

## **Stress Factors Impacting the Academic Performance of Saudi Students Studying in the U.S.: A Study of Student Perceptions**

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### **Abstract**

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*The purpose of this study was to examine the stressors that Saudi students experience while studying in the U.S. and their impact on academic performance. A survey was administered to 286 Saudi students enrolled at more than 90 colleges and universities in the U.S. The study found a considerable amount of stress as a consequence of cultural differences, language barriers, lack of social integration, a new academic environment, and inadequate orientation. All these stressors were found to affect academic performance. Recommendations include improving interactions between staff/administration and Saudi students, expanding programing for students and their families, creating opportunities for Saudi students to interact more with American colleagues in or outside class, improving the relevance of programs and courses, improving administrative support, creating quality mentorship relations, and designing effective orientation programs.*

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**Keywords:** International Students; Saudi Students; Stress Factors; Academic Performance; Study Abroad

### **1.1 Overview**

Worldwide technological development and transnational economic co-operation have transformed our modern world into a global village. The emerging globalization and an increased sense of global citizenship have led to major changes in academia (Crawford & Wang, 2016). The last two decades have witnessed an increased influx of international students into American and British universities. However, the increased influx of international students has initiated fierce competition in the global academic marketplace, as these students pay hefty fees and provide immeasurable social, cultural and academic benefits to the host country (Woodall et al. 2014). Eze and Ingelbedion (2015) reported that in U.K., each international student is worth £15,000, including fees and living expenses. American and British academic institutions are highly popular among international students. Since 1998, the international students' influx into American and British educational institutions has almost doubled. However, the international students coming from entirely different cultural backgrounds face challenges that directly affect their academic performance (Eze & Ingelbedion, 2015).

This study aimed to explore the issues faced by the Saudi students in American universities, analyze how these challenges affect their academic performance, and suggest strategies to resolve the identified concerns.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

Although the growing enrollment of international students offers large benefits to the host country and the host educational institution, the cultural shift, value conflict and major changes in the learning environment yield multiple challenges for international students (Orth, 2015). These wide-ranging factors affect the international students' academic performance, and in some cases, impact their self-confidence and perceptions towards the host country' academic environment. These challenges are more intense when a student comes from an entirely different culture (Robinson-Pant, 2009). The number of Saudi students studying American universities has increased considerably in recent years, reaching 53,000 in 2016-17 (IEE, 2017). Saudi Arabia ranks fourth in terms of student enrollments in the U.S. (after China, India, and South Korea). The international Saudi students regard the active communication with local American students crucial for understanding their culture and academic environment. Therefore, it is important for American universities to offer the best experience to international students in order to preserve their competitive advantage on the international stage. However, this effort requires an in-depth understanding of the multi-faceted factors that influence the international Saudi students' academic performance (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013).

The economic dependency of the U.S. universities on international students emphasize the need to address the challenges that Saudi students face. It is very important to understand the factors affecting the academic performance of Saudi students, since these students come from an entirely different cultural and academic background, and many enroll into undergraduate courses without benefitting from transition training (Orth, 2015). Although previous studies have explored the influences of different factors on Saudi students' academic performance (Abukhattala, 2013), more research is required to guide the American educational institutions and policymakers on how they can address the concerns related to academic performance and help international students accomplish their academic objectives at American universities. Many research studies suggest that international students are outperformed by local students due language barriers and cultural differences (Bailey, 2006). Some researchers argue that Saudi students face alienation and discrimination in western universities (Ghaffari, 2009). Many students fail to complete their studies due to language and cultural concerns (Williams & Johnson, 2011). It is evident from these studies that the language barriers along with economic and cultural issues affect the self-confidence of international Saudi students, and consequently influence their academic performance.

## 1.3 Research Purpose

The increased influx of international students in American universities, the growing economic dependency of higher education institutions on tuition and fees paid by international students, the fierce competition for international students, and the challenges faced by the Saudi students due to vast differences in academic and cultural backgrounds motivated the authors to explore the issues confronted by Saudi international students in American colleges and universities. The purpose of this study was to offer findings that can assist administrators and faculty at American universities in improving the study abroad experience of Saudi students.

