The Graduate Experience: Living and Studying Abroad (A Case Study)

La experiencia de estudiar un posgrado en el extranjero (un estudio de caso)

Rosario Hernández Castañeda
rosario.hdez@comcast.net
Centro Universitario de los Valles
Universidad de Guadalajara

Carretera Ameca-Guadalajara Km 45.5
C.P. 46600, Ameca, Jalisco, México

(Recieved: March 14, 2007; accepted for publication: July 15, 2008)

Abstract

This article is a qualitative case study describing the experience of Angélica an international graduate student from Latin America, who received her doctorate at the University of New Mexico in the United States. Her case demonstrated how administrators and faculty learn about the experience and struggles endured by international students, especially those who learned English a short time before admission to graduate studies. While a single case is understandably idiographic in nature and inevitably requires a larger sample, from the analysis of Angélica's case and the analysis of the relevant literature common topics emerged persuading me to conclude that the issues that commonly impact the life of international students have to do with: 1) second language problems; 2) the quality of academic advisement received; 3) the availability of financial support; 4) the level of integration into their academic program; and 5) the level of cultural adjustment in their host country.

Key words: Foreign student, second languages, educational counseling, student adjustment, financial support.

Resumen

Este artículo describe el caso de Angélica, estudiante internacional de origen latinoamericano, quien recibió su doctorado en la Universidad de Nuevo México, Estados Unidos. Su caso muestra cómo los administradores educativos y los profesores pueden aprender de las experiencias y desafíos que los estudiantes internacionales enfrentan, especialmente aquellos que aprendieron inglés poco antes de ser admitidos a sus estudios de posgrado. Aunque un estudio de caso es entendiblemente ideográfico y posiblemente requiere de una muestra más grande, del caso de Angélica y de la revisión de la literatura relevante emergieron categorías comunes, lo que lleva a concluir que la vida de los estudiantes internacionales comúnmente tiene el impacto de cuestiones como: 1) los problemas relacionados con el segundo idioma; 2) la calidad de la asesoría recibida; 3) la disponibilidad de apoyo financiero; 4) el nivel de integración a sus programas académicos; y 5) el nivel de adaptación cultural en el país anfitrión.

Palabras clave: Estudiantes extranjeros, segundo idioma, asesoramiento académico, adaptación del estudiante, apoyo financiero.

Introduction

International students enrich American universities in many ways. They add their diverse cultural experiences to an increasingly multicultural campus scene. They enlarge student enrollment, thereby making institutions more profitable. And they enhance the possibilities for facilitating United States achievement of future global partnerships. In spite of these benefits, however, American higher education does not always succeed in helping these students to make the transition to academic life in their host country (Ziegler, 1997), often resulting in periods of stress, depression, frustration, fear, alienation and pessimism (Dillard & Chisolm, 1983). What should American universities be doing to improve the academic lives and facilitate the attainment of academic success for international students? It is a question that every university, that truly appreciates the contribution of this desirable and valued sector of its population, should have always before it.

I conducted a case study of an international graduate student in the Educational Thought and Sociocultural Studies (ETSCS) doctoral program in the University of New Mexico's College of Education. My decision to initiate this study was the result of weekly interactions with international students over a two-year period. Nearly all of them often expressed concern and discomfort over everyday problems in their academic lives. There are problems that are unique to international students, and frequently these problems are undifferentiated as to the students' cultural origins. This research started with the simple hypothesis that there may not be a complete understanding of all the problems that affect the academic needs and achievement of international students. It is for this reason that this study aims to address the following research question: What are the academic

needs of international graduate students in the ETSCS program of the College of Education at University of New Mexico?

As a Mexican educator and a recent immigrant to the United States, I am a part of a dynamic intercultural hemispheric presence of *foreigners* who are contributing to this country by changing the face and substance of American culture. Educational institutions should hasten to include international students with their unique religious, ethnic, socio-cultural, ethical traditions and perspectives into the daily lives of their faculty, administrators and students. The primary objective of this study is to inform and enlighten the university community about the academic needs of international students, by learning to listen to a representative voice of this growing campus group.

Before describing the methodology and reporting on the findings, a brief description of the graduate program and an introduction to the main participant of this case study are necessary.

