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Chen, Feiran *Success and Retention of International Students at University of Wisconsin-Stout*

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore five factors of importance to international students' experience on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Stout. These factors included program satisfaction, physical/emotional health, happiness, difficulty of the academic experience, and feelings of welcome by members of the campus community. The data was collected through an online and paper survey formats. Surveys were distributed to 147 undergraduate international students enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, and a response rate of 32.5% was obtained. The findings indicated that international students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout were generally satisfied with their academic experience, in good physical/emotional health, happy, had a relatively easy experience while attending school, and felt welcomed by the campus culture. Gender, English as a second language experience, residence type, roommate status, years of living in the U.S., college standing, years of English-study at primary school, middle school, high school, and college, and tuition sponsorship did not significantly predict the five primary factors of international students' experience at the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
List of Figures	5
Chapter I: Introduction	6
Statement of the Problem.....	6
Review of the Research Literature	8
Chapter II: Methodology	13
Participants.....	13
Stakeholders	13
Materials	14
Data Collection.....	16
Data Analysis	17
Chapter III: Results	18
Demographic Data.....	18
Table 1: Descriptive Information of the Participants' Demographics.....	19
Table 2: Frequency Information of the Participants' Demographics	20
Descriptive Data	20
Table 3: Descriptive Information of Participant Outcomes	21
Statistical Analyses.....	22
Qualitative Analysis	26
Chapter IV: Discussion	29
Limitations	30
Conclusion	33

References	34
Appendix: Survey	36

List of Figures

Figure 1: Research Questions and Responses in Likert-Type Scales	16
Figure 2: Independent Variables Group Information for Independent Sample t-test	23
Figure 3: Independent Variables Group Information for ANOVA	25
Figure 4: Qualitative Responses	28

Chapter I: Introduction

The purpose of this applied research project was to examine the general experiences of international students who enrolled in an undergraduate course of study at the University of Wisconsin-Stout during the 2016-2017 academic year. This project was first initiated by the Office of International Education (OIE) at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, which served as the stakeholder for this project. This introduction section will first examine the problem of interest designated from the stakeholder related to undergraduate education for international students. Specifically, the following issues were of interest as they related to international students enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, including their: Overall satisfaction with the academic experience, general physical and mental health levels, feelings of happiness, difficulty of experience, and perception of welcome by the University of Wisconsin-Stout campus community. A brief review of the literature was also conducted to provide some initial evidence of the existing research on these issues.

Statement of the Problem

International students make up approximately 3.4% ($n = 325$) of the overall student population at the University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie, Wisconsin. The current study aimed to identify the social factors that influenced academic success, retention, and overall school experience of international students at University of Wisconsin-Stout. In terms of the institution and study body, the University of Wisconsin-Stout is a regional university in the United States of America with an undergraduate population of 8116 and a graduate population of 1285, with international students generally consisting of 3.4% of the total student population.

To support the unique needs of international students, the University of Wisconsin-Stout has established the Office of International Education (OIE), which seeks to advance education

abroad opportunities, cultivate institutional partnerships, diversify the campus population, provide quality support services to international students, advance initiatives that foster intercultural and global competencies, and provide quality English as a Second Language (ESL) courses to facilitate international student success.

Since there had not been previous research addressing this issue, the University of Wisconsin-Stout Office of International Education (OIE), along with the author, implemented this study to examine the school experiences of international students who were enrolled at University of Wisconsin-Stout from Fall 2016 through Spring 2017. There were two goals for this current study: 1) to better understand the experiences of international students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout and 2) to leverage this information to provide better student support services to international students. The current study surveyed 48 undergraduate international students and assessed their perspectives on their satisfaction, health, happiness, difficulty of experience, and feeling of welcome at University of Wisconsin-Stout. The results of this initial study were intended to improve understanding regarding the social challenges faced by undergraduate international students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, as well as to inform potential interventions for students' retention and academic success.

To be accepted as an international student at University of Wisconsin-Stout, one must submit an application to the University of Wisconsin system, provide the evidence of English proficiency such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score, a declaration form of finances such as a parents' income and property statements or government sponsorship proof, and official high school academic records. International students who are accepted by the University of Wisconsin system for enrollment into the University of Wisconsin-Stout then receive guidance and

assistance from the Wisconsin-Stout Office of International Education (OIE). A variety of services are provided by the OIE to help international students with their coursework and extracurricular lives. Some examples include *English as a Second Language* (ESL) classes to improve students' English proficiency level, opportunities to have a local host family to acculturate with the American lifestyle, and student events through the community center.

