysis while using a generic qualitative approach, the
literature suggests utilizing techniques that aim to eliminate research biases, such as reflective
commentaries, debriefing sessions with the committee chair, and triangulation process (Caelli et
al., 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sommer, Ward, & Scofield, 2011). These techniques will be
described later in this chapter.

Because there is no empirical research about the experiences of the international students
who study at The University of Mississippi and participate in the Cultural Connections Program,
this generic interpretive study can be an appropriate method of research. So in this way the
results of this research can add to our knowledge about international students and their
experiences as participants in a program designed to address the needs of this population. The
information received from focus groups provided a foundation to better understand participants’
perceptions, attitudes, and opinions about their experiences as participants in the CCP. The
following paragraphs will introduce the reader to the grand research question and focus group
questions, and as well as how the researcher will address issues of trustworthiness to insure the
integrity of the study.
Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of this research study, the following research question was posed:

What are the experiences of international students participating in the Cultural Connections Program (the CCP) at The University of Mississippi (The UM)? The grand research question was designed to give descriptions and explanations about what it was like for international students at The UM to participate in the CCP. To receive descriptive answers to this question, the first focus group question was developed. For the first focus group, the researcher asked participants the following question: How would you describe your experiences as you participate in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of Mississippi?

The initial question was a broad open-ended question that aimed to obtain general information about what it was like to be an international student and be involved in the CCP. Because the CCP is an umbrella organization and includes five interconnected programs and groups, the study participants were reminded of the components of the CCP mentioned in Chapter I in order to make sure the participants and the inquirer were on the same page.

Once the discussion from the first focus group was transcribed and analyzed, the second set of questions was developed. The second set of questions was based on the initial discussion and was designed to provide clarification and deeper understanding of themes or issues revealed in the first focus group discussion. In the event of gaps in descriptions or a lack of explanations in the previous interviews, the questions aimed to fill in those gaps. Because the second focus group was employed toward the end of the semester, the researcher anticipated more elaborate descriptions about the experiences of participation in the CCP in the second focus group.
After both focus groups were completed, the data was transcribed, analyzed, and presented at a member checking meeting with all focus group participants. During this meeting, the researcher asked the following questions:

1. According to my analysis of the focus group discussion that I have just presented to you, what seems to you accurate or inaccurate, clear or unclear, true or not true?
2. How would you correct or change my analysis of the focus group discussion and why?

According to Kline (2008), “[t]he development of appropriate interview questions is crucial to obtaining credible data, especially during initial interviews” (p. 214). Therefore, it was important to insure that the initial question during the first focus group asked what the researcher aimed to explore. The success of the second focus group depended on the question of the first focus group. Both focus groups gave the researcher essential material for data analysis and the development of descriptions. The resulting descriptions were checked for accuracy with all the participants during a member checking session. Based on the analysis of the descriptions that emerge, and a member checking, the researcher drew conclusions and discussed implications of the research. Thus, the outcome and credibility of this research project depended on the questions formed for the both focus groups.

At this point, the grand research and interview questions are presented and the member checking questions are stated. The population and sample of this study, as well as the procedures of the research will be described in the following paragraphs.

**Population and Sample**

The population for this study were international students attending The University of Mississippi as undergraduate or graduate degree seeking, nondegree seeking, exchange, and IEP
(Intensive English Program) students who participated in any of the groups or services offered within the Cultural Connections Program, including the International Ladies Club, the Cultural Connections Club (C3), the Cultural Connections Mentor Program, the Diverse Diggers Volleyball Team, and International Learning Exchange (ILEX). The sample consisted of 11 participants at focus group 1 and 10 participants at focus group 2. The sample included both male and female participants 18 years and older.

The researcher was the Cultural Connections Program (CCP) coordinator who was actively involved in the development and implementation of the CCP for five years. She is a fourth-year doctoral student in Counselor Education and has been a graduate assistant at the Office of International Programs at The UM. This research was conducted at The University of Mississippi, which was an appropriate source of information because the program was developed at this particular institution. The University of Mississippi is a public university in a small southern town where 69% of undergraduates are from Mississippi, 20% of all students are minorities; and 3.52% are international students that come from 79 different nations (OIP, Annual International Report, 2010).

The researcher recognizes that the scope of this study was narrow because it involved only international students at one university in the U.S., but this can be justified by the fact that the CCP is unique and implemented only at this institution. However, the researcher believes that because the CCP aims to address the most common international students’ needs discussed earlier in Chapters I and II, the results of the study may be transferrable to international students involved in similar programs on other campuses nationwide. At this point, the following paragraphs will explain the procedures of this research, including the sample selection and the data collection process, as well as data analysis.
Procedures

Sample Selection Process

There are no ground rules and specific parameters for selecting sample size in qualitative approaches (Patton, 2002; Thorne, 2008). However, Thorne suggests that the decision should be formed based on “transparent sampling logic” (p. 89) and understanding of what the sample ought to represent. To implement this study, the researcher was aware that time and resources available within this research would constrain the sampling. The time allotted to data collection was limited to two months (precisely nine weeks) within one semester by one researcher. There was no funding allotted for transcribing the focus groups. The choice of the sample size for this research was supported by the current literature regarding focus groups that suggests that there should not be less than four and more than ten participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1988). Small groups present issues with productivity when there is insufficient amount of voices and diversity of opinions. Big groups are hard to manage, plus there is a risk that participants will not receive equal opportunities to express themselves. According to Patton (2002), if a small number of selected participants can represent in-depth rich information, then such sample size is considered valuable. Therefore, the sample size for this study was limited to 10 international students.

Within the last four years (2007-2011) the Cultural Connections Program attracted more than 300 students; 200 of those were international students and their spouses and another 100 were American students. On average, there were about 22 international students involved in the program each semester. In the spring semester of 2011, there were 30 international students who participated in the CCP, which is about 5% of the total population of the international students on campus. The sample size of ten participants represented approximately 33% of the total CCP
membership. Therefore, the researcher believes this sample size provided a strong representation of the population of about 600 international students at The University of Mississippi (OIP, Annual International Report, 2010).

To select the sample for this research, the researcher used a purposeful criterion sampling strategy. Maxwell (2006) suggests using purposeful sampling “to achieve representativeness or typicality of the settings, individuals, or activities selected and to adequately capture the homogeneity in the population” (p. 71). Because the participants of this study share common characteristics, that of being members of CCP and being international students, they can be considered as homogeneous.

The researcher believes that the more international students participate in the CCP, the more they can inform the research about their experience in the program. The sample for this study consisted of 10-11 individuals who participated in the CCP for at least four times. Such sample strategy is called criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). Thus, the main criterion for the sample selection in this study was a high rate of participation in the CCP. The CCP offers at least 16 various services each month. Based on the researcher’s observations, on average, one member of the CCP participates in 4 activities per month. Using this as a benchmark, to be included in the sample, participants must have been involved at least four activities provided by the CCP, as of the beginning of the fall semester, 2011 or within the range of previous semesters.

Since the researcher was involved in coordinating and implementing the CCP, there may have been a perceived power difference in the recruitment process. To decrease the effects this might have on recruitment, potential participants were asked to participate in the study via email or via the social networking website Facebook instead of being asked personally. The researcher anticipated that potential research study participants would feel more comfortable when choosing
to participate or not to participate via indirect correspondence rather than having to state their choice in a direct personal interaction. The recruitment message contained a brief explanation of the purpose of the research and its process, as well as the explanation of the outcome of the research and a statement that the participation is voluntary and that declining to participate would not affect them in any negative way (see Appendix 2).

**Data Collection Method**

In qualitative research, there are two commonly used methods of data collection: individual interviews and focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Individual interviews provide a means to gain information in depth that represents individual points of view, whereas focus groups allow researchers to gain deep insights based on collective views. While there are many advantages of using individual interviews, the strength of focus groups is that they are used to collect deep understanding and knowledge about participants’ experiences in a context of a group dynamic (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990; Morgan, 1988).

Because the focus of this research was the experiences of participants in the CCP, a resource that provides the majority of services in a group setting, it seems natural to plan to obtain a wide range of information from a group of participants at the same time. The focus groups present advantages over individual interviews because they can provide basic exploratory information and create opportunities to gather a range of opinions without the need or desire to achieve consensus. Moreover, Byers and Wilcox (1991) emphasize that “[t]he group often stimulates recall and actuates important but forgotten personal detail” (p. 72). Therefore, the researcher believes that focus groups should facilitate gathering deeper and richer information about participants’ experiences.
Creswell (2009) suggests that focus groups should be used when the interaction between the participants should present better information flow, “when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other, when time to collect information is limited, and when individuals interviewed one-on-one may be hesitant to provide information” (p. 133). For this research project, it is evident that using focus groups as a method of collecting data is the best fit, because the interviewees are homogeneous, they are used to communicating with one another in a group setting, and they are more likely to be willing to cooperate with one another. Additionally, because the participants will be international students, they might be hesitant to share some information during individual interviews, while finding it safer and easier to discuss their experiences in a group setting. Although some of the participants might be uncomfortable to speak up in a group setting because of a language barrier, personality traits, the level of adjustment, etc., Krueger and Casey (2000) reported that focus groups have proven to be less threatening overall to participants. Therefore, the researcher anticipates that the focus group discussion may open some topics that otherwise would not surface in individual interviews.

Focus groups aim to explore the unknown, something that has not been previously researched. According to Byers and Wilcox (1991), “[f]ocus groups may be valuable to those exploring new territory in which little is known beforehand, or to gain unique insight into existing beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes” (p. 71). Because the experiences of international students participating in the CCP had never been previously researched, focus groups were one of the best instruments in obtaining the data necessary to answer the questions set forth within this research project.

According to the literature review by Halcomb, Gholizadeh, Digiacomo, Phillips, and Davidson (2007), “[f]ocus groups are a useful tool to expand existing knowledge about service
provision and identify consumer needs that will assist in the development of future intervention programmes, particularly within multicultural populations” (p. 1001). Thus, multiple perspectives of the participants of this study, who were international students, could substantially increase the researcher’s knowledge about the participants’ experiences within the program.

Finally, focus groups could be the best fit with the international student population because it is known that when participating in projects that they can feel they can contribute to or in which make a difference, they can gain a sense of empowerment (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2000). Krueger and Casey emphasize that focus groups “can enable the exploration, validation and clarification of multiple participants’ voices, regarding their perspectives and beliefs” (p. 1009). Thus, the researcher believes that this research study could benefit from the feeling of contributing or empowerment that participants may have experienced during the focus groups.

In summary, although there was some anecdotal evidence and feedback from international students’ regarding their experiences of participating in the CCP, they were not empirically researched. There was a need to explore those experiences to learn more about the process of adjustment and acculturation of this multicultural population. Thus, because this research aimed to gather in depth data about participants’ experiences and collective views and opinions on the topic that had never been researched before, focus groups were chosen as a primary method of data collection.

While there are many advantages of utilizing focus groups as a method for this research project, such as researching new experiences and knowledge, gaining rich data from a group of opinions with a multicultural population, there are also several issues that need to be addressed
when employing focus groups: moderator and moderator skills, group composition, and impact on participants.

**Moderator and Moderator Skills**

Many authors have stressed the importance of the choice of the moderator and moderator skills for conducting focus groups (Kleiber, 2004; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Steward & Shamdasani, 1990). The choice to use focus groups required a moderator team consisting of a moderator and a note taker (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The moderator for this research was an external person who recently received a PhD in Higher Education and a Master’s degree in Counselor Education at the same university. The note taker was one of the counselors from the UM Counseling Center who recently received M.Ed in Counseling at the same university and who was an international student from China. She had never participated in the CCP but she was experienced in group work and was trained to recognize verbal and nonverbal cues. The major rationale for bringing a third party to facilitate the focus groups and remove the researcher from that role was that the researcher is directly and actively involved in the CCP service delivery. The participants may have had positive and personal relationships established with the researcher that could subjectively influence data collection process.

The skills of a focus group moderator or facilitator also are important to insure the success of the research project (Halcomb et al., 2007). “This person requires a significant level of skill in facilitating group processes, listening and probing and encouraging participants to explore their perceptions of the topic” (p. 1006). Focus group moderators should have good listening, observation, and speaking skills. They also should be culturally sensitive. Because the moderator for this research had a Master’s degree in Counselor Education and a PhD in Higher Education, she had received substantial training in communication skills, as well as multicultural
sensitivity. Moreover, she had obtained extensive experience facilitating group discussions with international students for over two years. Therefore, the researcher believes that such training and experience significantly improved the data collection process.

**Group Composition**

The literature suggests that focus groups should include homogeneous participants (Halcomb et al., 2007; Kleiber, 2004; Krueger & Casey, 2000). If focus group participants have something in common, that can foster group interaction and help participants feel more comfortable with each other (Krueger & Casey, 2000). If participants feel comfortable with each other, then they are more likely to open up for sharing and elaborating on the topics of discussion. In this research study, the sample was homogeneous; the participants were international students and they all participated in the CCP. However, even in homogenous groups discussions can be sidetracked or dominated by a few vocal individuals. In this case, the moderator was instructed to intervene and redirect the group dynamics. For example, the moderator politely announced in the group that it was important for the purpose of the research to hear from other participants.

**Impact on Participants**

When the researcher and participants are invested in the topic of the research, the effect of the data collection process on the participants should be considered. “The ethics of the responsible conduct of focus group research requires full attention to the potential and actual influence of the experience on the participants and the possibility of creating intended or unintended consequences” (Kleiber, 2004, p. 97). Therefore, the participants were informed in advance that the confidentiality of focus groups is limited because of the nature of groups. The participants were asked to keep conversations confidential, the researcher and the moderator
team also pledged to keep data confidential, but the researcher did not promise participants that the confidentiality would be maintained by all participants of focus groups. This is the major limitation of group settings. Additionally, participation in this research could have made participants either less or more interested or involved in the CCP. To address this concern, the researcher instructed the moderator to specify for the participants that that was not the intent of this research study and should the participants have had any concerns, they could address them to the researcher after the focus groups were conducted.

**Data Collection Process**

Data collection process consisted of three steps: two focus groups and a member checking. The selected participants were asked to engage in two focus groups; a 90 minute focus group in the middle of October, 2011 and another 90 minute focus group toward the end of November, 2011. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) suggest that there are no particular rules to determine the number of focus groups conducted for a particular research project. The number of focus groups within one research can range between one and more than 50. The main purpose of conducting focus groups was to obtain diverse and wide range of opinions on a specific topic without having to come up with a consensus or a plan of action. The main reasons for repeating focus groups within one research project were to collect sufficient data from each participant, compare and contrast emerging themes between and across focus groups, as well as to clarify or obtain more depth regarding emerging themes from the first focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1995).

Morgan (1995) suggests that three to five focus groups is a common number to reach saturation. Saturation is the term used mainly in grounded theory that describing the process of analysis within and between focus groups, in which the information repeats or cycles around the
same categories without producing new categories, ideas, or insights (Creswell, 2009). Once saturation is achieved, it is a signal to stop conducting focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2000). In grounded theory research, achieving saturation is necessary for researchers to create theories about participants’ experiences. Therefore, saturation is important for the data analysis and can directly affect the result of the research. In this research project, saturation was not a major concern because of the chosen methodology. In generic qualitative studies, reaching saturation is not the main focus because there is no intention of creating a theory about participants’ experiences (Caelli et al., 2003). The main goal of generic qualitative studies is to produce thick descriptions of participants’ experiences, supporting them with quotations from participants. The researcher believes that data received from two focus groups, each 90 minutes long, conducted with eight to ten participants produced a considerable amount of data sufficient to develop thick descriptions. Therefore, there were two focus groups conducted.

The availability of time and resources to conduct focus groups is an important rationale to consider as well (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1995). The time allotted for conducting two focus groups was limited to eight weeks; each focus group lasting 90 minutes. The participants of this study were members of the CCP and they were involved in programs and activities organized within the CCP in addition to their academic studies. The CCP offered at least 32 various activities within the two months data collection period. Additional group meetings might have caused participant burnout that could lead to participant dropout. To preserve the sample and decrease the likelihood of participant drop out, and also obtain sufficient data, the researcher believes that two focus groups for this research study was optimal.

In the process of data collection, the first focus group set the stage for the development of a narrower second set of questions for the second focus group that aimed to answer the research
questions in more depth and detail (i.e., clarification and depth regarding emerging themes). Conducting the second focus group later in the semester allowed for the possibility of an increase in richness of participants’ experiences in the CCP. The focus group interviews had an unstructured format with open-ended questions intended to elicit opinions and information about the experiences of participating in the CCP. The researcher anticipated that data received by means of two focus groups would provide a sufficient amount of data satisfactory for the purpose and format of this research study.

In addition to questions developed for each focus group discussion, the moderator used probing questions. They are very important in focus group process because they help clarify the content of participants’ answers and the essence of participants’ opinions and insights. According to Kleiber (2004), “[p]robing and asking for clarification ensures that the data will be helpful in interpretation and analysis” (p. 101). Probing questions also allowed the moderator to ask participants to elaborate further and collect more detailed information and rich data about specific topics mentioned by participants. While probing questions are very important, the moderator should be careful to use them in such a way that they will not be leading participants in any direction but purely clarifying participants’ thoughts (Klieber). For example, it is not a good idea to restate participants’ statements using the moderator’s opinion. Good examples of probing questions are: Tell me more about this or Please explain what you mean. The appropriate use of probing questions was discussed with the moderator by the researcher before each focus group.

Along with generating questions for focus group discussions, the ground rules developed by the researcher and the committee chair were used as guidelines for conducting focus groups (See Appendix 3). Before conducting each focus group, the ground rules were introduced to the
note-taker and participants in writing, as well as presented verbally. The participants were also informed about the purpose and the design of the research, as well as the purpose and role of the note taker. In order to insure that all participants had a clear understanding about the CCP, the moderator was instructed by the researcher to provide a brief overview of the program and give them an opportunity to ask questions about the program.

Since both focus groups and a member checking meeting were audio recorded, a review of their consent to be audio-recorded and confidentiality issues were conducted by the moderator verbally before each session. That review highlighted the information regarding taping and confidentiality contained in the information letter that they received in writing before each focus group and at the member checking meeting. Audio-recording was chosen over video-recording for this study. While video recording could provide the researcher with additional cues about the nonverbal behavior of participants, it also could create tension within participants or even result in withdrawal from the study. The researcher believed that because international students are a minority on this university campus, their concern may have been that their voice, accent, slang, etc. may be easily recognizable within the rest of the student population. Additionally, some international students may feel insecure about their English language proficiency and they would not feel confident to present themselves on video (McLafferty, 2004). Since their voice was not directly connected to their name and image, using audio-recording during the data collection process could eliminate the stress and pressure of participation in this research. Therefore, both focus groups and the member checking meeting were audio-recorded.

The nonverbal cues were recorded by the note taker and debriefed for further understanding with the moderator after each session. Debriefing of observations of nonverbal cues was also reflected in field notes. The recordings of sessions were securely stored by the
researcher before transcribing and analysis; after that they were destroyed. Both focus group discussions were transcribed by the researcher. The transcripts did not contain real names of the participants; therefore they did not require being securely stored. The transcripts were discussed with the dissertation chair for accuracy.

