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# Barriers and Facilitators for Faculty, Staff and Students in the Implementation of an International Student Program at a Rural Community College

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**Barriers and Facilitators for Faculty, Staff and Students in the Implementation  
of an International Student Program at a Rural Community College**

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

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### **Abstract**

International students have become an increasingly important part of the higher education system in the United States. Recognizing that communication and social belonging are two of the strongest factors in successfully acquiring a second language, this paper looks at attempts to implement an international student program at a rural, Midwest community college, following a cohort of four international students in a nine-month program to identify barriers and facilitators in language learning and feelings of acceptance. By reviewing the perceptions, feelings and actions of these students as well as their instructors, I hope to identify some reasons why this program failed. Reviewing what institutional level barriers at MLC prevented international students from feeling embraced by the academic community and what would have enhanced the feeling of acceptance for international students as well as what led to the failure of the international program at MLC, this study identified several organizational and community-wide factors needing improvement or implementation. Using semi-structured interviews with the four international students in the CCID program, as well as the staff and faculty who regularly interacted with these students, the intent of this project was to identify the sociocultural factors that were perceived to have an impact, both positively and negatively, on a formalized international student program at MLC. By the start of fall semester 2013, all formal international student programs had been dropped, citing lack of infrastructure and the need to have a full-time ESL instructor and unwillingness or inability on the part of MLC to commit the funds to develop these two crucial areas for a successful language acquisition program.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

International students have become an increasingly important part of the higher education system in the United States. These students provide a wide variety of cultures and perspectives, contributing to a rich diversity as well as adding the benefit of international students as economic drivers (Kwon, 2009). The Community College Initiative Program is the parent program for the Community Colleges for International Development (CCID) program, headquartered in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. This program is funded by the Department of State, with the goal to provide quality educational programs, professional development, employment skills and a first-hand understanding of American society to underserved, non-elite international students. Program documents state that the goal is for successful participants to return to their homes and contribute to the continued economic and democratic development of their home countries. Students in the program study at an accredited U.S. community college for one academic year in training programs and receive a certificate in one of the fields of Agriculture, Applied Engineering, Business, Health, Information Technology, Media or Tourism & Hospitality Management.

Recognizing that communication and social belonging are two of the strongest factors in successfully acquiring a second language, this paper looks at attempts to implement in international student program at a rural, Midwest community college, following a cohort of four international students in a 9-month program to identify barriers and facilitators in language learning and feelings of acceptance. The goals were well laid out by the Community Colleges for International Development program; however the program only survived 3 years,

not being renewed in 2013. By reviewing the perceptions, feelings and actions of these students as well as their instructors, I hope to identify some reasons why this program failed.

Historically a linguistically isolated area, this community and Midwest Lakes College (MLC) in Midwest, a small city in the upper Midwest, are reluctant to embrace speakers of other languages. According to MLC's Former Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs, ethnic diversity is minimal, and when present, it is neither seen nor recognized by the general public. MLC is located in Lakes County which has a population of 62,500 residents, 94.1% of who are white/non-Hispanic ([www.quickfacts.census.gov](http://www.quickfacts.census.gov), September 2010) compared to a statewide average of 83.1%. Of the 4010 students enrolled at MLC for the 2009-2010 school year, 95.3% were white. American Indians made up 1.6% of the student body and all other reported races were less than 1% ([ww.mnscu.edu](http://ww.mnscu.edu), 2009). The student body is relatively young due to the college being a two-year institution as well as several area high school students participating in classes through the post-secondary enrollment option at MLC. In the fall of 2009, 47.3% of students were aged 19 and under, 21.8% were between the ages of 21-24, 11.9% were between 25-29 years, and 18.9% were either over the age of 30 or their age was unreported (email communication, MLC registrar office, 5/1/2013).

In autumn of 2009, MLC implemented an international student program through Community Colleges for International Development (CCID), offering 1-year certificates in various disciplines to international students who attended the college. International students were offered English language support classes as well as mainstream curriculum in subjects such as pre-engineering, business, environmental studies, and graphic arts. In order for this international student program to become a continuing and successful part of the MLC

curriculum, support from MLC and the Midwest Lakes community was vital (Community Colleges for International Development [CCID], 2010). This support could take the form of mentoring students, increasing cultural awareness in the community, involving international students in local and general school activities, and changing community practices to assist people whose first language is not English.

In November and December, 2008, I conducted two focus groups with the current MLC international students, and also with MLC faculty and staff who had a personal interest in an international program (Appendix A & B). These participants were asked for their thoughts on how people of different cultures were perceived and accepted in the area, as well as about existing community and MLC communication barriers. This preliminary research indicated three key areas that need examination and correction:

- Intercultural training for MLC faculty and staff
- Community interaction with the international students
- Emotional, social and academic support for the international students.

If sociocultural issues that could impair a successful international student program could be identified and addressed, these students would be enabled to develop a high level of belonging on campus and in the wider community which would, in turn, facilitate their acquisition of English. The Midwest Lakes Community, MLC faculty and staff, and the MLC student body would also have the opportunity of enriching their knowledge of other cultures.

### **The Community Colleges for International Development Program**

The CCID students participated in classroom instruction as well as a supervised, unpaid 60-hour internships and were expected to perform 30 hours of community service. The goal was that the on-the-job and service experience would be integrated with regular classes



to review and compare experiences with respect to workplace skills and technical expectations.

Participants were selected with regard their representation of the diversity of their home country, specifically underserved and non-elite students, as well as men and women who will have a positive impact upon their home country's future development. Preference was given to those who had no significant U.S. or other overseas study experience. In addition, the program's ideal participant would be in their early to mid-20s and have some prior work experience. The Fulbright Commission and U.S. Embassies in each represented country were responsible for recruitment and nomination of program participants.

Once students were selected for the program they would undergo orientations in their home countries, upon arrival in the United States, and at their host colleges. There were English language programs available during the U.S. orientation for incoming students. Once the students reached their destination schools, the program called for several levels of intensive English courses available to these students. In addition to the regular classes, internships and English language classes, the program required each CCID participant to participate in a class on Global Leadership.

The host colleges selected the program participants that they desired at their institution, based on the fields of study the school was equipped to teach. Each student had to be competitive for admission, meaning they possessed the necessary academic credentials, at the host college. Students were also required to comply with the academic requirements of the host school. The school provided, unfunded by CCID, housing, tuition, books and support for the student, but was encouraged to solicit funding for these expenses through other grants and

donations. An on-campus project coordinator was available to assist participants' navigation through the system of the college and the on-site CCID program. Each cohort was contacted in person by a member of the CCID staff at least once during the school year. The program coordinator facilitated weekly meetings for students to reflect, ask questions and to receive information.

After successful completion of the program, participants were required to return to their home residence for a minimum of two years. The host community college and CCID continued to follow up with each student after their return to their home country. The program hoped that this alumni network would allow students to maintain a positive connection to the U.S.

### **Research Question**

Sociocultural issues are a major factor in the success or demise of an English language support program. What institutional level barriers at MLC prevented international students from feeling embraced by the academic community? In what ways could these barriers have been ameliorated without totally revising the existing culture and practices at MLC? What would have enhanced the feeling of acceptance for international students? And what led to the failure of the international program at MLC?

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

I reviewed literature examining international student programs at colleges looking for ways other schools helped international students acquire English, be accepted by other students and feel a sense of belonging, as well as identifying barriers and how these barriers were overcome. Looking at writings starting in 1974 and continuing through 2010 on developing English language programs, practices have evolved, but are still based on second language speakers feeling accepted and becoming socially active with English speakers.

Over 40 years ago, Kessler (1974) recognized the importance of creating a community in which every student is a contributing member and assists second-language learners develop English language proficiency. Identifying the positive aspects of incorporating an ESL program into the regular school curriculum, her program supported English language learners with tailored ESL classes for each ESL student, benefitting these students in their mainstream classes. Kessler averred that aural comprehension and listening with understanding is crucial for any student who plans to use English in a career experience, citing that students must discover ways of relating to and understanding members of other social groups as well as mastering specific skills.

Teachers can facilitate the role of culture and how it can be reflected in classroom communication, leading to awareness and sensitivity. The cultural norms that participants bring to an encounter influence both teaching and learning contexts, which can lead to misunderstandings. Cultures of learning can vary across cultures in the way learners were socialized to classroom behavior and how to interact with particular methodologies (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2006).

The cohort at MLC found it challenging to make friends with the local students, the ones with whom they developed lasting friendships came from home schooled backgrounds. While local students would smile and say 'hi' when passing in the halls, they seldom went out of their way to try to find out more about the international students or to include them in their social circles. Bradley's 2000 study states many international students have difficulty developing friendships with the local students, feeling that the local students were outwardly friendly but that the relationships were superficial. Her research shows that international students felt that local students were not sensitive to the international students' living habits, such as personal hygiene and domestic cleanliness as well as differences in dress. The perception on the part of international students is that student culture centered primarily on alcohol. The international students at MLC had similar feelings, that local students just wanted to party and get drunk and were very immature. Life in bars and at parties only added to feelings of marginalization. Bradley's findings indicate that "international students also wished to access such information in other than written form preferring to receive information verbally and for it to be repeated at regular intervals in face-to-face contact" (p. 427). She also suggests that a personal supervisor, such as was provided to the MLC cohorts, is a key element in responding to students' needs, "A welcomed and well-adjusted international student group has an essential contribution to make towards an institution's multicultural identity" (p. 431).