However, even if international students meet the general admission requirements, enroll at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, and receive adequate assistance from the OIE, it does not guarantee that they will achieve and maintain an outstanding academic record or graduate, nor will it ensure that they will be satisfied with their lives at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. Thus, this study seeks to better understand current international students' experiences at University of Wisconsin-Stout regarding the following questions:

1. How satisfied are international students in general about their lives?
2. How difficult is the University of Wisconsin-Stout academic experience for international students?
3. How generally healthy (i.e., physically and mentally), are international students?
4. What is the degree of overall happiness for international students?
5. How welcomed do international students feel by the local campus and culture at the University of Wisconsin-Stout?

Review of the Research Literature

Compared to immigrants, who typically live for extended periods of time in the U.S. and may eventually establish residency, international students usually stay in the U.S. for only the amount of time necessary to obtain an educational degree (Lacina, 2002). International students are generally welcomed by academic institutes and the U.S. government because they bring

many benefits, such as diversity and innovative thoughts (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015), as well as a significant amount of tuition money that can provide additional financial support to the host institutions (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012).

Due to the many benefits of having international students, academic institutions often try to recruit more of them. In a review conducted by Choudaha and Chang (2012), the authors acknowledged the vested interest American academic institutions have in recruiting international students, and summarized three emerging recruiting practices, namely: Partnering with commissioned agencies, connecting with international alumni on social media, and working with other institutes state-wide to create a larger pool of applicants. Given the benefits that international students bring to host campuses, it is crucial that institutions retain them from year to year by ensuring students feel welcomed and supported at their home institutions.

College life can be highly stressful for all students, with academic pressures such as meeting deadlines, taking tests, and learning large volumes of materials (Beiter et al., 2015). Yet, international students have additional burdens compared to the domestic population of students. During their residencies in the U.S., international students face many additional sources of stress, such as language barriers, culture shock, unfamiliar learning methods, and lack of support from family and friends (Smith & Kawaja, 2011). These additional stressors can further impair international students' academic success and likelihood of graduating from their host institutions. For example, Martirosyan (2015) and colleagues found that low self-perceptions of English language proficiency correlated with lower GPAs for international students. Moreover, many of these stressors are likely interconnected with each other. For instance, language barriers not only affect international students' abilities to learn important academic content, but may also inhibit their willingness to participate in social events and understand common American cultural

phenomena (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). Therefore, language barriers for international students may impair communication skills, which ultimately harms social networking, resulting in a sense of loneliness and feeling of overall isolation.

Despite the benefits that international students contribute to U.S. educational institutions, many international students do not feel welcomed at their institutions. In some instances, this sentiment arises from significantly negative interactions between international and domestic students (Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010). In their study, Charles-Toussaint and Crowson (2010) found that some American students regarded international students as a threat to their economy, education, beliefs, and values. This apparent lack of intercultural communication may cause American students to misunderstand the effects of international students on the culture of a campus. These experiences undoubtedly increase stress for international students who may be exposed to unflattering and potentially biased beliefs about their presence on an American campus.

In the environment of American institutions of higher education, the way international students try to adapt to the styles of living, studying, and socializing is called “acculturation” (Chavajay, 2013). It was defined by Berry (2005) as “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (p. 698). To acculturate into mainstream American culture and society, international students are required to change part of their existing social and psychological behaviors (Lowinger et al., 2014). If the acculturation process is difficult, the previously mentioned stressors for international students can lead to what is called “acculturative stress” (Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004), which has been identified as “resulting from and arising out of the act of moving to and living in a new culture” (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015, p.

2). For example, it is very common for international students to not have enough emotional, physical, or financial support as their family and friends are likely to be quite physically distant.

According to Chavajay (2013), feelings of guilt and a sense of loneliness are commonly reported by international students, and their social support systems are greatly disrupted due to their physical distance from family and friends. Related to this effect is the observation that, compared to international students who are from Europe, Asian international students are more likely to experience the acculturative stress, as there is a wider gap between Eastern and Western cultures (Lowinger et al., 2014). Similarly, Lee and colleagues (2004) also believed that international students who come from Asian countries are more vulnerable to acculturative stress due to the larger distance from their home culture. In addition, a study conducted by Russell and colleagues (2010) found that 34.4% of the international students were under stress at any given time, and many of them tended to internalize their stress. This type of internalization can result in physical symptoms like loss of appetite, inability to sleep, headaches, fatigue, stomachaches, heartburn, and ulcers (Mori, 2000). In addition, students may experience psychological symptoms which include feelings of inferiority, low confidence, feelings of disappointment of their high expectations of what they will experience at an American institution of higher education, and resentment of the reality of achieving lower academic grades and lack of social support (Mori, 2000).