Before conducting focus groups, participants were assured by the moderator that their privacy would be maintained throughout the research and their names would not be mentioned on tape. However, if names happened to be mentioned during the focus groups, they would be replaced by pseudonyms during the transcription process. Subsequently, in notes taken by the note taker, participants’ names were be replaced by pseudonyms. At the beginning of each focus group, participants were notified that the only persons who would listen to tapes would be the researcher and the chair of the research committee. Participants were guaranteed that the tapes would be destroyed after the completion of transcriptions. Before each focus group was started, participants were given specific time to ask questions or address any possible concerns.

After each focus group was conducted, there were debriefing sessions between the moderator and the note taker. During those sessions, major ideas, themes, comments, and observations were discussed. The notes were reviewed and discussed to exchange any emerging themes and/or insights. At the end of each debriefing session, both the moderator and note taker made notes about each debriefing session. All the notes generated by the moderator and the note taker were considered as field notes. These field notes were discussed during the debriefing sessions between the researcher and the chair of the research committee to capture any new insights and check for accuracy of interpretations.

The final point of data collection also included a member checking meeting with all the focus group participants. They were presented with a summary of the researcher’s analysis of
the results of the study and were asked to give feedback on the accuracy of the summary. The member checking process and questions posed during this step will be described in detail later in this chapter.

During each step of data collection, participants were offered refreshments, such as tea/coffee and cookies. Such an approach was believed to facilitate the establishment of a casual and relaxing atmosphere, conducive to discussing their experiences.

During each focus group discussion, participants were communicating in a language foreign to them; that may have felt uncomfortable to them. Therefore, they were asked if they would prefer to receive the interview questions in advance to become more familiar with the questions and prepare their answers in English. The participants did not make that request. The focus groups were scheduled at the building where most of the Cultural Connections Program activities were held so that the participants would feel familiar with the surroundings and could relate their participation in this research to their participation in the CCP. Should this have been a concern for participants of this study, the interviews and/or the member checking meeting would be scheduled at a different venue. However, participants did not find that to be an issue.

**Data Analysis Process**

According to Kleiber (2004), “[d]ata in the form of transcriptions of audiotapes and videotapes and field notes from each focus group should be analyzed across groups for recurring themes and issues” (p. 94). Both focus groups in this study were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. There are different modes of analyzing data: transcript based, tape based, note based, and memory based (Krueger & Casey, 2000). These techniques vary in the level of rigor accordingly. Transcript based analysis requires transcription of all conversations recorded on tape or video. It is a very precise and rigorous technique, however it requires a lot of time for
transcription. Tape based transcriptions require less time because the researcher only transcribes those parts that are considered relevant and significant for the study. However, the judgment and the decision about the choice of transcription lies on the researcher and the rigor and objectivity of such judgments can be questionable. Note based modes of analysis rely mainly on field notes taken by the moderator and the note taker. The sessions might be recorded, but not transcribed. Memory based modes of analysis are the least rigorous because they rely on the memory of the moderator to generate the summary of the session.

Onwuegbuzie, Leech, and Collins (2010) recommend that transcript-based analysis should be used when the researcher is experienced in utilizing such approach. Because the researcher lacked extensive experience in data analysis, the best way to insure trustworthiness of the data analysis was to transcribe the complete focus group conversations, using field notes and comments from the moderator and note taker to provide additional richness of data. In addition, because of the researcher's close association with the CCP and many of its participants, tape based analysis may have been subject to researcher biases, limiting the quality and trustworthiness of the entire data analysis, second focus group direction, and final data analysis. Therefore, in the process of transcription, the researcher used a transcription based analysis mode for analyzing data from focus groups. It required listening to tapes and typing written text of what was said during focus groups. In case there were questions about specific pauses or intonation used by participants, the researcher referred to field notes. The field notes were received from the focus group moderator and the note taker in written form (see Appendix 5). The data was analyzed manually; no computer software was utilized in the process.

The data was analyzed using the techniques consistent with a generic qualitative approach. There were two focus groups that generated two sets of transcripts and field notes.
Each set of transcripts and field notes were read and re-read at least three times, thus the process of analysis consisted of three stages for each focus group. During the first reading the researcher looked for anything that stood out, seemed important, interesting, significant, striking, and/or repeated (Sommer, Ward, & Scofiled, 2011). This process included listening to audio tapes, reading transcripts and field notes from the moderator and the note taker, and identifying specific words and phrases that stood out. Based on the first reading of transcripts and field notes, the “recurring patterns” in the form of categories, factors, themes (Merriam, 1998, p. 11) or emerging themes were identified. At that initial stage, there were several emerging themes identified. Emerging themes were assigned a name (label, code) that described a category they represented.

During the second reading of transcripts and field notes, the researcher analyzed the data with reference to the emerging themes and indicated anything that spoke to a particular theme that was assigned earlier. The main task of re-reading transcripts and field notes during the second stage of analysis was to note any passages that referred to each emerging theme. When new ideas or emerging themes occurred, new labels or codes were assigned. In the same fashion, when any emerging themes appeared to be less significant or redundant at the second stage of analysis, then such emerging themes were removed. As a result of the second stage of analysis, a set of final emerging themes was identified and verified.

Once the second stage of data analysis was complete and the set of final emerging themes was identified, the transcripts and field notes were re-read again for the third time. During that stage, the task was to choose quotations from the participants that would illustrate the theme and support all analyses and interpretations. There are at least two major reasons for providing supporting quotations for each emerging theme. The first reason is to give voice to participants
of the study and provide richer descriptions. The second reason is to provide an additional way of establishing trustworthiness and authenticity (Sommer, Ward, & Scofield, 2011).

To ensure trustworthiness of this study, the researcher kept reflective commentaries before and after interviews as suggested by Lapan (2004). Reflective commentaries included the researcher’s reflections, written in the form of journaling. The transcriptions, field notes, and reflective commentaries were discussed with the committee chair during the debriefing sessions. During debriefing sessions, the reflective commentaries and data analyses were discussed with the committee chair to check for possible flaws, biases, or gaps in interpretations. Shenton (2004) suggests that “frequent debriefing sessions” between the researcher and the research committee chair can “provide a sounding board for the investigator to test his or her developing ideas and interpretations” (p. 67). Once the emerging themes were identified and focus groups data were discussed and analyzed, the second set of clarifying focus group questions was developed.

The data from the second focus group was analyzed in the same manner as the data received from the first focus group. The purpose of the second focus group was to narrow down the areas of description of the participants’ experiences, as well as to increase clarity and depth and to compare the emerging themes within the analysis of the first focus group. To minimize researcher bias, the researcher triangulation process was employed as soon as the data from both focus groups was compiled, analyzed, and discussed with the committee chair. The researcher triangulation process is particularly recommended in instances when the researcher is heavily involved in the program that is the focus of the research (Lapan, 2004). The researcher triangulation process involved a peer debriefer (i.e., the third person perspective of a peer doctoral student who was not involved in the proposed research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
The peer debriefer’s reports were compared and checked with the rest of the data and discussed with the committee chair by the researcher. That additional step allowed checking for research bias and accuracy of data analysis and contributed to the trustworthiness of this research study.

Finally, when the data from focus groups, field notes, reflective commentaries, and researcher triangulation was analyzed, the researcher scheduled a one-hour member checking meeting with all the interviewees. The researcher presented the preliminary data analysis to the participants. The member checking strategy provided an opportunity to verify the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations and insights with the participants and obtain their feedback and remarks about how well the results fit with their experiences and understanding (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). That also helped to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. Once the additional data collected at the member checking was analyzed, the results were discussed during the final debriefing session with the committee chair.

**Ethical considerations**

This qualitative study aimed to collect in-depth narrative data about the experiences of the international students involved in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of Mississippi. Before conducting the research, approval for the research project was obtained from the researcher’s dissertation committee chair and members and from The University of Mississippi’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The participants of the study were given an information letter with the description of the research and its purpose, as well as the details about participation procedures and confidentiality (see Appendix 1). The researcher included information about how the results would be used and who could potentially benefit from this study. The information letter also included permission to audiotape the interview sessions. The participants were advised that once the interviews were
transcribed and member checking analyzed, the audio recordings would be destroyed. Participants’ names were not on the audio recordings or transcripts. Names of the participants were substituted by numbers or pseudonyms so that confidentiality could be maintained at all times. Participants’ age, gender, country of origin, academic class level, and program membership status were obtained but not placed on the transcripts or audio recordings to ensure that participants could not be identified from any of the demographic data.

Because data collection occurred in a group setting, specific precautions were made. According to Halcomb et al. (2007), “[t]he consent form should also contain an undertaking by participants to not disclose the experiences shared by others during the group (p. 1009). Therefore, the confidentiality for other members was specified in the information letter and reminded to participants at the beginning and end of each focus group.

Participation in this research was on a voluntary basis and the researcher did not provide any payment or bonus for participation. Participants may have ended their participation at any point in the research process without negative consequences. The results of the research were made available for participants and others who may be interested.

Because there was no empirical data about the experiences of the international students studying The University of Mississippi and participating in the Cultural Connections Program, this generic qualitative study was an appropriate method for this research because it provided thick descriptions and detailed explanations. In this way the results of this research add to the body of research about international students’ experiences. The descriptions generated from focus groups provided a foundation for better understanding what it was like to be an international student and a member of such a unique multifaceted program as the CCP.
Trustworthiness of the Research

In the following paragraphs the issues of validity and reliability will be addressed. In qualitative language, both validity and reliability fall into the category of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness involves assuring “the integrity of the process and product” (Thorne, 2008, p. 101). Trustworthiness can be achieved by employing specific techniques to sustain credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These techniques will be described in the following paragraphs along with the definitions of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility in the qualitative approach can be established by matching the research design with the population of the study. In this study credibility was established by using focus group interviews with international students who had different perspectives and background from the ones of the students in the U.S. According to Merchant and Dupuy (1996), “[i]nterpersonal relationships and personal contacts are especially valued in many cultures; hence, using such an approach can enhance the richness and credibility of the data” (p. 538). The focus group format gave a chance for both moderator and participants to clarify the questions or answers during the inquiry. Such clarification helped overcome possible language barriers and encourage cultural understanding and sensitivity; all of which contributed to the credibility of this research.

To further ensure the credibility of this study, the researcher employed procedures briefly discussed earlier, such as frequent debriefing sessions, the researcher’s reflective commentaries, member checking, and researcher triangulation. The following paragraphs will include the detailed descriptions of these procedures.
Debriefing Sessions

Debriefing sessions were employed in the process of data analysis with a committee chair and/or committee members. Debriefing sessions provide a way for analytic probing of interpretations and analysis to insure richness and depth, identify gray areas of research, and uncover researcher’s biases and assumptions (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Therefore, the debriefing sessions helped the researcher gain a deeper understanding of her thoughts and reflections and check her interpretations with others for any possible biases.

Reflective Commentary

Reflective commentaries are the researcher’s reflections that she wrote in the form of journaling (Lapan, 2004). Shenton suggests that using reflective commentary can help “record the researcher’s initial impressions of each data collection session, patterns appearing to emerge in the data collected and theories [patterns] generated” (p. 67). Thus, engaging in reflective commentaries provided an additional source of information regarding the researcher’s insight and strengthened the credibility of the data analysis.

Member Checking

Member checking is the process of verifying the accuracy of the data analysis and the researcher’s insights with the participants and obtaining their feedback and remarks about how well the results fit their experiences and understanding (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Golafshani (2003) suggests using member checking to implement validation of participants’ “multiple and diverse realities” (p. 604). According to Lapan (2004), “[t]his member checking…allows [the researcher]…to question the findings or request clarification, thus challenging the [researcher] to reveal evidence, change interpretations, or collect additional data” (p. 243). A member checking meeting consisted of all the participants of
the research after both focus groups have been conducted, and the data transcribed and analyzed. Since the main purpose of a member checking meeting was to validate and verify the research findings, that strategy increased the trustworthiness and rigor of this study.

**Researcher Triangulation Process**

The possibility of researcher bias in this study was high because the researcher was heavily involved in the CCP. Therefore, the design of this study included the process of researcher triangulation. According to Lapan (2004), researcher triangulation “increases evaluator credibility” (p. 243). The researcher triangulation process involved a peer debriefer - a peer doctoral student who was not involved in this research study and who reflected and analyzed transcripts or researcher’s journals and/or notes without “knowing the insider’s [researcher’s] interpretation” (Pugsley, 2010, p. 243). Such a triangulation strategy reduced the influence of bias on the results of the study and allowed verification of the accuracy of data analysis and descriptions.

To conclude, the researcher believes that such strategies as debriefing sessions, reflective commentaries, member checking, and researcher triangulation ensured credibility and significantly strengthened the trustworthiness of this study, and produced valid and valuable research results.

**Transferability**

Transferability is the process of measuring of the results of research for generalizability to the population outside of the scope of a particular study and for applicability of the findings in similar contexts (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because of the nature of qualitative studies, the data is collected from a small sample in a particular environment, Shenton (2004) asserts that “it is impossible to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions are applicable to
other situations and populations” (p. 69). In qualitative research, transferability depends on the interpretations of the reader, while the main responsibility of the researcher is to provide maximum descriptions to help the reader determine generalizability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The researcher believes that the results of this study may be generally transferred to other international student populations with considerations and adjustments to the location and size of educational institutions in which international students are enrolled, as well as programs in which they participate and services they receive. The results of this study can be more likely transferred to the population of international students who participate in a program similar to the Cultural Connections Program. Should the CCP be established on other university campuses, the results of this study will be potentially transferable to international students attending those universities.

**Dependability**

Dependability is a construct of trustworthiness which suggests that study findings are consistent and similar results could be achieved if the study was replicated at a similar setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability addresses the issue of reliability (Creswell, 2009). Based on the suggestions of Shenton (2004), to insure the dependability of this research, the researcher provided the description of the research design and implementation, the summary journal of data collection, and the reflective evaluation of the study. That should allow readers to have a sufficient understanding of the context and the process of this research project to be able to replicate this study within similar contexts.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is the idea of testing the degree of neutrality and ability of the researcher to minimize shaping the findings according to her own assumptions, biases, and expectations
Confirmability addresses the issue of objectivity of the research findings (Creswell, 2009). In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is involved in the process of the research itself and it is impossible to expect complete researcher objectivity. Patton (2001) recognizes that “even tests and questionnaires [in quantitative research] are designed by humans, [thus] the intrusion of the researcher’s biases is inevitable” (p. 64). Neutrality and objectivity were monitored throughout the research analysis process by means of member checking, debriefing sessions, and a researcher triangulation process.

**Researcher bias**

Focus groups are susceptible to facilitator bias, which can undermine the validity and reliability of findings. Kleiber (2004) proposes that “[i]n order to minimize bias and provide a neutral group environment where participants can be candid, it is desirable to have an objective moderator who is not personally invested in the delivery of program, instruction, or services” (p. 99). In this research study, the focus groups were facilitated by the external moderator, who received her PhD in Higher Education and who was an international student at the same university. The moderator never participated in the CCP and she was not personally invested in the program delivery or services.

The researcher is an international student at The University of Mississippi and has been initially a member and then the coordinator of the CCP. The researcher was invested in this program and was interested in the results of this study; therefore she could be biased toward the process or outcome of this study. One of the biases may have been the belief that the majority of the potential study participants would be willing to participate because they like the CCP. Another bias may have been that it was unlikely that the CCP could have a negative impact on international students. The researcher was aware of her biases and made sure she kept her notes
and journals regularly and discussed the processes, focus groups questions, transcriptions, and field notes with her research committee and peer debriefer. There were no biases identified in the process of data collections and analysis.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this research study identified by the researcher. First, the researcher has been heavily involved in The University of Mississippi Cultural Connections Program (CCP). Not only is she an international student herself, she had been coordinating the development and implementation of the CCP for five years and could be biased toward the outcomes of the program.

The second limitation is that the intended population for this study was limited to the international students of The University of Mississippi who were members of the Cultural Connections Program. This may impact the generalizability of the results to other settings. The University of Mississippi is a public institution located in the south of the U.S. Therefore, it is unknown whether the results of the study can be transferrable to populations of students in other states and at other institutions.

Third, the sample of this study consisted of international students who participated in the CCP for at least four times and who were generally familiar with the CCP. The sample did not include international students’ spouses or their family members. Although the sample was fairly diverse, (i.e., represented by students who participated a number of times in the CCP), they were from different countries of origin, they may have been in the U.S. for longer or shorter periods of time, etc. Additionally, the study did not include students and/or spouses who had never participated in the CCP, students and/or spouses who came once or twice and never came back, as well as American students who participated in the CCP. Therefore, the study was limited to
the experiences of only those international students who chose to participate in the CCP for at least four times.

Finally, a possible limitation is that the number of focus groups chosen for this study was limited to two. Two focus groups may not have produced the thick descriptions desired to more fully understand the experiences of the participants. However this study was the first step in the exploration of the phenomenon that had never been researched. Future studies may explore this topic more thoroughly.

**Delimitations**

The study was conducted at The University of Mississippi, which is a public university in a small southern town where 69% of undergraduates are from Mississippi, 19% of all students are minorities; and the international students come from 79 different nations (OIP, Annual International Report, 2010). The results may have limited transferability to other universities.

There were two focus groups 90 minutes each with the participants of the CCP and one 60 minute member checking meeting. The first focus group was conducted in October, 2011 and concluded with the second focus group in November, 2011. A one-hour member checking meeting was held in January, 2012.

**Summary**

This chapter introduced the reader to the purpose and rationale of this generic qualitative study with the explanations of the research design and research questions. The description of the population and sample, as well as procedures and ethical considerations were provided for reader’s review. To provide evidence of trustworthiness, the researcher included information about credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Several appendices have
been included in this chapter to provide further information about the content of the Cultural Connections Program and the context and procedure of this proposal.
CHAPTER IV
ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of international students participating in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of Mississippi. This chapter will include the descriptive characteristics of the research participants, their profile and demographic information that can be important to consider in the analysis of data. It will also include the analysis of the data collected from focus groups with the descriptions of the participant’s experiences in the program.

Organization of Data Analysis

The research questions will be stated in the beginning of the chapter to remind the reader about the purpose and goals of this research. The process of data analysis will follow, with the explanation of stages and procedures used to make sense of the data. The data analysis will be presented in the form of descriptions of participants’ reports obtained during two focus group interviews based on the themes that emerged as a result of the data analysis. Each description will be supported by the participants’ direct quotes to add to the richness of data and accuracy of the report. The description of the data will be followed by the summary of the findings.

Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of this research study, the following grand research question was posed: What are the experiences of international students participating in the Cultural Connections Program (the CCP) at The University of Mississippi (The UM)? To receive
descriptive answers to this question, the following first focus group question was developed:

How would you describe your experiences as you participate in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of Mississippi?


As a means to further clarify and understand the initial themes, a set of eight clarifying questions was developed for the second focus group interview. The questions were discussed with and approved by the dissertation chair. The following eight questions were developed for the second focus group interview:

1. In the first focus group, being connected to other International and American students was discussed. Tell me more about what being connected means.