The doctoral degree in ETSCS is one option within the Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies (LLSS) in the College of Education at the University of New Mexico. The program's focus is on the social and cultural study of educational institutions and practices. One of its more attractive characteristics is its interdisciplinarity; the program offers a rigorous, but flexible course of studies which may satisfy a broad range of professional and scholarly interests and needs. Students are at liberty to develop a program of studies which includes courses and seminars from within the College of Education and from related disciplines in other colleges.

The program has gained popularity and recognition in the past five years, attracting students from the United States, as well as students from Latin America, Asia, and Europe. In the last four years, 20% of the total admissions in ETSCS have been international students. One of them is "Angélica".

The main participant: Angélica Rodríguez, a native of Argentina, worked for more than 20 years as professional educator. She was an elementary school teacher and principal; a Psychology and Philosophy teacher in high school, and the director of a teachers' professional development institute at the state level. In August, 1998 Angélica began the Master's program in Educational Foundations. Two years later she entered the PhD program, and recently received her doctorate. How does she describe her educational experience at the University of New Mexico? What obstacles did she have to overcome to achieve her goal? Her comments, observations and insights are reported and analyzed in the results section.

I. Methodology

The daily academic needs of international students were uncovered and examined in Angélica's case study. The case study design was chosen because: 1) as a researcher I find that discovery and interpretation provide more depth from the

participant's perspective than the testing of hypotheses for verification of theory; 2) the case study is especially useful in seeking in-depth understanding of the lived experience and meaning for a participant; and 3) this type of qualitative research is differentiated from others since case studies are intensive descriptions and analyses of a single unit or bounded system, *i.e.,* an individual, program, event, group, intervention, or community (Merriam, 1998).

1.1 Participants

The participants were selected through a non-probability strategy called purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). This strategy maximizes the investigator's ability to devise grounded theory, and gives her flexibility in selecting cases rich in information. The participants in the study were: 1) Angélica Rodríguez (the case) was a Latin American doctoral student in ETSCS. She was selected because she was both a typical and a uniquely rich case. The other two participants were employees in ETSCS; 2) Lorena Carrera is a faculty member in the Division of LLSS and teaches in the ETSCS doctoral program, and 3) Jackie Smith is a staff member in LLSS who interacts daily with international students about admission, contracts, scholarships, deadlines, etcetera.

1.2 Data collection techniques

The data collection techniques employed were: interviews, documents, and the researcher's personal journal.

- Interviews: These took place over a six-week period and were carried out person-to-person, audio-taped and transcribed. The interviews with the student participant were the only ones that were extensive because I wanted to gain understanding of her academic needs from her own perspective. The interviews with the staff and faculty members were semi-structured, and used to triangulate them with the interviews of the primary participant. I conducted the interviews in Spanish (the student) and English (the faculty and the staff members).
- Documents: I analyzed all documents officially defining the relationship between the academic lives of international students and their graduate unit as well as the Office of International Studies and Programs, and the Office of Graduate Studies. I also consulted printed materials that further explain the contractual obligations between students and the University including catalogues, student handbook, bulletins, students contract forms, etc.
- Researcher's personal journal: During the entire research process I kept a researcher's personal journal in which I recorded all my ideas, reactions, reflections, questions and problems about the data that I was collecting and analyzing. I usually wrote short entries which I later numbered and identified as memos. Lincoln & Guba (1985) tell us that the researcher's journal is an introspective record, whose value is to help the investigator in enlarging and illuminating her analysis and philosophical positions, leading

toward making decisions about and carrying through the inquiry to its conclusion.

1.3 Data analysis techniques

The data analysis techniques used in this project were content analysis and constant comparison. LeCompte & Preissle (1993) affirm that these two strategies are specifically appropriated in inductive design. According to Merriam (1998), the main focus of content analysis is communication of meaning. The process involves the simultaneous coding of raw data and the construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics of a document's content. Regarding the constant comparative method, Merriam affirms that the basic strategy of this method involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences.

I transcribed and numbered the interviews, and I did member checking. I designed a table entitled: Table of Categories and Triangulation. At the same time that I was doing the content analysis, coding and looking for tentative categories, I was completing the table. According to Yin (1994) the transcripts, the field notes, the investigator's own documents and reflective memos should be organized by categories. Yin calls this organized material *the case study data base.*

The table of categories and triangulation facilitated the analysis of this case. It was a data base in which I had integrated all the tentative categories, notes from the documents and reflective memos. This instrument helped me both to visually know which categories needed more work, and to identify what data collection sources I needed to use to complete the triangulation and constant comparison strategy.

