Culture, Personal, and Academic Objectives of International Students at Illinois State University

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Anthropology 285
Dr. Hunter
November 18, 2009
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Culture, Personal, and Academic Objectives of International Students at Illinois State University

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The purpose of this project is to study the international students at Illinois State University in order to understand what kind of experiences they are having and hope to have at ISU in regards to their personal lives, culture, and academics. Through interviews with six international students and observations at international student events (at the International House), we hope to discover what studying at Illinois State University means to various students in terms of their personal goals and their future academic possibilities. This paper offers a look into the life of an international student at Illinois State University.

Methods

Data for this paper was collected through several different methods. The majority of information was recorded through one-on-one interviews with six international students (both degree-seeking and through a year-long study abroad/exchange program) from various countries and grade levels. (Interviews took place in public areas with international students who were above 18 years of age in accordance with the Institutional Review Board.) In addition, we observed International House sponsored events, such as the Open House for the Marilyn M. Boyd International House, and we observed interactions of students in Stevenson Hall and in the Marilyn Boyd International House Office.

A Brief Overview of International Students at Illinois State

In order to understand the experiences of international students, we did some literary research into the historical and statistical background of previous international students at Illinois State. Also, research was done about their environment to discover if where they live and walk has any impact on the kinds of experiences they have.
With the arrival of President Robert Bone to Illinois State University in the mid 1950’s, the university had begun to develop new ideas for rapid change. This change was seen by the creation of new residence, dining, and lecture halls; there were also new ideas for internationalizing the university by attracting international students to Illinois State University and sending ISU students to study abroad. As part of this effort, in the early 1960’s, President Robert Bone embarked on a 5-week trip to Egypt to promote Illinois State University’s willingness to welcome and accept international students and international studies (I-House Flyer, 2009).

These initial efforts proved successful. Illinois State University’s international student numbers grew from fewer than 12 in 1955 to 34 students in the 1966-1967 school years. ISU created a position for an official immigration advisor and, also in the 1967 school year, established the international student advisor position, which was run from the Student Counseling Center. In the following year of 1968, Illinois State University conducted its first international student orientation. By 1969, Illinois State University had 70 international students (I-House Flyer, 2009).

To further help and accommodate the growing influx of international students, Illinois State University decided to create the International House in 1970. The I-House (as it was later called) became not only a place to house international students, but it became a center for all international discussion. In an observation done at the Open House and Reception for the Marilyn M. Boyd International House, it was said that I-House was enacted with specific goals: “to improve interactions between American and international students in enjoyable and educational ways, to foster lingering friendships, and to expose the campus and America to international students.” In the past, Illinois State had an
anthropology professor live among the international students in Fell Hall which provided input for the program. American students and international students are put on the same floor to encourage interaction.

At the same ceremony, much was also discussed about the history of I-House. It has moved from several different residence halls around campus, which as one of the speakers joked at the ceremony, made I-House as “well-traveled” as its students. From Watterson Towers (in the Van Buren section) to Fell Hall to Walker Hall to Atkin-Colby to where it now resides in Manchester Hall, the ceremony celebrated the finding of a stationary residence for foreign students.

From 1972 through 1982, the International House experienced dramatic changes in leadership coordinators and the incorporation of new offices like International Admissions, Coordinator of Foreign Student and Scholar Services, Immigration Advising, and the Office of International Studies and Programs. By spring of 1982, Marilyn Boyd became the Program Coordinator of International House. She would coordinate these efforts for the next 25 years and become identified with I-House for many on campus. By 1994, Illinois State University’s international student population was 327 with students representing over 50 countries (I-House Flyer, 2009).

Today, I-House is located in Manchester Hall. At the open house, several different speakers discussed the different functions of the International House which reflects on the broader purpose of the program. To promote more interaction, I-House sponsors many different programs involving international students. In the spring, they hold an International Fair, where many countries are represented through their different food, clothing, and where international students present live entertainment of their own culture.
There is also international week which has a soccer tournament and a cultural gala night. Also, there is a group on campus called the Global Review Student Association which sheds light on and allows students to discuss global issues.

As of 2008, ISU enrolled 109 undergraduate and 266 graduate students. The greatest number of undergraduate international students in that year (27) came from South Korea. The greatest number of graduate students (144) came from India, while China came in next with 32 graduate students. This information is important when trying to understand how many students come from other countries to Illinois State University and why they come either for undergraduate or graduate study. It also shows enrollment trends -- in the Fall of 2007, there were 118 undergraduate international and 311 graduate international students. The data shows a slight decline in the number of international students from 2007-2008 (ISU FactBook, 2008).