2. In the first focus group, having a sense of belonging was brought up. Tell me some more about that please.

3. In the first focus group, you talked about safety and security. Help me to understand what you mean by that.

4. Confidence emerged as a theme at the last focus group. Please tell me more about that.

5. Please help me understand what you mean by the theme of openness, which was brought up in the first focus group.

6. Sharing emerged as a theme in the first focus group. Please tell me more about what this means to you.
7. One of the themes that emerged from the first focus group was personal growth. Please tell me more about that.

8. In the first focus group, the theme of change emerged. What do you mean by "change?"

Before presenting the report of findings which emerged from the research questions, the descriptive characteristics of the participants will be presented.

**Descriptive Characteristics of the Participants**

To fulfill the purpose of this research project, the researcher intended to recruit eight to ten participants to participate in two focus groups. There were initially 11 participants who matched the selection criteria, which was international students who participated in the CCP for more than 4 times. All 11 participants were asked and agreed to participate in this research and attended focus group 1. There were 10 participants at focus group 2. Therefore, the intended number of participants was met for both focus groups.

There was an even representation of gender in the sample of ten participants: five females and five males. During the focus groups, the participants were respectful and attentive to one another. There seemed to be cohesiveness in the group. That can be attributed to the following two facts: first, the majority of the participants knew each other prior to the research through participation in the Cultural Connections group discussions; second, because they participated in the CCP group discussions, they were familiar with the format and basic rules of the focus group interview that was similar to the format of the CCP group discussions.

The age of the participants ranged from young to mature international students: 19 to 28 years old. There were no freshmen students in the sample. There were three juniors, four seniors, and three graduate students (two PhD, one Master’s). There were six international
students for whom it was their first semester studying abroad. The rest of the participants had been studying in the U.S. for more than three months to over three years. The reported frequency of participation in CCP was from more than four times to more than 12 times.

The sample for focus group 1 was represented by the following countries:

2. India  7. Serbia
3. Netherlands  8. Singapore
5. Pakistan  10. Ukraine

There were 2 participants from the Ukraine. The participant from Pakistan did not participate in focus group 2. There was a broad representation of countries by the participants – from Europe to Africa and Asia. However, there were no students from Latin American countries. That is not surprising because normally students from Latin American countries form an exclusive tight group within themselves and do not actively participate in the CCP. There were only two Latino international students participating in the CCP during the semester when the data collection for this research project was conducted. Although both of them met the selection criteria of being international students and participating in the CCP more than four times, none of them could participate in focus group interviews because of the time constraints of the data collection period.

The sample fell into the following distribution: 40% of the sample represented Asian countries, 40% came from Europe, 10% from Africa, and 10% from an Arabic country. The sample appeared to be an accurate representation of the overall population of the students who participated in the Cultural Connections Program during data collection. This fact can add to
transferability and trustworthiness of this research. Now that the information about the participants has been described, the analysis of data, including the process of data analysis and the results will be presented.

**Process of Data Analysis**

The main goal of using a generic qualitative approach for this research was to produce thick descriptions of participants’ experiences, supporting them with quotations from participants. The data received from two focus groups, each 90 minutes long, produced a considerable amount of data sufficient to develop thick descriptions.

Data was analyzed using techniques consistent with a generic qualitative approach, such as reflective commentaries, debriefing sessions with the committee chair, and triangulation process. These techniques help eliminate research biases in data analysis while using a generic qualitative approach and ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of this research project (Caelli et al. (2003); Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sommer, Ward, & Scofield, 2011). The process of data analysis consisted of five major stages: 1) organizing data for analysis, 2) implementing various analyses, 3) coding, 4) generating descriptions, and 5) naming the themes (Creswell, 2009). The description of each stage will follow.

Before the stages of the process of analysis are described, it is important to specify that the data was analyzed manually without using any computer software. Although computer software would have made the process of data analysis faster and easier, the decision to analyze data by hand was based on the special characteristics of the sample. Because the participants of this research were international students, they had a level of English proficiency that resulted in unusual or incorrect grammar, sentence structures, word order and word choice. Therefore, many quotes of the participants required special attention in transcribing that cannot be
accomplished utilizing computer technology. Thus, to increase the accuracy of the reports and
descriptions and the trustworthiness of this study, the transcriptions and data analysis were
completed manually.

To implement stage 1 – organizing data for analysis, both focus group interviews were
transcribed by the researcher. In the process of transcription, the researcher used a transcription
based analysis mode. That mode required listening to the recording and typing the conversations
word by word. In the process of transcribing, the researcher referred to field notes for
clarification of the meaning of pauses, laughter, and change in intonation. The field notes were
received from the focus group moderator and the note taker in written form (see Appendix 5).

Stage 2 of data analysis occurred after interviews were transcribed. The transcriptions
were carefully read and reread by the researcher. The researcher kept reflective journals at every
major step of data analysis, such as after listening to the tape and after finishing transcribing.
Each transcription, reflective journal, and preliminary analysis was triangulated with a peer
debriefer for accuracy of interpretations. The purpose of triangulation was to achieve a “coherent
justification” for emerging themes (Creswell, 2009). In the process of triangulation,
transcriptions, reflective journals, and field notes were read and major themes were checked for
accuracy and confirmed by the peer debriefer. The data was triangulated with the dissertation
chair in the same manner that was used with the peer debriefer. As a result of this process, the
major emerging themes were identified. At that point, stage 2 of data analysis was complete and
the data was ready to be coded to allow for further refining of the emerging themes.

Stage 3 focused on coding participants’ quotes based on the themes that were identified
during stage 2. According to Rossman and Rallis (1998), coding is the “process of organizing the
material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information (p. 171).
During stage 3, the data that was organized during the two preliminary stages was coded simultaneously and independently by the researcher and the dissertation chair. The coding process included assigning each quote a number and then placing them into one or more categories.

Stage 3 included the process of triangulation. Data analysis can be made more reliable when data is coded by another researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). The researcher and the dissertation chair coded the data independently. After independent review and coding was completed, the researcher and the dissertation chair met to compare and discuss the participants’ quotes and their assignment into the categories. As a result of that triangulation process, the research team gained consensus about the distribution of items into specific categories or themes and which themes were distinctly similar (homogeneous) or different (heterogeneous) from each other (Spruill & Benshoff, 2002). For example, the themes “change” and “growth” were collapsed together with a new category named “opportunity” and the themes “share” and “help” were grouped together because they did not appear to be heterogeneous. Once the agreement on each item and theme was reached, stage 3 was completed.

Stage 4 involved the description of each theme and choosing the quotes that would best support each theme. Such descriptions aimed to give depth and richness to the data, therefore ensuring the trustworthiness of this research project. Trustworthiness is the qualitative term that is used to address validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005; McLeod, 2001). Thus, the purpose of stage 4 was to provide rich descriptions that would explain participants’ experiences as thoroughly and clearly as possible. To ensure the depth and richness of the descriptions, each theme and subtheme was supported with at least one direct quote from the participants. Whenever possible, each theme and subtheme was presented from different
angles, using a variety of perspectives and voices. When the theme descriptions reached sufficient richness and depth, stage 4 was finished. There was only one stage left to complete the process of data analysis – stage 5.

During stage 5 the researcher reviewed the quotes within each theme and assigned a name and/or an overarching description for the theme that would summarize the participants’ experiences. This stage helped refine the data into a concise summary and prepared the researcher to present her findings to the participants during the member checking meeting.

The member checking meeting was implemented as part of the data analysis process to validate the emerging themes and accuracy of descriptions with the participants. The summary of the findings was presented to them and the following questions were asked:

3. According to my analysis of the focus group discussion that I have just presented to you, what seems to you accurate or inaccurate, clear or unclear, true or not true?

4. How would you correct or change my analysis of the focus group discussion and why?

As a result of the member checking meeting, the participants confirmed all of the emerging themes. They expressed that the emerging themes were described accurately. Participants also presented the idea that there may be a sequence in the experiences of participation in the CCP. They suggested however, that the sequence may fluctuate depending on the individual. That suggestion was taken into consideration for the discussion of the results. Apart from that, participants neither suggested any changes nor made any corrections. Therefore, it would be accurate to conclude that the results of the data analysis were validated by the participants. Such validation added to the trustworthiness of this research. Now that the
results of the member checking meeting have been presented, this concludes the description of the process of data analysis.

The previous section provided a detailed explanation of 3 major steps of data collection and analysis (focus group 1, focus group 2, and member checking) and 5 major stages of the process of data analysis. The purpose of such detailed explanation was to provide transparency to the research. Transparency results in the presentation of the process of the research in such a way that there is a clear and precise explanation of its sequence and logic (Merriam, 1998). When the research procedures are clearly explained it provides the opportunity for other researchers to replicate the study and determine the appropriateness of the method chosen for the research. It was also important to check for transparency because it is the key to ensure the rigor of the research. The rigor occurs when the researcher employs several stages of data analysis, validates the accuracy of the findings using multiple procedures, such as peer debriefing, triangulation, and member checking, and represents data in a transparent manner (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, it would appear that the researcher used a rigorous approach in data analysis and presentation.

At this point, the process of data analysis is presented with the explanation of transparency and rigor of this research. The following section will introduce the reader to the description of major themes that emerged as a result of each step and stage of data analysis described above.

**Description of Themes**

During focus group 1 the participants verbalized several challenges of adjustment, such as language and communication barriers; loneliness; academic difficulties; mistrust between American and international students; feeling lost and overwhelmed. As a result of data analysis
and triangulation with the peer debriefer and the dissertation chair, the following themes emerged from focus group 1:

1. Connections
2. Sense of belonging
3. Safety & security
4. Confidence
5. Openness
6. Sharing
7. Growth
8. Change

The preliminary analysis of focus group 2 implemented by the researcher showed that the participants confirmed all the emerging themes from focus group 1. There were also four new themes that emerged from focus group 2:

1. Acceptance
2. Help
3. Learning
4. Opportunity

The results of preliminary data analysis of focus group 2 were discussed, and initial findings were shared with the peer debriefer. The peer debriefer read through the transcriptions, field notes, reflective journals, and the emerging themes. As a result, she noted that the participants confirmed all the themes identified as a result of focus group 1 and she confirmed the evidence of four new emerging themes. The peer debriefer suggested a new theme “Americans”. She stated that participation in the CCP appeared to provide international students with valuable opportunities to meet American students. That suggestion was taken into consideration and presented to the dissertation chair along with the rest of the findings. As a result, the theme “Americans” was added for data analysis.
After the data was discussed with the peer debriefer, the findings were triangulated with the dissertation chair. As a result of data triangulation, the following 13 themes were chosen for coding – stage 4 of the process of data analysis:

1. Connections
2. Sense of belonging
3. Safety & security
4. Confidence
5. Openness
6. Sharing
7. Help
8. Growth
9. Change
10. Acceptance
11. Opportunity
12. Learning
13. Americans

The quotes of the participants’ reports were coded and assigned to the 13 emerging themes by both the researcher and the dissertation chair independently from each other. These results were compared and discussed. Themes were compared with one another to determine if they were significantly different from each other. As a result of triangulation of data with the dissertation chair, the 13 emerging themes were then collapsed into six themes that while having some interaction and overlap could be distinguished as different from each other and also homogeneous within themes:

1. Connecting/Connections
2. Belonging, Safety, and Security
3. Confidence
4. Acceptance and Openness
5. Sharing and Help
6. Opportunities to Learn, Grow, and Change
At this point, the process of data analysis has been described and the six themes that resulted from the final step of analysis process have been introduced. In the following paragraphs, the researcher will provide a detailed description of each theme, supported with direct quotes from the participants.

**Connecting/Connections**

“We are having fun being together!”

As stated earlier, international students face many challenges related to adjustment and acculturation (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Mori, 2000; Wendler & Nilsson, 2009). Sumer, Poyrazli, and Grahame (2008) found that those challenges can be addressed by providing social support to international students. The Cultural Connections Program offers multiple venues and opportunities for international students to gain support through engaging in different groups, activities and events. The results of data analysis showed that the theme of Connecting/Connections was very important for all the participants, seemingly a part of each of the other themes. For example, many questions would either begin or end with the theme of connections. Therefore, the theme of Connecting/Connections was pulled out as an overarching theme. Data analysis further identified two subthemes: the experience of connecting and the benefits of connections.

**The Experience of Connecting**

“I started to know people. That made me very happy.”

Several participants described their experiences of connecting. According to the data, participating in the CCP allows international students to “have fun” and “have a good time together.” One participant reported that the experience of connecting was “nice” and “cool” because she had a chance to meet others, spend time with them, and not be alone:
And actually when you come here you don’t know anyone, so when I heard about the ILC and C3 it was very nice to literally have something to do from 4 to 6. So that’s a good thing that can get you out of your room and so that was pretty cool.

Another participant felt welcomed and connected when he was contacted by another international student upon his arrival:

Like during my first week here the first person who contacted me was number 6, through facebook, and I did not even know her so I was like “who is this?” (everyone starts laughing). But you know it’s really cool she said that she is an international student as well and it made me feel warm during my first week here.

One participant expressed it made him happy when he connected with others once he started playing volleyball: “We started playing volleyball and meeting new people. That was good; this is how I started to know people. That made me very happy.” Many students reported that they enjoyed hanging out with peer international students. One of them said that the experience of connecting was good for her: “so that was pretty cool […] meeting new people, other international students from different cultures.” Another participant reported being happy to have met new friends:

So like the week before the classes started I did not know anyone, but the freshmen that come here they already have some company, but now our Ukrainian students, American and Russian, I am really happy I know these people.

Several participants described their positive experiences of connecting with American students. One participant said: “Actually it is fun to meet and hang out with many international students within C3 and so on but [with] Americans also…and they are very cool people.”

Another participant shared that the CCP helped her meet new friends: “The program helped me
a lot to find really good friends among Americans.” One more participants expressed that although she had never been away from her family, participating in the CCP prevented her from feeling homesick, lonely, or bored, and gave her a sense of belonging and security:

I have never been away earlier for such a long period of time aside of my family, and we are very close, we spend a lot of time together. But here, I was surprised actually I did not feel that I am lonely, and I am bored and I am missing them so much. I think partially it’s because of these programs, the system – everything is cool, this is why I am good, in the right place.

The following quote concludes the description of participants’ experiences of connecting: “So I like this place and I can know different people from different countries and what they think. And it is an amazing experience.” Thus, the participants only described positive experiences of connecting. Among those experiences they emphasized that they enjoyed hanging out with peer international and American students – members of the CCP, as well as others that they have met as a result of connecting with each other. Along with the experiences of connecting, many students indicated multiple benefits of connections.

**The Benefits of Connections**

“You are coming to Cultural Connections club to talk to people and find solutions.”

The subtheme “benefits of connections” includes the descriptions that exemplify positive outcomes from connecting with others. There were several benefits mentioned by the participants that connections brought to them. Many participants shared that the CCP helped them develop relationships and friendships. As stated by one participant, she found an opportunity to connect with other international students by attending the CCP: “In Cultural Connections Program there is a great way to get in touch with internationals.” Another
participant emphasized that the benefit of building relationships was in possibility to extend relationships for the future that may influence their career: "You make friendships here and they will probably last for a life time...we develop those bonds that extend well beyond my career at Ole Miss, it’s kind of like a long term investment."

Several participants specified that the CCP provided them with social support and networking. For example, here is a quote from the data:

At first you just playing sports – we went to intramural fields, but after a few weeks we started going out, drinking beer, play games, cooking dinner together. And you know that’s good because you start meeting friends and building friendships.

Another benefit of connections is in having a venue to meet fellow international students. As one participant stated: “I don’t have to actively search for other international students around campus, I can just come to C3.” That is a value and a convenience to the participants because international students are the minority on the university campus at The UM and it may not be so easy for them to meet each other in a regular setting like a classroom or the library.

An additional benefit of connections is an opportunity to meet American students and develop relationships with them. For example, one participant shared: “It is a good platform to create those relationships with friends that are here in Cultural Connections. It is a good place to start to communicate with Americans.” Another participant added that the benefit of connections was to have an opportunity to practice communication with Americans by saying: “It helps you, gives a platform to practice, especially if they are Americans, you know like our group.”

Several participants emphasized that one of the benefits of connecting was to belong and to be included. One participant stated that the connections made in the CCP stayed strong even after some of the meetings were missed and because of that he did not feel alienated:
You can miss and still not be alienated from that. Something that strongly connects you with others. Because in my community, with my national peers, being connected is a must. If you do not contact others for a week, they exclude you from the circle.

Many participants reported gaining sense of stability and security as another benefit of connections within the CCP. One participant expressed that such stability was very important for international students because it made it less overwhelming to handle the amount of information in the beginning of their studies abroad:

It is kind of nice to have that structure, because when international students come to campus, everything is bombarded to them, at once, immigration stuff, registration stuff, which is like horrible, so it is important for us to have these structured things, so we can go every day, enjoy and go back to…we can relax.

Another benefit reported by participants was in being connected to peer international and American students increased participants’ confidence. As stated by one of the participants: “I think being connected increases people’s confidence because if you are acting like a fool, you feel more confident around people you connect to.” The confidence gained through connections encouraged international students to start new relationships. One participant explicitly described that in the following words: “So, the Cultural Connections is like an important step for me to meet other people from the same region I am from and from there on I had confidence to branch out and meet people from other cultures.” Another participant shared being connected to other members of the CCP gave her confidence to interact with others outside of the program: “So when you go to class and there is also a person that is part of the same group, you have somebody from your group there and you again feel more confidence to interact with other people.”
Several participants found benefits of connections in having opportunities of sharing and helping others and receiving help. One participant stated: “Sharing interests, helping out in many different and difficult situations. This is what connections mean to me.” Another participant found connections being beneficial because he could find solutions: “For example, you are coming to Cultural Connections club to talk to people and find solutions.” Another participant added that the benefits of connections were also found in sharing and finding solutions:

I think that when you can share with somebody what’s disturbing you, to share the problem, you will find the solution to the problem easier and faster…because I need like someone who would share with me my happy moments, and my sad moments…so it’s cool.

Another benefit of connections is to be informed about and exposed to other programs and services. As one participant stated: “If you know someone who invites you, you’d much rather go there.” Some students found recreational opportunities through connections within the CCP. For example, one participant stated: “I have played a lot of volleyball. And the idea is kind of like to be together to have fun.” Connections created opportunities to make plans for weekends and holidays and traveling together. Here is what one participant said about that: “The program helped me a lot to find really good friends among Americans. And we are friends until now and we are making plans for winter breaks and it’s really great.”

Many participants found benefits of connections in opportunities to learn new skills and ways of relating, as well as to learn about cultures of other countries and America. One participant shared: “It helped with a lot of skills. Definitely speaking – public speaking, English, sporting skills, hiking…Wide range of skills, yeah. Definitely.” Another participant said: “So I
feel like in Cultural Connections, since we talked about all sorts of things, like people are from everywhere, so you learn about all sorts of things.” Another participant noted about learning new ways of relating: “I feel like I have learned now from my experience here, I feel like I would be open now.”