To make sense out all this data, I continued to reevaluate my data base and to move back and forth between integrating, reducing and trying to interpret the categories. I asked myself: "How am I seeing this?" "How am I interpreting that?" "What am I failing to take into account?" All these questions showed me that I could take nothing for granted. In addition to these questions I employed the following measures to ensure validity and reliability:

a) Triangulation. As I already described I used multiple sources of data (interviews, documents and a reflexive journal). I completed this task with the help of the table of categories and triangulation which I designed.

b) Member checks. I received confirmation of approval from all three participants interviewed in a second meeting-conversation as to their statements and opinions.

c) Participatory research. I already indicated that the interview with the student was developed between the participant and the investigator. After that, I was continuously asking her in different parts of the research process for her opinions and comments. The parts that I checked with her were construction and reduction of categories of this study, because these are the answers to the research questions.

d) Peer examinations. I asked one noninvolved professional peer to comment and challenge the design and emergent findings of this study; e) Researcher's biases and position.- I clarified at the outset of this report my assumptions and standpoint in this study.

f) Detailed description. I hope that by this description of how the case study was conducted I have ensured the validity and reliability of my investigation.

II. The findings

There were five main categories that emerged from Angélica's case: 1) second language struggle, 2) academic advisement, 3) financial support, 4) cultural adjustment and 5) integration into the graduate program. These five factors have played an important and significant role in her academic life. To allow Angélica to tell her story exactly as she told it, I conducted the interviews in Spanish. To assist the reader's understanding I provide a close English translation of Angélica's "text".

2. 1 Second language struggle

An important issue in the life of international students is the level of proficiency in English when it is their second language. Students from non-English-speaking countries often continue to experience difficulty in speaking and comprehending English. Although they are required to score on the Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL) at or above a level considered to be adequate for them to understand lectures, read texts and write papers, many still report English to be a problem (Harvey & Stewart, 1991). Angélica's struggle with her second language is characterized for the following dimensions: Painful silences; extended working days; and loss of profundity.

2.1.1 Painful silences

The hardship of expressing ideas or engaging in academic discussion or dialogue on a scholarly level is something that likely not only Angélica but other international students struggling with English as their second language, have felt through their classes and into the writing of their dissertations. With respect to Angélica's experience dealing with English in the doctoral program, she affirms:

> Well, it was a very hard experience. When I had to speak or do a presentation. Every day I had class was a day of suffering. I could understand everything the professors would say and the content of the books, I had my own thoughts. And I could do very well on my papers and put my thoughts into them and that's how the professors would get to know me.

The mastery of a new language requires comprehension (listening and interpretive skills) as well as communication (expressing and interpretive skills). For a new language learner what is often missing is the immediacy of transforming knowledge acquired into knowledge disseminated. That is, while it is virtually automatic for

Jane, who is a native speaker of English, to tell her professor exactly what her thought is in the very act of thinking the thought, Angélica has to struggle through time lapses where she is searching for the correct way to say something in English, and thereby may suffer through an extended distraction which may leave her unable to think through what was on her mind in Spanish. To compound the problem, while Jane is absorbed in the exchange of a seminar discussion with her professor and fellow students, Angélica is slipping behind in her efforts to stay involved in the discussion. Compounding the situation further, at the same time she is struggling with her thoughts and expression, the international student may have to contend also with her fears and self-consciousness in not being able to participate in the manner expected of a graduate student. This could lead to discouragement, feelings of inadequacy and isolation.

2.1.2 Extended academic working days

Participation in a doctoral program places the student at the highest academic level. Doctoral studies requires hard work, long hours and self-discipline. However, when we talk about international students the burden becomes a little heavier and a little more complex. That is, in order to compete with their American peers or those whose first language is English, international students such as Angélica, must overcome a language barrier that comes close to causing them to double or triple their hours of private study. With regard to the time that Angélica spent preparing her assignments, she said:

> (...) I would study every day of the week until two and three o'clock in the morning. I would read, write, work on reflections that needed to be done. Especially during those hard times when you have to turn in your papers and they all have to be done at the same time. It was amazing! Amazing! the number of hours I had to work, and without a break!

