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## Asian International Students' Perceptions of their University Experience

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### Abstract

Asian students make up the largest proportion of international students who study in the United States. Seeking a degree in higher education can be challenging for any student, but Asian students often encounter more obstacles to completion than many other international and domestic students. Culture, family and health concerns, and safety are some of the largest concerns that this study found among Asian students in the US. The study found that East-Asian international students had more issues than students from other parts of Asia and difficulty with the English language was of major importance to respondents. In addition, safety is an issue that Asian students were concerned with while studying in the US. The study was exploratory in nature and informs the field on future avenues of research.

**Keywords:** international students, language, culture, safety, health.



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## Introduction

International students accounted for 886,052 students studying higher education in the United States during the 2013-2014 academic year, and accounted for nearly \$27 billion in revenue to colleges, universities, and their surrounding communities. This group of students was represented most by students from the Asian continent, accounting for 64.16% of the total international student population (Witherill & Clayton, 2014). These population numbers are on the rise, and the need for internationally educated students and professionals has intensified over the past 30 years. In previous studies, Asian students have often been grouped together with other students, but international students differ greatly based upon their nation of origin (Baumann & Hamin, 2011). Asian international students have unique experiences and perspectives that may differ from many other international students; many are not satisfied that they chose to pursue their education in the United States and many are less likely to advocate studying in the United States to their peers back home (Lee, 2010). Therefore, it is important to understand Asian international students' perceptions to determine ways in which institutions can improve the experiences of international students studying in the United States.

### *Literature Review*

The purpose of this study was to provide basic insight into the perceptions and experiences that Asian international students have had at a land grant university in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. The current literature on the topic reveals numerous issues that international students face when embarking upon their educational journey in a foreign nation. These include cultural concerns like language and discrimination; family and health care; and safety, both on-campus and in the community. These topics were the main focus of the study and the review of the literature.

### *Cultural Concerns*

The two main facets of culture that this study focused on were based on language barriers and perceptions of discrimination experienced by Asian international students in the United States. Researchers have identified language issues as a major concern for Asian and other international students (Counsell, 2011; Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012; Zhai, 2002). However, not all international students have the same issues and regionally-specific information can help target programs for individuals and groups most affected by language issues. For instance, Asian international students were more likely to struggle with understanding their lectures. Some of these students even struggled so much that they made audio recordings to improve their comprehension (Lin & Scherz, 2014). Moreover, language differences were found to be most troublesome for students from China, Japan, and Korea (Roy, 2013). This may be due to the fact that these Eastern languages often lack a direct translation to English. Due to these and other issues, Asian international students were more distressed than their North American and European counterparts (Mitchell, Greenwood, & Guglielmi, 2007).

Language may also play a role in the threat of perceived and actual discrimination (Wei, Wang, & Ku, 2012). It has been reported that 50% of international students have felt the distress of discrimination at some point during their time in the United States (Sawir et al., 2012). This is a rather alarming number and may explain why many students struggle to form relationships with American students. Students who had more personal and professional

connections to American students were found to have fewer issues with both language and discrimination (2012). This indicates that more needs to be done in both areas to help improve relations between Asian international students and their domestic peers.

### *Family and Healthcare*

Personal and family healthcare are important concerns for many Americans, especially considering the drastic changes made to the healthcare system in the last few years. However, the system in America often differs greatly from healthcare systems of other nations. Because of this, healthcare concerns can be especially troublesome for international students. In a previous study, Ellis-Bosold and Thornton-Orr (2013) spoke with a group of Chinese students and found that 45% did not know what healthcare services were available to them as an international student. Moreover, a resounding 71% would appreciate more information pertaining to student health services available through the university. In addition, Sherry, Thomas, and Chui (2010) found that many students mentioned the high costs of health insurance as the source of issues specific to international students. Finally, Russell, Thomson, and Rosenthal (2008) found that Asian students were less satisfied than other students with the availability of appointment times and 51.5% of international students did not know where to go to find health services. These are all interesting data that shows that more can be done to provide information and guidance to international students in reference to healthcare and available health services.

### *Safety*

Safety is another issue that international students have identified as problematic in their time in the United States. This may be the result of discrimination or other causes such as housing and safety on campus and in the community. In fact, some students felt unsafe as they had experienced aggressive hostility due to their cultural differences and speaking ability while in the workplace (Sawir et al., 2012). This may indicate that language plays a large role in a student's ability to feel secure. An inadequacy of safety may be especially applicable to East-Asian students as these students have more difficulty with language and interaction with American students (Roy, 2013). Moreover, Nyland, Forbes-Mewett, and Marginson (2010) went so far as to say that international student safety is a concerning systemic issue that needs to be addressed more completely.