For these reviewed reasons, being an international student in an American institute can be stressful. If international students are unable to successfully cope, the pressures can ultimately cause significant acculturation stress, which is mostly seen when people enter a new culture. Hence, based on previous research, the OIE has recognized that international students at University of Wisconsin-Stout may have similar issues. Therefore, by distributing surveys to

collect in-depth information about international students' experiences, they may be able to better understand the aspects that can influence their satisfaction of school life, health level, feelings of happiness, difficulty of experience, and perception of welcome at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. By better understanding these aspects, the University of Wisconsin-Stout Office of International Education could implement targeted interventions to provide higher quality assistance and support for struggling international students.

Chapter II: Methodology

This chapter summarizes the methods and instrument that was used to collect data from international students enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. Specific survey items focused on five main factors: Overall satisfaction with the University of Wisconsin-Stout academic experience, general physical and mental health levels, feelings of happiness, difficulty of experience, and perception of welcome at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. Data on these aspects was collected through a short survey which participants completed either on paper or online through the Qualtrics software system. Forty-eight valid responses were gathered. Data was then analyzed to examine the five factors of experience listed above, and to determine if any outside social aspects significantly predicted responses to the five factors of interest. The following section outlines the participants and stakeholders in the study, the material used, and the data collection and analysis procedures.

Participants

The target population of this study was 147 undergraduate international students who were enrolled in a 4-year degree program and the English as Second Language (ESL) program at the University of Wisconsin-Stout as of November 2016. A survey in both an online and paper format was separately distributed to the 147 international students who fit this profile at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. A total of 48 participants completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 32.7%.

Stakeholders

The University of Wisconsin Stout Office of International Education (OIE) plays an important role in providing support to international students, such as ESL programs. The primary stakeholders of this study were Dr. Joan Pougiales and Dr. Joleen Hanson. Dr. Pougiales worked

at the OIE and also taught English classes at the ESL Institution at University of Wisconsin-Stout as of May 2017. Dr. Hanson worked as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Philosophy, and she also taught ESL courses at the ESL Institution. The current survey project began in August of 2015, during which some initial data was collected using surveys and interviews with international students enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Stout during that time. Due to low response rates and lack of analysis capability, participant data from this initial study was never analyzed; however this initial data was used to revise survey materials for the current study.

Materials

A survey that consisted of 33 demographic, Likert-style, and open-ended items (see appendix for the full survey) was created by the 2 PIs to broadly examine the experiences of international students enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. There were 5 main research questions regarding satisfaction, health, happiness, experience of difficulty, and feeling of welcome (see Table 1 for a summary of these items).

Sample demographic questions included “Do you share your residence with other people?” (Yes & No), “Who is responsible for paying your tuition?” (Government, Family, & Other), and “Have you studied English in any other school or program?” (Yes & No). Sample open-ended questions include “How many months did you study at an ESL school?”, “How many children do you have, and what are their ages?” and “What is the name of your academic program or major at University of Wisconsin-Stout?”. After the survey instrument was constructed, it was submitted to the University of Wisconsin-Stout Institutional Review Board for research approval and then imported into Qualtrics for online distribution.

Questions	Response scales
1. How would you describe your satisfaction with University of Wisconsin-Stout today? My experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today is...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very Satisfying • A little Satisfying • I can't decide between Satisfying and Unsatisfying • A little Unsatisfying • Very Unsatisfying • I do not want to answer this question about satisfaction
2. How would you describe your health today? My experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today is...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very Healthy • A little healthy • I can't decide between healthy and Unhealthy • A little Unhealthy • Very Unhealthy • I do not want to answer this question about health
3. How would you describe your level of happiness with University of Wisconsin-Stout today? My experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today is...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very Happy • A little Happy • I can't decide between Happy and Unhappy • A little Unhappy • Very Unhappy • I do not want to answer this question about happiness
4. How would you describe the difficulty of your experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today? My experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today is...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very Easy • A little Easy • I can't decide between Easy and Difficult • A little Difficult • Very Difficult • I do not want to answer this question about difficulty
5. How welcome do you feel at University of Wisconsin-Stout today? In my experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today I feel...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very Unwelcomed by people in the University of Wisconsin-Stout community • A little Unwelcomed by people in the University of Wisconsin-Stout community

-
- I can't decide between feeling Welcome and Unwelcome
 - A little welcomed by people in the University of Wisconsin-Stout community
 - Very welcomed by people in the University of Wisconsin-Stout community
-

Figure 1. Research questions and responses in Likert-type scales.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited to be involved in the study through online and in-person communication. A consent form was distributed to participants either via Qualtrics or as a paper form. The participants were informed of the PIs' contact information if they had any questions.

The first round of the online survey was sent out to all qualified international students in late October 2016 through email. Along with a link to the survey, the email also explained the purpose of the study, the amount of time needed for completion, and additional information about a potential follow-up interview. Students were informed that completing the survey would be counted as a volunteer experience, which would provide partial credit for eligibility for the International Student Scholarship. However, response rates to the online survey were low, in that only 11 out of 147 students completed the survey.