All college level students need to be acculturated to US college life, including acquiring familiarity with faculty and library practices. However, international students may feel more anxiety and discomfort than domestic students in a participatory environment where

they will be called upon in classes to answer questions, present in front of groups, and work on group projects as part of classroom assignments, as well as American school practices of individualization and critical thinking, such as asking questions of the teacher. Lack of technology skills may also cause difficulties for ESL students. Nonverbal cues may cause communication deficiencies (Prucha, Stout, & Jurkowitz, 2005). Sociocultural sensitive pedagogy is needed to effectively teach diverse populations of second language learners. Development of ESL programs should include critiquing current teaching practices to identify problems, socially creating alternate practices and reviewing the results of these changes in practice (Teemant, Smith, Pinnegar, & Egan, 2005). By reviewing and revising classroom practices, MLC would likely develop a more welcoming environment for international students, as well as several local students, creating a space of learning and cultural diversity.

Each of the international students in this study was asked why they wanted to be part of the CCID program. Each of them stated that they wanted to improve their English to increase their employment chances in their home country as well as the opportunity to travel. Motivational factors also play a large part in language learning. Individual motivational differences are influenced by factors with origins in environmental characteristics such as cultural, personal, social, political and educational (Gardner, 2006). Language acquisition, which takes place in both formal and informal language learning contexts, will result in both linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes. If a student is motivated toward engaging and persisting in formal and informal activities, he will have a greater chance of acquiring a second language.

While Teemant et al. (2005) identify ways to enhance the classroom learning experience, Tharp (1997) and The Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence have focused more on socialization methods for language acquisition. They have synthesized the consensus of sociological pedagogy into five specific actions by teachers and student peers designed to support learning during social interaction: joint productive activity; language and literacy development; making meaning by connecting teaching and curriculum with experiences and skills of the students' homes; complex thinking; and instructional conversation by engaging students through dialogue (Tharp, 1997). A blending of improved classroom practices and expanded and varied social interactions would benefit the CCID students at MLC.

Learning a second language is more than learning a structure for communication; it is also learning social and cultural norms for interpretation and forms of reasoning (Watson-Gegeo, 1988). Ethnographically, study of language socialization focuses not only on the acquisition of language skills, but also on features of the contexts of learning such as values, attitudes and frameworks for interpretation that are taken for granted by communicatively competent native speakers (Watson-Gegeo, 1988). Looking at the success in acquiring these socialization, language and learning skills will show how well the CCID program succeeded at MLC.

Another important part of an international student program is professional development of teachers. Teachers receive a higher impact from professional development if they strongly believe in the benefits of an international program (Eun & Heining-Boynton, 2007). Another finding of this study is the need for strong organizational support at the school

level to effectively implement their knowledge and skills, preparing teachers to effectively work with every student, despite cultural and linguistic diversity in student populations.

The international students in this study were usually hesitant to speak in class, for fear of not being understood or not comprehending the material. One instructor relayed that several of the local students would outwardly exhibit frustration at the difficulty of understanding the international speaker's accent. Willingness to communicate can vary depending upon several factors, according to MacIntyre (2007). For example, is a student reluctant to speak regardless of the situation, or is he only comfortable communicating in his first language? Or is he simply stressed at this current time, causing him to be hesitant to speak? MacIntyre identifies the major motivation for learning another language as "developing a communicative relationship with people from another cultural group" (p. 566). This motivation shows a desire to learn the language and to enjoy the process of doing so; however this motivation undergoes changes during the learning process. Initiation of communication is a choice made at a particular moment. Does the student raise his hand in classes or does he initiate actual conversations with other students? Individual personalities and cultures are also an indicator of willingness to communicate. For example, in some cultures, it is not acceptable for students to take or call attention to themselves. The international student needs to be able to overcome his anxieties and chose to speak with others in his second language. A motivation to learn does not necessarily indicate a motivation to speak or communicate.

Interactions between native speakers and ESL students are never neutral and teachers need to be sensitive to what it means to enter a new foreign culture, which is different from

what students expect from television, movies and other media representations of life in the U.S., which carries with it its own set of customs, values and assumptions, ESL students need experience new language and culture through new routines and practices, thus enhancing understanding of cultural norms and social practices. Understanding the positive effects of including sociocultural and political aspects in teaching English as a second language (ESL) have long been recognized. (Roswell, Sztainbok, & Blaney, 2007). However, communities and schools as well as ESL students must be able to understand cultural differences and identify ways to work with these differences, using them to gain increased understanding of each other. In order for underrepresented students to feel culturally validated, they must be included beyond representation of specific cultural practices and towards a more all-inclusive approach acknowledging that all students bring specific and valid knowledge to the school (Roswell et al., 2007). Rowsell et al. support Tharp, stating that language, literacy and discourse derive from social and cultural practices, meaning that social and cultural practices derive from ways of knowing, doing, talking, reading and writing.

Sharing and learning about other is at the heart of ESL teaching, which is not only about a linguistic divide but, more importantly, a cultural divide (Roswell et al., 2007). Increasing sociocultural awareness within communities and schools is necessary to overcome stereotyping and generalizations and to promote international student and ESL programs, which in turn, will embrace diversity and myriad cultures.

Although there was a campus coordinator for the CCID students, she seemed ill equipped to address their social and emotional needs. It is important for counselors to be knowledgeable and aware of international students' needs as perceived by the students



themselves. Counselors who are able to create discussion groups, seminars and workshops for these students assist in their adjustment to college life (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007). Tidwell and Hanassab report that the greatest personal change in awareness on the part of international students was that of different philosophies, cultures and ways of life in this country. The second greatest change was their skill in understanding English. Awareness of perceived needs and experiences of international students can increase a counselor's understanding and enable them to develop appropriate counseling services. Counselors can address gender specific needs through workshops and can also create discussion groups and workshops for students from different regions according to the students' perceived needs.

Similar to MLC, Niagara Community College in Ontario, Canada is considered a rural college with a marked lack of diversity in the regional and collegiate population, which contributes to international students electing to go to more urban and diversified schools in an urban area. The school also struggles with a definition of internationalization. One primary barrier to overcome is the confusion over the meaning and importance of internationalization to a college (Grabow, 2009), MLC has no strong direction of the purpose or future of having an international student program. According to V. Grabow (2009) at Niagara Community College, there is no school-wide consensus on the definition of internationalization, which creates a barrier of confusion regarding the meaning and importance of internationalization. One goal at this particular school is that internationalization of the campus should include international content and learning activities to provide local students with opportunities to effectively contribute to and participate in the learning process. Ideas vary among faculty members that internationalization is to be an integration of international dimensions into their

teaching as academic knowledge and/or respect for diversity of perspectives; however most of the faculty perceives internationalization as international projects, students, campus activities and global opportunities. The administration recognizes the need for internationalization as a source of revenue. Grabow claims that the internationalization focus has been at the administrative corporate level but marginalized at the academic level, with little sensibility towards internationalization infused across the curricula, except on an ad hoc basis by faculty whose experience and philosophies include diversity and/or internationalization. However, awareness of the international program has been augmented by increased international programs and activities. Grabow indicates that a lack of diversity in the regional population contributes a barrier and lack of awareness regarding internationalization. She finds that there is no metric at this college to measure integration of internationalization in a curriculum. Interpretation of internationalization is often misunderstood and manipulated. On the whole, faculty at this institution are not internationalized and international student populations will be unable to integrate or share learning strategies with local students until the significance of targeted learning and teaching strategies are recognized.

Our society is subjected to increasing forces of globalization in the rapidly changing world; studying abroad has become highly recommended for any student who hopes to study and work with various kinds of people worldwide. Educators and policy makers must be aware of the difficulties international students face and endeavor to help them adjust to multicultural contexts (Kwon, 2009). Kwon suggests better counseling service programs, hospitality programs, international activities and financial aid for international students improving support for them as well as increasing retention.

The CCID cohort had difficulty getting to know local students and forming lasting friendships with them. If every human encounter should be viewed as an opportunity to learn and grow as Juan Moreno (2009), of the University of Minnesota points out, we are both teachers and learners as international students may feel overwhelmed and not be ready to educate us about themselves. He suggests that every human encounter is an opportunity to learn and grow, that in education we are both teachers and learners. Moreno also recommends a healthy sense of humor and a willingness to laugh at ourselves over uninformed behaviors. Institutions can play an important role in facilitating integration of international students. Such integration is crucial for these students, who come for friendships, but are held back by language and communication as well as differences in qualifications, work experience, age and expectations. Community College campuses similar to MLC do not provide a guaranteed social life for international students, especially when it comes to interacting with local students (Sovic, 2009). International students miss out on the traditional supports of friends known before going to college that support the early stages of student life at college. In the absence of family, they count on support systems provided by the university to assist in getting to know other students in an informal manner. As students develop friendships, these relationships will become their main source of social and emotional support. Focusing on social interaction, Sovic's findings indicate that one main expectation international students have is to meet students of different backgrounds and to establish lasting friendships with them. She suggests that international students expect institutional staff to facilitate social situations in order to develop friendships with local students. Some obstacles that came to light in integrating with local students included shyness on the part of the international

student, difficulty adapting to local language, accents, acronyms and slang, unfamiliarity with social contexts and unwillingness on the part of local students to initiate contact.

At MLC, the students felt removed from the surrounding community, except when they were giving presentations at local organizations. ‘A university culture receptive to internationalization and conditions that strengthen culture for the purpose of planned change along with an organization’s cultural readiness for internationalization will increase the probability of a sustainable internationalization program’ state Agnew and VanBalkom (2009, pp. 451-462). They feel that the more involved a university is with the surrounding community, the greater the likelihood the university will adapt and advance a mission of internationalization and partner with the international community, government and local businesses.