## 1.4 Research Questions

This study sought to answer four research questions:

- 1) To what extent does stress caused by cultural differences impact the Saudi students' academic performance at American universities?
- 2) To what extent does stress caused by lack of social integration impact the Saudi students' academic performance at American universities?
- 3) To what extent does stress caused by a new academic environment impact the Saudi students' academic performance at American universities?
- 4) To what extent does stress caused by an inadequate orientation impact the Saudi students' academic performance at American universities?

## 1.5 Significance

The current study can assist the American educational institutions understand which factors affect the academic performance of international students. It can also help the international students coming from entirely different backgrounds achieve their academic objectives.

Additionally, it is hoped that the empirical results will offer important insights to the American policymakers regarding Saudi students' study abroad experience by identifying factors affecting their academic performance. This study can also be a valuable source for the Saudi Government and the Ministry of Education and can also help Saudi students become more comfortable with American universities and improve their academic performance while studying abroad.

## **2. Literature Review**

The review of theoretical and empirical literature has revealed various challenges that international students typically face when they enter an entirely different cultural and academic environment. For example, Tran (2011) noted that international students from Asian countries often face discrimination based on racial and ethnic grounds, which consequently affects their motivation to perform in the classroom. Houshmand et al. (2014) argued that racial discrimination has a direct influence on the international students' academic performance in Canadian universities. Mak et al. (2014) stated that international students face difficulty in understanding the foreign language accent, which consequently affects their discussions in the classroom.

Contending on the same note, Rienties et al. (2013) stated that unfamiliarity with the local cultural norms, values and learning environment makes the adjustment process difficult for international students. Lin and Scherz (2014) characterized the differences in the academic environments (home country compared to host country) result in unfamiliarity with the assessment procedures, pedagogical and andragogic practices and student-centered classroom environment. Yakunina et al. (2013) concluded that the orientation before and after arrival can significantly lessen the impact of cultural differences, however, Rienties et al. (2013) argued that the orientation is not effective strategy, until the student demonstrates the willingness to have an informal and open communication with the native students.

### **2.1. Impact on the Academic Performance**

Various studies have discussed the challenges that international students face when they enter a different cultural and/or academic environment (Lee, 2007; Al-Murshidi, 2014; Tan & Winkelman, 2014). However, limited empirical evidence is available to confirm the impact of those factors on the academic performance of students. Lee (2007) explored the influence of informal conversation of Saudi students with American counterparts and self-confidence on their academic performance. The results confirmed that open and friendly conversations with Americans lessen fear and anxiety, and consequently improve academic performance.

Al-Murshidi (2014) agreed and observed that oral communication and expression significantly influence the academic performance of non-native students. When students feel comfortable in the class, they actively participate in class discussions, resulting into improved grades. In a study of 100 international students studying in Australian universities, Tan and Winkelman (2014) empirically confirmed the impact of stress, personality traits and coping style on the academic performance of international students.

### **2.2. Cultural Differences**

Li et al. (2010) analyzed the impact of cultural shocks and cultural differences on the international students' academic performance. Their results revealed that students coming from Asian countries or regions whose culture is entirely different from the U.S.A and U.K. face difficulties due to cultural shock, which directly affects their academic performance. However, this negative influence could be minimized if students place high importance to cross-cultural learning, fulfilling their parents' expectations and healthy communication with the native peers. Rienties and Tempelaar (2013) agreed and concluded that students from Asian and Arab regions face more difficulties than other international students due to the cultural shock they experience. However, the impact of this cultural shock on academic performance varies from one student to another. Overall, the wide cultural differences negatively influence the international students' academic achievement. The empirical results confirmed the significant impact of the Hofstede cultural dimensions (uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and power distance) on social and academic adjustment. The above discussion suggests that when significant cultural differences exist between the home and the host country, a cultural shock influences the international students' ability to accomplish their academic objectives. Based on the above discussion, the underlying study hypothesizes that stress related to experienced cultural differences directly influences the academic performance of Saudi students while studying in American universities.