To rectify the low response rate, a paper version of the survey was distributed to international students during the University of Wisconsin-Stout Culture Festival in November 2016. Methods and structure generally replicated the online survey, however additional study and consent information were provided. An additional 34 international students completed the face-to-face survey as a result. Moreover, additional follow-up attempts to reach participants via the institutional Facebook page yielded another 16 participants. Unfortunately, a total of 13

graduate students also completed the survey due to the public posting. These responses were excluded from the survey, leaving 48 valid responses.

Data Analysis

After the data collection phase, paper-version survey responses were hand-entered into Qualtrics to ensure uniformity in terms of data. Raw survey data was then exported as an SPSS file, and was imported to SPSS (ver. 24) for cleaning and analysis. Data of the 13 graduate students were removed and the response scales of the five factor scales were reverse coded where appropriate. To examine the research questions, descriptive analysis, independent sample t-test, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and a post-hoc within-participants Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were performed on the quantitative data.

Chapter III: Results

The goal of this study was to explore international students' satisfaction, health, happiness, experience of difficulty at the university, and perceptions of welcome at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. This section describes the demographic data, descriptive information, the t-test, MANOVA and post-hoc ANOVA tests results, and qualitative responses from the collected surveys.

Demographic Data

Out of the 48 international students who completed the survey, 29 were male and 19 were female, with a mean age of 22.43 years ($SD = 3.302$). In terms of housing circumstances, all but two participants currently lived in the U.S., and had been living in the U.S. for an average of 2.37 years ($SD = 1.32$). Participants reported either living in on-campus dorms or residence halls ($n = 23$) or off-campus in apartment buildings or houses ($n = 23$). Of the participants, 39 shared a residence with other roommates. In terms of academic funding, there were 29 participants financially sponsored by their families, 16 participants were sponsored by their home country governments, and 3 participants had other types of financial sponsorship.

Regarding academic standing, 15 participants were in their fourth year of college, 16 in their junior year, 6 participants were in their sophomore year, and 11 participants in their first year. Forty participants had enrolled in colleges in their home countries before entering the University of Wisconsin-Stout, reporting an average of 3.58 years ($SD = 1.54$) of college-level coursework. Most participants had at least some English education in primary school; with an average of 3.56 years ($SD = 2.47, n = 37$), middle school with an average of 3.52 years ($SD = 1.16, n = 45$), high school with an average of 3.42 years ($SD = .85, n = 46$), and college with an average of 2.11 years ($SD = 1.44, n = 30$) of English coursework. Half of the students studied

English at an ESL school for an average of 1.50 years ($SD = .51$, $n = 24$). Seventeen students studied English at another school or program for an average of 1.65 years ($SD = .48$). Finally, in terms of immediately family structure outside of the University of Wisconsin Stout: Five students identified themselves as married, and one reported supporting dependent children during their enrollment.

The descriptive and frequency information are displayed below in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 1

Descriptive Information of the Participants' Demographics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Age	22.43	3.30	17	36	47
Years of living in the U.S.	2.37	1.32	1	5	46
Years of primary school level English	3.56	2.47	0	8	48
Years of middle school level English	3.52	1.17	0	8	48
Years of high school level English	3.42	.85	1	5	48
Years of university level English	2.11	1.44	0	6	48
Years of previous university education	3.58	1.54	1	6	48
Years of ESL study at University of Wisconsin-Stout	1.50	.51	1	2	48
Years of ESL study at other schools	1.65	.48	1	2	48

Table 2

Frequency Information of the Participants' Demographics

	Frequency	Percent	N
Currently live in the U.S	46	95.8	48
Live on-campus	23	50	46
Live off-campus	23	50	46
Share residence with others	39	81.3	46
Tuition sponsored by government	16	33.3	48
Tuition sponsored by family	29	60.4	48
Tuition sponsored by other sources	3	6.3	48
Have ESL studying experience	24	50	48
Married participants	5	10.4	46
Participants who have children	1	2.1	48
Freshman students	11	22.9	48
Sophomore students	6	12.5	48
Junior students	16	33.3	48
Senior students	15	31.3	48

Descriptive Data

Participants generally reported positive levels of satisfaction, health, happiness, relative ease at the university, and feelings of welcome at the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