Prior to coming to the United States, three of the four international students had to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam to assess students’ readiness to function in post-secondary environment. It is largely a written assessment, which can lead to students to perform inadequately in classroom situations where oral interactions and specialized vocabulary are part of the curriculum. English language learners can be frustrated by lack of vocabulary which may make them hesitant to participate in classroom discussions or during group projects. A lack of specialized vocabulary can also make note taking or even comprehending lectures difficult. Students will often times spend most of their non-class time trying to keep up with class work which, in turn, detracts from beneficial time spent socializing with local students which would accelerate English acquisition (Bifuh-Ambe, 2009).

The CCID program seeks to strengthen ties between its participant, businesses and local residents. Commenting on a strategic alliance between Indiana University and projects in Kenya, Chancellor Charles Bantz (2010) states,

deep learning that grows from successful strategic international alliances extends to the campus as a whole from students, staff and faculty who spend time working with one another. Colleagues share their experiences through classes and lectures and encourage others to pursue similar experiences. (p. 9)

He goes on to state that community colleges are a natural for collaboration with universities that allow international students to better adapt to the U.S. academic environment and better prepare them to transfer to universities. However, Bantz reflects that it takes time to build collaborative relationships, making open our minds to recognizing the boundaries of our knowledge and culture.

More and more colleges and universities are seeking international students, citing intercultural learning as well as increased revenues. More revenue, diversity on campus, and a greater opportunity for students and faculty to learn how to communicate and work with people of different cultural heritages, seems like a move in the right direction, an increased number of international students brings a unique set of often hidden academic, social and cultural challenges (Stevens, Serap, & Yameshita, 2010). Students are simultaneously adjusting to two new cultures, one foreign to their life experience, as well as an unknown school experience, which carries its own set of expectations. International students can offer a fresh classroom perspective for faculty, but the behaviors of such students are often misinterpreted, as the faculty does not recognize the challenges experienced by the international student. Citing that international learning is critical to a high quality education, most colleges and universities typically state their internationalization goals in terms of inputs

such as incorporating global perspectives in the general curriculum, increasing the number of international students on campus, and in study abroad programs, and fail to define change as related to student learning (Dietrich & Olson, 2010). Despite advances, there is no clear consensus on the best way to measure the desired knowledge, skills and attitudes concluding that the outcomes of international learning are similar to the outcomes of general learning, expecting students to attain increasingly complex levels of knowledge, skills and attitudes over time. These authors have defined a globally competent student as one who:

- Understands his or her culture within a global and comparative context.
- Demonstrates knowledge of global issues, processes, trends and systems.
- Demonstrates knowledge of other cultures.
- Uses knowledge, diverse cultural frames of reference, and alternate perspectives to think critically and solve problems.
- Communicates and connects with people in other language communities in a range of settings for a variety of purposes, developing skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing.
- Uses foreign language skills and/or knowledge of other cultures to extend his or her access to information, experiences and understanding.
- Appreciates the language, art, religion, philosophy, and material culture of different cultures.
- Accepts cultural differences and tolerates cultural ambiguity.
- Demonstrates an ongoing willingness to seek out international or intercultural opportunities. (p. 142)

If colleges such as MLC can continually improve their ability to offer meaningful international learning experiences, it can ultimately lead to a more globally aware and internationally engaged student population.

The community surrounding MLC is not overly diverse and often times, it is hard for newcomers to the community to feel accepted. Howard and Matthew Greene (2010) state:

Many American students will have had little, if any, contact with international students, let alone the kind of intensive residential, social and intellectual engagement that takes place on a typical campus. Helping international students to acculturate and succeed will likely require your American student body, faculty, and staff to create a

university and community-wide effort to reap the rewards of a global campus community. (p. 74)

At the end of the school year, the CCID students felt an involved and interested mentor would be beneficial. Stevens et al. (2010) found that sharing a reflective journal with a mentor is one successful means of support. This is where international students keep a journal and share it with their mentor. The international students in this study found that it was a safe place to explore ideas and feelings, reflect on current challenges, and to brainstorm, organize and plan for events, school and work. The students felt that this type of journaling improved organization, fluency and content in their academic writing. They also learned that they were unable to separate their academic and private lives in the journal while considering the academic, social and cultural processes they underwent during this project.

When considering building an international student program, the impact of new, international students on current students should be considered, as well as the possible reactions of alumni and other supporters. The positive side of a program is the advantage that local students will receive a global exposure on their home campus, as cited as a benefit by some MLC faculty. However, sometimes international student programs take up budget dollars that would otherwise be spent on traditional students. A college should consider educating supporters regarding the benefits of an international student program (Greene & Greene, 2010).

In his study on globalization of two non-urban community colleges, Frost (2009) identifies several factors on how community colleges might be impacted by globalization, including curriculum planning for graduates to work in multilingual industries, business training to help local firms competing on an international level, and seeking funds from

non-traditional sources. Competitive pressures as a result of product and service differentiation due to global influences and authorities, developing and supporting current computer and communication technology, and the necessity of supporting ongoing training needs are still more factors to take under consideration. He concludes that although the Midwestern community college is adapting through external influences, to an increasingly global society, the leaders of these colleges in Frost's study lack the funding and flexibility to make the changes needed to proceed toward a globalized future at the same rate as other, larger schools.

Employers have begun to recognize the importance of recruiting personnel with international experience which contains language acquisition, forming networks and cultural understanding. International experience puts people into places where they are exposed to global thinking (Crossman & Clark, 2010), and has an impact on the recruiting process. According to Crossman and Clark, international graduates are considered to be better able to build and conduct intercultural business relationships. They note that workplace practices that are enhanced by an international student who has experienced the following:

- Direct experience of expatriation or short term overseas travel.
- Interaction with visiting business people from overseas.
- Participating inter-culturally both face to face and virtually.
- Recruiting incoming international professionals.
- Arranging visas, accommodation and travel.
- Maintaining relationships with overseas contacts. (p. 605)

Another factor in selecting international students for employment, as stated by Crossman and Clark, is the understanding of surrounding culture, religion, language, laws and economic issues as they impact business practices. Language learning, regardless of which language, develops cultural insights on a deeper level including empathetic responses toward workers.



Knowledge and understanding of international students is identified through personal and academic experiences on the part of local students through their interaction with international students, an internationalized curriculum, intercultural friendships, intermarriage and voluntary work with international students such as Rotary. This 2010 study by Crossman and Clark connects international experience with developing tolerance, initiative, empathy, respect, to being informed and humanity. These experiences and traits will enhance graduate employability for both international and local students.

At MLC, international students often felt that their language needs are not met sufficiently. Spoken language barriers are more frequent than written language problems. Some students wish to have a formalized process of social interactions with American students where the international students can acquire English language skills, including slang. Others would prefer a more informal approach such as group meetings to share culture with Americans and other international students (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010).

Gregory (as cited in Roswell et al., 2007, p. 141) speaks of how ‘ESL students need to “lose their strangeness”, not only to a new language but to different practices through experiencing new routines and ways of daily life’. Making students feel they are connected to and supported by their college is an integral part of incorporating international students into the mainstream of the student body. Smith (2010) recommends using learning communities, student groups who gather to study, as one way for ESL students to meet and practice English with peers, which can reduce self-consciousness, increase confidence and build relationships not only with learning community members, but with faculty and other students. Smith also reports that being a member of a non-native-English-speaking learning community is a

predictor for increased learning in all classes. She credits this to the extra time spent studying with non-native-English-speaking peers. Her research indicates that although learning communities by themselves have no direct relationship with higher learning outcomes, the support non-native English speaking students receive contributes to academic success. These communities can be a venue for ESL students to experience peer interaction, support, and tutoring which can facilitate learning. Creating a collaborative learning environment can expand outside of the learning community into the rest of the campus and community, a good practice for MLC to engage in, to expand language acquisition and social acceptance for its international students. A learning community is just one way to ensure ESL students feel validated. International students are subject to the same pressures as other college students, but also carry the extra burden of often experiencing culture shock, difficulty with the host language, and coping with the pressures to succeed as an international student, either due to economic reasons or to participation in a program that requires a certain level of academic success.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Using semi-structured interviews with the four international students in the CCID program, as well as the staff and faculty who regularly interacted with these students, the intent of this project was to identify the sociocultural factors that were perceived to have an impact, both positively and negatively, on a formalized international student program at MLC. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the students, faculty and staff. The interviews allowed for an opportunity to expand the questions in order to elicit deeper understanding from the interviewees. This paper focuses solely on the CCID students' experiences at MLC and in the Midwest Lakes area. Although there are other international students, each of the non-CCID students who had come to MLC had a previous support network in place and had already spent time in the United States acquiring English. Non-CCID students who were enrolled at MLC were either local high school exchange students, were athletes recruited by MLC, had family members enrolled at MLC or were supported by local churches.

A request was emailed to 195 MLC staff and faculty in 2010 and 2011 who were not directly involved with the CCID students requesting an interview to discuss the international student program with them; if they preferred, they also were offered the option of completing an online questionnaire. Two people responded: one said he had no contact with the CCID students so thought he would not have anything to contribute, and the other requested an emailed version of the questionnaire, but never returned it, despite reminders.

I first encountered these students at an International Club meeting held at MLC and facilitated by the English/ESL instructor at MLC. Early in the fall semester of 2009, I

arranged to individually interview four CCID students to solicit their goals, expectations and perceptions for the coming school year. Over the course of the following academic year, I had several opportunities for additional social interactions with these international students through attending the International Club meetings and other events they were involved in, including capoeira classes, sledding and snowshoeing excursions, a field trip the Festival of Nations in Minneapolis, MN and a Spanish conversation group. At the end of the spring semester in 2010, as these students neared the end of their stay in the United States, I conducted a second set one on one interviews with them to see how their goals, expectations and perceptions had been met or had changed as a result of their MLC experience. Finally, over the following two academic years, 2011 and 2012, interviews were conducted with 11 of the 23 MLC faculty and staff members and community members who had been identified by the CCID students as instructors, staff, and community members with whom they had interacted on a regular basis during their time on campus. Thirteen could not be reached or did not respond.

