

## **THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN GRADUATE STUDENTS IN A COLLEGE OF HUMAN SCIENCES**

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*International students are an integral part of graduate education. This research examined the experiences of African graduate students in a College of Human Sciences in the Midwestern region of the United States. Given the research that states international students face specific challenges when studying in the United States, this study sought to examine the experiences of African graduate students receiving advanced degrees. This research used a qualitative research design. Students cited opportunities to grow academically and professionally as primary reasons for study in the United States. Challenges included difficulties balancing responsibilities and lack of culturally familiar resources. Results from this study will be useful to academicians and school administrators attempting to better enhance international, specifically African, graduate student experiences.*

Hosting international students in colleges and universities is beneficial because these students contribute to the enrichment of higher education, to the strengthening of relations with countries in world trade, and to the promotion of global understanding (Chapdelaine, 2004). The United States annually hosts more than 500,000 students (close to half, 267,876, study at the graduate level). International students constitute 13.3 percent of all graduate students, compared to 2.7 percent undergraduate students (Altbach, 2004). In 2000, more than 34,000 students from Africa traveled to the United States for study (Teferra, 2002). International graduate students complete research that attracts grants and helps guarantee future faculty and program growth. Moreover, the diversity of these students provides contact with other cultures and worldviews for fellow students and brings different research perspectives and life skills into the learning environment. By virtue of living and studying in a foreign country, international students exemplify drive and resourcefulness that could be modeled by all students.

Colleges of Human Sciences, including programs traditional to family and consumer sciences including education, human development, textiles and clothing, hospitality, and human nutrition, are concerned with the critical societal issues present today and projected for the future (Iowa State University, 2005). Given the increasing focus on internationalization strategies by many institutions of higher education, Colleges of Human Sciences provide unique opportunities for supporting diverse perspectives. The incorporation of culturally relevant curriculum materials and opportunities for mentoring relationships to ease transitions into new cultural settings has been recommended for diverse secondary and undergraduate students (Allison, 2003; Ralston, Floyd, Fluellen, Colyard, Fields, Rasco, & Bell, 2004). In the present study, the perspectives of African graduate students studying in a College of Human Sciences were explored to better understand their reasons to and challenges of study in the United States. Suggestions for welcoming and integrating international students were included in this study.

International governments have viewed study abroad opportunities in the United States as vehicles in which to build academic, scientific, and technological capacities (Teferra, 2002). Despite the positive outcomes of international study, graduate students face specific challenges when attending institutions of higher education. Feelings of isolation, challenges adapting to different learning and teaching styles, financial constraints, and difficulties acclimating to unfamiliar climates and cultures have been recognized in the literature (Jones, Robertson, & Line, 1999). Human Science professionals have a history of working to improve the quality of life for individuals and families (Adams, Sewell, & Hall, 2004). Through a better understanding of the expectations and challenges faced by international graduate students, Human Science academicians and administrators will have increased opportunities to create beneficial learning environments for all students.

### Methods

A qualitative study was conducted with a sample of African graduate students. Names and email addresses of 12 African graduate students in a College of Human Sciences were obtained from the college homepage; 9, or 75% of the potential participants agreed to participate. A sample size of nine was considered adequate for generating themes in exploratory analysis (Esterberg, 2002). This study was approved by the university's Human Subjects Review.

Data for this study were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The goal of the interviews was to allow the informants to be guided, but to also freely express opinions and ideas. With the informants' consent, all interviews were audiotaped to ensure accuracy in transcription. The interview consisted of three parts. Part one requested demographic information and information related to why students chose to study in the United States. Part two concerned specific challenges related to activities inside of and outside of the university setting. Part three requested educational aspirations and included questions concerning experiences at the university and in the United States. Interviews ranged from one to one and a half hours in length.

### Results

Students in this study were in their second or third year towards completion of a doctoral degree or completing masters' degrees. Five were male and four were female with ages ranging from 23 to 45. Three participants were from east, three from west, and three from southern Africa. Table 1 includes further demographic information, such as programs of study within the College of Human Sciences, interest areas within the major program, country of origin, and degrees sought.