The way to understand the size of Illinois State University’s international studies program is by comparing the number of international students at Illinois State University to other universities across the country. According to research done by the Institute of International Education, the American university with the largest amount of international students in 2008 was University of Southern California with 7,189 international students out of the total enrollment of 33,408, or 21%. Harvard University, which has a total enrollment similar to Illinois State University, enrolled 4,948 international students out of a total 19,987. In other words, nearly one quarter of Harvard’s student population is international students. (Institute of International Education, 2008) In contrast, Illinois State University’s, 375 international students in 2008 represented only 1.8% of a total enrollment
of 20,450 students. Illinois State University’s international program is much smaller than other universities across the country (Institute of International Education, 2008).

International students have two different options upon deciding to study at Illinois State University. The first is through an exchange program where they can study abroad for a semester or year-long program. The second is for degree-seeking students, who plan to study abroad for longer periods of time to acquire an undergraduate or graduate degree in their specific field of study (and those offered at Illinois State University).

Findings: What International Students Hope To Gain By Studying At ISU

We discovered in the course of the interviews three major themes: personal reasons for coming to ISU to study abroad, students’ desire to change their culture/world view understanding, and students’ hope to expand their academic/business objectives.

Personal

Through this research, we found that many international students at Illinois State University came to the U.S. to better enhance their futures, but also chose to study at ISU for family and personal reasons. In the section below, there are a number of different examples from Asian, African, and European students for why they choose to study at Illinois State University.

Ela*, a Nigerian woman who is a degree-seeking junior political science major and economics minor, decided to study at Illinois State University to enhance her personal and educational experiences. In this case, she mentioned that Nigeria did not have a well-off educational system and that anyone who earned a degree outside of Nigeria had a better chance to form social stability within the country. She also mentioned that she decided to study at Illinois State University because she has an uncle who lives near campus, making
her family feel more comfortable about her safety while in America. This was similar to the story of Chuck, a Malaysian male of Chinese descent who is an undergraduate degree-seeking international business major, who stated that he “had always planned to study in America.” He decided to study abroad at Illinois State University because he has an aunt that lives near the ISU campus. Chuck enjoys the American education system, but he believes that the Malaysian education system was of equal quality. However, he noted that in fact it was easier to find a job in Malaysia.

While Ela and Chuck had family ties which led them to the Illinois State, Don and Sean, international students from England, had a very different connection with the university. Don is a junior American Studies major studying abroad for a year, while Sean is a junior American Studies major, only studying abroad for a semester. Both went to the same school in England and had met and formed friendships with Illinois State University students who were studying abroad at their university. Don had started a relationship with one of the abroad students at their university. While talking with the America students, they had heard many positive things about Illinois State University and decided to look into their exchange/study abroad program. Both students had planned on studying abroad in America previous to meeting the American Illinois State University students, but they had not decided on which schools they wanted to study. Their reasoning for choosing Illinois State University was due to knowing current students at Illinois State University, having fostered friendships with them abroad.

**Academic Experiences**
All the international students mentioned similar academic reasons for studying abroad. We found that a main academic purpose for studying abroad was to experience a different kind of educational environment as stated by Ela, Chuck, and Sean. When asked about the differences in class experience, Don said that the differences were in the amount of time one spent in class to the kinds of assignments and exams. At their school in England, a class that would be 50 minutes long at ISU would last two hours abroad, half being a lecture, the other half being a seminar. He said that there was more teacher-student interaction at Illinois State University than his school which he thought was better. Also, he talked about having to adjust to taking exams as to the essay-based courses he took back at his own school. On the same token, Chuck also shared similar experiences. When asked about his Illinois State University experience, he said that Illinois State University professors interact more with their students, and the environment is much less formal.

A similar experience was from Sue, a South Korean degree-seeking graduate student and concert pianist major. Sue stated that in her home country, the social gap between professor and student are much more apparent as they do not share the relationships like ISU that seem friendly and close. She explained that teachers back home are often more strict, and student's behavior is much more formal. At Illinois State University, she found the professors are more easy going and the students very casual (i.e. students in her classes who leisurely put their feet up on chairs would be scolded for being disrespectful if they were in her country's school).

Ela had slightly different reasons for what she is hoping to attain from Illinois State University in terms of education. She spoke of the poor education system in Nigeria, and the concept of poor leadership within the country. She also mentioned that “Nigeria does
not invest in its education process” and that “the government does not elaborate on education based on events in Nigeria.” She also stated how she became frustrated that the Nigerian government is not investing its oil money into Nigerian institutions like education, infrastructure, and oil refineries.

Culture

In terms of culture, our major findings included positive and negative culture shock experienced by international students, changed world views on American and other societies, and how communication seemed to be the largest barrier of interaction.