Specifically, 45 participants completed the question “How would you describe your satisfaction with University of Wisconsin-Stout today”, and most of the responses fell between “a little satisfying” and “very satisfying” ($M = 4.24$, $SD = .91$). The 44 participants who completed the

question “How would you describe your health today?” generally indicated feeling “a little healthy” or “very healthy” ($M = 4.34$, $SD = .83$). The 44 participants felt “a little happy” or “very happy” ($M = 4.30$, $SD = .85$) to the question “How would you describe your level of happiness at University of Wisconsin-Stout today?”. Moreover, 32 participants who completed the item “How would you describe the difficulty of your experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today?” indicated “I can’t decide between difficult and easy” or “a little easy” ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.18$). Lastly, 42 participants generally moderate levels of welcome from the community, indicating either “a little welcomed by the people in the University of Wisconsin-Stout community” or “very welcomed by the people in the University of Wisconsin-Stout community” ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.00$) to the question “How welcome do you feel at University of Wisconsin-Stout today?”. The descriptive information is displayed in Table 4 below.

Table 3

Descriptive Information of Participant Outcomes

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Satisfaction	4.24	.91	1	5	45
Health	4.34	.83	1	5	44
Happiness	4.30	.85	2	5	44
Experience of difficulty*	3.19	1.18	1	5	32
Feeling of welcome	4.31	1.00	2	5	42

Note. Mean score for Experience of difficulty is significantly lower than all other items. No other score comparisons reached significance.

* $p < .05$.

Statistical Analyses

Four aspects (gender, ESL experience, residence type, and roommate status) were analyzed through independent sample t-test, respectively, to see if they had an effect on the five factors of experience (satisfaction, health level, happiness level, difficulty of experience, and feeling of welcome). See Table 5 below for independent variable groups information. No significant differences were observed in any of the tests. Specifically, no statistically significant differences between male and female participants in their satisfaction, health level, happiness level, difficulty level, and welcome level of experience. No statistically significant differences between participants who have had ESL experience and participants who had no ESL experience in the five factors. Likewise, no statistically significant differences in the 5 factors of experience were found between participants who lived on-campus and who lived off-campus, and participants who had roommates and who did not have roommates (all $ps > .08$).

Finally, a post-hoc within-participants Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was carried out on the item means for the five factors of experience (satisfaction, health level, happiness level, difficulty of experience, and feeling of welcome). The results demonstrated that international students provided significantly lower ratings of difficulty (i.e., more difficult) compared to all other items (all $ps < .04$).

IVs	Groups
Gender	Female
	Male
ESL experience	Had ESL experience
	Had no ESL experience
Residence type	On-campus
	Off-campus
Roommate status	Have roommate
	Have no roommate

Figure 2. Independent variables group information for independent sample t-test.

The t-test results indicated that the participants' satisfaction about studying at University of Wisconsin-Stout, their health and happiness levels, experience of difficulty, and feeling of welcome were not affected by their gender, whether they had ESL experience, whether they lived on-campus or off-campus, or whether they had roommates or not. In addition, three aspects (marital status, whether they had children, and whether or not they were living in the U.S.) were not analyzed through independent sample t-test due to vastly unequal number of participants in each group (married vs. single; had children vs. had no children; were living inside of the U.S. vs. living outside of the U.S.).

An additional Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) test was conducted on the seven social aspects (years of living in the U.S., college standing, years of English-study at primary school, years of English-study at middle school, years of English-study at high school, years of English-study at college, & tuition sponsorship) to see if they had any impact on the five factors of experience. None of the tests yielded significant results, which again indicated that the

social aspects listed above did not have an influence on international students' experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout. Specifically, the participants' satisfaction about University of Wisconsin-Stout, their health and happiness levels, experience of difficulty and feeling of welcome were not influenced by how long they had lived in the U.S. The five factors of experience were also not affected by whether the participants were freshman, sophomore, junior or senior students at college. Likewise, the years they had learned English at primary school, middle school, high school, and college played no role in their satisfaction about University of Wisconsin-Stout, their health and happiness levels, experience with difficulty, and feeling of welcome. Whether their tuition was sponsored by their governments, families, or they had other ways of paying tuition did not affect the five factors of experience (all $ps > .19$). The 7 social aspects and their scales are presented in table 6 below.

IVs	Groups
The years of living in the U.S.	Less than one year
	One year
	Two years
	Three years
	Four or more years
Year in college	First-year (Freshman)
	Second-year (Sophomore)
	Third-year (Junior)
	Fourth-year (Senior)
The years of learning English at primary school, middle school, high school, and college, respectively.	None
	Less than one year
	1 year
	2 years
	3 years
Tuition sponsorship source	4 or more years
	Government
	Family
	Other

Figure 3. Independent variables group information for ANOVA.