The interview questions were tailored to either the international student or the faculty/staff and community members interviewed. The overriding theme behind the survey questions was the identification of benefits and barriers for students who had successfully completed the CCID program at this institution in 2010. Success was measured not only by completion of the program, but by the feeling of acceptance and realization of goals expressed at the outset of the program by the students, including improved English language and communication skills.

I used a qualitative methodology in the form of face to face, one on one interviews, as well as personal observations of the students, which permitted flexibility in data gathering and allowed the ability to gain closer insight into problems and successes of the international students, faculty and staff through their own words. The qualitative results will be analyzed by a compilation of results, sorted both by frequency of occurrence and according to whether the information came from CCID students or from the faculty, staff and other involved community members. I was looking for recurring themes among these four students and 11 faculty and staff members, to ensure the barriers and facilitators are not solely the desire of one specific group.

### **Expected Outcome**

My belief was that the outcome of this study will indicate a need for Midwest Lakes College to develop multicultural training for faculty, staff and students. I also believed there was a need to increase awareness among the faculty and staff toward different cultures within this population, to stimulate interest in bringing local and international students together, achieved through formalized, yet informal gatherings for all students. It was anticipated that the findings would show a need for MLC for an increased support network regarding international students and for developing ways to incorporate them more fully into the academic and student communities which would allow the international students to feel welcome, enabling them, in turn, to develop social connections, improving their English language skills.

## **Background**

CCID placed four students at MLC during the 2009-2010 academic year, Winnie, 21 years old, from South Africa; Ingrid, 24, from Brazil; Julio, 22, from Brazil; and Diego, 22, also from Brazil. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy of the participants. They had learned of the CCID program through teachers or counselors at school. Winnie was from an urban area while Ingrid, Julio, and Diego came from smaller cities. It was the first time for each of them in the United States. Ingrid and Diego studied for and received certificates in Environmental Studies, Julio in computer networking and Winnie in Engineering. Each student planned to continue on at universities upon return to their home countries. All of these students were very friendly and willing to participate in this research.

All of these students appeared to have a good solid relationship with their parents. Winnie came from a family of six siblings, Ingrid had one and Julio and Diego were only children. All of them came from two-parent households. They communicated with them regularly via email and occasional phone calls to relate how life and school was going for them. They told me they did not share with their parents any big problems they were having, nor did they talk about feeling homesick, as they did not want their parents to worry. They all stated that their parents were proud of them for being in the program. Winnie, the oldest child in her family, felt she was setting a good example for her siblings.

All four CCID students stated that they enrolled in the program in order to increase their English skills, for the opportunity to see another country than their home country, and to improve employability and the possibility of high-paying jobs, both in their home countries and internationally. Ingrid, Winnie, and Julio all attended ESL classes in Champaign, IL in

order to improve their English skills prior to coming to MLC. Diego tested higher on the TOEFL test and came directly to MLC from Brazil at the same time the other students arrived. Diego previously had taken private English lessons in his country two to three times per week. Diego appears to have come from a more affluent background than the other students, but he met the criteria for the program, as administered by the Department of State. He also spent a lot of time listening to movies and music in English to strengthen his knowledge. The three who studied in Champaign developed strong friendships with others in the program and kept in contact with them throughout the year. Upon arriving at MLC, the students had hopes of becoming enmeshed in the student body, making friends and learning about Midwest, MN, while simultaneously acting as ambassadors for their own countries.

During the first few weeks of the semester, the CCID students experienced orientation, classes, clubs, and met with their mentor families, as well as attending social venues, and developing a basic level of comfort in their new surroundings. Their early impressions were very similar. All of them liked the smaller classes at MLC and found the instructors to be very accommodating and helpful. These four students did not have great difficulty understanding their instructors but were unprepared for the amount of daily homework. Homework practices and expectations in the United States differ greatly from their home countries, and although CCID orientation discusses the expectations, the reality did not sink in until these students were into their classes. Ingrid exclaimed, “I go home after classes and spend the rest of my time doing homework. Oh! It is so much. I have to look up so many words and it takes me too long to read everything”. Winnie shared that in her schools, most of the homework was done in the classroom. Ingrid thought that the class tests were too lengthy, but eventually became

accustomed to it. Each instructor had offered these students extra time in which to finish tests, but every one of them declined the offer.

The MLC classroom setup is similar to their home schools. Julio and Diego both commented on the excellence the library and laboratories. They felt the more formal language of the lecturer, plus the slower spoken pace attributed to their understanding. However, they did not understand their fellow students as easily. Not surprisingly, slang is one area they all wish they understood more readily. They also have difficulty with the rapid speaking style of most of the students. Winnie was taken aback by the amount of cursing she heard every day on the part of local students. She remarked that public cursing is not as prevalent in Africa.

When asked about how they interacted with the local students, each one of the CCID students said they had very little interaction with them. All of them said that they spent time with each other or with the other international students on campus, who they met at International Club, where were 21 students in attendance, four of whom were native to the Midwest, MN area. Three of these four local students had been home schooled prior to enrolling at MLC. When they did interact with local students, it was the previously home schooled students they felt the most comfortable with and thought this was perhaps because they were all coming into a strange situation at the same time. Julio and Diego were members of the student senate, but apart from attending meetings and working on projects, they had not developed any outside friendships with the other senate members. Ingrid tells me “Some days students will come and ask me lots of questions but then, the next day, they act like they don’t know you”. Ingrid feels that the local students are more scared to meet the foreign students and talk to them than the other way around. She said she wanted to say to them “Don’t be



scared of us, we don't bite. I know I can be hard to understand because of my accent, but be patient and get to know us!!" Ingrid also told me "There is one boy, Caleb, he speaks to me every day. He talks to me slowly. He is the only one to do so." She could not understand why her cohort knew a lot about the U.S., but the local students did not know about much about the world outside the U.S. Julio related how he would walk around the college waiting for people to talk and hold discussions; and expressed his disappointment that others did not seem really open to learning. Diego shared that he thought it would be easier to interact socially with the local students, and said it was very hard to break through the cultural barrier. One impression he maintains is that local students make him feel as though they are comparing 'local' way of doing things to how things are done in his country. Diego says he feels as though they are saying "our way is better than yours." Winnie made it a practice to greet people she had not met before. She felt that one reason local students did not expend the effort to get to know the CCID students was because the students would only be here for nine months and it was not worth the effort to get to know them since they would be leaving in a relatively short time.

The students found it easier to talk to older people than their fellow classmates. Diego says he saw some older students, but not very many and never on campus outside of classroom hours. Ingrid wonders why they had been placed with a 'bunch of kids', typically under the age of 19. Their perception is that their classmates don't show an interest in the international students and those that do, have based their perceptions on television and movies. Local students would ask them "Do you have *this (such as internet)* in her country?" says Ingrid referring to basic amenities, "like we are a totally backward country". Winnie

offers that more than one local student has asked her if they have monkeys in the streets of the city where she lives. The faculty and staff exhibit a greater interest and Ingrid says “The Geography teacher knows more about my country than I do!” says he preferred to spend time with the Spanish instructor, finding it hard to hang out with minors under the age of 21, claiming they are too immature. He feels they don’t share the same interests he does. When the students gave a presentation at the Congregational church, as one of their required community service activities, they felt that all of the people (adults) in the audience were very interested in what they had to say about their countries and asked pertinent questions to really try get to know and understand their home countries.

Although CCID students enjoyed the small city atmosphere of the Midwest area, each of them bemoaned the lack of activities. Julio, who was very physically active, would have liked a pool to swim in, as he had access to one in Brazil, and said that campus was closed on the weekends so there was no place for them (the CCID students) to hang out. During the week, the international students congregated in the small student lounge between classes, but few local students spent time there. Diego said he spent most of his free time watching movies in his apartment. These four students also gather with the few formerly home schooled students from International Club to play board games. All of these students, CCID and home schooled, claimed that it seemed that all the local students do for entertainment is party and get drunk.

Housing was disappointing to the CCID students. They were housed in The Pines apartments on the west side of the campus, the furthest away from the main campus buildings. Midwest Lakes College does not have any school-sponsored housing; these apartments are

owned by a corporation and were fairly run down during the 2009-2010 school year. Winnie and Ingrid roomed together with two other local roommates, Julio and Diego shared an apartment with two more roommates as well. Each student had their own bedroom, sharing a bathroom with one other person. The kitchen and common area are shared by all four roommates. While rooming with another CCID student was gratifying, the relationships with the other roommates were not as satisfying. Aside from small chats and the usual roommate issues, the local students and international roommates did not interact much, which contributed little toward language acquisition on the part of the international students. Diego spoke of one roommate using a lot of drugs. Winnie and Ingrid had a difficult time making friends with one roommate, who eventually moved out. Winnie stated that their other roommate worked all the time and was never around.

As with all college students, these four missed the food of their homes. Winnie missed lamb stew and bourwors, a South African sausage. Ingrid missed truly fresh fruits and vegetables of good quality. Both Ingrid and Winnie commented on how meat is cut differently here. Winnie exclaimed “Being healthy is expensive here!”