2.1.3 Loss of profundity

Loss of a depth of understanding (*familiarity of knowledge*) and verbal skill in oral and written communication puts a student such as Angélica at a disadvantage. While some international students, who learned English at an early age, possess second-language facility necessary to articulate subtle and complex ideas at the same level as their first language, others, who began to learn English shortly before becoming graduate students, often give the appearance of diminished or inadequate profundity of thought and expression. Angélica's interpretation of this hardship reflects the experience of untold others like her as they seek acceptance as individuals and acknowledgment of their intellectual strength and sophistication as thinkers:

> (...) in the second language we can say many words or not, but we never reach the level of profundity that we reach in our first language. On a higher level, as in doctoral studies, where you have to think   independently and in fact you do that, but you communicate only a fraction of an insight in your second language. You are presenting your thought, but without the conviction and strength of a first language.

International students are aware of their responsibility to function competently in their second language. Professors also expect (and some may require) them to express themselves as academic persons in their oral and written communication. The students are eager to develop both skills to the satisfaction of their professors.

2.2 Academic advisement

A meaningful and effective advisement process ought to take into account the cultural differences and unique needs of international graduate students individually. Fundamental objectives in advising these students help them in adjusting to the demands of academic life and integrating themselves into their department and discipline. The academic advisor, a central figure in the lives of these students, should be genuinely solicitous and take an active interest in her or his advisees as individuals and as students. Angélica had two academic advisors in sequence, who regularly gave her the support and the time when needed, and actively participated in her academic development. Advocacy, availability of the professor, and participation in academic activities are the three basic subcategories drawn from the data of Angélica's interviews.

2.2.1 Advocacy

Advocacy and support are not always given equally or consistently to international students by their advisors. There is a significant difference between advisement and support or advocacy. In the former the advisor guides and directs the student in her strategic and tactical choices in building a successful academic program. The advisor supports the student in his or her readiness to address specific and incidental needs as they arise; and is a fair and deliberate advocate of the advisee within the academic program. Angélica's advisors treated her not only as a student, competing and acting with her peers, but also as a person to whom they related as persons. The latter includes familiarity with the unique personal qualities and the socio-cultural history of the student. The former suggests knowledge of the student against the backdrop of the program and the discipline. Both advisors were sensitive to all that Angélica had to overcome to earn her Ph.D. They saw Angélica's strong determination to succeed. Angélica discussed her two advisors:

> My academic advisement was excellent. With my first advisor I worked on a more personal level because our relationship was a professor-student relationship at the beginning, which evolved into a friendship and after that I had to be more strict with myself, even more than when our relationship was academic. But it was so rewarding because I felt supported, taken care of, I don't know how to describe it… protected. When I was halfway through my Master's, this professor volunteered to be my advisor. He just offered himself and said: "You need somebody who can teach you, because you don't know anything here and somebody needs to support you. If you like, I can do it". And then I thanked him and he was my advisor until I took my Ph.D comprehensive exams.

Angélica's first advisor was a human bridge between Angélica and her new academic world. In time he became her mentor. Angélica also enjoyed a

productive working relationship with her second advisor (the first advisor moved to another university, but remained as a member of her dissertation committee):

> (...) when my first advisor left, I chose this man and he graciously accepted. And ever since then we have been building a sort of academic relationship in which we can interact with ease. Our communication is quite professional, but also very informal because we don't operate in a bureaucratic way. Like the first relationship this one has also been very positive.

It is noteworthy that both of Angélica's advisors are bilingual, allowing her the luxury to express herself in her mother tongue and communicate exactly and directly what she wanted to say. Both are familiar with her homeland. One was born there. The other worked in Argentina during his sabbatical. Both value Angélica's sociocultural and national identity. They understand Angélica's academic and personal contributions to the program.

2.2.2 Availability of the professor

Time is always a concern for professors at every level, and it was no different for Angélica's professors. They have to prepare class, teach, write manuscripts for publication, attend meetings and conferences, write grants, and do service in the community. If done appropriately, being available for students is one of the most necessary but time-consuming activities for a professor. Some professors inform their advisees that their consultation will be limited to matters of importance.