Qualitative Analysis

Following each question that asked about their satisfaction, health, happiness, difficulty at the university, and feeling of welcome levels for their experience at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, participants were given the opportunity to write more comments about their experiences. For example, after the question “How would you describe your satisfaction with University of Wisconsin-Stout today?”, there was a follow-up question “Would you like to write more about your satisfaction with University of Wisconsin-Stout today?” with response options of “Yes” and “No”. If participants chose “Yes”, they could provide their comments to the following question “What else would you like to say about your satisfaction with University of Wisconsin-Stout today?”. The same format existed for the factors of health, happiness, difficulty at the university, and feeling of welcome levels. Given the limited amount of participants who elected to provide responses, qualitative comments were organized into their respective categories below for further examination by the Office of International Education. The qualitative responses are displayed in the Table 7 below.

Factors	Responses
Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • convenient stout and community bus • I love the university location and people are very kind • First of all the international office does a great job! Also the professors are understanding and really good. The only bad thing for me was/is that I have to take other classes instead of electrical engineering classes because my classes in Germany already cover the classes here. • The teachers are helpful, and the facilities on campus are good.
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • depends. That question is too broad.. cuisin in india is by default healthy which is missing here.. • I am underweight and anemic and to much to do with school and family, so it is really hard to be healthy • I believe that every could be healthier if we had better options of food in campus, because sometimes there were only junk food on Commons for days • In General the variety in the commons/cafeteria is okay but still always the same. And it is hard to eat healthy here in Menomonie. I also guess a major problem is the gene manipulation of the vegetables and fruits. So the taste is completely different • Back in my country we don't need a personal doctor who writes you letters when you have issues attending class. I am asthmatic, I can't predict my next day during the cold season, I try to keep myself warm. If I missed a few classes and ad to explain the to my professors, they'd ask for a letter from my doctor, which would require me going to a clinic and get one, but then that is money, being an international student, It's quite difficult to deal with paying tuition,

	<p>medication, bills, food and all that as my government doesn't take care of any of that.”</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • my department is very helpful • Since I came from a huge city with 20M citizens, it's very weird to move to small town, in my program we can suggest 3 units and I suggested big ones. But I'm liking it so far, the different weather and culture.
Happiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homesick • People are very kind and I love the place. • I am sometimes unhappy because of this language barrier which prevent me understanding people. • I met a lot new friends, and learned a lot new skills!
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes I can't understand what others ' say • Communication
Difficulty at university	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For me the difficulty is the English language because I cannot get full understanding of what both the teacher and the students are saying. • When reading, I need to look up into dictionary a lot.
Feeling of welcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People here are absolutely friendly, that's was a surprise for me. • Classmates are willing to talk to me, and teachers are willing to help me.

Figure 4. Qualitative responses.

Chapter IV: Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of international students at University of Wisconsin-Stout. Specifically, the current study examined international students' overall satisfaction, health, happiness, encountered difficulties, and perception of welcome by others on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Stout. In addition, demographic variables, such as age, living conditions, and year in college were also examined to see if they influenced students' educational experience in any significant way. The following section outlines a general discussion of the results, the limitations of this study, as well as the recommendations for issues to avoid in future surveys of international students.

According to the results, international students generally appeared satisfied with their experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout. Students indicated that the convenient bus routes around campus, school location, the Office of International Education, faculty members, and facilities were the primary reasons for their self-reported satisfaction. In addition, most of the surveyed international students reported generally high levels of health. However, some participants indicated dissatisfaction with the variety of foods offered at the cafeteria, which may be causing a detriment to healthy eating habits.

Students also generally reported high ratings of overall happiness. Yet, while some participants reported positive qualitative comments about new friendships and acquired skills, some students also remarked on the difficult adjustment of moving from a big city to a small university town. Homesickness and language barriers were also indicated as issues related to feelings of happiness. Related to ratings in this category was the observation that international students generally felt welcomed by faculty, staff and domestic students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

One factor related to difficulties at the University of Wisconsin-Stout stood out from the other items. Indeed, students generally rated difficulty ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.18$) as lower than satisfaction ($M = 4.24$, $SD = .91$), health ($M = 4.34$, $SD = .83$), happiness ($M = 4.30$, $SD = .85$), and feeling of welcome ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.00$), $p < .05$. Qualitative comments from participants about their difficulties at the University of Wisconsin-Stout generally focused on language barriers that existed on and off-campus. For example, students reported experiences where they did not understand what other people were saying, and the necessity of using a dictionary while reading textbooks. Previous research has demonstrated that language barriers are a commonly experienced issue for international students, one which significantly impacts academic performance and psychological adjustment to the cultural context of the home institution (Lowinger et al, 2014). Aside from the item related to experienced difficulty on the University of Wisconsin-Stout campus, no other item reached statistical significance. In addition, no demographic factor provided any statistically significant predictive power (all $ps > .06$).