Midwest Lakes College is primarily a commuter campus. Most of the students possess cars and immediately depart campus after their final class. It is not situated close to any entertainment areas and transportation is not easily accessible. Winnie experienced an academic difficulty with transportation; the school administration had scheduled some of her classes at the Staples campus, 30 miles west of the Midwest campus, without arranging transportation to get her to and from Staples. Ultimately, they worked out a carpooling situation with an instructor who taught at both campuses, which left Winnie dependent upon

his scheduling. This arrangement was not in place prior to Winnie's arrival at the campus. The CCID students are given bicycles at the start of the year and the Student Life Director was available to drive them wherever they needed to go one day per week. The CCID students thought that the taxis were too expensive and did not like the public transport service, which required 24 hours advance notice or the rider paid an increased fare. In addition to this, the public transport was only available from 7:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. and they experienced difficulties with the dispatchers due to their accents. They relied on friends to drive them to events, but felt uncomfortable asking acquaintances for rides on a regular basis. "Transportation is the worst!" claims Ingrid. Diego thought there would be more busses available to get about the Midwest Lakes area as well as around the state, but stated he was surprised at the amount of traffic Midwest had for the population of the city.

Each CCID student was assigned a mentor family to help them adjust and give them a sense of home. The involvement of these mentors varied widely. Diego said his mentor family was nice, and they kept in touch via email, but they seldom got together and by the end of the school year, was not really communicating with him. Ingrid's mentors were very involved, checking up on her, having her over for meals, inviting other international students over for somebody's birthday party and taking her on trips around the state. Julio's mentor family would occasionally invite him to their house, but lived 20 miles from town, so it was necessary to arrange transportation for him to come for dinner. This difficulty precluded his going to their house very often.

By the spring of 2010, some the perceptions of the students had shifted. Each of them still greatly enjoyed the teachers. Julio and Ingrid referred to the faculty as "awesome", Diego

said ‘everybody is great, always smiling’. Winnie pointed out that her teachers would not let her be shy, but would draw her out and talk to her. Although Ingrid was at first disappointed that her Natural Resources classes did not include sewage treatment, by the end of the year, she was thinking of specializing in Environmental Controls once she returned to her country. She related that the lectures, especially calculus, were hard to understand, particularly specialized vocabulary, and that she spent a lot of time studying and looking up words she didn’t know. Winnie says she learned a lot during the school year. She says it was very difficult but that she “adjusted and learned a lot”. Although they liked her as a person, there was some concern regarding the CCID campus coordinator. Ingrid tells me of leaving messages for her and not having her calls returned, Winnie felt she received very little assistance in locating an internship, Julio summed it up by saying, “She is not organized and often late with things they need to do”. Two of these students mentioned a confusion regarding the budget on the part of the coordinator, leading to delays in availability of funds.

By spring, each of the students was satisfied that their language acquisition expectations had been partially met. They felt the regular English classes were good, but that the ESL class, held during second semester, was too basic and did not cover what they needed nor wanted. This class took the form of an American Government class, fulfilling a CCID requirement. The four students all felt that the language level was too basic for their existing skill level of English and that their English skills were not improved by this class. They would rather have had a class that focused more on learning the English language that they would be using in their futures, such as Academic English, Business English, or Composition, than on having Government as their ESL class. Diego commented that his vocabulary grew and he

learned new words and phrases, such as wind chill, every day, which helped his language to flow more smoothly. Ingrid would have liked to have learned more slang and technical English, although she did acquire quite a bit of technical English through her classes.

These four students identified their increased language acquisition as attributable to social interactions throughout the school year. Winnie and Ingrid credited each other for improving their English skills and knowledge. Winnie says “We had to speak English to understand each other”. Ingrid pointed out that Winnie spoke a lot of English in her home country. Ingrid also credits one of her other roommates with being willing to answer questions she had about general language usage and definitions during second semester. The ESL instructor/International Club advisor was mentioned by each of the students as a big help in their understanding and acquisition of English. She made herself available at all hours for the students’ questions and concerns as well as arranged several activities for the International Club, which the CCID students all attended. Diego says he learned a lot of from being a member of several clubs, such as the International Club, Student Senate, and Green Club.

When asked specifically in what areas their language skills had improved the most, Julio relates that he has started speaking more to people. Before he could not keep up with and participate in daily conversations, but now he could and did. Diego credits class lectures for helping build his language skills, specifically in listening to the teachers and having to take notes. Ingrid says her most improved areas were in listening and writing, claiming “I had so many assignments and essays to do”. Winnie states she is more confident in giving directions and that her greatest improvement has been in speaking publicly from giving so many presentations either for class or for the community service portion of their CCID

requirements. Winnie also shares that she has learned so much, she can identify the differences in the English she has acquired at MLC versus the English she was taught in her homeland.

The students had different individual answers when queried about which skills they would have liked to have had greater improvement. Diego would have liked to have spent more time with local students and community members, thereby increasing his regional and casual conversational abilities. Winnie would have appreciated having more reading and writing classes. Ingrid feels more conversation classes would have been beneficial but made the point that hanging out with friends was the best way to learn conversation. Julio would like to have had more experience in developing and giving presentations and speeches.

Proposed improvements for English language acquisition through their MLC experience suggested by these students were to get the CCID students more involved with the community, particularly younger people and the local MLC students. They also considered more conversation classes would be beneficial. One of the students suggested using different books that were more communication-oriented and not directed toward U.S. History and academic writing. The other suggestion was to have more reading and writing classes as part of the CCID curriculum.

In reviewing how the CCID students interacted with the local students, faculty and community members some things had evolved while others remained the same. For the most part, they did not assimilate into the student body. They were still heavily dependent upon the International Club for relationships and were even more self-identified as a subgroup of four CCID students. Diego felt that meeting people of different backgrounds helped him attain a

higher level of understanding. He liked it that, during club meetings, people could have different points of view, yet still remain friendly while discussing the topic. However, he did not maintain social contacts with the club members outside the club venues. He said his main social contacts were with the International Club members and older people, such as staff and faculty members and members of the church he attended with one of the instructors. Julio and Barb, one of the homeschooled members of the International Club, became romantically involved. He felt comfortable talking to her as he could make mistakes, something he did not feel he could do in front of his teachers and other students. Julio states that he never expanded his friendships beyond the International Club. "It is very hard to make friends, kids don't stay around. It is like going to work, they come and then they leave." Along with the International Club, older faculty, mentors and staff made up the majority of Winnie's social network at the end of the year. She feels that the older people were more empathetic and were truly interested in her home culture. She enjoyed talking to the faculty member with whom she commuted to the Staples campus, feeling he was helpful in her language acquisition, but she never socialized with him outside of the commute.

Ingrid assimilated more fully into the local culture once she and a student from Cambridge, MN started dating late in the second semester. He expanded her social horizons beyond the experiences of the others by doing unstructured activities around the state, such as the Eelpout Festival in Walker, MN, a trip to Chicago, and ice fishing as well as introducing her to his friends and family. Ingrid says that during the first semester, she found the cultural barrier hard to cross. She had several 'hi-bye' friends, people whom you recognize and will



say hello to, but never really engage each other in conversations, but by the end of second semester felt she had developed a lot of good friendships.

The scope of social activities these four students were engaged in was varied, but was typically arranged by a club or specifically for the CCID program. These students went on tours of the state capital and Duluth. They also did several presentations to community member organizations and the student body about their home countries as part fulfillment of their community service requirement. Julio spent a portion of his community service time teaching capoeira to a group of interested students after classes; 98% of these participants were from International Club. The International Club went to the Festival of Nations in Minneapolis and organized the first International Festival at MLC in May of 2010. A few faculty members arranged opportunities for Diego, Julio, Ingrid, and Winnie to experience Minnesota pastimes such as skiing, tubing, and hockey games in the winter as well as summertime activities such as canoeing and going to the beach. During winter break, the CCID students went on a trip to New York and stayed with friends they had made earlier in the year during their orientation in Illinois. Going to the movies as a group was popular with the CCID students and the other international students.

In discussing the mentor families for these students, there was a great discrepancy in satisfaction, although they all agree with Diego when he says “Sally (one of the mentor families) could be the mentor for everybody. She is awesome!” Julio says that his mentors were “OK”, but he didn’t really spend much time with them beyond Thanksgiving dinner. They would call to check on how things were going with him, but not initiate many activities or gatherings. To Julio, they always seemed too busy to do things with him and lived fairly far

out of town, so Julio could not get to their house easily. Winnie and Diego had very little to do with their mentor families as the school year progressed. Diego's invited him to their home for the Thanksgiving meal, but other than that, had limited contact. Winnie's would check on her by phone and email, but she felt they were very uninvolved with her overall.

Overall, the students liked the MLC campus itself. They enjoyed the small student to teacher ratio and the green spaces outside. Winnie liked the fully equipped labs and computer areas. Julio liked the small physical size of the campus. Diego praised the computers labs as well as the infrastructure of the campus and the advanced technology. What they did not like was the small physical size of some of the classrooms and that several had no windows. They all continued to be disappointed by the campus being closed on weekends unless there was a special event occurring. Winnie did not like the high-school clique culture she encountered among the students. Julio would like to have seen more physical and sports type of activities available, such as soccer or a pool. There are athletic teams for MLC sports, but Julio was looking for something along the intramural lines or even just access to casual games.

Two of the outstanding issues that created the greatest dissatisfaction were housing and transportation. The students did not like the building they were housed in, they would have rather been housed in one of the buildings closer to campus. Ingrid tells me that "special" students are housed in The Pines and it is very loud with a lot of screaming and fighting going on. They did like the furnishings and the layout of the apartments, except that Ingrid expressed a desire to have separate bathrooms for each person. Both apartments suffered from roommate issues. The boys had three different roommates in the first semester. At the semester break, they had yet another one, but this one was 'cool'. They did not interact

with him much, but did peacefully coexist, as a lot of college roommates do. Julio says he would choose bad roommates as his greatest discontent with his experience in the program. The girls ended up with one of their initial roommates after she had moved out partway through first semester and moved back in during second semester. Winnie and Ingrid felt that this girl had calmed down quite a bit and they did not feel the tension with her that they had in the beginning of the year, yet they never became close to her.