### **2.3. Stress Levels**

This independent variable shares some relevance with cultural differences, as inability to handle the cultural differences raises the stress level, and affects students' academic performance. Misra and Castillo (2004) empirically confirmed the effect of stress caused by different factors on the international students' academic performance. The researchers compared the American and international students, and concluded that international students perceive differently various stressors and react differently than the native students. The findings suggested the need to consider the stress arising from cultural differences while assessing gaps in academic performance. A recent empirical research conducted by Karaman and Watson (2017) also confirmed that international students face more stress than American students due to different factors and have less confidence to overcome the challenges they face due to reduced external locus of control.

The above discussion suggests that when stress levels are higher and students lack the confidence to handle stress, students' ability to accomplish their academic objectives in an entirely different cultural environment is negatively affected. The current study hypothesized that the level of stress (coming from various sources) directly influences the academic performance of Saudi students while studying in American universities.

### **2.4 Satisfaction with Academic Environment**

Adapting to a new academic environment can also cause significant stress, which in turn can affect the international students' academic performance. Rienties et al. (2012) showed that when students experience a transition from a predominantly teacher-centric to a student-centric academic environment, this change affects their ability to adjust. Similarly, Gu et al. (2010) proved this claim and observed that it is important to analyze the satisfaction of international students with their current academic environment compared to their previous academic environment, as this difference can affect their academic success. Other researchers concluded that the difference in faculty members' interaction and communication style between home and host countries influences the students' satisfaction with their academic environment, which consequently affects their academic performance (Gu et al., 2010).

The above discussion suggests that when international students perceive the academic environment entirely different from their home country academic environment, their ability to accomplish their academic objectives is affected. Based on the above discussion, the current study hypothesized that satisfaction with the new academic environment directly influences the academic performance of Saudi students while studying in American universities.

### **2.5. Language Barriers**

Among different predictors that influence the international students' academic performance, the language barrier is one of the most consequential and most extensively researched. The language barrier affects the students' ability to interact with faculty and their native peers. It also affects their ability to participate in classroom discussions (Misra & Castillo, 2004). However, the impact of the language barrier on academic performance is moderated by the students' willingness to learn and adapt to the new culture (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). This impact is also moderated by students' friendly relationships with native peers. Li et al. (2010) examined empirically the influence of language barriers on the academic performance of international students and their results revealed that students from Asian and Arab regions face more language barriers than students from European students while studying in American universities. Consequently, the perceived language barriers affect their ability to participate in classroom discussions.

The above discussion suggests that when language barriers are significant, the international students' ability to accomplish their academic objectives in an entirely different cultural environment is negatively affected. The current study hypothesized that language barriers directly influence the academic performance of Saudi students while studying in American universities.

### **2.6. Instructional delivery**

A change in the mode of instructional delivery is also an influential factor that affects the learning outcomes of international students while studying in physically and culturally different environments (Zhang, 2016). Most of the instructors teaching in Saudi educational institutions embrace a teacher-centered role whereby students obey instructions given by the teacher to broaden their knowledge in a lecture format (Akanwa, 2015).

In contrast, in most of the American educational institutions, a student-centered approach is more popular where the teacher acts as a facilitator and learners participate actively in the class (Wu et al., 2015). The transition from a teacher-centered academic environment to a student-centered academic environment can create significant challenges for international students.

Lin and Scherz (2014) commented that Asian international students studying in western higher education institutions find it difficult to adjust to an academic environment that offers unfamiliar modes of instructional delivery. Differences in the teaching methods can affect the international students' engagement in classroom. While corroborating these findings, Zhang (2016) noted that differences in the language and the cultural settings make the transition from teacher-centered to student-centered instructional approach more difficult. Akanwa (2015) advised instructors to customize their instructional approach in order to make the transition smoother for international students coming from different educational and cultural backgrounds. Based on these insights, the researcher hypothesized that stress related to differences in mode of instructional delivery (compared to the home country) influences the learning outcomes of Saudi students studying in the American higher education institutions.