According to Summers and Volet (2008), interaction with American students is considered beneficial because they represent local culture and can provide information about local language differences, such as accents and slang words/phrases. Several participants reported that experiences of participating in the CCP gave them opportunities to find friends among Americans. One participant shared: “Actually it is fun to meet and hang out with…Americans also […] and they are very cool people. And we are friends until now and we are making plans for winter breaks and it’s really great.” Several other participants reported that connections helped them learn about other cultures: “Well, in addition, also, getting to know about other cultures is also part of the connection thing.” In addition, connections helped international students learn about American culture and experience it. For example, one participant emphasized: “And the other cool thing I like about C3, ILC that we can celebrate American holidays, Halloween, Thanksgiving, tomorrow we have Thanksgiving Dinner, so it’s very cool.” Thus, it appears that participants benefited from connections because they introduced and educated them about the culture and the context of the local community.

This paragraph concludes the theme Connecting/Connections. The theme was divided into two categories: experience of connecting and benefits of connections. In summary, the participants described positive experiences of connecting, such as feeling happy and welcomed; having fun; having a good time; and enjoying the company of other international and American friends. There were multiple benefits of connections described, such as establishing
relationships and networking with international and American students within the CCP; connecting to other people outside of the CCP; connecting to other programs and services; making relationships and plans for the future; building confidence; sharing experiences, getting and receiving help and finding solutions to problems; and getting opportunities to learn. Now that the theme Connecting/Connections has been discussed, the descriptive data for the theme of Belonging, Safety, and Security will be provided.

A Sense of Belonging, Safety, and Security

“I think that’s great that I can belong and be included.”

This quote is chosen to introduce the reader to the theme because it stands out strongly and supports the significance of the theme. More details and descriptions regarding a sense of belonging, safety, and security will follow in this section.

A sense of belonging and a sense of safety and security are the first two basic needs that human beings seek to obtain after physiological needs, according to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Huitt, 2007). That means that every individual has a need for shelter, safety, security, and community. International students are not different from everybody else. When they arrive to study in a foreign country, their usual support system and environment are lost and their initial goal is to have those basic needs met. Therefore, it is not surprising that the theme of belonging, safety and security was one of the most significant in the participants’ reports.

A sense of belonging was expressed as comforting and sheltering, as a “human blanket.” As one participant expressed: “Sense of belonging, it’s always nice, I mean…it’s kind of like a human blanket. If you belong there, you are completely comfortable.” Many participants found it comforting to belong because it gave them the feeling of being included in a group of likeminded individuals. For example, one participant stated:
If you don’t know anyone, and you are quite shy it’s kind of great to have somewhere where you can have a sense of belonging and you know you are so far away from your comfort zone…and it’s great to be able to find it and it is so much easier through Cultural Connections here.

Thus, the data shows that a sense of belonging can eliminate the feeling of alienation and isolation that international students often have when they study overseas.

Being different from others may cause a sense of alienation and isolation. However, according to participants’ reports, belonging to the CCP provided them with the support of community members with similar experiences. For example, one participant emphasized: “So you are in the same boat trying to deal with the different people and being different than Americans and I can share everything but not with Indians because they do not like me sharing…stuff.” This quote is very significant, because it appears that in the participant’s experience, belonging to the CCP and trust established as a result of that belonging allowed him to share more than he normally would with people from his motherland. Another participant also shared that she felt more comfortable sharing at the CCP than with people from her own country:

When you are here and you are going to the C3 sometimes…it helps you to be more open than you are in your home country and I think it’s a good thing, because you might not tell people in your own country what you do or what you did not do or things about yourself that you might feel more comfortable sharing here.

Several participants found the CCP environment to be safe and secure. One of the participants stated: “I think Cultural Connections Club is a safe and secure place.” Thus, it becomes apparent that a sense of belonging is tightly connected to a sense of safety and security.

A sense of belonging brings a sense of safety and security through essential support of the
community of international students thus reducing a sense of alienation and isolation mentioned earlier. One participant expressed this idea in the following words:

When we are here at C3, we are part of something, we are our own group, I know that I have friends that can laugh on my joke so that I can feel more confident, so and that would just give me so back up [support], I won’t feel like I am alone on the island.

A sense of belonging made international students feel comfortable because they felt accepted. It appears that when they belong to a group of peers, they can feel safe to express themselves, and each time they get confirmation of being heard and understood, they gain confidence. The data suggests that when participants felt accepted they gained confidence and courage to open up and take risks. As one participant stated: “Because you have the feeling of relying and belonging, you think you belong here, you can say what you want to say and you don’t feel like someone is judging me.” They felt accepted thanks to the relationships they developed through their connections.

Jacob (2001) stated that because international students are removed from their families and familiar environment, they may feel lonely and homesick; sometimes even isolated and alienated. He emphasized the importance of social interactions between international and American students that would provide “a sense of belonging” (p. 79). Mitchel, Greenwood, and Guglielmi (2007) found that international students felt lost and lonely because of being far away from home and loved ones. According to participants, being involved in the CCP gave international students opportunities to reduce the feeling of being lost and lonely. For example, one participant said: “It [the CCP] is a good platform to create those relationships. Friends that are here in Cultural Connections…[it] is a good place to start to communicate with Americans.” Another participant added that it was helpful to be in the CCP because they could practice their
interactions with others, especially Americans: “It helps you, give a platform to practice, especially if they are Americans, you know like our group.”

A sense of safety comes with belonging and acceptance. Feeling accepted helped participants feel safe because they were not being judged and they were not afraid of making mistakes. As one participant reported: “You are comfortable and you are not afraid of making mistakes in front of them or like being perfect because you do belong to them.”

Participants described a sense of security that came with stability and the consistency of knowing that the CCP would be there every week at the same day and time with people who are similar to them. One participant shared: “C3 is very perfect opportunity for me, so like – ok, this time, this place, you meet new people, and it is nice to have a constant thing to have in my very busy day plan.” Another participant shared that she felt secure knowing that there was always someone to rely on: “And I like knowing that there’s someone…there’s always someone to talk to. I think that’s what you call feeling secure.” A third participant stated that she felt secure by saying: “Just knowing that Cultural Connections or Ladies Club is there at a certain time every week.” Another participant added: “I agree, like the routine, is like an automatic thing that you can go to. And get to hang out in set hours.”

A sense of safety and security comes with belonging and being connected. As a result, international students develop trust that allows them to share, learn from each other, and find solutions. For example, one participant stated: “I think that when you can share with somebody what’s disturbing you, to share the problem, you will find the solution to the problem easier and faster.” Another participant noted that she appreciated to have someone to explain to her things that she did not know: “It’s a different country with different experiences, so it’s good to have someone around to explain.” A third participant added: “You are coming to Cultural
Connections club to talk to people and find solutions.” Thus, the participants reported that sharing, finding solutions, and having someone to interpret the world were valuable in developing a sense of belonging.

According to participants’ reports, friendships developed within the CCP gave them a sense of belonging and that helped them feel safe and secure. For example, one participant shared: “Well personally I think it’s good that there’s Cultural Connections friendship, there’s a feeling of belonging, so that you feel secure.” The relationships established within the CCP provide participants with a sense of security for the future as well. According to one participant: “You make friendships here (at the CCP meetings) and they will probably last for a life time…we develop those bonds that extend well beyond my career at Ole Miss, it’s kind of like a long term investment.” Similarly, some participants reported that a sense of belonging could extend beyond the time and regular participation in the CCP, thus providing security over time. For example, one participant said:

The thing is that even if you feel like you don’t go to those meetings, you still feel like you belong. For the past two years my program did not allow me to go to any of the C3 or Ladies club meetings, but still everyone who is there they are like, all of them are like my very good friends.

In summary, a sense of belonging, safety, and security can potentially reduce isolation and alienation and provide international students with stability for the present and future, consistency, confidence, opportunity to share, find solutions, a community of likeminded individuals, and the opportunity to establish friendships for the moment and for a life time. With this conclusion, the description of the theme of belonging, safety, and security is complete and the next theme of confidence will be described.
Confidence

“I became more open and more confident in myself.”

As a result of data analysis, the theme of confidence has emerged. In the context of this study, the researcher defines confidence as a state of being certain that a prediction or an expectation is correct and that a person can take a specific course of action accordingly. When international students arrive to study to a foreign country, there is a lot of unknown around them and the likelihood of being confident decreases initially (Walker & Conyne, 2007). Therefore, it is not surprising that many participants expressed the value of gaining or re-building confidence in addition to talking about being connected, and having a sense of belonging, safety, and security.

Several participants reported that being connected helped them become more confident because it created an opportunity for developing friendships. As one participant stated: “I am not the most confident person, so having somewhere to go where I can meet people and establish relationship is very-very great.” Another participant went on to describe the connection between participating in the CCP and obtaining more confidence: “Once we are a part of some group we are more stable, we have more self-confidence, so by being in groups, in different groups, we actually build up our self-confidence.”

Other participants added that a sense of belonging, safety, and security could help them gain more confidence. For example, one participant shared: “I think being connected increases people’s confidence because if you are acting like a fool, you feel more confident around people you connect to.” Another participant reiterated about a sense of safety and security that came with a sense of stability and belonging and resulted in building self-confidence: “Once we are a
part of some group we are more stable, we have more self confidence, so by being in groups, in
different groups, we actually build up our self-confidence.”

Several participants reported that confidence came with feeling supported and accepted.
The following quote is a good example:

When we are here at C3, we are part of something, we are our own group, I know that I
have friends that can laugh on my joke so that I can feel more confident, so and that
would just give me so back up, I won’t feel like I am alone on the island.

Thus, feeling connected and accepted could boost participants’ confidence. One participant
shared: “I mean you just need to be yourself, have no fear and approach girls and then you like
connect and miss the gaps between culture and then you get confidence.” Thus, feeling
confident at C3 gave a feeling of belonging and a sense of acceptance.

The confidence gained in the safe and secure setting of the group that participants belong
to (i.e., the CCP) allowed them to practice communication with others outside of that group. For
example, one participant noted: “Cultural Connections Club (C3) is a place to rebuild your
confidence and you practice how to deal with […] others.” Other participants talked about
feeling more confident to talk to someone they don’t know if there was someone around to
support. One participant expressed it in a following way:

When we are part of groups, you are part of C3, you are part of Ladies club and stuff like
that, so when you go to class and there is also a person that is part of the same group, you
have somebody from your group there and you again feel more confidence to interact
with other people.

The confidence gained within the C3 can be expanded to other social circles. For
example, one participant stated: “The confidence gained by talking to other people at the C3
have been giving me more confidence to start some conversations in my class as well, so I think I can take that confidence and move it to other situations.”

Confidence also comes with gaining knowledge and being informed. For example one participant shared: “I think the more the person knows the more confidence you get.” This quote confirms the idea that confidence is the state of being certain. To be certain about things, people need information and knowledge. Once they gain essential information and knowledge, they can confidently move forward.

To conclude the theme of confidence, the participants reported that a sense of belonging, safety, and security gave them more confidence because they feel supported and accepted. Once they obtain a basic level of confidence, they can move on to building more confidence and explore more possibilities. Thus, the theme of confidence can be summarized in the following way: when friends are watching their back, international students are learning the lay of the land and confidently moving forward. At this point, the description of the theme confidence is complete and the next theme Acceptance and Openness will be described.

Acceptance and Openness

“Yeah, don’t be afraid to be open to different people, to their perceptions” [when]

“you have a social group that you’re accepted.”

These two quotes combined together represent the theme of acceptance and openness that stood out as a result of data analysis. When international students arrive to study in a foreign country, they may feel vulnerable because they lose their normal support system and familiar environment. They may get disoriented and lost. Moreover, they may feel that they are different from everybody else (Mitchel, Greenwood, & Guglielmi, 2007). In circumstances like that, it is
hard to open up and feel accepted. Therefore, it is not surprising that the theme of openness and acceptance appeared to be significant as a result of data analysis.

According to participants’ reports, acceptance and openness were closely related to each other. While to open up means to take a risk of being judged or misunderstood, being accepted means being approved and regarded as normal. Therefore, it appears that when participants felt like they were accepted and approved, they could take the risk to open up. One participant described how his experiences were normalized when he learned that others had similar problems: “It is really good how we connect with each other and other internationals. We have the same problems and stuff and I was glad to hear that everybody else had the same problems not just me.” He also appreciated the opportunity to hear others open up and share solutions to their problems: “So, yes, basically see what everybody else is trying to implement their solutions to their problems is a really good thing.”

According to the data, participants were prone to open up and feel accepted when they knew that they belonged to a group. Here is what one participant said about that: “Because you have the feeling of relying and belonging, you think you belong here, you can say what you want to say and you don’t feel like someone is judging me.” Being yourself and not being afraid to be judged allowed international students to be genuine. Being genuine means being more honest and direct; it also means that the true information or feeling is not covered, masked, or sugarcoated. In other words, being open allowed the participants to be genuine because they did not have to put up their guard. However, when communication is indirect, it gets more complicated because it takes more time and skill for them to interpret the meaning. Here is a quote from one participant that highlights the idea and the issue related to that:
First thing I think about it is that Americans are used to be more indirect than people in my country or perhaps even Europeans, so especially in the South. You know they say a lot of things that they mask what they really want to say. People from Europe find it difficult sometimes or at least people from my country, because we are very direct, very frank, say what we do, what we want. And then you get things like “bless your little heart,” you know.

The paragraphs above explained how acceptance and openness are related to each other.

Participants also described acceptance and openness as subthemes.

**Acceptance**

“If you say a joke and if other people don’t like it, not to say like it was bad. You know that the people like you.”

Participants reported that being accepted means being liked. One participant also emphasized that when she felt accepted, being judged by others did not matter because she was supported by the group she belonged to. Here is her quote: “People would be looking at you thinking “she is crazy” but you don’t care, because your friends are with you.”

It is commonly understood that many college students perceive different as weird. The students at The University of Mississippi are no different in this respect. Because international students most of the time are quite different from others, they may be pushed away and not accepted in some circles. However, the participants of this research shared that this was not the case at the CCP. Several participants reported they enjoyed the fact that at the CCP, being different was perceived as being unique. Here is one example:

“I mean the first thing I think like, ok, he is American or she is American they might not like me because I am here, I am a foreigner I may say something wrong and he may say...
like “ok, she is so weird” yeah, but in Cultural Connections you are personality you have like uniqueness, your culture is praised. Therefore, being different is normalized rather than viewed negatively.

After overcoming their fear to be regarded as different or weird, they could interact more freely, because they were not afraid anymore to be judged or misunderstood. Several participants specified that they felt safe to open up because they could be themselves and were not scared to be judged. For example, one participant stated: “You can say what you want to say and you don’t feel like someone is judging me.” Another participant described feeling accepted and open in the following words:

Just the second you come to the Cultural Connections it just kind of gives you like chance to be yourself and a chance to talk and be yourself and you are not feeling to be judged for any reason because other people who are in the boat with you or other people that understand your position even though they are not necessarily in it themselves, so having that platform to kind of speak and speak English without being judged.

Although many participants reported being different from others, especially Americans, the data suggests that they developed common bonds based on being different. One participant shared that the fact that they were all different brought them together: “As foreigners we feel uncomfortable here because of being perceived as different from Americans…but in Cultural Connections Program there is a great way to get in touch with internationals so…”

The participants talked about acceptance they experienced based on the uniting factor of being different. One participant shared: “I think only in this environment that I feel I am not being judged. Everywhere else on campus I’m so self-conscious about what they might be
thinking about me but not in the Cultural Connections.” Another participant elaborated more on the topic in the following words:

Because I am a little bit different from my countrymen, it always happens to me, I get pushed away. But this is one circle I am going, I just come here and all of us have constrains with time and everything, and people understand, they are so free and caring, and friendly and open.

Moreover, the participants reported that they got accepted into the group even if they possessed less or a different set of skills or knowledge. For example, one participant said: “I discovered that I am terrible…I can’t play volleyball at all. But the good thing is I was not turned away, even though I kept missing the ball.” It would appear that the characteristic of not knowing everything was a common characteristic of this population and it was treated as normal in this particular group because most of them were international students and they all shared the experience of not knowing everything while adjusting to a new environment.

Thus, the data suggests that participants get accepted to the group regardless of being different or less competent. When they get accepted to the group of similar individuals, they may become more open to others. The paragraphs below will illustrate this idea.

**Openness**

“When you are here and you are going to the C3… it helps you to be more open than you are in your home country and I think it’s a good thing”

As far as openness, being open means talking and listening to other people. Openness initiates and requires a two-way relationship. If one person takes a risk making, him or her vulnerable, the expectation is that another person would respect that and appreciate that and open
in return. Similarly, participants emphasized that the members of the CCP model openness and teach others to become more open. For example, one participant stated:

So basically how C3 can help you be more open and you see other people approach to different cultures so you just take that behavior and implement it by yourself. And be more, I don’t know, not shy and be more open and like take a word, like break the ice or something like that. Make us ice-breakers.

To continue the theme of openness, it is important to note that not everyone is initially open. Sometimes one must experience openness to be able to take a risk to open up, especially if a person feels insecure or vulnerable. The data suggests that participating in the CCP helped participants experience openness and learn to open up and identify others that are open. For example, one participant noted:

The openness actually starts from you coming to C3, so I think it’s like another type of openness. And at C3 after you have had an experience of people that are open you go out to meet people because you can’t meet people who are not open to listening to you, so you kind of develop a sense of spotting openness.

Being open also means learning how to help others and accept help from others. Participants saw the experiences of helping and being helped as important. Such relationships provided them with a sense of belonging, safety, and security. One participant shared:

I think it’s also about mentorship program, because some people also want to help you and at some point you also want to help other people…It’s about you join this group, you see the people who have a lot of experience like organizing people and making these different projects and clubs…And it really helps also.
To summarize the theme of acceptance and openness, the data show that being different and not knowing everything actually created bonds among participants. They got connected and accepted each other in such a way that differences were normalized and their uniqueness was appreciated and praised. At the same time, because participants felt accepted and experienced openness, they were willing to take risks to be open to others. By opening up, they got opportunities to learn how to identify others that were open and learned how to receive help and provide help to others. This concludes the description of the theme openness/acceptance and leads to the next theme Sharing and Help.

**Sharing and Help**

“Sharing is caring.”

This quote can both introduce and summarize this theme because the data show that participants found it helpful to share their experiences and when they did so, they felt cared for or they shared because they wanted to care for others. This is how “Sharing is caring.”

As stated earlier, Ramsay, Jones and Barker (2007) emphasized that international students have reduced opportunities for social companionship and emotional support. Sharing experiences allows giving and receiving of help and support. When international students arrive in a foreign country, their usual support system is normally back in their country of origin, therefore the support they used to get from their family and/or friends is either reduced to emails, skype, or phone calls or is no longer available. However, the need for support and help is still there or even intensified because of the adjustment challenges. Therefore, it is not surprising that the theme of sharing and help emerged as a result of data analysis of this research project.

Sharing is important for international students in the process of adjustment because it helps them feel more comfortable. For example, one participant mentioned: “It just helps you to
feel more comfortable sharing things with others.” When experiences were shared, participants did not feel alone and feel supported. One of them stated: “Yes, of course, because I need like someone who would share with me my happy moments, and my sad moments…so it’s cool.” Moreover, it is a common fact that connections based on experiences of shared emotions are the most powerful because they are lived together. Therefore, it would be accurate to conclude that sharing emotions within the CCP helped international students develop strong connections and relationships.