## **Methodology**

A survey was sent to international students at a Rocky Mountain university. Twenty-nine students who identified themselves as Asian completed the survey. Of the respondents, 14 (48%) were male and 15 (52%) female. Twelve (41%) were in the age group of 18 to 24; 15 (52%) were in the age group of 25 to 34; and two (7%) were 35 or older. Ten (34%) respondents were married and 18 (62%) were single. The respondents' number of months at the university ranged from two to 72 months; the mean number of months was 17.62 ( $SD = 16.59$ ). The respondents were divided into two groups for comparison; students from East-Asian nations, and those from other Asian nations. Students from other Asian nations were from India (31%), Saudi Arabia (3%), Turkey (3%), Nepal (3%), and Russia (3%). The East-Asian group included students from China (38%), students who only indicated they were from "Asia" (10%), and South Korea (3%).

The survey was inspired by the international student survey at the University of California at Berkeley. The research team consulted with leaders at the international student

center, and modified the items to reflect the needs of the university. The survey was sent to students during a holiday break, and two reminder messages were issued. The Institutional Review Board approved the study before data collection began, and the results were analyzed with IBM SPSS (version 22).

Based on previous research and survey items, the following hypotheses were proposed for the study:

- East-Asian international students would be more concerned about others understanding what they said when compared to students from other Asian nations.
- East-Asian international students would report greater concern with discrimination from all parties when compared to other Asian students.
- More than 50% of students would report issues with family medical care and insurance issues.
- There would be no difference in safety concerns between different groups of Asian international students.

The first two hypotheses regarding discrimination and language issues were tested with independent samples t-tests. The survey items which reflected these constructs were: *I am concerned about discrimination from Americans*; *I am concerned about discrimination from other international students*; and *I am concerned about other students being able to understand what I say*. In addition, the correlation between discrimination and language issues was calculated. The next hypothesis about healthcare issues was tested with descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests. The survey items which indicated health issues were: *I struggle to understand health insurance provided by the university*; *I struggle to understand whom to rely on in the American system (Dr. referral, etc.)*; and *I struggle to understand necessary forms and information to receive medical service*. The final hypothesis about safety was tested with independent samples t-tests. The items pertaining to safety were: *I worry about finding safe housing*; *I worry about my safety when walking in the community*; and *I worry about my safety when walking on campus*. These items were separately analyzed to look for overall percentages and differences between the two groups.

## Results

The analysis of cultural concerns resulted in significant differences between East-Asian and international students from other Asian nations. First, East-Asian international students were more concerned about others understanding what they said when compared with students from other Asian nations,  $t(27) = 2.35, p = .027$ . East-Asian students ( $M = 4.19, SD = 1.22$ ) were concerned that others could not understand them, whereas West Asian students' ( $M = 3.07, SD = 1.32$ ) responses averaged to basically neutral. There was no significant difference in how Asian international students felt about discrimination from Americans. Twelve (41%) reported feeling some level of discrimination from Americans and six (21%) reported feeling no discrimination; the other ten were neutral. However, East-Asian students ( $M = 3.19, SD = 1.38$ ) reported greater concern with discrimination from other international students than students from other Asian nations ( $M = 2.23, SD = 0.83$ ),  $t(27) = 2.20, p = .037$ . Correlations between the three survey items are shown in Table 1. The correlation between worrying about discrimination from Americans and worrying about discrimination from other international students was significantly high,  $r = .70, p < .005$ .

The analysis of family and health issues yielded no significant differences between East-Asian and other Asian international students. Overall, when considering all Asian international students as a group, 18 (62%) were concerned about insurance, while eight (28%) were not concerned. Eleven (38%) were not concerned about the system and 16 (55%) were. Ten (34%) were not concerned about forms and 15 were. In all these cases, the level of concern was over 50%. Correlations were calculated to understand relationships between the items, and these are shown in Table 2. The correlation between struggling to understand whom to rely on in the medical system and what forms are necessary was very high,  $r = .95$ ,  $p < .005$ . The other two correlations were also moderate to high.

Likewise, there was no difference between East-Asian international students and those from other Asian nations when considering safety. Thus, we did not find evidence to contradict the third hypothesis, and the safety concerns of all Asian international students were similar. When considering all Asian international students as a group, and when asked about finding safe housing, nine (31%) felt safe and 13 (45%) did not; whilst seven were neutral. When asked about walking in the community, 11 (38%) felt safe and 13 (45%) did not; whilst five were neutral. In addition, when asked about feeling safe when walking on campus, 12 (41%) felt safe and 12 (41%) did not; again, five were neutral. Correlations were included to understand relationships between the three measures of safety. They are shown in Table 3. All three of the items were highly correlated to each other, indicating a strong linear relationship between finding safe housing, finding safety when walking on campus, and finding safety when walking in the community.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Since the majority (64.16%) of international students come from Asian nations, it is important to understand the factors that influence students' perceptions and experiences (Witherill & Clayton, 2014). This study was exploratory in nature, but has been used to develop subsequent surveys and qualitative research studies. There are many issues that college students must deal with, but it is evident that some of these obstacles can be more problematic for international students, especially if they are from an Asian nation. While our data differed from previous studies, the issues that we investigated cannot be ignored. While issues were not as pronounced as other studies, they are still potential obstacles for many students from Asia.