Limitations

There were 3 main limitations to the current study: A low response rate, potential social-desirability bias issues, and survey item design. First, the data collection process proved challenging. More explicitly, many eligible international students were unwilling to take the time to fill out the survey, even with an incentive to allow the survey response to count for required volunteer experience. One explanation for this was that the survey was sent out in late October, when many of the international students had already completed their volunteer requirements. Another possible reason for the low response rate was that the survey was not anonymous, which decreased the tendency for international students to fill out the survey, as international students may have been concerned about voicing negative opinions about their host campus. Therefore,

one recommendation for future research is that surveys of international students should be sent out at the beginning of the semester, to provide better incentives for completion. A second recommendation would be to ensure that future iterations of this survey allow for anonymous participation. A final recommendation to increase response rates would be to incorporate this survey into other evaluations completed by international students at the end of each year, similar to course evaluations that are completed at the conclusion of every semester.

The second limitation for this survey was the potential for social-desirability bias in respondents. This happens when participants purposely “downplay or exaggerate characteristics or behaviors that place them in a potentially negative or positive light” (Tait & Voepel-Lewis, 2015, p. 660). Given that the current survey was not anonymous, and many of the questions dealt with satisfaction or dissatisfaction with areas directly influenced by the University of Wisconsin-Stout International Office of Education, it is likely that participants may have not been fully honest in their responses regarding aspects of campus they found dissatisfying. As with the current recommendation to increase survey responses, allowing for anonymous responses to surveys is one of the most effective ways to deal with social-desirability. For future iterations of this survey, it is also recommended that survey responses be separated from in-person interviews. Participants may be instead offered the opportunity to volunteer for a follow-up interview by optionally providing their name and email address to the survey.

The third limitation of this study was that some of the survey items were poorly designed and worded. For example, for the question “How would you describe your satisfaction with University of Wisconsin-Stout today? My experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today is...”, the response scale provided to participants was: Very Satisfying, A little Satisfying, I can’t

decide between Satisfying, Unsatisfying, A little Unsatisfying, Very Unsatisfying, and I do not want to answer this question about satisfaction.

Items such as the one above may have been awkwardly phrased, and the responses scales available to participants were also ones that are not frequently used in survey research, and may have been interpreted differently by different participants. For example, participants may have perceived non-equivalent differences between the item modifiers of ‘a little’ and ‘very’.

Regarding the current survey, it is specifically recommended for questions related to attitudes and perceptions to instead use brief question stems and standardized Likert-type scales (Passmore & Parchman, 2002). General expectations for question stems are that they be short and “clearly stated in a simple sentence or statement” (Passmore & Parchman, 2002, p. 283) which allows respondents to better discriminate the scales (Passmore & Parchman, 2002). In addition, traditional Likert-type scales typically range across a single scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree, while the short stem statements focus on differing attitudes and perceptions. (Passmore & Parchman, 2002). Therefore, it is recommended to change attitude question formats (i.e., satisfaction, health, happiness, difficulty experience, & feeling of welcome) to stem statements and responses to Likert-type scales. As an example, the question from above would be rephrased as, “I am satisfied with my experience at the University of Wisconsin-Stout”, and participants would respond on a common Likert-type scale of “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”.

Another survey item flaw was the misuse of open-ended questions. The questions “what is the name of your home country?” and “What is the name of your academic program or major at University of Wisconsin-Stout?” were in open-ended formats. This required more time and effort for participants to provide responses (Passmore & Parchman, 2002), as well as increased

the challenge to analyze the data (Tait & Voepel-Lewis, 2015). Hence, it is recommended to change the question formats to close-ended questions and utilize a list of closed-ended responses. In this instance, adding a list of countries and academic programs as responses would have provided clearer answers that were easier to analyze after data collection.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes and experiences of international students enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. The data was collected through online and paper survey versions that contained the same content. The findings indicated that the international students at University of Wisconsin-Stout were reported high levels of program satisfaction, health, happiness and feelings of welcome. However, students also reported moderately higher levels of experienced difficulty, due to potential language barriers experienced in and out of classes. Demographic variables such as students' gender, ESL experience, residence type, roommate status, years of living in the U.S., college standing, and tuition sponsorship did not influence the examined factors for international students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

While the current study provided helpful information to the Office of International education, there were also several issues with survey format and implementation that should be addressed in future iterations. These limitations may have potentially caused issues with students' willingness to complete the survey or provide honest answers regarding the experiences at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. Yet, despite these issues and imitations, this survey also provided helpful explorative data which lays the groundwork for future research and potentially provides useful information for actionable items on behalf of the Office of International Education at the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

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Appendix: Survey

1. What is your preferred email address? (We will send the follow-up surveys to this address)
2. What is your age?
3. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Other

4. What is the name of your home country?

5. What languages do you use?

6. Do you plan to earn a 4-year undergraduate degree from University of Wisconsin-Stout?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Not sure

6a. Please explain why you are not sure that you will earn a 4-year degree from University of Wisconsin-Stout?