According to participants’ reports, sharing occurs when they belong and connect to others at the CCP. One participant reported that sharing was in the core of the CCP: “I’d say sharing is a thing which C3 exactly do. The name [is] Cultural Connection Club so we have been in there and sharing the experience…” Being connected allowed international students to share positive and negative experiences in a similar way to how they would in their home country, with their family and close friends. For example, one participant stated:

I mean, sharing is good […] I do think that sharing is at the center of the C3, because all the games that always start up the meetings that always about sharing in some form, you know? Getting you to talk…about your day, or problems and stuff.

Another participant noted that although it was hard to adjust to American life, it was easier to do so in the community of individuals that had the same challenges to face:

I think we have the same problems may be and we have to adjust to American life. And I think the hardest one is the first step. If you join C3, we encourage each other, we talk to each other, we tell stories, we share the experiences, good or horrible, and we go together to some dinner. To have it is cool; it is very helpful for me.
Thus, the data clearly show that participants found it helpful to join the CCP because it provided them with opportunities to talk and share.

Sharing also helped solve problems and find solutions because in the process of sharing they could exchange their knowledge, information, and experience; thus they could learn from each other. For example, one participant reported: “I think that when you can share with somebody what’s disturbing you to share the problem, you will find the solution to the problem easier and faster.”

Sharing helped participants understand each other better. As one participant emphasized: “We can also like share aspects of their personality we can understand them better, and that lets you bring the connections closer with you.” Participants also reported that they felt comfortable and trusted more to share with people at the CCP versus others because they communicated with them on a regular basis. For example, one participant noted: “But then if you are Monday through Friday mostly with these people, you share more stuff with them because you see them more often than those that you see the most outside of the general group.” Another participant added: “I felt comfortable sharing my problems with peers at C3.”

Sharing was also important because it helped participants learn about each others’ cultures. One participant expressed it in the following words: “…we have been in there [C3] and sharing the experience, sharing different festivals of our countries. Different county –different culture. So maybe I think important thing is sharing, you know, in C3.” Another participant explained how sharing helped exchange cultural heritage:

Sharing some cultural aspects. Sharing some I mean home language, home traditions, or like national costumes, because it happens sometimes when someone brings like food
made like in their own traditional way or just tell something about what is different in his home community from American community.

Participating in the CCP and sharing their experiences helped them to be informed about what was going on around them and gave them an opportunity to be plugged into the local environment. One participant reported that: “Being connected feels by itself like being inside of this cultural environment…really like being inside of these things that are happening here.” That in itself alleviated a sense of alienation and isolation that is typical for international students to experience, especially in the beginning of their studies in a foreign country.

As reported by participants, sharing was important and meaningful because shared experiences helped international students relate and connect to each other, especially in the absence of their familiar support systems back in their home countries. Sharing brought understanding and understanding brought connections based on mutual vulnerability and trust. Sharing provided opportunities to learn from each other, find solutions, and get plugged into the local environment. Now that the concept of sharing has been explained, the theme of helping will be described.

The theme of helping is closely related to sharing because when they share their experiences, they essentially help each other. Both sharing and helping are reciprocal because it is a two-way process – when one person shares, it helps the other; when it helps one person, he or she is more willing to share or help back. The participants of this study reported their experiences of help and helping as a two-way interaction: being helped and helping others.

**Being Helped**

When international students initially arrive to study in the U.S. they need orientation and assistance because they have many questions about how things work and what they have to do.
According to participants’ reports, they were able to find help at the CCP. Here is a quote from one of the participants:

You have a huge amount of questions in the beginning of the semester and I just asked all those questions in Cultural Connections Club and Nadia managed to answer all of them and if not directly but to tell who can really refer to, who can I ask exactly that exact question and it helped a lot.

The data suggest that participants received help with many different problems. This is how one of the participants described that:

People were having academic problems, for example, you are coming to Cultural Connections club to talk to people and find solutions […] not only academics, but problems with like…Social security number, like problems with rights, problems with getting along with people and anything like whatever.

While being helped was reported as an important and essential part of the experience of participation in the CCP, helping others was reported as significant as well.

**Helping Others**

Participants reported that they were eager to help other international students because of their own experiences with the challenges of adjustment. They remembered what it was like for them and they wanted to prevent others from having to go through those challenges. For example, one participant said: “I want new students to have a friend that I did not have.” Another participant explained how she would offer help to a new international student: “So I would call him and see if he had everything and ask me questions and stuff even if it may seem stupid.” A participant shared her experience of helping other international students in the following words: “I always like helping the students to go through the same things I had to go
through to make it easier on them. So I participated in ILEX, so that I can help them to know new tips in getting adjusted.”

Because many international students are high achievers, it may be hard for them to admit that they are having problems and to ask for help (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007). These students have to feel safe and secure to be able to admit that they do not know something and/or need help. This challenge is related to building trust. Trust can be established when they feel connected in a safe way. The data suggest that trust and connections happened when participants shared their experiences and helped others. For example, one participant stated: “Sharing interests, helping out in many different and difficult situations. This is what connections mean to me.” Another student gave an example of how they connected on the basis of help: “Some Americans that I know learn Russian, so we help them and they speak Russian with us, so we spend time together, so I think language connections are very important.”

Finally, according to participants’ reports, the act of being helped and seeing others providing help teaches others how to reach out and ask for help. “I still remember how we actually help others so they just share their experience of not being shy, not being afraid of giving the answer. Just ask others for help. I think that really helped.” Moreover, at the CCP the act of helping others was modeled and promoted. As one participant explained: “It’s about you join this group, you see the people who have a lot of experience like organizing people and making these different projects and clubs and you just want to organize something by yourself.” Another participant explained how being helped through the CCP inspired her to become a mentor and help others:

I was very much involved in C3 and Cultural Connections Mentorship program. I was a mentor for two-three years. From what I learned from my first year here, all the
challenges I had to face, like Nadia, she inspired me to help other people like she is. So, rather than participating in these activities, I was helping to facilitate sometimes. And number 8 did something like that too, being a Mentor.

To summarize this theme, being a part of a community within which participants were comfortable to share, helped them find solutions and resources. Sharing and helping were essential and important in participants’ experiences of adjustment because they provided them with opportunities to connect with each other, learn from each other, learn about foreign and American cultures, and get plugged into the local environment. Sharing and helping also taught them how to accept help from others and provide help to others in need. Thus, it seems like the participants benefited from sharing, helping, and being helped. According to the data, other benefits come with opportunities to learn, grow, and change. The explanation of these opportunities will be provided below.

Opportunities to Learn, Grow, and Change

“I see the different cultures, appreciate that more and it makes my horizons bigger.”

This quote was chosen to introduce the theme of opportunities to learn, grow, and change. This is the last theme that emerged in the result of data analysis. This theme was formed by collapsing four themes together (opportunities, learn, grow, and change). Data analysis showed that the categories were not heterogeneous enough to remain as separate themes and, in fact all four were strongly related to one another. This section will describe opportunities to learn, change, and grow reported by the participants.

As Summers and Volet (2008) stated, in cultural conversations, both international and American students can learn more about themselves and educate each other about other cultures; thus building bridges of understanding and awareness of the specifics of multicultural
communication. The results of data analysis show that the participants of the CCP got opportunities to learn about themselves and others and exercise multicultural communication. For example, one participant stated: “So I feel like [at] Cultural Connections, since we talked about all sorts of things, like people are from everywhere, so you learn about all sorts of things.” Another participant explained how they learned to relate to each other: “Talking, trying, experimenting, what is crazy, what is not, what is not acceptable, like you saw, when I said something, they know it was a joke…” Likewise, in a safe and trustworthy environment, international students learned to experiment with their language, communication, and behavior. As one participant noted: “So basically how C3 can help you be more open and you see other people approach to different cultures so you just take that behavior and implement it by yourself.”

Many international students may feel insecure about their English speaking ability and communication skills when they arrive to study in a foreign country. English proficiency can predict international students’ level of adjustment and well-being, therefore offering social support groups can reduce stressed related to adjustment and acculturation (Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008). The data show that participating in the CCP gave participants a valuable opportunity to improve their English and communication skills. For example, one participant noted:

I would say that C3 helped me to be open to tolerate others through the English, and I think at first when you come to other country you speak English which is your second language and it’s very hard to understand and interact and you are worried about the grammar.
Another participant stated: “This is the safe place I can [say] what I want to say. And this is a good place to...you know, you must practice English, and you want not to be shy just to speak out – C3 is a good place.” Many other participants reported improvement of English language skills as a result of getting practice in the CCP groups. For example, one participant said:

I think at first when you come to other country you speak English which is your second language and it’s very hard to understand and interact and you are worried about the grammar when you speak to a foreigner and learn American but at C3 and with others... I think everyone just needs practice and practice. I think C3 is a good place for me to get used to English.

In other words, the participants reported that they felt comfortable enough to practice English while participating in CCP activities and that they grew thanks to that opportunity.

Participants reported that the CCP brought opportunities to learn and grow because it helped in the development of a wide range of skills. For example, one participant said: “It helped with a lot of skills. Definitely speaking – public speaking, English, sporting skills, hiking...Wide range of skills, [...] definitely.” The development of new skills can ease the process of adjustment and acculturation of international students because they can apply new skills to new situations that they come across in the process of transitioning to a new environment.

Being connected also gave international students opportunities to get exposed to new things to explore, discover and learn. One participant shared: “I think the connection with others helps to learn and also it helps to share, to share your feelings with others.” Another participant added: “I also think it [the CCP] gets you to get plugged in, like Oxford for example, at Ole Miss, if you have friends, different friends have different interests in different things then
you know more about stuff.” One more participant stated: “As an international student, having the connections allows having possibilities of things to do, that you would not get otherwise.”

Another participant concurred: “So, in the same sense like you know, having someone that you are connected with helps you to explore a new place.” Such learning, as reported by participants, expanded their horizons and encouraged them to travel the world. Here is a representative quote that supports that statement: “The whole experience made me want to travel the world more.”

Sharing at the CCP provided opportunities to learn about different perspectives. According to participants’ reports, being exposed to differences made their worldviews broader, perspectives deeper, and experiences richer. Different perspectives could influence participants in new ways that were not known before. Such influence could lead to personal growth and change. Here is how one participant described that:

I see the different cultures, appreciate that more and it makes my horizons bigger and I see things more…from different points of view, from different angles. It just makes meaning of life different for me, and just all these angles and perspectives width it makes it richer and of course it makes influence in your further goals.

Being exposed to different cultures provided participants with opportunities to learn, grow, and change their future goals. Different cultures and perspectives helped expand personal outlooks and horizons. For example, one participant explained:

I see myself growing up, being more and more mature, my goals are changing. So being here, seeing another point of view of the life, it makes my perspective, my view richer, bigger. So that just change my future goals, [...] I see the different cultures, appreciate that more and it makes my horizons bigger.
New perspectives brought new challenges that created new questions and brought new answers and solutions. Those new answers and solutions brought about learning and growing. One participant explained this in the following words:

The experience that comes as part of personal growth, getting to know other people, who might not understand you and the fear of getting rejected is all the part of personal growth. And I personally think that you eventually learn something if you experience something bad. So it’s always something good at the end.

Several participants shared that participation in the CCP gave them an opportunity to change and grow though that change. They reported that they became more tolerant to differences and other cultures. One participant said: “For example me, like before I came here in the United States and before actually I joined this C3 group, I’ve been really ignorant to other cultures.”

The opportunity to change and grow can result in accepting people the way they are and accepting their differences. Participants talked about embracing themselves in a way that they did not have to give up who they are while being willing to learn about others. In that regard, one participant stated: “It’s like holding on to what I am and I am accepting other people for what they are, so in that sense that we can be friends because you are not the same as I am, you know. So, I think this is the growth I have.” Another participant stated that he changed so significantly that his parents would not recognize him when he comes back. He also added: “when it comes to changes, some changes I am aware that happened and some changes I am not aware that happened…And then again, some changes that I am not aware of that probably I will see when I come back.” This statement shows that the participant anticipated future changes and was open to new developments.
In concluding the theme of opportunities to learn, grow, and change, there are several main points that can be highlighted as a result of data analysis. First, experiences of participating in the CCP brought opportunities for participants to learn about themselves and others. They also learned how to communicate with others regardless of differences in language and culture. Additionally, they learned a wide range of other skills that resulted from meeting other people and learning from others. Second, participating in the CCP provided opportunities to explore and discover new things, as well as made them want to travel the world. Being exposed to different cultures opened new perspectives and showed them different worldviews. Finally, participation in the CCP created opportunities to change and grow in the sense of becoming less ignorant and more tolerant to others. At this point the theme of opportunities to learn, grow, and change has been described. To complete the description of the themes, the summary of all the themes will be provided below.

**Conclusion**

As stated earlier, there were six themes that emerged as a result of data analysis: connecting/connections; a sense of belonging, safety, and security; confidence; openness and acceptance; sharing and helping; and opportunities to learn, grow, and change. The first theme included references to other five themes; therefore it was described as an overarching theme for all participant experiences. To better describe participant experiences, the theme was also divided into two subthemes: experiences of connecting and benefits of connections. The participants shared many positive experiences of connecting and benefits of connections, such as having fun being connected to other international and American students; having a solid platform for sharing common experiences; being understood, supported, accepted and helped; and learning from each other.
Regarding belonging, participants reported that because they were connected to others at the CCP, they felt like they were “in the same boat” with others, which gave them a sense of safety and encouragement, security, structure, and consistency. Belonging to a community of likeminded individuals provided them with a secure base that is very essential for international students when they study overseas.

In describing the theme of confidence, the participants indicated that because they were connected to others, belonged to the group, and felt safe and secure, they felt more confident to interact with other people outside of the group, practice new skills, and explore new opportunities. At the same time, they felt more confident because they felt accepted by others. The confidence and acceptance gained through participation in the CCP also helped them open up to others. The theme of openness and acceptance was also described as a catalyst for sharing and helping. The participants stated that they felt comfortable sharing positives and negatives when they participated at the CCP groups. The subtheme of helping was described in two categories: the experience of being helped and helping others. Participants reported that they enjoyed receiving help, providing help to others, and at the same time they learned how to accept help and how to help others.

The last theme of opportunities to learn, grow, and change showed that the participants appreciated the opportunity to learn and practice English, speaking out, and other new skills. It also became apparent that taking part in groups of the CCP contributed to participant’s growth and change. The participation in the CCP was reported as an eye-opening experience because it helped them develop tolerance and sensitivity to differences. Being involved in the CCP was described as a great learning experience because it opened horizons and made participants want to travel the world.
In summarizing the data, it appears that the emerging themes may develop a specific progression or sequence - starting with Connecting/Connections, every other experience (theme) contributes to another one and continues until it ends with the theme of Opportunities to Learn, Grow, and Change. The purpose of the CCP is to help international students with adjustment and acculturation. The reason for that purpose is based on the idea that if international students overcome stresses related to adjustment and acculturation, their healthy functioning may be increased. At the same time, when international students gain a secure base and feel confident, they are more prone to taking healthier risks, explore more, learn, and take advantage of what universities or colleges have to offer. Such exploration can open doors for more opportunities to learn, grow, and change. When international students get such opportunities, they may be more successful in handling the challenge of transition, adjustment, and acculturation that they have to face as they come to study overseas. Positive experiences studying at a particular university in the U.S. can positively affect retention rates. Therefore, the final goal for the CCP is to help international students learn, grow, and change. And that is the final stage in the progression of themes that emerged as a result of this research project. This idea will be described in more details with supporting quotes below.

The progression or sequence in achieving higher levels of adjustment and acculturation may begin with the connections developed in the CCP give opportunities to the participants to establish and develop relationships that allow them to feel like they belong. When they belong to a group they gain a sense of safety and security. Here is an example: “I think it’s good that there’s Cultural Connections friendship, there’s a feeling of belonging, so that you feel secure.” Once those basic needs of belonging, safety, and security are met, the participants regain the confidence they may have lost in transition and build more confidence. For example: “Once we
are a part of some group we are more stable, we have more self confidence…” A sense of belonging, security, and safety, together with the confidence gained through the relationships established within the CCP helped them stretch their relationships outside the group. Here is one of the quotes that illustrates that: “the confidence gained by talking to other people at the C3 have been giving me more confidence to start some conversations in my class as well, so I think I can take that confidence and move it to other situations.”

When international students obtain more confidence, they may be open to others more and start feeling accepted regardless of their differences. The following quote supports this idea: “Because you have the feeling of relying and belonging, you think you belong here, you can say what you want to say and you don’t feel like someone is judging me.” Feeling confident, accepted, and supported gives them opportunities to share their experiences and get help from others in the group. Here is what one participant said: “I felt comfortable sharing my problems with peers at C3.” Moreover, they learn how to accept help from others and how to offer help in return. This quote is a good example: “I just learned to give some advice like to help other people also, like to accept help from them.”

Eventually, connections and relationships with others can open new opportunities and possibilities. As one participant stated: “As an international student, having the connections allows having possibilities of things to do, that you would not get otherwise.” The new opportunities and possibilities provide international students with learning experiences, and as a result contribute to their growth and change. This quote explains this idea, especially regarding learning and growth: “So I feel like in Cultural Connection, since we talked about all sorts of things, like people are from everywhere, so you learn about all sorts of things.” This quote illustrates the opportunity to grow and change though learning: “I see things more […] from
different points of view, from different angles. It just makes meaning of life different for me, and just all these angles and perspectives width it makes it richer, and of course it makes influence in your further goals.”

The researcher suggests that the experiences of the participants do not have to follow a specific sequence. It may vary for each individual, depending on his or her personality, age, country of origin, level of English proficiency, and availability of resources. For example, those international students that come from English speaking counties, such as Nigeria or Great Britain may not have the same amount of difficulties in communicating in English as their peers that came from China or Japan. And those international students that come to study to a foreign country together with their support system, such as their family or significant others may not have the same intensity of the need for social and emotional support. They may skip one step or stage and move to the next one or come back to the other the one they were previously at, depending on circumstances and demands of a particular situation. Therefore, the experiences of international students can be described as a type of a circular relationship. Moreover, the experiences can be repeated in the same sequence or in a different variation, but on a new level. For example, when international students get opportunities to learn, grow and change, they may get more chances to connect to others and feel that they can belong to wider circles of friends; they may start feeling even more secure and confident, and open up to new people and share their experiences with them.
Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to report data analysis of this research project. The chapter included the review of the research questions and descriptive characteristics of the participants. The detailed explanation of the process of data analysis was presented as well. The description of six emerging themes with a conclusion completed this chapter. The next chapter will present the results and conclusions based on data analysis, along with implications of the study and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER V

INTRODUCTION

This is the final chapter of this paper. It will include six components that summarize this research study. The chapter will start with the summary of the study, with the discussion of the findings to follow. After that, the limitations of this research will be presented, as well as recommendations for future research. The implications and summary of the study will conclude this chapter.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of international students participating in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of Mississippi. To fulfill the purpose of this research study, the following grand research question was posed: What are the experiences of international students participating in the Cultural Connections Program (the CCP) at The University of Mississippi (The UM)? To obtain descriptive answers to this question, two focus groups were conducted to collect data.