The other main issue is lack of transportation. When I ask about it, Julio says “What transportation?” Winnie says “It is baaaaad!” Ingrid states, “It’s a problem, it really is a problem. I get embarrassed to ask people for rides so I don’t go places on weekends”. Both Ingrid and Winnie had internships out of town and had to make special arrangements with their interning companies to find people who could give them rides to their jobs. The bus transportation is expensive and has limited availability and range and the taxis cost too much for their budget. They walked and rode their bikes when possible, but Diego pointed out that things are spread so far apart and, after researching car ownership, determined it was too expensive to purchase one.

The geographical Midwest Lakes community was enjoyed by all four of these students. They liked the lakes, the natural environments, the parks, the ski hill, and the serenity of the area. Regarding interaction with community members, Ingrid said she liked that when she walked in the park, people she didn’t know and had never seen before would say ‘hello’. Winnie did not like the fact that she could not get anywhere by walking. Julio says “people here live in a bubble. They don’t want to socialize, they just drive in their cars”. Diego liked that once summer weather appeared, everybody was doing outside activities and

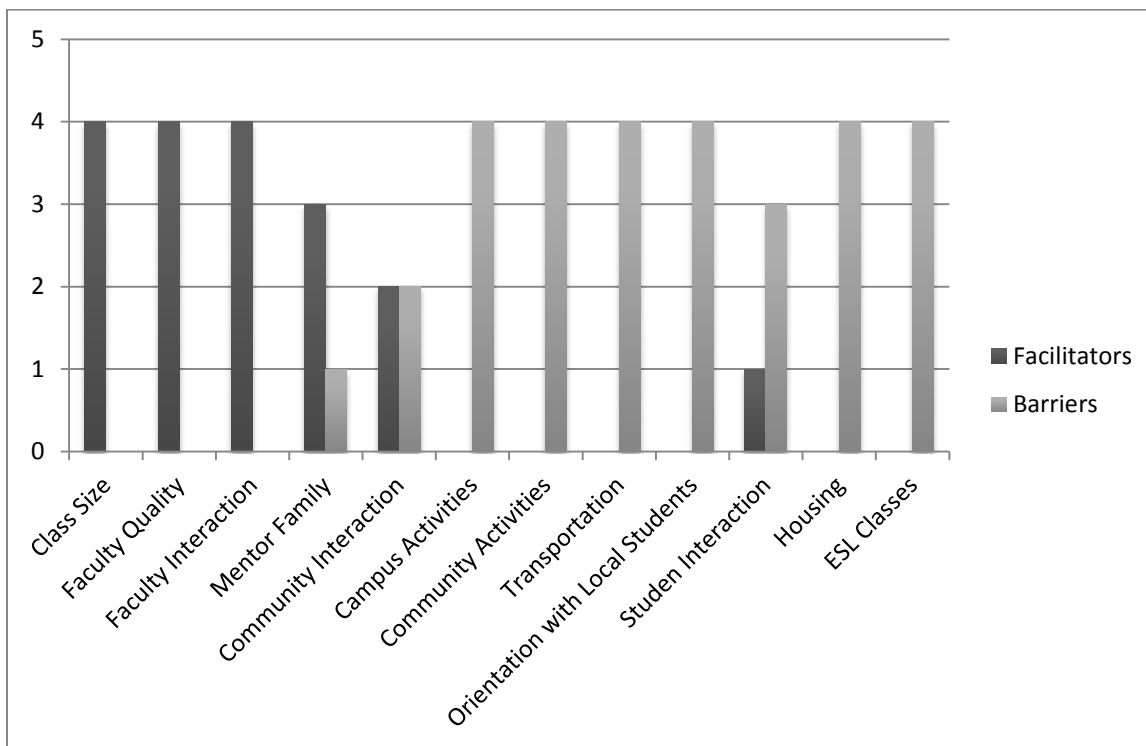
on the lakes. Ingrid related that she has encountered communication difficulties, mostly because of her own colloquialisms in English. She would try to make people understand what she meant, but did not always succeed. Diego did not feel any language or cultural barriers in the community, but did comment that some things he was not able to say, as the other person would not understand his meaning. Winnie felt that on several occasions, people in the community did not know what to say to her. She felt awkward as she was frequently the only black person in the group. Although she told me she never felt overt racial tensions, she related that community members did not seem as open with her as with the others.

When asked if they would recommend Midwest Lakes College to friends and family as a place to study, Diego replies that he would, but would suggest they only go to MLC for one year, feeling it would be more beneficial to be closer to a larger city. Julio echoes this thought that he would tell people thinking of going into this program to really think about it because it is really a small town and did not have the amenities he was looking for. Winnie tells me she would not necessarily recommend it because of the lack of transportation. Ingrid says she would recommend MLC for the instructors and well organized classes as well as the labs and field trips.

Also asked was if they had to do it all over again, would they go to MLC or somewhere else if they had the choice. Winnie would go elsewhere, because she felt the classes are too Minnesota-based and she would have liked a more international focus. Ingrid would return but stipulated she would want more sanitation classes available. Julio and Diego both said they would choose to go elsewhere, preferring a larger city, with transportation and more activities, although Julio said he had a great experience.

The students contributed ideas of how they thought the program could be improved. Each one of them suggested a student mentor in addition to the mentor families. The student mentor should be “older, but not too old” and would have traveled outside the United States. Their feeling is that an older person with global travel experience, would have broader interests and be more interested in cultural sharing. Ingrid contributed that it would have been nice to have had this mentor student be able to guide them academically, assisting them in navigating registration, academic requirements and classroom tips. Diego told me the younger kids were not interested in sharing cultures, only parties. These four students also felt there should be better vetting of roommates and of mentor families. Roommates should have some areas of commonality with the students and mentor families should be in town or easily accessible and have some minimum requirements about how much time should be spent with the students. One student expressed the thought that there should be more than one program coordinator for the CCID program.

Due to the limited scope of the nine month program for the CCID students, there is a limited exposure to faculty through classes. It is not unusual for a student to have the same instructor for two or three related classes in a semester. Ultimately, the number of faculty who interacted on a regular basis with students in the CCID program was fairly small.



**Figure 1.** Campus and Community Integration—Student Perceptions

When asked, the faculty and staff who had regular interaction with these students related their observations of communication and social barriers on the part of the students. Several of the faculty commented on the overall good command the students had of the English language, although their reading was slow, the instructors felt that the English writing skills of these students were far above those of the local students. All of the instructors witnessed mixed messages due to vocabulary, pronunciation, and colloquialisms. One person related that ‘root beer’ caused some confusion, the student thought it was alcoholic beer, not a soft drink; in Geography class, there was a confusion regarding geyser, the student was pronouncing it ‘geezer’. Another instructor told of great frustration due to the CCID student’s accent, the local students in the class could not understand a lot of what this student said in class, and after several repetitions, both the international student and the local students were

exasperated. The ESL instructor noted that the international students were frequently not understood by the local students because the foreign students spoke too rapidly. The CCID students wanted their speech to be more easily understood instead of leading to frustration and disappointment on both sides of the conversation.

Another barrier encountered was one international student would often nod in class, indicating they understood the material. When tested, this proved to be incorrect; the instructor spent some one-on-one time with the student to ensure the student fully understood the material. After that, this instructor took extra time with this student to confirm that she understood the lectures. A different instructor pointed out that if the international student did not understand what was being said in class, they then failed to grasp the concept of what was being taught. This instructor also would check frequently with the international students during class to see if they understood the material or had any questions. The Student Life Director noted that the CCID students all congregated together and those from the same country used their native language when talking, restricting their exposure to English conversation.

The faculty and staff members shared their perceptions of what the CCID students liked and disliked about MLC. They all agreed that the students liked the size of the classrooms, and that the faculty and staff were supportive of them. They felt that the students liked the bonding with the other international students on campus and the welcoming atmosphere of the faculty and staff of the college. The field trips both through the CCID program and with classes and clubs were popular. The Spanish instructor tells me that the CCID students really like the International Club, adding “The ESL instructor keeps it going!”

Without fail, each of this faculty group named lack of transportation as a disappointment to the students as well as the small size of the city and the lack of readily accessible creative and entertainment venues, such as live music. The weather and food was also a downside.

Although all of the students were excited for snow, the dark winter months took quite a bit of adjustment as well. The faculty also shared that an age difference of up to 5 years and difficulty integrating with local students was yet another factor along with the commuter campus culture of MLC. The local students all left as soon as their classes are over, the majority of them living a distance away from the main campus.

The faculty and staff who interacted with the CCID students described their interaction for the most part as in the classroom, greeting them in the hallways, and at Cultural Thursdays, a monthly event held at the college to introduce the student body and community to other cultural concepts. Presenters were volunteers, usually people who have traveled outside the United States or international students. Attendance at Cultural Thursdays is voluntary, unless an instructor requires attendance as part of class. The CCID student coordinator also conducted required weekly meetings with the CCID students and said these students will drop into her office if they have questions. Upon arrival, the Student Life Director picks up the students at the airport with the CCID student coordinator, so is one of the first MLC staff they meet. These two staff conducted the CCID orientation at MLC. The Student Life Director was also in charge of providing rides and coordinating their cell phone accounts. He drove them one day per week wherever the students want to go in the Midwest area during his work hours. They also came to him to have more funds loaded into their cell phones. The ESL instructor sought these students out daily and kept in touch with them via



social media. The Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs walked the halls at MLC three times per day and made a point of greeting the CCID students as well as attending any functions in which they take part. He also conducted the exit interview at the end of their academic year.

Assistance for the students provided by the faculty and staff included help in searching for internships, classroom help such as editing and researching papers, clarifying essay questions for better understanding and answering questions related to class issues, as well as community information, regarding activities and transportation. Navigating the school, such as how to work in group projects and understanding class participation and the school attendance policy also initiated requests for assistance. The students also sought advice for social issues, such as resolving conflicts with other students and how to make friends of the local students from their faculty members.