Professors and graduate students, when possible, should find other opportunities to share ideas about the profession, the discipline, their research interests, etc., thereby making the professor-student (advisor-advisee) dialogue the center of the continuous culture of learning. When the advisor-advisee relationship succeeds, then both parties benefit from the cooperation, the sharing of insights and the sense of accomplishment arising from generous and professional mutuality. This attitude is contained in Angélica's satisfaction with her advisor's availability and magnanimity:

> (...) And we spent a lot of time talking about professional topics. And that's something I'd like to say, we spent a lot of time, which is exactly what I want to say. But he was a professor and had to prepare his classes and spend time doing research, one thing at a time. However, he would always make time to be with me and talk and I feel very thankful for that, because I felt I was growing intellectually. I was starting to feel more comfortable at an academic level. Many interesting topics arose in our conversations that helped me grow toward a higher academic level.

2.2.3 Participation in academic activities

An outgrowth of a mutually satisfying advisor-advisee relationship, more fully integrating the student into the scholarly life, occurs when the professor invites the students to collaborate on a paper for publication or to share a panel or roundtable at a conference. Although such invitations are more common now than in the past

(they occur earlier in the sciences), most graduate students do not enjoy such a privilege. Angélica was one of the fortunate ones. Both her advisors gave Angélica opportunities to experience scholarly activities that have become milestones on the path toward her professional development:

> (...) from our conversations my first advisor had the idea of inviting me to write a paper and get it published in a North American university journal that is called "Democracy in Education," I give myself credit for what I wrote. But, of course, when you write with your advisor, it's not a small thing. From the very first moment he invites you to do that, he gives you his name, his reputation (...), his support made me believe in myself even more.

Angélica's advisement was individualized and structured. Besides receiving wise and skillful counsel from her first advisor, she became more secure and confident about her future in her host country. The second advisor maintained the same level of cordiality and active professional interest that was initiated by his predecessor.

What contributed significantly to the efforts of Angélica's two advisors was that both were fluent in Spanish and English. As a result, it increased Angélica's access to them, thereby almost immediately shortening the artificial distance that often exists between a professor and his or her student. This was apparent in these professors' eagerness, once they saw Angélica's talent and her determination to succeed, to share the authorship of professional papers with her and to invite her to participate in panel discussions at several major international conferences.

2.3 Financial support

In 2004-2005 international students contributed 13.3 billion dollars to the United States economy. Over two-thirds (67%) of all international students receive most of their funding to study in American universities from personal and family resources (Open Doors, 2005). This support comes with considerable sacrifice for many of them and their families. International students are legally required to maintain full-time status and must pay out of state tuition. When colleges and universities provide support for international graduate students it is often through research grants from federal and other sources, which now are more scarce than in the recent past. Even at the most affluent institutions financial assistance for international students is often strictly limited. The assistance, when provided, is usually by way of graduate, teaching or project assistantships. However, these options, for a variety of reasons, are also limited.

Before Angélica was admitted to doctoral study, she completed a master's degree and took three semesters of intensive English. As to the financial resources used to pay these two programs Angélica said: "I paid with my own funding. This was a very considerable amount of money because I had to pay as an international student." However, when Angélica began her doctoral study the situation was different:

> As soon as I started the semester, I received a Graduate Assistantship (GA), because my advisor talked to the division people at the meetings to get me a job and he managed to get me twenty hours a week.

It is common knowledge among the faculty and staff of the Language Literacy and Sociocultural Studies division that international students have severe financial needs, which are generally in excess of those experienced by United States students. It is not unusual for an international student–and this is precisely Angélica's situation–that after she completed her master's degree, her country terminated all future financial assistance.

The division continues to make efforts to obtain more funds for its international students, while it continues to improve financial assistance for its United States students. The University of New Mexico has reaffirmed publicly its distinctive self-characterization as "a university for the Americas." It is a significant gesture for a leading research institution, such as the University of New Mexico, to see this issue as a major public policy, so that it is not just one department or one college, but the entire university that is included in this vision: "UNM will demonstrate that diversity and excellence go hand in hand. UNM will be prominent in our hemisphere as a university for the Americas" (University of New Mexico, 2003, p. 11).