International students were recruited for participation in the study by e-mailing a letter of introduction and a request for participation to international students who had participated in the Cultural Connections Program a minimum of four times at the time of the study. A total of 11 international students who met these criteria agreed to participate. All 11 students participated in focus group 1, with 10 of the original 11 students participating in focus group 2. The participants represented a variety of foreign countries, including China, India, Netherlands,
Nigeria, Pakistan, Scotland, Serbia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Ukraine. The sample appeared to be an accurate representation of the overall population of the students who participated in the Cultural Connections Program during data collection.

To begin data collection to answer the grand research question, the following initial question was developed for focus group 1: How would you describe your experiences as you participate in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of Mississippi? After data analysis of the responses to this question from focus group 1, the following set of eight clarifying questions was developed for focus group 2.

1. In the first focus group, being connected to other International and American students was discussed. Tell me more about what being connected means.

2. In the first focus group, having a sense of belonging was brought up. Tell me some more about that please.

3. In the first focus group, you talked about safety and security. Help me to understand what you mean by that.

4. Confidence emerged as a theme at the last focus group. Please tell me more about that.

5. Please help me understand what you mean by the theme of openness, which was brought up in the first focus group.

6. Sharing emerged as a theme in the first focus group. Please tell me more about what this means to you.

7. One of the themes that emerged from the first focus group was personal growth. Please tell me more about that.

8. In the first focus group, the theme of change emerged. What do you mean by "change?"
The responses to the clarifying questions from focus group 2 were then analyzed by the researcher. The findings were triangulated with the research team and verified with the participants at the member checking meeting. The findings will be reviewed and the discussion of the results will be presented below.

**Discussion**

Participants in this study revealed six themes describing their experiences as members of the Cultural Connections Program. These themes were all based on a strong foundation of the importance of connecting with others as a means to address the themes of belonging, safety and security, confidence, acceptance and openness, sharing and help, and opportunities to learn, grow, and change. These themes are consistent with the needs and challenges of international students identified in prior research (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Mori, 2000; Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007, Sumer, Poirazli, & Graham, 2008). The following paragraphs will present the discussion of findings regarding each theme.

**Connecting/Connections**

The theme of Connections emerged as the foundation for all the other themes. This overarching theme is consistent with prior research findings that primary concerns of international students are homesickness, isolation, and alienation (Jacob, 2001; Mitchel, Greenwood, & Guglielmi, 2007). This study revealed that through their participation in the structured programs of the CCP, international students received opportunities to connect with other students and services. The CCP served as a platform to address and overcome feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and isolation. For example, one participant stated:

It’s been good to have somewhere to go basically. I arrived alone, I am the only one form my University and I did not know anybody else. And I am not the most confident person so having somewhere to go where I can meet people and establish relationship -  is very-very great.
Furthermore, participants reported that unlike in their home countries, the connections they made within the CCP remain strong regardless of irregular attendance. This quote is an example of participants’ reports: “you can miss [CCP meetings] and still not be alienated from that. Something that strongly connects you with others. Because in my community, with my national peers, being connected is a must. If you do not contact others for a week, they exclude you from the circle.”

In addition to isolation and alienation, this study also confirmed that one of the most common challenges for international students is initiating interactions with people from different and unfamiliar cultures (Summers & Volet, 2008). Failure to initiate interactions with others prevents international students from making the connections that reduce isolation and loneliness. The participants revealed that their experiences in the CCP provided the structure and safety to risk meeting new people and experiencing new things. The increased opportunities to meet other international students prevented them from feeling “alone on the island.”

The theme of connections also includes the experience of addressing cultural assumptions and decreasing language barriers with peer international students, and more importantly, American students. That is consistent with the findings of Summers and Volet (2008) that specify that in cultural conversations, both international and American students can learn more about themselves and educate each other about other cultures; thus they build bridges of understanding and awareness of the specifics of multicultural communication. Participants reported that having opportunities to practice their English and communication styles helped them overcome language barriers and become more prepared to approach others and more willing to initiate new contacts.
The current findings also suggest that Connecting/Connections is a foundational starting point related to the themes of belonging, safety, and security, confidence, acceptance and openness, sharing and helping, and opportunities to learn, grow, and change. The results show that the experiences of connecting/connections either start or permeate all the rest of the experiences of participants. For example, this quote explains how connections/connecting is related to another theme of sharing and help: “Sharing interests, helping out in many different and difficult situations. This is what connections mean to me.” Therefore, the theme of connections/connecting is considered as an overarching theme. Closely related to the overarching theme is the theme of belonging, safety, and security.

A Sense of Belonging, Safety, and Security

Participants of this research reported that they experienced a sense of belonging to a community. That was one of the themes that participants mentioned frequently. Consistent with prior research (Jacob, 2001; Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007), participants reported that connecting with other international and American students at the CCP helped them gain social support and a sense of belonging. The results show that experiencing a sense of belonging provided these international students with a secure base that gave them a sense of safety that is very essential in the beginning of the process of adjustment. Experiences of belonging allowed the participants to experiences a sense of “family” that many of them lost when they came to study abroad. Moreover, the results show that the participants also experienced a sense of stability, which is very important for international students because it makes it less overwhelming to handle the large amount of information in the beginning of their studies abroad.

The results also show that a sense of belonging extended beyond their participation in the CCP, thus experiencing security and stability over time. Thus, connections and connecting can
result in a sense of belonging, safety, and security which can assist international students in the process of adjustment and acculturation by bringing essential support, stability, a sense of a family and belonging to a local community.

In summary, connections and a sense of belonging are crucial elements in providing a sense of safety, security, and stability. Additionally, connections and belonging helped participants to overcome isolation and alienation, thus easing the process of adjustment and acculturation. Furthermore, research participants showed that the themes of connections and a sense of belonging, safety, and security are related to each other and to the other four themes: confidence, acceptance and openness, sharing and help, and the opportunity to learn, grow, and change. This conclusion is based on the results of the research that show that when participants connected to others, they experienced safety and security. They also reported experiencing more confidence. The next paragraphs will discuss the theme of Confidence and how this theme is related to the other themes.

Confidence

Another theme of the participants’ experiences was Confidence. The results show that being connected to peer international and American students can boost participants’ confidence. The confidence gained from experiencing safety and security in a group setting (e.g., C3, International Ladies Club) allows them to practice communicating with others and practice English. This quote is a good example: “this is the safe place I can talk what I want to say. And this is a good place to […] practice English, and you want not to be shy just to speak out – C3 is a good place”. In addition, the participants reported that confidence gained within their CCP activities spilled over into other social areas, such as classrooms, dorms, and other activities outside of the CCP.
Confidence also comes with gaining knowledge and being informed. Having opportunities for “talking, trying, and experimenting” as well as learning the 'rules of engagement' was associated with feeling more comfortable initiating contacts with others within and beyond their classroom. Gaining essential information and knowledge helped them experience the confidence to move forward. The results of this study confirm the findings of prior research that when international students are exposed to a wide variety of valuable information and support from their professors and classmates, they are more likely to form relationships that can extend beyond their academic setting (Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007).

In addition, participants emphasized that as they gained more confidence in communicating with American students, they could relate to them better because they were able to find more similarities than differences with them. Their experiences of identifying the similarities between themselves and others confirm the significance of establishing connections with representatives of local culture. As stated by Summers and Volet (2008), such interactions can substantially contribute to the process of adjustment and acculturation of international students. Thus, experiencing confidence helped these international students in the process of adjustment and acculturation.

To conclude the theme of confidence, the results show that confidence can be achieved through connections that give a sense belonging, safety and security and that provide opportunities to practice interactions with other international and American students. Related to confidence was the reported experience of acceptance and openness that seemed to result from experiencing a sense of connection, belonging, and confidence.
Acceptance and Openness

Acceptance and openness emerged as a theme of this research. The results show that although participants reported feeling alienation and isolation, experiencing the support and acceptance of community members with similar experiences reduced these feelings of alienation and isolation. Perceptions of being different from others may cause a sense of alienation and isolation (Jacob, 2001; Mitchel, Greenwood, & Guglielmi, 2007). Participants indicated that due to being different, away from their habitual comfort zones, separated from their regular support systems, acceptance and openness was valuable to them, especially in the beginning of their adjustment to studying abroad. Participants reported that they found relief from alienation and isolation by experiencing acceptance and openness. This quite can best describe this statement:

Because I am a little bit different from my countrymen, it always happens to me, I get pushed away. But this is one circle I am going, I just come here and all of us have constrains with time and everything, and people understand, they are so free and caring, and friendly and open.

Although many participants reported being different from others, especially Americans, the data suggests that they developed common bonds based on being different. According to participants, this was accomplished through the acceptance they experienced from others within the CCP programs and through the experience of acceptance and openness, they began to notice that everyone had similarities, regardless of country of origin. One participant stated:

I mean many people raised that issue that as foreigners we feel uncomfortable here because of being perceived as different from Americans, but I mean I’ve been here for like 3 months and I see a lot of similarities between me and Americans actually, so it’s
kind of easier for me to get to know them and in Cultural Connections Program there is a
great way to get in touch with internationals, so…

In addition, the participants reported experiencing openness and acceptance, regardless of
their skill levels (e.g., language, knowledge of local customs). Therefore, being different was
normalized rather than viewed negatively. The results show that when participants felt like they
were accepted and approved, they could take the risk to open up. Participants also reported that
the level of acceptance and openness they experienced allowed them to be themselves and not be
afraid of being judged by others. For example, one participant said:

Just the second you come to the Cultural Connections it… gives you […] a chance to talk
and be yourself and you are not feeling to be judged for any reason because other people
who are in the boat with you […], so having that platform to kind of speak and speak
English without being judged.

Participants indicated that a key element in their experiencing acceptance and openness
was the modeling of openness and acceptance by leaders and mentors within the CCP. For
example, one participant shared: “So basically how C3 can help you be more open and you see
other people approach to different cultures so you just take that behavior and implement it by
yourself.” Exposure to this modeling allowed them to feel more comfortable in sharing their
own experiences and in their willingness to receive and give help.

Sharing and Help

According to Ramsay, Jones and Barker (2007), international students have needs for
social companionship and emotional support. Sharing brings understanding and understanding
helps build connections based on mutual vulnerability and trust. The data suggest that trust and
connections happen through sharing experiences, receiving help, and helping others. Being
connected, accepted, and open creates a sense of belonging which allows international students to feel safe to share positive and negative experiences. Moreover, participants reported feeling more comfortable sharing with other international and American students than with people from their own country, because at the CCP they shared similar adjustment experiences and were in the context of a group that promoted acceptance and openness. Thus, having opportunities to connect with people in a trusting environment not only addresses needs for social companionship and emotional support, but also results in sharing experiences and helping others.

Participants also reported that sharing was an important way to solve problems. Through the process of sharing they could exchange knowledge, information, and experiences, thus learning from each other (e.g., other cultures, local culture, mistakes, and solutions). For example, one participant said: “I think that when you can share with somebody what’s disturbing you […] you will find the solution to the problem easier and faster.” Sharing also seemed to decrease feelings of alienation and isolation. As one student stated: “because I need someone who would share with me my happy moments, and my sad moments…so it’s cool.”

The experiences of 'being helped' and 'helping others' emerged as a theme that seemed to be related to the theme of sharing. The experience of being helped and seeing others providing help normalized for them the importance of asking for help and the value of helping others. These behaviors may not have been part of their experiences prior to studying abroad. One participant shared:

When you are here and you are going to the C3 […] it helps you to be more open than you are in your home country and I think it’s a good thing, because you might not tell people in your own country what you do or what you did not do or things about yourself that you might feel more comfortable sharing here.
Finally, the experiences of asking for help and helping others may increase the likelihood for international students to seek counseling services as needed and to help others to do the same.

To summarize this theme, being a part of a community within which participants are comfortable to share can help them find solutions and resources. Sharing and helping are essential and important in participants’ experiences of adjustment because they provide them with opportunities to connect with each other, learn from each other, learn about foreign and American cultures, and get plugged into the local environment. Sharing and helping also teaches them how to accept help from others and provide help to others in need. Thus, the participants described their experiences of sharing, helping, and being helped as satisfying and helpful in their adjustment and acculturation because sharing resulted in opportunities to learn, grow, and change.

**Opportunities to Learn, Grow, and Change**

Participants reported that in their experiences they received opportunities to learn a wide range of skills, such as English, communication skills, accepting help and helping others, sharing and problem resolution. According to prior research, the development of such skills can ease the process of adjustment and acculturation of international students because they can apply new skills to new situations that they come across in the process of transitioning to a new environment (Poyrazli et al., 2002; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Consistent with prior research, international students found it beneficial to connect with representatives of the host culture because American students can provide information about local culture and language differences, such as accents and slang (Lee, Park, & Kim, 2009; Summers & Volet, 2008). The participants’ experiences illustrate that in the CCP groups they learned to experiment with their language, communication, and behavior. Additionally, the
experiences of the participants described in this study show that the CCP provides international students with opportunities to learn about other programs and services available to them to support them in the process of adjustment and acculturation. Therefore, the CCP can serve as a gateway for reaching out to international students and a promotion tool of counseling services.

The findings suggest that due to learning about different cultures and perspectives, participants’ outlooks and horizons expanded and they reported experiencing change and grow in the sense of becoming less ignorant and more tolerant to others. This quote can best exemplify how participants described their experience of changing their worldviews:

After I came here and made friends I could see how different they are. It might sound funny but to come here is such an eye-opener and you can recognize people as individuals. If someone else does it I would be mad, it is just wrong, but I have learned from the experience. It is understandable now for me when people generalized about how people look and make judgments. So, I understand how other people think.

Such opportunities to learn, grow, and change can increase the level of adjustment and acculturation, because being open-minded and tolerant to other cultures increases the chances of identifying themselves with the local culture and community, and improves multicultural understanding and acceptance.

In summary, participants’ experiences of involvement in the CCP resulted in receiving opportunities to learn, grow, and change. Such opportunities are instrumental and essential in the process of adjustment and acculturation. The following section will provide a discussion regarding how these themes may be related to the programs and structure of the CCP.
Experiences of Participation in the CCP

The themes that emerged from this research add immeasurably to our knowledge of international students’ participation in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of Mississippi. To further extend the importance of these data, it would be useful to compare the program structure and goals of the CCP with the experiences of the participants to determine if the multiple points of entry that the CCP provides are consistent with the experiences reported. Such a comparison would seek to identify if, in fact, the CCP represents a holistic, multifaceted approach to serving international students.

To ensure a holistic approach to serving international students, the Cultural Connections Program offers five interrelated programs: Cultural Connections Club, International Ladies Club, International Learning Exchange (the series of discussions on adjustment and acculturation), Cultural Connections Mentor Program, and Diverse Diggers Volleyball Club. The main purpose of these interrelated programs is to provide multiple venues and opportunities to fulfill the needs of international students related to adjustment and acculturation. It would appear that the six identified themes may not only reflect their experiences but may also relate to the structure and the purpose of the CCP.

Although Mori (2000) suggested that traditional counseling services must be adjusted to meet the unique needs of international students, the current study suggests that merely insuring the cultural competency of practitioners may not be enough. In addition to providing formal social support groups, which may increase the possibility of seeking counseling help, participants reported the value of alternative forms of support, such as playing volleyball, going on hiking and road trips, celebrating traditional holidays, going to dinners, and participating in ILEX. These are examples of the creative and alternative forms of support in adjustment and
acculturation that were suggested by Walker and Conyne (2007). Participants reported these alternative forms of support as being instrumental in the process of adjustment and acculturation. The paragraphs below will explain how the themes relate to each program within the CCP.

**Cultural Connections Club**

Participants in this research identified social support as being instrumental to their adjustment and acculturation. The purpose of the Cultural Connections Club (C3) is to provide international students with social support and connect them to counseling and other valuable resources on campus through that social support. The following quote demonstrates how participants were able to receive social support through connecting to other international and American students within C3:

The program helped me a lot to find really good friends among Americans. Actually it is fun to meet and hang out with many international students within C3 […] And we are friends until now and we are making plans for winter breaks and it’s really great.

Experiences of connecting provided them with a sense of belonging, safety, security, helped them gain more confidence, allowed them to experience acceptance and openness, and receive opportunities to learn, grow, and change. Therefore, it appears that all six themes are related to their experiences of participation in the Cultural Connections Club. Consistent with the findings of numerous researchers (Jacob, 2007; Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008; Wilton & Constantine, 2003), C3 seems to provide social support to aid in the process of adjustment and acculturation.

According to Jacob (2001), explaining and normalizing culture shock symptoms and experiences can substantially increase the likelihood of utilizing counseling and other support services by international students on university campuses. Thus, it would appear that offering
social support groups would not only be instrumental in addressing the issues related to
adjustment and acculturation, but also would represent a positive entry point for any additional
individual counseling and support that may be needed.

**International Ladies Club**

International Ladies Club (ILC) has a similar format and purpose as the C3, however it is
offered only for female members. Participants reported that when they attended ILC they felt
relaxed and comfortable because had a sense of belonging to a group of other females. Here is
what one participant said:

I do like all the programs – the one that has been on my mind – the Ladies Club […] The
one I remember it was about 2 weeks ago that really struck me. We did not have any
program like a make-up party or any of that. I just got there and we were all sitting and
lying down on the floor and it was just so […] just so nice and chill. Because there were
just all girls there and we were just talking and it was so […] just really nice and I
enjoyed just lying down and talk. It was good.

It appears that a sense of belonging to a group of other females within the ILC helped
participants experience acceptance and allowed them to share their thoughts and experiences of
adjustments. Therefore, the format of ILC appears to be conducive to the needs of acceptance
and sharing of international female participants, and without ILC they may have not fulfilled
those needs.

**Cultural Connections Mentor Program (CCMP)**

The CCMP is one of the most important programs within the CCP because the mentors
perform the role of agents of information about essential resources and counseling services. At
the same time, they are the social agents that establish personal contacts with every international
student at the point of arrival and from there on connect them to other members and services within the CCP. Overall, participants reported receiving positive and helpful support from the CCP mentors. In particular, participants experienced increased confidence to communicate in English and with Americans because they were connected to mentors. Mentors are also trained in such a way that they educate international students about the process and issues related to adjustment and acculturation, model help seeking behavior, and refer international students to various services that are offered for their support. In this study, it was reported that students received answers to their questions and got referred to essential services. For example, one participant stated:

You have a huge amount of questions in the beginning of the semester and I just asked all those questions in Cultural Connections […] managed to answer all of them and if not directly but to tell who can really refer to, who can I ask exactly that exact question and it helped a lot.

Such positive experiences are consistent with prior research that discussed effective support can be provided by student mentors and peers (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Participants reported that mentors shared their experiences and provided information necessary for initial transition and successful academic and social integration. Participants reported that they enjoyed sharing their knowledge and experience of adjustment: “I always like helping the students to go through the same things I had to go through to make it easier on them. So I participated in ILEX, so that I can help them to know new tips in getting adjusted.”