7. Are you currently living in the U.S.?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

8. How many years have you lived in the U.S.?
 - a. Less than one year
 - b. One year
 - c. Two years
 - d. Three years
 - e. Four or more years

9. What type of residence do you have at University of Wisconsin-Stout?
 - a. On campus (dorm or residence hall)
 - b. Off campus (apartment or house)

10. Do you share residence with other people?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

11. What is the name of your academic program or major at University of Wisconsin-Stout?
12. What is your career goal (desired future job)?
13. Who is responsible for paying your tuition?
 - a. Government
 - b. Family
 - c. Other
14. What is your year in college?
 - a. First-year (freshman)
 - b. Second-year (sophomore)
 - c. Third-year (junior)
 - d. Fourth-year (senior)
 - e. Graduate student
15. How many years of university-level education did you complete before entering University of Wisconsin-Stout?
 - a. None. I have not completed any university education
 - b. Less than one year
 - c. 1 year
 - d. 2 years
 - e. 3 years
 - f. 4 or more years
16. How many years did you study English in primary school?
 - a. 0 years
 - b. 1 year
 - c. 2 years
 - d. 3 years
 - e. 4 years
 - f. more than 4 years
17. How many years did you study English in middle school?
 - a. 0 years
 - b. 1 year
 - c. 2 years
 - d. 3 years
 - e. 4 years
 - f. more than 4 years

18. How many years did you study English in high school?

- a. 0 years
- b. 1 year
- c. 2 years
- d. 3 years
- e. 4 years
- f. more than 4 years

19. How many years have you studied English at the university level?

- a. 0 years
- b. 1 year
- c. 2 years
- d. 3 years
- e. 4 years
- f. more than 4 years

20. Have you studied English at an ESL school?

- a. Yes
- b. No

20a. Where was the ESL school located?

20b. How many months did you study at an ESL school?

21. Have you studied English in any other school or program?

- a. Yes
- b. No

21a. Please describe the other school or program and tell how long you studied English there.

22. Are you married?

- a. Yes
- b. No

22a. Please give the date of your marriage.

23. Do you have children?

- a. Yes
- b. No

23a. How many children do you have, and what are their ages?

24. How would you describe your satisfaction with University of Wisconsin-Stout today? My experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today is...

- a. Very Satisfying
- b. A little Satisfying
- c. I can't decide between Satisfying and Unsatisfying
- d. A little Unsatisfying
- e. Very Unsatisfying
- f. I do not want to answer this question about satisfaction

25. Would you like to write more about your satisfaction with University of Wisconsin-Stout today?

- a. Yes
- b. No

25a. What else would you like to say about your satisfaction with University of Wisconsin-Stout today?

26. How would you describe the difficulty of your experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today? My experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today is...

- a. Very Easy
- b. A little Easy
- c. I can't decide between Easy and Difficult
- d. A little Difficult
- e. Very Difficult
- f. I do not want to answer this question about difficulty

27. Would you like to write more about the difficulty of your experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today?

- a. Yes
- b. No

27a. What else would you like to say about the difficulty of your experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today?

28. How would you describe your health today? My experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today is...

- a. Very Healthy
- b. A little healthy
- c. I can't decide between healthy and Unhealthy
- d. A little Unhealthy
- e. Very Unhealthy
- f. I do not want to answer this question about health

29. Would you like to write more about your health today?

- a. Yes
- b. No

29a. What else would you like to say about your health today?

30. How would you describe your level of happiness with University of Wisconsin-Stout today? My experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today is...

- a. Very Happy
- b. A little Happy
- c. I can't decide between Happy and Unhappy
- d. A little Unhappy
- e. Very Unhappy
- f. I do not want to answer this question about happiness

31. Would you like to write more about your level of happiness at University of Wisconsin-Stout today?

- a. Yes
- b. No

31a. What else would you like to say about your level of happiness at University of Wisconsin-Stout today?

32. How welcome do you feel at University of Wisconsin-Stout today? In my experience at University of Wisconsin-Stout today I feel...

- a. Very Unwelcomed by people in the University of Wisconsin-Stout community
- b. A little Unwelcomed by people in the University of Wisconsin-Stout community
- c. I can't decide between feeling Welcome and Unwelcome
- d. A little welcomed by people in the University of Wisconsin-Stout community
- e. Very welcomed by people in the University of Wisconsin-Stout community

33. Would you like to write more about your feelings of welcome at University of Wisconsin-Stout today?

- a. Yes
- b. No

33a. *What else would you like to say about your feelings of welcome at University of Wisconsin-Stout today?*