In evaluating cultural concerns and our first hypothesis, we found that East-Asian international students were more concerned with language issues, which supports the findings of Roy (2013). East-Asian languages do not have direct translations with English, which may be the main reason for these findings (Roy, 2013). In addition, students at the university reported a lower incidence of discrimination (41% vs. 50% or more) than other previous studies (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Sawir et al., 2012). While this is encouraging, the figures are still much higher than we would like to see on American college campuses. There may be numerous reasons for this difference such as smaller school size, novelty of diverse students at a predominately white university, and proactive attempts by the university to improve multiculturalism and equality on campus. However, this study did not attempt to determine the causes of discrimination, only the incidence rates among Asian international students. Therefore, more work needs to be done to determine what the university and community may be doing to experience lower levels of discrimination than other institutions.

Healthcare was another noteworthy concern among students, with more than half of all students indicating their concern with the healthcare system in the United States. The healthcare system in the United States has received ample criticism and many domestic residents do not understand the inner workings of the system. The challenge may be more pronounced with Asian international students who are adjusting to numerous factors when moving to the United States to study. These findings agree with Russell et al. (2008), who found that Asian students were less satisfied with the healthcare system than others and that more than half of students did not know where to go when seeking healthcare assistance. Therefore, we suggest that universities consider the inclusion of healthcare preparation when offering orientation for incoming international students. By discussing the healthcare system, health insurance, and doctor visits, universities can alleviate the confusion and frustration before it becomes an issue for Asian international students.

Finally, there were no significant group differences in regards to safety, but it is evident that safety is an important issue for students from Asia. There were more students that indicated they felt unsafe at the university than those who felt safe. This issue could be linked to discrimination as there was a positive correlation between students who were concerned with these two issues. However, without further investigation it is not possible to determine if the link is causal. Moreover, the city where the study was conducted is not well lit at night and police presence is often negligible. This may contribute to students feeling unsafe in their new environment. The data indicate that the issue of safety is correlated across all areas of inquiry, which shows that students who feel unsafe may tend to apply that feeling to multiple arenas.

While the study was exploratory in nature, it shed light on the Asian international student experience. Students from Asia make up the largest portion of the international student population so it is important to ensure that these students feel safe, understand their healthcare options, and do not feel discriminated against (Wetherill & Clayton, 2014). The study provides information and insight into the experiences and perceptions of Asian students, but there are limitations to the findings. First, the study was conducted at a single university that differs greatly from many other in the nation due to its rural location and its predominately white student body. The data may show less discrimination than other studies, but the findings may not apply to other universities and institutions. Moreover, the study did not attempt to find causes for the findings, which should be explored in future studies. While this study adds to the discussion of Asian students' perceptions while studying in the United States, more work needs to be done in these areas to improve the overall experience for students. The benefits that international students bring to the American university are indispensable and it is important to ensure a positive experience for current and future Asian international students.

## Notes

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**Appendix**

**Table 1.** Correlations of items pertaining to discrimination

I worry about:		Discrimination from Americans	Discrimination from other international students	Others might not understand me
Discrimination from Americans	Correlation	1	.695**	.048
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.806
	<i>N</i>	29	29	29
Discrimination from other international students	Correlation		1	.207
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.282
	<i>N</i>		29	29
Others might not understand me	Correlation			1
	Sig. (2-tailed)			
	<i>N</i>			29

Note. \*\* signifies that correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 2.** Correlations between items measuring healthcare concerns

I struggle to understand:		The health insurance provided by the university	Whom to rely on in the American medical system (doctors; referrals; etc.)	What forms and information are necessary to get medical service
The health insurance provided by the university	Correlation	1	.591**	.622**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001	.000
	<i>N</i>	29	29	29
Whom to rely on in the American medical system (doctors; referrals; etc.)	Correlation	.591**	1	.954**
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.000
	<i>N</i>		29	29
what forms and information are necessary to get medical service	Correlation			1
	Sig. (2-tailed)			
	<i>N</i>			29

Note. \*\* Pearson correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 3.** Correlations between survey items concerning safety

I am concerned about:		Finding safe housing	Safety when walking on campus	Safety when walking in community
Finding safe housing	Correlation	1	.870**	.888**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	29	29	29
Safety when walking on campus	Correlation		1	.956**
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.000
	N		29	29
Safety when walking in community	Correlation			1
	Sig. (2-tailed)			
	N			29

*Note.* \*\* Pearson correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).