The current research also indicates participants experienced opportunities for taking on leadership and mentoring roles and to participate in organizing workshops and cultural events
and activities. Through their experiences with CCP mentorship and leadership activities, participants reported getting inspired to do something similar and explain others how to go through the process of adjustment and acculturation. This is what one participant said:

I think it’s also about mentorship program, because some people also want to help you and at some point you also want to help other people. And personally I’d like to be a mentor, really, if I stay here for a longer term, but I have to go home, you know. It’s about you join this group, you see the people who has a lot of experience like organizing people and making these different projects and clubs and you just want to organize something by yourself.

The current study also revealed that participants felt empowered when they were able to offer help to other international and American students because their CCP mentors modeled for them how to use their own strengths and resourcefulness in the process of adjustment and acculturation. This is consistent with the findings of Yoon and Portman (2004) who suggested that using international students’ strengths and resourcefulness can be another alternative way of encouraging them to utilize campus resources that would help them in adjustment and acculturation.

Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) reported that an additional benefit from positive experiences with mentors may be that mentoring programs can “promote greater psychological and academic achievement among international students and also increase the retention rate of these students for the institution” (p. 47). The experiences reported by participants in relation to the CCMP, such as connecting to other students and services, sharing, giving and receiving help, and gaining opportunities to learn, grow, and change may increase retention rates and strengthen
the economy of the United States. The following quote summarizes the experiences of participation in the CCMP:

If you have a lot of connections, if you know a lot of people, then it’s definitely much easier for you to succeed at your goals […] It’s like helping your future plans come though in the way you basically not noticing and it also helps you in everyday life, so…

**International Learning Exchange, ILEX**

Arthur (2008) suggested providing innovative services for international students, such as lectures, workshops, information sessions, and round table discussions. The purpose of the International Learning Exchange is to educate international students about the process and issues related to adjustment and acculturation. The ILEX discussion sessions are lead by counseling professionals with active participation of the Cultural Connections Mentors.

While ILEX is a formal setting to receive information, it is also a venue to establish social support and get plugged to all other services and programs within the CCP. Participants reported that the ILEX helped them connect to other students that had similar concerns, and that helped normalize their experiences. Participants experienced more confidence and a sense of safety and security that came with learning about common adjustment problems, sharing, and finding solutions and resources available for international students on campus.

**Diverse Diggers**

Another proactive approach of service delivery within the CCP is providing sports and recreational activities for international students. Participating in the CCP sports activities, such as Diverse Diggers volleyball, hiking trips, and international sports days gave international students additional opportunities to connect with others and receive support. Consistent with the finding of Mori (2000) and Yoh (2009), participants reported that being involved in those sports
activities gave them opportunities to connect to many other members of the CCP, get exposed to
other services within and beyond the CCP, and get plugged into local community through
learning and/or participating in other events and activities campus wide.

The findings suggest that the experiences of participating in the international volleyball
club Diverse Diggers gave an alternative opportunity for international students to receive support
and counseling services. This quote is a good example of how participating in sports activities
provided participants with social support: “I was still lonely when I came here […] We started
playing volleyball and meeting new people. That was good, this is how I started to know people.
That made me very happy.”

Overall, the six themes of experiences that emerged appear to be positively related to the
format, structure, and programs of the CCP. The results show that many participants were
involved in more than one program within the CCP: “I’ve been a member of C3, ILC, and I
went to volleyball, and I have attended ILEX.” “I participated in Diverse Diggers may be like
two times, but I was like very much involved in C3 and Cultural Connections Mentorship
Program”. That means that the CCP offers international students a variety of entry points and
multiple opportunities to learn about and receive services and support. The data suggests that
participants appreciated the structure of the CCP, for example:

Yes, it is kind of nice to have that structure, because when international students come to
campus, everything is bombarded to them, at once, immigration stuff, registration stuff,
which is like horrible, so it is important for us to have these structured things, so we can
go every day, enjoy and […] we can relax.

Therefore, in order to aid international students in the process of adjustment and
acculturation, professionals should begin with providing connections and social support and offer
opportunities to learn, grow, and change, while meeting the needs of belonging, safety, security, confidence, acceptance and openness, and sharing and help. The Cultural Connections Program uses a holistic, multifaceted approach to provide services to international students because it includes social support groups, a mentoring program, a series of discussions on adjustment and acculturation, and several outlets for sports and recreational activities, such as Diverse Diggers.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, participants experiences of connections established in the CCP can provide international students with essential support and a sense of belonging that they immediately lost when they left their homes and come to study to a foreign country. Once they regain their sense of safety and security, they can function with more confidence and feel more accepted. The more the students can feel safe, secure, confident, and accepted, the more they are prone to open up and share their experiences. Therefore, there may be a greater chance they would reach out for help and explore the possibilities of helping themselves through finding essential resources. At the same time, sharing and helping gives increases opportunities to learn, grow, and change. This can lead to better and faster adjustment and acculturation. Better adjustment and acculturation can contribute to increasing international student retention rate. Therefore, providing social support groups like the groups within the CCP to international students can ensure that the students receive the help they need when they need it and improve their experiences as students at The University of Mississippi.

**Limitations of the Study**

The experiences of participants of the Cultural Connections Program have not been previously researched. Therefore, the generic qualitative approach was chosen as the best approach to conduct this study. Because a generic approach only seeks descriptions of
participants’ experiences, this approach did not provide any numeric data; neither could it draw comparisons of the experiences between groups of students or different time lines.

Although international students may experience discrimination, gender issues, experiences with racism and discrimination, due to the nature of a generic qualitative study, the researcher is limited to presenting only the data received from the grand research question and the follow up clarifying questions. According to basic tenets of a generic qualitative study, it is not appropriate to add areas that the participants did not reveal in their responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McLeod, 2001). Participants were not asked directly to address these issues, nor were they specifically reported in the interviews. Although important, they were not the focus of this research and would be appropriate for future research involving international students.

The results of this study are drawn from the reports of 11 international students that participated in the CCP program at The UM in the Fall 2011. Therefore, the results can be generalized closely to other participants of the CCP and vaguely to other international students of The University of Mississippi. It is not certain however, how much the findings of this research may represent the experiences of all international students nationwide. They may have similar experiences through participation in similar programs or they may have similar experiences of adjustment if they study at a similar university or state. At the same time, the results of this study may be generalized to future participants of the CCP if the format and structure that the CCP remains the same as it was when the data was collected.

The sample of this study was limited to international students who had participated in the CCP at least four times at the time of data collection. The sample did not include international students’ spouses or their family members. Additionally, the study did not include students and/or spouses who have never participated in the CCP, students and/or spouses who came once
or twice and never came back. Although the sample was fairly diverse, it did not include international students from Latin America, Canada, or Australia. The sample also did not include students who participated in the CCP for less than four times; neither were the experiences explored of international students that participated only once and never came back or chose not to participate at all. The sample did not include American students who participated in the CCP. The sample overall was limited to 11 students at focus group 1 and 10 students at focus group 2. It is unknown how the results would differ if participant 11 was present at focus group 1. It is also unknown how a larger sample would have impacted the results of the study.

The results of this study revealed mostly pleasant and positive experiences of participation in the CCP. It may be because those students who were actively involved in the program because they appreciated it; however, it is certainly possible that the results are not represented by those that did not participate or dropped out of the program. Therefore, the findings may be different if the data was collected from a different sample.

Finally, a possible limitation is that the number of focus groups chosen for this study was limited to two. Two focus groups proved to produce thick descriptions and valuable data that helped understand the experiences of the participants. However, additional focus groups may have resulted in more depth and richness.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The Cultural Connections Program is unique and is established only at The University of Mississippi. There has been no prior research about this program or the students that participate in this program. The current study is exploratory and was designed to discover general descriptions of the experiences of participation in the Cultural Connections Program. These experiences were analyzed and six themes emerged. Overall, participants clearly benefited from
this program, having acquired a sense of belonging, safety, security, confidence, and acceptance, and gained opportunities to open up, share, help, and learn, grow, and change. However, further research is needed to explore the connections between the six themes and their relationship with the outcomes and structure of the program. Thus, a further study and program evaluation is recommended. Such study can aid counseling and higher education professionals who are involved in program development and implementation for international students.

Specific areas of further enquiry include broadening the investigation to all categories of students that participate in the CCP, such as international students that participated fewer or more than four times, international students’ spouses, American students, or those that dropped out of the program. Such follow up research will be helpful for counseling practitioners to understand any differences among these groups to assist in matching participants’ needs with services offered.

The sample of this study included both graduate and undergraduate international students, as well as students that spent three months to three years in the U.S. Future research is suggested to explore the experiences of international and American students based on the year of study and the time spent in the U.S. Such information may provide practitioners with opportunities to adjust services to better assist international students in adjustment and acculturation. It may also aid service programs, such as the CCP, in designing and adjusting programs and services to better serve a wider array of international students and student issues.

This study explored the experiences of international students that participated in one or more programs and services within the CCP. Although several participants identified their experiences in relation to a particular service, (i.e., C3 or ILEX), future research is needed to obtain a clear understanding of the relationship of services and programs within the CCP and
levels of acculturation and adjustment. This knowledge can aid program administrators to modify the format and/or structure of the CCP and increase program effectiveness.

In describing their experiences, participants in this study did not report having serious psychological issues or provide specific descriptions of how serious psychological problems may have been addressed. Additionally, issues regarding sex, academic status, religion, and/or discrimination were not revealed (Mitchel, Greenwood, & Guglielmi, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Mitchel, Greenwood, and Guglielmi (2007) reported that international students are referred to crisis services and express suicidal thoughts more often than American students. Although participants of this research did not report having those issues, there are several hypotheses about the reasons for absence of this information. First, these issues are very sensitive and participants may not have been comfortable talking about them during the focus groups while other participants were around. Second, because there was no specific question asked about psychological issues, they may not have thought that this was a focus of the research, nor would they have shared information not specifically asked for. Third, they may have not experienced the psychological stresses reported in other studies due to the social support they reported experiencing through the CCP. While Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame (2008) found that social support reduces depression and anxiety, additional research is needed to confirm or disconfirm the impact of the CCP social support programs on psychological issues such as depression and anxiety.

The results of this study revealed six themes that participants experienced in the process of adjustment and acculturation. These themes can be loosely compared to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which also include safety, belonging, and confidence (Huit, 2007). It is not known if these experiences can be related to needs, whether or not they are hierarchical, and if there is a
specific relationship with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Future research is recommended to examine these areas. For example, while the results of this research study show that the most important and fundamental experience of participants was connecting/connections, it is not known if the five other themes can be ranked, are sequential in their development, and/or are interrelated in some way.

While participants reported a variety of experiences that resulted in the six themes that emerged, it is not known how these experiences impact international students’ functioning and if they lead to increased success and mastery in their field of study. Future research about these relationships would be helpful in designing services and programs that are more focused on enhancing the achievement of academic success.

Finally, comparing the experiences of participation in the CCP with experiences of participation in other international student programs can add to our knowledge about program effectiveness, aid in the development of alternative services and programs, and help programs to work together to provide integrated and complementary services.

In summary, six themes based on the experiences of international students in the Cultural Connections Program have been identified. These results are preliminary in nature and represent the first step in what is hoped will result in future research that adds to our knowledge of the experiences, programs, and services that impact international students. The implications and summary of this study will be presented in the section below.

**Implications and Summary**

Understanding the experiences of international students that participate in the CCP at The University of Mississippi can help counseling and higher education professionals at this university raise awareness about international students’ needs and contribute to knowledge about
their needs, challenges, and experiences. The significance of this study is that it resulted in rich descriptions of the experiences of international students that participated in the CCP, which is a holistic, multifaceted program. Prior to this study, only perception data was available to examine these experiences. The availability of this information provides program planners and counseling practitioners with new data to utilize in creating, adjusting, and evaluating programs and services.

In summarizing the results of this research, there are several implications suggested by the researcher, beginning with the importance of connecting and having connections for international students. As discussed previously, the theme of connecting/connections appeared to be the foundation for and related to each of the other themes. Additionally, the findings indicate the possibility of a sequential progression in the development of adjustment and acculturation in international students, based on the participants’ experiences. Maslow’s pyramid or hierarchy of needs (Huitt, 2007) was utilized as a framework to represent a possibility of a hierarchy of international students’ adjustment and acculturation. It appears that in the development of international students, for the participants of this study, Connecting/Connections come before a sense of Belonging and Safety and two additional experiences of Acceptance and Openness and Sharing and Help appear to occur next in their adjustment and acculturation. According to the data, as soon as participants feel accepted, they can open up and share their experiences of adjustment. Sharing experiences allows participants to reach out for help and provide help to others, thus, increasing the Opportunities to Learn, Grow, and Change. This developmental hierarchy can be illustrated in the following picture:
Such a developmental hierarchy, if empirically confirmed, would be valuable because it can help explain to counseling and higher education professionals where to focus the provision of primary services and how to structure service delivery. If such a sequence and/or hierarchy can be determined, service planners will have additional tools in planning and matching international student with services appropriate to their development and/or place within a hierarchy. Further investigation in this area is recommended because it may assist counseling professionals in improving services to international students.

In attempting to interpret the six themes in a more holistic manner, the researcher has suggested an interactional model of participants’ experiences that provides a graphic means to understand the interrelationships and possible sequences of adjustment and acculturation. It is postulated that adjustment and acculturation begins with the experiences of Connecting/Connections and may end with the experiences of Opportunities to Learn, Grow, and Change. The intervening steps in this model are the themes of Belonging, Safety, and Security,
Confidence, Acceptance and Openness, and Sharing and Help. This model can be illustrated in the following diagram:

In this diagram, the two main circles of Connecting/Connections and Opportunities to Learn, Grow, and Change are overlapped and the rest of the four themes are integrated within this overlap, representing the interrelationship and integrative nature of the adjustment and acculturation process. In this model, Connecting/Connections are thought to lead to Opportunities to Learn, Grow, and Change, but that before this can occur, participants must first gain a Sense of Belonging, Safety, and Security, Confidence, Acceptance and Openness, and Sharing and Help. This model and diagram may help explain the process of adjustment and acculturation and can assist counseling and higher education practitioners with additional information about the tasks, goals and priorities in providing services for international students.

The current research also suggests that the six themes that describe participants’ experiences may be related to the five stages of group development suggested by Tuckman
The five stages are: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. Such comparison may be reasonable because most of the services within the CCP happen in group settings. Connecting/Connections and a sense of Belonging, Safety, and Security may be similar to the first stage of forming because this is when group members establish safety and belonging to the group. However, participants of this research did not report experiences related to conflict, that is associated with the second stage of group development – storming (Tuckman, 1965). The themes of Confidence, Acceptance, and Openness may be similar to stage 3 – norming because the participants reported that they felt more comfortable open up to others and could identify with one another. The theme of Sharing and Help may be associated with the fourth stage of group development – performing because participants reported having experiences of problem solving and helping each other to reach their goals. The last theme of Opportunities to Learn, Grow, and Change may be related to the fifth stage of group development – adjourning because participants talked about applying their new skills at a new level and expand their social circles.

Future research is suggested to explore the possible relationships between the six themes of this research and the stages of group development. Additionally, it may be suggested to explore the experiences of conflict within international students who participate in the CCP and if it affects the process of group development and their experiences of adjustment and acculturation. Such exploration can increase the knowledge about international students’ experiences with conflict and learn about their conflict resolution strategies and behaviors. Such knowledge can assist counseling professionals in working with international student population.

The knowledge about international students’ experiences gained from this research can result in the integration of service delivery and program development within the CCP. Because the CCP is a collaborative effort between three entities at The University of Mississippi, the
major stakeholders that can benefit from the descriptions of participant’s experiences are the UM Counseling Center, the Office of International Programs, and the Psychological Services Center. Other professionals that serve participants of the CCP outside of the CCP can benefit from this research, such as professionals at the UM Career Center, Academic Support Center, the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, the Writing Center, etc. Such system wide integration can be helpful to all programs and services seeking to provide systemic, holistic, and multifaceted approaches to international students.

There are several implications of this research that relate to counselor education programs. This research revealed that the most prominent and fundamental experience of international students is connecting/connections. Therefore, addressing this area is something that can be easily incorporated into the process of counselor training. Consistent with prior research which suggests that social support groups provide a foundation for adjustment and acculturation, counselor education programs are encouraged to establish culturally and clinically relevant units that not only expose international students to counselors in training, but also expose counselors in training to international students. The establishment of trust which can result from social support groups may potentially increase the likelihood of international students seeking counseling help or seeking help in general. In addition, exposure to international students has the potential to produce more culturally aware and culturally competent counselors to serve the international student population. The results of this research also suggest that alternative, innovative, and proactive approaches, such as the CCP mentor program, ILEX, and Diverse Diggers, in addition to social support groups may be appropriate for assisting international students. Counselor educators are encouraged to build participation by their counselor education students in these programs through specific assignments associated with
participation in programs for international students. These experiences should be in addition to
traditional programs and services and training experiences offered within counselor education
programs. This may result in increased effectiveness in service provision and supports the
importance of providing holistic, multifaceted approaches to counseling and supporting
international students in the process of adjustment and acculturation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study revealed the importance of establishing social support and group
interventions of outreach for international students. This chapter described six major
participants’ experiences of their involvement in the CCP as well as implications for practice and
suggestions for future research in the field of counseling international student population.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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INFORMATION LETTER

**Title:** A Generic Qualitative Study of the Experiences of the International Students Involved in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of Mississippi

**Investigator**
Nadezda “Nadia” Kholomeydik, M. Ed., NCC
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education, 120 Guyton Hall
The University of Mississippi
Phone: (662) 801-5210
Email: nnkholom@olemiss.edu

**Advisor**
David Spruill, Associate Professor
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education, 103 Guyton Hall
The University of Mississippi
Phone: (662) 915 - 4995
Email: dspruill@olemiss.edu

**Description**
We want to know about the experiences of the international students involved in the Cultural Connections Program at the University of Mississippi. In order to answer our question, we are asking you to participate in two focus groups that will be held within the fall semester of 2011. The first focus group will be scheduled toward the middle of the semester. The second focus group will be held toward the end of the semester with a member checking meeting to follow. Each focus group will take about 90 minutes, and a member checking for about an hour. We anticipate having 8 to 10 international students, members of the Cultural Connections Program, to participate in this research project. During the member checking meeting the results of the analysis of the interviews will be presented to you and your opinion upon the results will be asked. You can ask any questions you have about the study, the results, or the process of it.

**Risks and Benefits**
You will be answering the questions in person and they may be in a foreign language to you. We hope that you will let us know if you need to receive the focus group questions in advance in order to get familiar with the questions and prepare to answer them in English. You can ask any questions about the inquiry. The focus groups will be scheduled at the Conference Room, Martindale, 3rd floor, the same building you participate in most of the Cultural Connections Programs, but if this is a concern for you, please, let us know and we will schedule an interview/interviews and a focus group at a different venue.

Both focus groups and a member checking meeting will be audio-recorded. Audio-recordings will be transcribed in order to generate the text that will be used for data analysis. Having those transcripts will increase the accuracy of data analysis. The only other person who might listen to audio-recordings, except for the researcher, will be the research committee chair. Your opinions, insights, comments, or language skills will not be judged.