Accommodations for this group on behalf of the faculty included longer testing times for an entire class, so that the CCID students had more time to work on the test without feeling singled out, one instructor positioned the international students to look good in class while asking local students in-depth questions ensuring the international student had a good grasp of the subject. The geography teacher assigned the CCID students projects related to their native countries as opposed to strictly following the syllabus. Other faculty and staff felt they affiliated with these students and diligently worked to involve them in activities and in making social connections.

The perception among this group of faculty and staff was that the students were a positive influence and were welcomed. They liked having different perspectives in their

classrooms which brought a new dimension to their teaching. They also felt that this group of students was more mature than the majority of the local students in their classrooms and that they were miles ahead academically. However, these educators pointed out that it was a small group of faculty and staff, mostly from the liberal arts departments, that were enthusiastic about global and cultural exchanges and the CCID program. They felt that the majority of the staff was ambivalent towards the program. This Vice President of Academic and Student Academic Affairs related that there existed a small number of faculty who questioned the value of such a program.

When asked how they felt local students viewed the CCID students, the responses from the faculty group were that the local and CCID students communicated well during class group projects but did not interact outside of classes. “Most of the local students are not interested in them at all, they are just not interested” says the Geography Instructor. A Math Instructor sensed a hesitation on the part of the local students to interact with the foreign students. MLC’s Spanish Instructor stated that the CCID students were well received in her “Many Faces of Mexico” class, but added that she felt it was due to the nature of the class. She did not see much interaction of these students outside of class, and said that the local and CCID students seemed to have parallel existences. The Student Life Director stated that several local students felt that the CCID students were catered to and thought campus-wide communication regarding how the program worked would be beneficial.

When asked about ways in which the CCID students navigated MLC in a positive manner, the faculty and staff cited the students’ involvement in presentations and clubs, particularly the strong student senate presence and a sustained presence at the club meetings,

which the students joined of their own initiative. The faculty was impressed with the level of maturity these students exhibited, especially their exemplary classroom behavior. The presentations by the CCID students, both at MLC and within the community were another instance of positive actions. These students formed classroom friendships for projects and small groups, but did not carry these friendships beyond the classroom setting. Despite the non-integration with local students, the CCID students remained outgoing and cheerful as well as visible to the college population. Each faculty person commented that the CCID students did not intermingle as much as the other students, whether those students were international or local students. They kept to themselves, staying together as a group, which made it harder for them to make friends outside of their cohort. The Geography instructor said 'If they don't mingle with local students, their language does not improve much'. Midway through the spring semester, they did start to branch out with their friendships to an extent, such as shooting pool with local students at the college; the faculty sensed that the CCID students only integrated with the local students on a limited basis.

Frustrations these students shared with their instructors and support staff focused on housing, transportation and lack of activities. The students disliked the location of their housing unit and related that the noise in their apartment building was very disruptive, and the lack of internet at the apartments was disappointing and detrimental to their studies. The ongoing roommate issues were unsatisfactory for the students as well. Lack of transportation was an ongoing frustration. The students would like to have had the ability to move about the community on their own. They also felt that there was nothing to do and that this was a boring area, especially on weekends, when the campus was closed. There was great excitement on

the part of the students when they arrived and they didn't truly comprehend that they would need to leave in a mere nine months, until the reality of the end of the school year was looming.

Positive experiences on the part of the students as viewed by the faculty included the field trips and excursions to events and locations such as the Festival of Nations in Minneapolis, Duluth and Itasca State Park. The faculty cited the different style of classroom teaching was a good learning opportunity for the students as well. The presentation experiences were viewed as beneficial as well as the internships and volunteer requirement. The students felt well cared for and enjoyed the fact that the current Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs was an immigrant as well.

When asked how they, the faculty and staff, felt the CCID students wanted to be viewed by the school and community, the perception was that the CCID students wanted to blend into the student population and not be seen as exclusive or a curiosity. They wanted to be considered as hardworking students and as capable as the local students. At the same time, they wished to be cultural ambassadors for their countries, learning a lot about the culture of the Midwest Lakes area and sharing their own.

The faculty and staff sensed that the major disappointments for the students were lack of transportation and spontaneous opportunities for entertainment and cultural events. The area is not a big city and it took the CCID students quite a while to figure that out. It is still a valid and vital culture, just different from a metropolitan area. Prior to arrival, the students did not seem to have a concept of what a community college was, thinking they would receive a better education than they ultimately did. They would have liked to blend more and do more

socially with the local students, developing lasting relationships with them. Instead, it appeared that overall, very few local students cared and those deep friendships never developed.

Each faculty and staff member interviewed was adamant that the CCID program was a good development tool for MLC. Every one of them felt that MLC needed more cultural diversity and that it was a good opportunity for the local students, who have little opportunity to partake in foreign exchange programs through the school, and to have exposure to a variety of cultures and viewpoints. The CCID Student Coordinator said “it is good to have a cultural exchange in our global society; it helps the MLC students attain global diplomacy”. This group of faculty felt the program raised cultural awareness in class, giving exposure to local students, who live in such an isolated environment that they would not have gotten it without the program. One instructor felt that the program was too small to make much of an impact, and that increasing the size of the CCID program would be beneficial. Another faculty member felt the CCID program was very good for MLC, but was not necessarily a positive for the CCID students, saying that it was difficult socially and culturally for the CCID students to live in an environment that was not rich, nor vibrant. However, the feeling was that the positive aspects of the program outweighed the negative ones.

In seeking the faculty and staff’s input on how to create a more welcoming environment for international students, they offered several suggestions, mostly centering on integrating the local and CCID students. A center where all students could congregate and interact with one another was mentioned, as well as a dedicated international center or reception room, where local students can meet them through structured gatherings to find

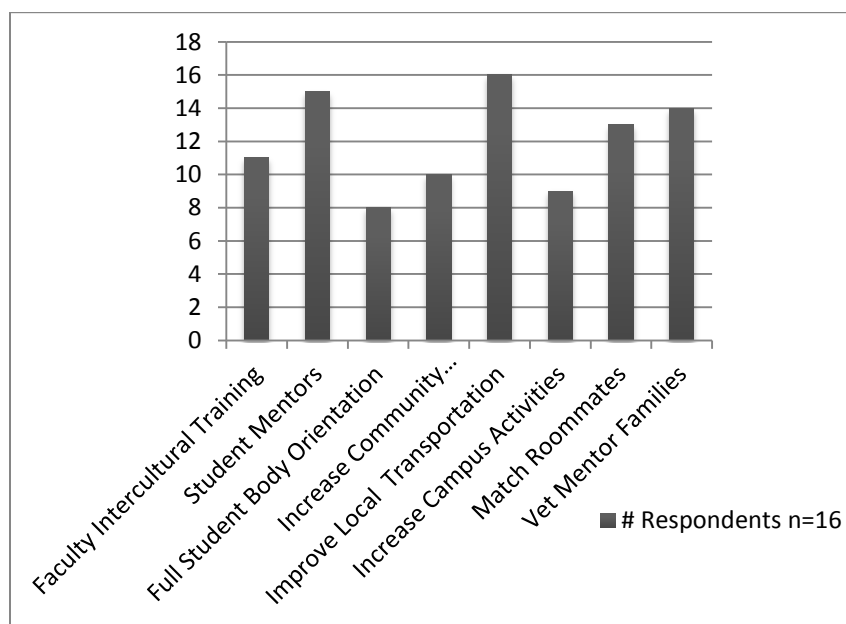
commonality of interests with the CCID students. Holding an orientation regarding the CCID program and the incoming international students with the entire student body would be a way to build a community with CCID students. Having and enforcing an academic policy of students taking cultural awareness/sharing/intercultural communication classes with both local and international students was recommended. If there were larger numbers of CCID students and they were spread more evenly across disciplines and it was thought that it would be more difficult for the students to congregate as a closed group and easier to integrate them into the student population, as well as exposing more local students to the CCID group. Another integration suggestion was to have the college hold more whole group activities, such as dinners and entertainments, and to encourage the faculty and staff to become involved in mentoring the CCID students. The ESL instructor suggests holding a faculty workshop on how to help international students in the classroom without lowering expectations.

Housing was another area that elicited several ideas from the faculty and staff. Ideally, it would be best if MLC were to build dormitories for students, both international and local, which would facilitate more interaction. If this were not a possibility, then moving them out of 'The Pines' apartment building to one closer to the main campus and assigning local roommates with similar interests to the CCID students, should be a priority for MLC.

These faculty members felt that the internship process needed refining, not only in making the placements easier and in the area of the students' expertise, but also that the CCID program should assist in locating companies with ties outside of the United States. A faculty member posits that MLC needed the infrastructure to place the students in meaningful internships, and that it would take a focused marketing effort on the part of MLC to get the

CCID students into the community on a regular basis. An English instructor thought an effort should be made to integrate the students into the business community by taking them on tours of local businesses. Other suggestions made were for a shuttle bus that would allow for more fluid transportation for all students. The Student Life Coordinator suggested utilizing the international students as a marketing tool for MLC, encouraging other prospective students to attend as a place to access global views.

The Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs said MLC had strong interest in building a global studies program but would need to build an intensive immersion program in order to attain that goal. He said that the CCID program really had no tangible outcomes at the end of nine months. The students end up with a certificate, but no degree for their efforts.



**Figure 2.** Facilitators for Language Acquisition

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

Language and culture are closely related and the sharing of culture facilitates language acquisition. As well, social interactions are vitally important to all students, particularly to those students who lack the support of easily accessible family connections and strong friendships. All of these factors must work together in order for a strong international student program to truly work.