Table 1  
*Participant Demographic Information.*

<i>Program of Study</i>	<i>Interest Area</i>	<i>Home Country</i>	<i>Degree Sought</i>
Education	Curriculum development	Kenya	M.S.
Education	Curriculum development	Sierra Leone	Ph.D.
Education	Instructional technology	Botswana	Ph.D.
Education	Teacher education	Botswana	Ph.D.
Human Development	Life course development	Tanzania	Ph.D.
Human Nutrition	Community nutrition	Kenya	Ph.D.
Human Nutrition	HIV transmission	Ghana	Ph.D.

Human Nutrition	Infant health	Ghana	M.S.
Textiles and Clothing	Rural entrepreneurship	Malawi	Ph.D.

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### Themes

Three major themes appeared as a result of analysis of the interviews.

1. Students chose to study in the United States to gain both personal and professional competencies for the purpose of contributing productively to their home countries.
2. African graduate students faced a number of challenges that affected their well-being and scholarship while studying in the United States, particularly feelings of isolation and loneliness.
3. Students expressed a desire to return to their home countries while actively maintaining personal and professional relationships with colleagues from the United States.

These themes were prevalent throughout the interviews. Students expressed gratitude for the opportunities they received within the United States educational system. All of the students, however, did offer suggestions for helping future African graduate students navigate the differences of culture both internal and external to U.S. institutions of higher education.

### Reasons to Study in the United States

Students mentioned numerous reasons informing their decisions to study in the United States. The primary theme discovered in the collection of the responses included the quest for scholarship to contribute productively in their home countries. New pressures, societal contexts, and global opportunities were mentioned as key reasons to pursue graduate education in the United States. One participant mentioned:

The level of education that I am receiving here is not easily available or even present in my country. Botswana has a severe shortage of qualified professors at the university level. Brain drain or the flight of the educated out of Africa affects many regions. With the ravages of HIV (AIDS) in Africa, we need qualified researchers and teachers who are sympathetic and understanding of our culture. I would like to help the development of my country using the knowledge I have learned here.

Students seemed pleased with the education they were receiving in the United States. All of the students interviewed mentioned the competencies they had acquired through research, teaching, and professional opportunities available in their programs. The activities most mentioned by students as important to their professional development included working with faculty on research and grant projects, interaction through seminars with practitioners in their fields, internship opportunities, and financially supported travel to domestic and international conferences. According to one participant the possibilities of success were so abundant in her program of study in the United States that she stated,

I am confident that I could inject positive and necessary ideas into the curriculum back home. The information taught at home is stagnant. I know now that I have the abilities, the knowledge, and soon the credentials to help change that!

### Challenges of Study in the United States

Results from this study indicate African graduate students face a number of challenges that affect their well being and scholarship. Participants expressed concern about balancing employment, relationships with family and friends at home, and feelings of belonging. Feelings of isolation were most often mentioned challenges according to the students interviewed. One participant stated,

When you are away from your home country you lose the link. After I finished my first degree in the United States it was very difficult to re-connect with friends at home because we had lost touch. In most African countries coming overseas is seen as a luxury. Many people do not appreciate what we go through. This morning I called my bank back home and said I need money for my schooling. The banker said, "What are you talking about, you are in the land of plenty." You really have a problem because you are not accepted here and you are not accepted at home. Then you ask yourself where do I belong? Sometimes it can be quite a challenge.

The feelings of isolation were heightened by university and cultural expectations. Participants mentioned belonging to cohort groups within the educational system of their home countries. By sharing a common course load, the cohorts developed professional and personal relationships. Students mentioned feelings of isolation due to the United States emphasis on individuality. Several students suggested that feelings of isolation could be lessened with an increase in the diversity of services available for African students in the university and the greater Midwestern region. All of the students referred to the difficulty of finding adequate African food markets and hair stylists who understood their unique interests and needs in the local and regional community. Despite certain feelings of isolation and loneliness, participants recommended new international students come with an open mind and immerse themselves in the U.S. culture. One participant stated, "In the United States society you need to ask for help, you can not be afraid to ask for help or clarification...People are willing, and want to assist you."

### Aspirations

Almost all of the participants expressed a desire to return to their home countries, contrary to literature findings (Choi, 1995). Only one participant stated ambivalence for returning home, largely because of a spousal commitment in the United States. According to one participant,

The education I have received here will help me help the Ghanaian people. I have learned so many strategies here, such as sustainable agriculture that will help alter the constant problems experienced by the uneducated and poor back home. I also see opportunities for empowerment of women that is needed at home. I now see how things could be different and more importantly how to implement these changes.