A lot of international students enjoy engaging in focus groups because it gives them a chance to share their thoughts and opinions, which can be empowering for minority students as international students are. Also, we will talk with you about our study, and we think you may learn more about the Cultural Connections Program.

Cost and Benefits

Each focus group will take about 90 minutes, and we will talk to you for about one more hour during the member checking meeting. There are no other costs for helping us with this study. However, your input in the study can help us gain more understanding about experiences of participating in the Cultural Connections Program at The University of Mississippi. That knowledge can help us better serve international students nationwide.

Confidentiality
We will not put your name on any of transcriptions or reports. The only information that will be interested in is your gender (whether you are male or female), country you are from, your academic level, and your program membership status. Therefore, we do not believe that you can be identified from any of your participation in focus groups of a member checking. The nature of focus groups is such that there are other participants that are present at the discussions and the researcher cannot guarantee that they will not disclose what was said. However, the researcher will make sure the moderator asks each participant before and after each focus group and a member checking meeting to not disclose the experiences shared by others during the meetings.

**Right to Withdraw**

You do not have to take part in this study. If you choose to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate or to withdraw will not affect your standing academically, socially, etc. at the University. It will not cause you to lose any benefits to which you are entitled. The researchers may terminate your participation in the study without regard to your consent and for any reason, such as protecting your safety and protecting the integrity of the research data. If the researcher terminates your participation, you will be notified personally or via email.

**IRB Approval**

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study fulfills the human research subject protections obligations required by state and federal law and University policies. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482.

Appendix 2
Focus Groups Guiding Principles for the Group

The following are some guidelines or “ground rules” that will help the moderator establish the focus group norms:

• Only one person talks at a time.

• Confidentiality is assured. “What is shared in the room stays in the room.”

• It is important for us to hear everyone’s ideas and opinions. There are no right or wrong answers to questions – just ideas, experiences and opinions, which are all valuable.

• It is important for us to hear all sides of an issue – both the positive and the negative.

• It is important for women’s and men’s ideas to be equally represented and respected.

These ground rules will be presented to the group by the moderator. In addition to these ground rules, which have been established prior to the focus group, the participants will be invited by the moderator to establish their own ground rules or guiding principles for the discussion. Once the above ground rules have been presented, it will be important to ask participants if they have anything to add to the list.

(Adopted from http://www.omni.org/docs/FocusGroupToolkit.pdf)
Focus Group Checklist

Remember to bring the following:

✓ Two writing utensils (in case the lead in a pencil breaks/ a pen runs out of ink)
✓ A notepad with sufficient paper for taking notes during the entire focus group
✓ A flip chart
✓ Name tags or badges
✓ Cultural Connections Program fliers

Recording equipment:

✓ a tape recorder
✓ extension cord
✓ extra tapes
✓ extra batteries
✓ Information Letters
✓ Focus group guide
✓ Note taking form
✓ Debrief Discussion Tool

(Adopted from http://www.omni.org/docs/FocusGroupToolkit.pdf)
APPENDIX 4
Focus Group Checklist

Remember to do the following…

✓ Become very familiar with the primary research objectives of the study
✓ Become very familiar with the focus group guide
✓ Review this checklist
✓ Arrive at the focus group location a few minutes before participants to organize the room and your materials
✓ Welcome focus group participants, inviting them to get something to eat
✓ Explain, in a general and brief way, the purpose of the focus group and how information collected during focus groups will be used and toward what goal
✓ Introduce yourself and the note taker
✓ Explain participants’ rights and what participating in the focus group will entail
✓ Remind participants of the duration of the focus group, emphasizing the importance of their participation during the entire discussion
✓ Let people know where the closest restroom facilities are located
✓ Provide Information Letter to participations and have the focus group recorded
✓ At the end of the focus group, let the participants know that the researcher is available for questions/concerns/suggestions, etc.
✓ Complete the Debrief Discussion Tool with the note taker
✓ Ensure that tapes are labeled appropriately (Focus Group 1, Focus Group 2)
✓ Ensure that hand-written field notes, tapes, and the Debrief summary form, are given to the researcher. (Adopted from http://www.omni.org/docs/FocusGroupToolkit.pdf)
Focus Group Note Taking Form

Instructions: Please use this form to record the proceedings of the focus group. Notes should be extensive and accurately reflect the content of the discussion, as well as any salient observations of nonverbal behavior, such as facial expressions, hand movements, group dynamics, etc.

Please specific which focus group you are recording (please check one):
Focus Group 1
Focus Group 2

Date of Focus Group: ______________________
Location of Focus Group: ______________________
Name of Note Taker: ______________________

Focus Group Question:

Clarification or Follow up Question 1:

Clarification or Follow up Question 2:

Clarification or Follow up Question 3:

Clarification or Follow up Question 4:

(Adopted from http://www.omni.org/docs/FocusGroupToolkit.pdf)
Email or a Facebook Message to Recruit for Participation in the Study

Dear International Student,

Over the course of this semester of Fall 2011, I will be conducting a study that aims to explore your experiences of participation in the Cultural Connections Program (CCP), including any of the groups and services, such as the Cultural Connections Club (C3), the International Ladies Club (ILC), the Mentor Program, the Diverse Diggers Volleyball Team, and the International Learning Exchange (ILEX). The results of this study will help me understand how the CCP works. The knowledge gained through this study may help me improve the CCP and share this program with other universities nationwide. That will contribute to the improvement of services offered by other counseling and higher education professionals and wellbeing of international students.

I will need to recruit ten international students to participate in this study. You are a potential participant for this study because you have participated in at least four different services or activities within the CCP. Please, let me know if you can invest four hours of your time during this semester. If you agree to participate, I will provide you with more details about the process of the study and we will set up the time and place best suited for you to meet for the interview.

Best regards,

Nadia Kholomeydik, M.Ed, NCC, LPC
Counselor Ed. PhD Student,
University of Mississippi (UM).
Cultural Connections Program Director,
Graduate Assistant,
The Office of International Programs
nnkholom@olemiss.edu
(w) (+1) 662-915-7404
Cultural Connections Program, CCP

is a result of a 5 years collaborative effort of the UM Counseling Center, the Office of International Programs, and the Department of Psychology.

Cultural Connections Program has 5 main tasks:

- Provide complex assistance in adjustment and acculturation
- Serve as an essential link connecting international students to valuable resources
  - Provide education and advocacy
  - Promote diversity and multiculturalism

There are 5 interconnected programs within the CCP:

- Cultural Connections Mentor Program
- International Ladies Club
- Cultural Connections Club "C3"
- International Learning Exchange
- Diverse Diggers, International Volleyball Team

If you want to participate in the CCP, contact us:

Nadia Kholomeydi, Counseling Ed. Graduate student,

nnkholm@olemiss.edu, 662-915-5210

Laura R. Johnson, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology,

ljohnson@olemiss.edu, 662-915-5185

Marc Showalter, Director of the Student Counseling Center,

mshowalt@olemiss.edu, 662-915-3784

Visit our Facebook pages and website at www.olemiss.edu/ccp
Cultural Connections Club, “C3”

Join us every Thursday from 4 to 6 pm at Martindale, 1st floor

Within the club you can:

➢ Meet new friends
➢ Participate in cultural exchange and experiences
➢ Practice English
➢ Celebrate birthdays and holidays
➢ Learn about new cultures and traditions
➢ Try new foods
➢ Get peer support and acceptance

Our Club Members are International & American students, faculty, & staff.

We offer refreshments 😊

For more information, please check out our website: www.colonial.edu/cep, OrgSync, Facebook Group or contact
Nadia Kholomezkikh: nkholomezkikh@colonial.edu 662-915-7404

The Cultural Connections Club is part of the Cultural Connections Program and is affiliated with and sponsored by the UMC Counseling Center, the Office of International Programs, and the Psychological Services Center.
International Ladies Club

Join us every Tuesday from 4 to 6 pm
at Martindale, 1st floor

Within the club you can:
➤ Meet new friends
➤ Practice English
➤ Take part in unique cultural exchange
➤ Celebrate birthdays and holidays
➤ Learn new skills
➤ Try new foods
➤ Go to shopping trips

Our Club Members are international & American students, faculty, & staff as well as international students’ female spouses and members of the community.

We offer refreshments 😊

If you have questions, please go to www.olemiss.edu/cop, OrgSync, Facebook page or contact Nadia Kholomeydkin.kholom@olemiss.edu 662-915-7404

This Club is part of the Cultural Connections Program and is affiliated with and sponsored by the UM Counseling Center, the Office of International Programs, and the Psychological Services Center.
International Volleyball Club
At Ole Miss
“Diverse Diggers”

We are an international group of students, faculty, and staff. We are passionate about volleyball, friendship, outdoor activities, and having tons of fun. We invite American and International students, faculty, and staff who would like to try themselves in volleyball (your skill level does not matter) for regular practice and then those who can face the challenge are welcome to participate in intramural competitions.

Diverse Diggers won the Intramural Championship in Spring 2009!!! We also went to Pensacola, FL in Summer 2009 to compete with local team in sand volleyball.

So, join us if you would like to:

- Meet friends
- Hang out and travel together
- Celebrate birthdays and holidays
- Go hiking, biking, camping and so forth

Please, check out our Facebook Group and schedule of practices at http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/group.php?gid=30803757069

If you have questions, please contact Nadia Kholomeydk nnkholom@olemiss.edu or call Counseling Center at 662-915-3784

The group is affiliated with the Office of International Programs, the Psychological Services Center and the University Counseling Center.
APPENDIX 11
Cultural Connections Mentor Program

As soon as new international students arrive to the orientation they are divided into groups and assigned a Mentor with whom they have their lunch together and go to a little tour around the campus. The Mentor is the key person to address their questions and concerns to. The group members are encouraged to meet every month throughout the semester/academic year to “check up” with their status, their needs, and experiences.

For more information go to: www.olemiss.edu/ccp. Orgsync, and Facebook or contact Nadia Kholomeydk at nnkholam@olemiss.edu 662-915-7404

CCMP is part of the Cultural Connections Program and is affiliated with and sponsored by the UMA Counseling Center, the Office of International Programs, and the Psychological Services Center.
APPENDIX 12
Cultural Connections Mentor Program 2010/2011

Cultural Connections Mentor Program 2010/2011 is part of the Cultural Connections Program that was developed in 2007 as a joint effort between international students, the UM Counseling Center, the Department of Psychology, the Office of International Programs.

Program Outcomes

- Explore cross-cultural communication opportunities
- Meet new friends from throughout the world
- Share your experiences and help international students
- Improve your language skills if needed

To Apply, please type in your info and read carefully:

Name_____________________________________Country____________________

I am a: Undergraduate  Graduate  Doctoral Student  New Professional  (circle one)

Phone number and e-mail: ________________________________

I do have a car available __________ I do not have a car__________

I Agree with the Mentor’s Responsibilities:

1. Attend the Mentors’ training session(s) and International Student Orientation(s).
2. During the orientation: 1. promote the other groups, clubs and services available for them on campus, 2. motivate the group members to come to the future meetings at the assigned time, 3. set up a date and time for the first meeting as a group.
3. Maintain a key person position and keep in touch with your Mentees throughout the year/semester to “check up” with their status, their needs, and experiences, inform them about the news, and remind them about the following meeting times regularly through phone calls, e-mails, or www.facebook.com website, come to social events together with the members when possible.
4. Report twice a year to the coordinators about the events and contact information, inform about the significant incoming phone calls or e-mails/difficulties, or whatever might come up.
5. Understand that international students needs come first and exercise multicultural sensitivity and respect to differences or similarities at all times. If that is not possible, consider consultation with program coordinators and/or dismissal from the CC Mentorship program.

Date___________________________ Signature__________________________

Program Directors’ contact information:
Nadia Kholomedyk, NCC, Counseling Ed. GA
nnkholom@olemiss.edu, 662-9153784

Program Advisor: Laura R. Johnson, Ph.D. Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology
ljohnson@olemiss.edu
International Learning Exchange
Cultural Connections Program

Come join us for the series of workshops/round table discussions on adjustment and acculturation. Schedule for Fall 2011:

1. September 7, 4-6 pm –
   Tips for Survival: Adjustment Strategies

2. September 14, 4-6 pm –
   Tips for Academic Success

3. September 21, 4-6 pm –
   Room-mates: Friends or Best Friends?

4. September 28, 4-6 pm –
   Healthy Lifestyle in a Foreign Country

5. October 5, 4-6 pm – Career International
   The workshops will be held at Martindale, 1st Floor.
   Refreshments will be provided.

For more information: www.olemiss.edu/ccp, Orgsync, Facebook or Nadia Kholemydik at nmkhom@olemiss.edu or call at 662-915-7404

The workshops are affiliated with the University Counseling Center, the Office of International Programs, and the Psychological Services Center.
VITA

NADEZDA “NADIA” KHOLOMEYDIK

Education

University of Mississippi, University, MS

Master of Education in Counselor Education; Graduation date: 08/2008

Far Eastern State Technical University, Vladivostok, Russia

Master of Arts, Specialist in Social Work; Graduation date: 06/2004

Work Experience:

The Office of International Programs (OIP), University of Mississippi

Graduate Assistant, 07/2011 – 01/2012

- Coordinated, and lead the Cultural Connections Program (CCP) – www.olemiss.edu/ccp
- Coordinated Cultural Café and Cultural Excursions. Invigorated existing programs, developed and created new programs according to the needs of the students, availability of resources, and visions of the office and the University
- Planned, oversaw, and coordinated the International Student Orientation and the International Welcome Week activities and events
- Trained five graduate assistants to direct and facilitate the Cultural Connections Program
- Authored the CCP’s Master Guidebook for Leaders and Supervisors.

Counseling Center, University of Mississippi

Graduate Assistant, 06/2007 – 05/2011
• Provided individual and group counseling services to domestic and international students, utilizing a variety of therapeutic techniques and multicultural counseling interventions.

• Coordinated, developed, and expanded the Cultural Connections Program that included five interconnected programs: International Ladies Club, Cultural Connections Club, Mentor Program, International Learning Exchange, and Diverse Diggers Volleyball Team.

• Served as a member of the Center’s Crisis Intervention team, which involved weekly rotations.

• Carrying the twenty-four hour “crisis phone” to support individuals in crisis.

• Served as an interface between the Counseling Center, The Office of International Programs, and Psychological Services Center to ensure the success of the CCP.

• Presented at the International Student Orientation about the services provided by the Counseling Center.

Housing Authority, Water Valley, MS

*Summer Camp Counselor, 06/2009-07/2009, 06/2010-06/2010*

• Oversaw 30 children sports activities including teaching a group fitness class.

• Organized and developed children arts and crafts projects.

• Presented on “Life in Other Countries: Russia”.

• Organized and implemented a workshop: “Origami Sail Boat, the Trip of Your Dream”.

• Chaperoned children on their field trips.
• Coordinated projects with other counselors and the program coordinator

Leader Training Consulting Company, Vladivostok, Russia

*Sales Manager and Trainee’s Assistant, 09/2005-07/2006*

• Created and executed four sales projects, increasing company sales by 10%
• Developed and expanded clients’ database from 10 to 300
• Conducted workshops, including presentations and training on teambuilding and leadership skills
• Organized one conference for the companies – potential clients of the area; as a result 70% of the invitees showed up and 10% of them became the customers
• Negotiated contracts and consulted clients on daily basis
• Trained and supervised two employees

Far Eastern State Technical University, Vladivostok, Russia

*Deputy Director of Student Affairs, 11/2003-07/2006*

• Supervised extra-curricular work and activities of 1000 University students in the Lesozavodsk Institute of Management Technologies
• Conducted government sponsored youth programs promoting leadership skills, academic success, artistic development, and healthy lifestyles
• Served as Program Coordinator for the student government associations
• Officially represented the university in meetings and negotiations with local government
• Organized student volunteer projects, such as “Charity Group” and “A Letter to Veterans”
• Advised students on topics of career, academics, and housing

Kholomeydik Company, Vladivostok, Russia

Owner of a Consignment Store (Furniture and Supplies), 8/2001-09/2004
• Organized and supervised store operations, including marketing and merchandising
• Developed and oversaw the budget of the company, including profits
• Provided training to the personnel – two shop assistants and two merchandisers
• Expanded clients’ database to over 10,000
• Created public relations and advertisement projects

Licensure and Certification

Mississippi Licensed Professional Counselor, 2011 – Present. License # 1599
National Certified Counselor, 2008 – Present. Certification # 239948

Research and Publications

• “Influences of Patterns of Relating, Child Abuse, and Dissociation on Prison Population: Implications on Counseling and Rehabilitation”, University, MS.
• “International Student Acculturation: Translating Concerns into Programs with Participatory Action Research”, University, MS, In Progress.
• “Supervisee with a Thousand Faces”, University, MS, In Review.
• “The Use of Film as a Mid-Term Evaluation in a Multicultural Counseling Course”, University, MS, In Press.


Awards and Honors

International Service Award, May 2011

Edmund S. Muskie Scholarship, August 2006

Professional Development

• Woodall Spring Conference for Helping Professions, Delta State University, Cleveland, MS, 04/11/2012

• Eating Disorders, Pine Grove Behavioral Health, University, MS, 03/30/2012

• Southern Association of Counselor Education and Supervision, Williamsburg, VA, 10/28-10/31/2010

• Group Work with Chemically Dependent Clients Training, Pine Grove Behavioral Health, University, MS, 02/05/2010

• Psychology of Wellness Conference, Saint Petersburg National Institute of Psychology and Social Work, Saint Petersburg, Russia, 12/2009

• Mississippi Counseling Association Conference, Jackson, MS, 11/05/2009

• PTSD, The Veteran, The Family, The Community Training, University, MS, 09/23/2009
• The Fifth Interdisciplinary Conference on Clinical Supervision, Buffalo, NY, 06/11-13/2009

• Business for Russia Exchange Program, IREX – San Francisco, California, USA, 03/2003-04/2003

Professional Membership

American Counseling Association

Association for Specialists in Group Work

Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development

Mississippi Counseling Association

Community Involvement

International Students Organization (ISO), University, MS

Volunteer, 09/2006-2008

Adviser, 09/2011

• Coordinated fundraisers and the International Night 2006

• Organized and adviser at ISO general meetings and socials

• Represented ISO in meetings with the university officials

ROTC Cultural Sensitivity Training, University, MS

Group Moderator, 10/05/2010-03/03/2011

• Recruited international students

• Lead discussions and reflections

175
• Organized cultural games

“La Casa de Acogida”, Shelter for Battered Women and Children, Cuzco, Peru

Volunteer, 06/10-06/26/2010

• Organized games and activities with children
• Provided basic counseling to battered women
• Taught other counselors new games and activities

One Mississippi Racial Reconciliation Retreat, Louisville, MS

Group Moderator, 02/2009, 02/2010

• Recruited prospective international student-leaders
• Lead discussions and reflections
• Organized sports activities and cultural games

University Career Center, University, MS

Volunteer, 01/2007 – 05/2009

• Served as a Peer Career Educator
• Assisted at the Career Fairs every spring semester
• Developed career services and programs for international students

Skills

Languages: Russian (native), English (fluent), Japanese (intermediate), Spanish (basic).