Until several years ago there were no financial aid programs, beyond occasional assistantships, for international students at the University of New Mexico. Currently there is only one such program, the Amigo Scholarship for International Students. It is generous insofar as it allows those students who are awarded this scholarship to pay in-state resident's tuition, which is about one-third the cost of regular out-of-state tuition. The only additional funds awarded to a student holding this scholarship is in the amount of $100 per semester. More such initiatives are necessary if the University is to seriously pursue a public policy of international (with a special emphasis on Latin-American) education.

2.4 Integration into the program

The academic unit or department is a relevant community for graduate students. Their academic lives are linked to their units until they receive their graduate programs, and often beyond. Integration is the process by which students–after admission–acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate successfully within their academic programs. The primary agents of socialization and integration for students in any academic program are faculty (Golde, 2000). Nevertheless, peers (mainly advanced students) are influential as a source of tacit knowledge for new students (Green, 1991). All entering students have to learn the norms, practices, requirements, and culture that influence and form life in the academic unit. Angélica's integration into her academic unit was a process in which her advisors and peers played valuable roles. Every stage of graduate study is accompanied and punctuated by forms, letters, deadlines, etc., that the student must fully attend to before proceeding to the next stage. As tedious and burdensome as this is, there is the consolation that all of one's peers must also

comply. Angélica learned how to cope with these tasks by asking for direction and advice:

> (...) I learned from the classmates who were ahead of me and I had to ask them questions along the way and also because my advisor would tell me what I needed to do. He'd say: Now it's time for this, time for that, we already have all these courses, we need to start looking at the number of courses that will lead you to a major, or something like that. But the administrative part is the kind of thing that develops along the way. And in the vast majority of situations, I had to find out by asking. I do not know of anything that is written and that tells you about how to proceed with administrative issues. For example, when is the right time to take the comprehensive exams? When is the right time to write the dissertation proposal? I don't know.

I asked Angélica if she had any recommendations about how to ease this burden. She answered:

> My suggestion is that there should be a student manual (student handbook) which states explicitly what needs to be turned in from the beginning until the end of the program. That includes, for example, the number of credit hours, how to choose your comprehensive exam committee, how to choose your dissertation committee, when exactly you are supposed to take your comprehensive exam, when you need to submit your dissertation proposal.

Angélica's observations comported with reality when she discussed the international student's accessibility to important information about conformity with university-wide graduate requirements, deadlines, and departmental policies, procedures and time-lines. Her recommendation that all the information she would need to know from her admission to her graduation should be collected and organized within a single document or publication is now being implemented. Its importance should also be stressed at a well-planned orientation meeting for all new students, so that essential information about the university's and the academic unit's policies and procedures are known to students and faculty advisers alike. Such an arrangement might simplify academic advisement by eliminating time wasted on searching for information already at hand; reduce the student's anxiety and stress; and most important of all, make the student's integration into the academic program simpler and complete.

2.5 Cultural adjustment

Depending on their preparation for the transition to a new culture, international students usually require a period of basic accommodation to the culture of their host country. Sometimes this process appears to force a student "to squeeze [one's] identity within pre-established conventions" of the host culture (Luzio, 1998, p. 209). A model of cultural adjustment typically passes through three phases, from contact, to conflict and to adaptation, although not necessarily in that order. There is evidence, also, that some never get beyond the second stage. This process is short for some individuals and longer for others, and their experiences may include assimilation, integration, rejection, or deculturation (Pedersen, 1991).

Angélica's cultural adjustment began when she arrived in New Mexico to pursue her graduate degree. Her recollection of this process is still vivid in her use of details:

> When one comes to an unknown country, of course everything is different. You start out by learning how to behave, how to handle your body language. So it is an adjustment to this kind of everyday behavior. And on the other hand, it is an adjustment to the academic life and how to show the knowledge that you acquire little by little and how to put it in words, according to the academic tradition of the country.

For Angélica, developing her social and human relationships on and off campus was central in her process of cultural adjustment and academic development. I asked her what she considered important for survival in the academic world. She answered:

> I think it's the interpersonal relations that you can build into your personal and academic life. If you are able to establish a good connection or a good relationship, everything is easier. And in fact, I survived thanks to this, because I have been able to establish a good relationship with people and thus, many of the needs that I've had, I dare say 90% of them, I have overcome thanks to the support that people have given me. When you establish personal relationships, others respond to you and not to the institution or the bureaucracy. People respond because a human connection is established (...) To me, that's the key, communication with people and to be able to establish human relationships.