While students wished to return to their home countries, all expressed great interest in maintaining academic and professional relationships with colleagues from the United States. Participants suggested diverse ways of maintaining these relationships. Participants referred to federal and state grant opportunities to create links between institutions at home and in the United States. They also cited the importance of conferences as well as the development of interpersonal relationships with professors and fellow students as key ways to foster global, professional connections.

Although participants were positive about returning home to be close to family and friends, one student mentioned possible professional and personal challenges of this decision.

The transition after completing your studies and going back to Africa is difficult because of the shortage of professional people there. You change drastically from being a student in the United States to being a mentor for everybody there. You are the professional at home and this is very difficult to adjust to. Returning home is quite a challenge because there are quite a number of professional obligations that you are required to complete but that you may not be ready for.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

The presence of international students gives higher education a richness of diversity unavailable in most United States communities. As African students continue to choose to study in the United States, institutions of higher education will need to respond to growing globalization. The challenge facing these institutions is to make international diversity and multiculturalism a positive element in the lives of all students. The enriching experience of association with people of diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and beliefs can be an enriching part of university life.

Colleges of Human Sciences have the unique opportunity to provide programs of study dedicated to sustaining and improving the most basic aspects of life, food, shelter, clothing, safety, health, and relationships, as well as optimizing the quality of that life (Iowa State University, 2005). The disciplines within Colleges of Human Sciences are ideally suited to contribute to an expanded understanding of the cultural heritage of African students, the interplay of personal and professional dynamics within academia, and the potential impact of international perspectives on families and communities. African students possess diverse cultural perspectives. Forums for the discussion of unique problems faced by African communities within the disciplines of Colleges of Human Sciences would aid a deeper understanding of theoretical issues in the field. These opportunities would provide important teaching and leadership opportunities for graduate students, as well as informing attendees of possible career paths and international research possibilities. Since the participants mentioned feelings of isolation within their research programs, forums catering to the diversity of perspectives within College of Human Sciences would offer interdisciplinary networking opportunities. To further build a sense of community and alleviate feelings of isolation, African students could be paired with domestically born students or experienced African students, easing adjustment for the new student and allowing current students an opportunity to learn about another culture. The recruitment of diverse and international faculty will also have an impact on attracting and retaining culturally diverse students.

Participants mentioned challenges balancing responsibilities and lack of culturally familiar resources. It is suggested that Colleges of Human Sciences host informal events that discuss balancing professional and personal demands. The celebration of other cultures, though food, demonstrations of traditional clothing, examples of African housing and family structures, as well as celebrations of local customs and family traditions could provide a sense of pride for African graduate students as well as learning opportunities for domestically born and other international students. These events could be marketed to the larger community to enhance local understanding of diverse perspectives as well as publicizing programs within Colleges of Human Sciences.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

This study adds to the limited literature on the perspectives of graduate students from Africa studying in the United States. However, only students from one institution were included in the sample and findings were based on a small sample size. Attempts to generalize these findings to all African graduate students studying in the United States should be approached with caution. Findings from this research present many fruitful opportunities for informing Colleges of Human Sciences forums and community outreach. A future research project includes a longitudinal study in which participants are re-interviewed once they have graduated.

## **Interview Questions**

### Part I:

1. What is your home country?
2. What is your major? What is your area of interest within this major?
3. What degree are you working on?
4. Why did you choose to come to the United States?
5. What was your undergraduate (and masters' if applicable) degree in?
6. Why did you choose to study at this institution?
7. Do you have family in the United States? Do they live nearby?
8. Do you have family still in your home country?
9. How often have you been able to travel home since coming to the United States?
10. Are you currently employed? By whom? How many hours do you work?
11. What do you do in your free time?

### Part II:

1. What challenges have you faced living in another country and pursuing a graduate degree?  
*Probes:*
  - a. What do you find most difficult?
  - b. Describe the affect of the change in cultures, food, weather, etc.?
2. What challenges have you faced with the workload?  
*Probes:*
  - a. How do you manage the course requirements?
  - b. What aspects of teaching styles are different from what you expected?
  - c. What services would you wish were available from your current department and University to help with your workload?

### Part III:

1. Describe your experiences living in your present community.
2. Describe your experiences returning to your home country.
3. What advice would you give new international students from Africa studying in this country?
4. What are your aspirations?
5. Do you wish to return to home country?
  - a. If yes, do you feel this education has prepared you to return home?

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