International students are usually thrust into another country’s social structure. Although, many institutions try to guide the international student in acting as a confidant, advisor, and friend, there are still social factors that shock the student in recognizing that he or she is no longer at home. These shock factors may have a negative or positive effect, and in many ways, they take form as a culture and personal shock, but may also help with the international student’s education and future job search. Also, these introductions into American society can establish broader cultural views, not only on American culture itself but on all other cultures represented at Illinois State.

In helping to define Illinois State University’s international student’s cultural concerns, we decided to conduct interviews in order to learn about the cultural shocks that Illinois State University’s international students may encounter. One of these cultural shocks was documented by Bob, a graduate degree-seeking IT security major. Bob’s major includes map checking in technological and security areas. He noted that the biggest cultural shock that he experienced upon arriving to America and Illinois State University was the profoundly different communication styles. He stated that “people are a lot more
outspoken…voice their minds,” although he did mention that his judgment was based off Normal, Illinois; he also believed that Illinois State University seemed like “a culture atmosphere to have fun all the time; positivity is a good thing,” he stated.

Sue also discussed the language barrier as an issue in adapting to American culture. While she does speak English, some words are difficult for her. Sean said that knowing and speaking English before coming to Illinois State University probably really helped him adjust to American culture better and in getting along with other American students who may not know any other language besides English. Both Sean and Don live in the International House where there is a mixture of different people from different countries. Don said communication was sometimes very difficult depending on where the student was from. His roommate is French and because they are located closer to each other (in terms of geography) than to those who come from Southeast Asia, they have more in common. He also said it was sometimes difficult to talk with other international students because not all of them speak English, and he sometimes has to be particular with the words he uses and how fast he talks.

Aside from language barriers and culture shocks, views on American culture have also been changed for these international students. Don and Sean had similar impressions of America before coming overseas. They described their previous view on America as “pretty fair unlike a lot of other people” and that Americans “always seemed to be a little arrogant, but I never had any problems with them.” After living in America for a few months, both said their impressions had only become more positive. Don talked about how helpful other students have been, that no one was rude to them, and how excited American students seemed to be about speaking with someone from another country. They both
spoke about wanting to learn about other cultures and how America seems to be a great place to experience it because it has so many different groups all mixed together.

Another example of how Illinois State University’s international students are hoping to build their cultural background comes from Chuck and his statements on Malaysian politics. He mentioned that Malaysia, like America, considers itself as a multi-racial country, embracing Chinese, Malays, and Indians. He also explained that Malaysia is a conservative Islamic country who works hard to protect its image, but who also tolerates and accepts non-Islamic traditions like the Chinese New Year, Christian holidays and Indian holidays. This is very similar to the United States, he noted; because he stated that “America is not too liberal in protecting its image because people can not drink until after 21…which is good.” Nevertheless, he mentioned that Malaysia could learn a lot from the United State’s political atmosphere when handling high-scaled cases and coming through on political promises.

**Business/Résumé**

Students studying abroad may have a variety of reasons for doing so, beyond cultural and personal aspects. Many students hope that their ISU degree and experience will help them achieve their goals; our findings had to do with future job opportunities both in the United States and our interview subject’s home countries.

Don and Sean had similar reasoning for studying abroad. Both wanted to improve their résumés, hoping future employers would look at their experience as an advantage over other competing applicants. Ela is depending on her Illinois State University degree to help her in constructing the future of her country via social structure, governmental leadership, and infrastructure. She stated that she wants to return to Nigeria after college and help
promote literacy and encourage the people to “open their doors and use their resources,” to help build Nigeria’s economy. Furthermore, Chuck discussed hoping to help expand on Malaysia’s international global view by majoring in International business and studying abroad at Illinois State University.

**Conclusion and Overview of International Student Experiences**

The big question was what these students gained from studying at Illinois State University. All discussed their broadening world view and how much more open they are now to understanding and accepting others of a different culture. Furthermore, all the international students said they hoped to maintain the friendships they had made here, and several mentioned that they hoped to come back to America after finishing school and possibly working in America.

One of the biggest problems overall that had occurred was the language barrier; While only few of who were interviewed did not know English early in their life, colloquial speech had caused difficulty for everyday conversations with other native speakers. English was spoken and understood in a more formal context among foreign speakers, but when encountering a more vernacular speech pattern, this informality caused miscommunications and confusion that did not only appear in situations regarding casual conversations with other students, but also within the classroom.

From the data we have collected, we conclude that there seems to be a double benefit for Illinois State University and the international students. All interviewed spoke only positively about their experiences both academically and socially. International students viewed studying abroad, whether it is degree seeking or short term, had engaged them in different perspectives and helped them further to connect globally. Illinois State
University, other than revenue, gains appeal to foreign students as a place to further their career with programs that may not be offered in their home country. From this, the university is able to expand and grow towards becoming a greater part of the international community.

* All names have been changed.

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