Angélica was entering a process of cultural adjustment, which is not always organized and manageable, "the adjustment to living in another culture presents a number of challenges. Primarily these are problems of acculturation, isolation, and alienation. But with time these diminish significantly as social networks are established" (Ziegler 1997, p. 2). It requires one to take risks and to trust those whom one at first does not know well. Although the process may seem chaotic and incidental, eventually a pattern begins to evolve. In Angélica's case she learned how to coexist with the unfamiliar by observing carefully the human activities around her; by gradually establishing a series of inter-personal contacts that gave her the confidence to move along in the process of adjustment. In time some of these contacts grew into mature, interdependent relationships and friendships. It was a blessing for Angélica when some of these friendships were based not only on the academic but centered also in her personal life: the daily routine of going to class, exchanging ideas with fellow students, and developing professional ties with her advisors and, in some cases, with other faculty members, as well. The process of integration benefited Angélica and those around her, and not surprisingly, she completed her doctoral degree.

III. Discussion

A single case is understandably idiographic in nature and inevitably requires a larger sample. From the analysis of Angélica's case and the review of the

literature common issues emerged persuading me to conclude that international students have significantly different experiences in American universities. Issues that commonly impact their academic lives include:

1. Second language problems (often for students who learned English shortly before their admission to graduate studies) such as barrier language that impede their engagement in academic dialogue with the same level of proficiency as United States students, a loss of depth in their oral and written communication, and the need to spend longer hours completing written assignments.
2. The quality of academic advisement received.
3. The availability of financial support.
4. The level of integration into their academic unit or program.
5. The level of cultural adjustment in their host country.

Although this is a limited study, my analysis provides an integrated and valuable understanding of academic life for an international graduate student in an American university. Angélica's journey from uncertainty and isolation to integration into her host country and academic unit was a continuous struggle–day by day, semester by semester, one challenge met and another just ahead. Angélica's statements led this investigator to dwell inductively on the concrete realities rather than to justify or verify a particular theory or model by applying it to her case. I think that McLaren (l999) correctly affirms that "while theoretical models help us to organize and select our perceptions, these also bracket or isolate portions of the phenomenal world and invariably distort reality by emphasizing certain aspects of reality to the exclusion of others" (p.15). It remains my conviction that the needs of international graduate students cannot be understood without listening attentively to the voices of those who have lived through the experience.

It was through the agency of Angélica's honest and eloquent voice that I found the path that led to my analysis and interpretation of her case. At no point did I fail to take into account Angélica's perspective on all matters we discussed. Angélica's narrative, although reflecting the inevitable risks and doubts of her early months in the program, clearly indicates that the program itself was able to meet her two basic needs, by providing highly personalized academic advisement and by consistently awarding her graduate assistantships. Because of such responsiveness and generosity, she was able to prevail in her struggle with a second language and devote her energies toward her integration into the academic program. Angélica's two advisors were indispensable to her academic development. The fact that both were familiar with the history and culture of her homeland, and both were bilingual, not only facilitated the communication, but reinforced her sociocultural capital.

Success in one case, however, does not assure success in all cases. Academic programs must be given the means to extend to every international student the same support that was given to Angélica. Attentiveness and generosity are virtues

that are manifested from within the institutional structure of a program on an everyday basis. Advisement, support, tracking and communication must be built into the program and scrupulously monitored by administrators, graduate advisers and other responsible personnel. If a program does not provide this, then all responsible persons in that program must be prepared to make the appropriate changes to fulfill its publicly stated policy–or take responsibility for allowing added hardships that will slow their students' progress, or even contribute to the abandonment of their studies.

The purpose of this study was to provide a representative voice for international students. The study describes a context wherein administrators, faculty, staff and American graduate students became familiar and more sensitive about needs that a particular international student confronted in the development of her academic life. I chose Angélica's case because in her story faculty and others can learn about the experience and struggle endured by many international students, especially those who learned English a short time before admission to graduate studies. This study will not have achieved its ultimate purpose, until the academic community becomes aware of the vital role they play in improving the opportunities and conditions for the success of their international graduate students.

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