Midwest Lakes College possessed the desire and the programs to incorporate a dynamic international program at their institution. The school had several beneficial practices in place in the form of involved faculty and staff, ESL resources, emotional support for the students and field trips around the state of Minnesota to further their learning of the geographic area and cultures of Minnesota. It was agreed, among the faculty and staff I spoke with, that having an international program was beneficial to local students, who are culturally isolated in a global scope.

All four of the students in the CCID program received their certificates upon completing their courses, and each of them felt they had improved their English language skills, but there were several ways in which the program could have been improved to increase the language acquisition of future students and promote positive cultural exchange between the local and international students.

Based upon the responses from the CCID students, and the faculty and staff, Midwest Lakes College should have explored conducting cultural awareness and cultural communication classes for the faculty, staff and all students, in an effort to pique interest in a greater number of people in the international program. Included in this effort, an educational



component regarding the CCID program and what it encompassed would go a long way toward informing students and staff and quelling misconceptions that the students were elite and received special treatment. Instructors should also have attended a seminar on how to teach students from other countries without lowering the standards of their curriculum. Assigned classes for the international students should have been planned to allow the greatest number of teaching staff to interact with these students on a regular basis.

The ESL program should have been adapted to focus on the language needs of the cohort, for example conversation, slang, and pronunciation. It should also have planned to teach skills for furthering the students' future global employability, such as academic or business English.

A formalized effort to enhance interaction among the local students and international students needed to be implemented. Identifying a place, such as a Commons area, where students can interact and congregate in greater numbers and accessible outside of regular classroom hours would have been beneficial. Orientation including all of the student body and the international students needed to be conducted early in the first semester as well as events for bringing all of these students together. Each incoming CCID student should have been assigned a student mentor, preferably someone who was older than the average MLC student as well as someone who had traveled and exhibited interest in cultural exchange. This student mentor would be a person the foreign students could turn to for assistance in navigating classes and registration, communication clues and social activities, at least until the students became comfortable and integrated with other local students.

The broader community should have been encouraged to play a more active role in the MLC experience of these learners. There are many ways for accomplishing this, but the plan should include blocks of non-structured time with local community members as well as local businesses.

Mentor families needed to go through a more thorough vetting process and should have been made aware of contact expectations, for example, the minimum number of in-person contacts, other than contacts through phone or social media, expectations for socializing and introductions to the community, transportation expectations. If a mentor family was not meeting these expectations, there needed to be a backup mentor plan in place. It was important for these students to feel as though they had a 'family' they could depend upon.

The housing options needed to be revisited. A dormitory would be the best solution, a place where the CCID students were in close quarters with other local students ensuring more interaction. Another option would be to move the CCID students closer to the main campus buildings, which would be in closer proximity to other student apartment buildings and more local students. The college needed to screen prospective roommates closely, the way other colleges with shared student housing does. If there was a commonality of interests, the chances were greater that the roommates would become friends and be introduced to the local roommate's social groups, leading to other friendships and more social contacts, all of which would improve English acquisition on the part of the international student due to using English in everyday situations with myriad people.

Without a doubt, transportation issues needed to be addressed in order for other students to want to attend this college. One way in which this could have been resolved is to

partner with the community to improve the bus system and to place MLC on one its regular routes, as well as looking at the feasibility of extending hours of operation. If the students could easily access mass transit, they would be able to go to more places in the community and discover that there were activities to be enjoyed.

The scope of this study was very limited due, in part, to the small number of students in the CCID program at MLC. However, it does present several issues that deter from the attractiveness of the program that MLC could undertake to improve upon these issues. It is hoped that other rural community colleges look discriminatingly at the same issues as they are all items that plague rural areas in the United States.

Midwest Lakes College was committed to improving their global awareness and the CCID program was a good place to start. Although the time frame of the program was brief, thus limiting opportunities for the students to develop lasting relationships with their classmates, the probability of increased language acquisition would have been greatly improved by addressing the aforementioned issues. As the ESL instructor said of the program “Economically it makes sense. Socially it makes sense. It just makes sense”.

In spring of 2012, MLC was planning to dramatically increase their international student involvement, intending to bring in 40-50 CCID students. However, by the start of fall semester 2013, the ESL instructor informed me that all formal international student programs had been dropped, citing lack of infrastructure and the need to have a full-time ESL instructor and unwillingness or inability on the part of MLC to commit the funds to develop these two crucial areas for a successful language acquisition program.

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## Appendix 1A

### Preliminary Focus Group 1

Group: International Students at Midwest Lakes College

Date: November 25, 2008

Room set: Library, circle of chairs

Facilitator: Peggy Blistain

Recorder: XXX

Introduction of students

Why they chose MLC

Where they are from

Why they want to participate

What are they studying

Ground rules

- Respectful
- Maintain confidentiality of group
- What is said here is will not be identified to any specific person, the information will be gathered and assessed.
- Everyone should participate
- All ideas are equally valid
- There are no right or wrong answers
- Each person's view should be respected
- Respect each other's confidentiality

Contact information

Student- for follow up questions

Self- for students to contact me with concerns or desire to withdraw

## Consent Form

Statement of Purpose: What would make the Midwest Lakes Area and Midwest Lakes College a better place to study, work and live as a person who is studying at MLC from outside the United States?

Reiteration: Recording session for own personal use, names will be redacted and recording destroyed. Nobody else will hear it.

### Questions

1. What made the campus inviting to you?
  - a. What made it not inviting?
    - i. What have other said or what have you heard?
2. What are the settings/areas you operate in now? (What is your life like?)
  - a. Classes, campus, home, community, church, etc.
3. Is there a difference in how you operate/act between classes, community and campus?
4. What do you need to succeed as an international student at MLC?
  - a. More academic counseling
  - b. More community interaction
  - c. More money
  - d. Bilingual teachers and tutors
  - e. ESL tutors
5. Have you encountered any barriers in classrooms or the community because of language or culture?
  - a. Seek examples
  - b. Use personal example.
6. How do you think people in Midwest and other places you have been view you?
7. What are your biggest challenges to feeling accepted in the community/MLC?
  - a. What are some ways you have not been accepted or what have you heard?
8. What are some examples of how you have been accepted in the community/MLC?
9. How do you want the community to see you?
  - a. Other international students and/or people from other countries in general?
10. If you were talking to your family or friends at home, how would you describe your experience at Midwest/MLC.
  - a. How do you think your family views your experience here?



## Appendix B

### Preliminary Focus Group 2

Group: Faculty and Staff who have contact with International students at MLC

Date: December 9, 2008

Room set: Library, circle of chairs

Facilitator: Peggy Blistain

Recorder: XXX

Introduction of Faculty and Staff

Position at MLC

Interest in International Students

Ground rules

- Respectful
- Maintain confidentiality of group
- What is said here is will not be identified to any specific person, the information will be gathered and assessed.
- Everyone should participate
- All ideas are equally valid
- There are no right or wrong answers
- Each person's view should be respected
- Respect each other's confidentiality

Contact information

Participants- for follow up questions

Self- for students to contact me with concerns or desire to withdraw

Consent Form

Statement of Purpose: What would make the Midwest Lakes Area and Midwest Lakes College a better place to study, work and live as a person who is studying at MLC from outside the United States?

Reiteration: Recording session for own personal use, names will be redacted and recording destroyed. Nobody else will hear it.

**Questions:**

1. What are your experiences with international students at MLC?
  - a. In the classroom,?
  - b. Advising?
  - c. MLC functions?
  - d. Counseling?
  - e. Have they approached you?
  - f. Do you approach them?
  - g. Do you seek them out?
  - h. In what ways do you interact with the international students?
  - i. In what ways do you avoid them?
2. How have these experiences been similar to those with Minnesota students?
3. How have they been different?
4. What facilitates good communication in these situations?
5. What inhibits good communication?
6. What do you see as the greatest academic challenges for international students at MLC?
  - a. Benefits?
7. What do you see as social challenges?
  - a. Benefits?
8. What do you see as community living challenges for the international students?
  - a. Benefits?
9. How will an increased international student population impact MLC classes?
  - a. What are the barriers?
10. MLC community?
11. Midwest Lakes Community?
12. How do you think international students feel about their experiences at MLC and the Midwest Lakes Community?
13. What is the greatest factor to help international students succeed at MLC?
14. What do you see as the greatest drawbacks to having international students at MLC?  
What are the greatest benefits to having international students at MLC?

## **Appendix C**

### **Informed Consent Form**

#### International Student Preparedness Study

Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Description of the Study:**

You are being asked to take part in a research study on international student community, campus and curriculum preparedness at MLC and the Midwest, MN area. The goal of this study is to learn about some of the challenges current and future international students can and do face in the Midwest Lake area. I want let you know that if you have any questions you can ask me them before you agree to be in the study.

If you decide to take part, I will ask the group a series of questions, if you feel uncomfortable answering or do not wish to answer any question, you do not need to answer. You can cease participation at any time. Our discussion should take about 60-90 minutes, depending on how much you want to share.

#### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

The risks to you if you take part in this study are minimal. All responses are voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to.

Your answers along with others will be utilized to help us understand some of the cultural and academic challenges of being an international student studying at Midwest Lakes College, and will be used to complete a thesis in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

#### **Confidentiality:**

All of your responses are anonymous, I will not be sharing any identifying information from you. The data derived from this study could be used in reports, presentations, and publications but you will not be individually identified.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your decision to take part in the study is voluntary. You are free to choose not to take part in the study or to stop taking part at any time without any penalty to you.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have questions now, feel free to ask me. If you have questions later, you may contact Peggy Blistain, 218-851-1208 or [blistain@emily.net](mailto:blistain@emily.net)

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Email/telephone: \_\_\_\_\_