### **2.7. Social integration**

After language barriers, social integration is one of the most widely discussed factors in the studies on international students. Researchers often argue that the initial cultural shock and language differences make the social integration difficult for international students (Rienties & Nolan, 2014). In many cases, low class participation has been cited as being caused by the students' inability to effectively integrate in different cultural and societal settings. Stromquist and Monkman (2014) noted that international students must prepare themselves to adjust in a different society with entirely different norms and values in order to have a fully productive experience. Campbell and Prins (2016) agreed and observed that international students' difficult social integration affects their academic performance.

However, friendship within and outside the class speeds up the integration process. Lee and Ciftci (2014) assessed the factors that make social integration difficult or easy, and concluded that multicultural personality, assertiveness, social support and academic self-efficacy influence the overall social integration process of international students in the American educational institutions. The researchers further concluded that a difficult social integration negatively influences the learning outcomes of students coming from different academic, cultural and social backgrounds (Lee & Ciftci, 2014).

Rienties and Nolan (2014) conducted a longitudinal study to examine how learning networks, friendship and social integration between host and international students influence the overall learning outcomes. Based on the empirical insights, the study concluded that friendship and wide learning networks positively influence social integration, which in turn improves the overall learning outcomes of international students studying in different universities (Rienties & Nolan, 2014). Based on these insights, the researcher hypothesized that the lack of social integration negatively influences the learning outcomes of Saudi students studying in American educational institutions.

### **2.8. Orientation Before and After Arrival**

A few studies have discussed the importance of training and orientation before and after travelling to the host institution (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). However, this variable has been mainly discussed in the context of organizational settings and executives travelling for international assignments (Koo Moon et al., 2012). In the academic context, comparatively less empirical evidence is available to prove the effect of orientation on international students' ability to adjust in the host country academic environment and successfully accomplish their academic objectives. By applying the findings from the business literature to international academic settings, the study hypothesized that orientation before and after arrival directly influences the academic performance of Saudi students while studying in American universities.

## **3. Methods**

This study employed a cross-sectional research design, using a web-based questionnaire to survey Saudi students who are studying at American universities. A convenience sample was used to select participants for the student survey.

A convenience sample is a type of nonprobability or nonrandom sampling where members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate are included for the purpose of the study. A total of 286 Saudi students studying at more than 90 universities and colleges across the United States comprised the sample for the survey.

The questionnaire that was developed for this study included a mix of open ended questions and Likert scale questions. The questions were grouped into the following categories: 1) cultural differences, 2) social integration, 3) academic environment, and 4) orientation before/after travel to the U.S. The last section of the survey was dedicated to demographic questions.

The survey underwent the review of multiple Saudi student organizations across the U.S., which approved and posted the survey on their social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp). More information about these organizations is available at the SACM

website: <http://www.sacmclubs.org/en/site/page/view/aboutsacmclubs>.

The sample comprised both undergraduate and graduate students. The demographic information of these participants is provided in Table 1. The table indicates that approximately two-thirds of the respondents who took the survey were graduate students and one third were undergraduates. A large majority of the students in the sample (82%) were supported financially through the Saudi Government Scholarship Program.

Table 1  
*Characteristics of the Sample*

Characteristic	%	N
<i>Degree Level</i>		
Undergraduate	32.49%	64
Graduate	67.51%	133
<i>Cumulative GPA</i>		
2.00 or lower	0.93%	2
2.01 - 2.50	6.02%	13
2.51 - 3.00	8.33%	18
3.01 - 3.50	21.30%	46
3.51 - 4.00	56.02%	121
Not Applicable, it is my first semester in the U.S.	7.41%	16
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	58.88%	126
Female	41.12%	88
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Single	38.89%	84
Married	59.26%	128
Divorced	1.85%	4
<i>Children</i>		
None	49.30%	106
One or More	50.70%	109
<i>Main Funding Source</i>		
Saudi Govt Scholarship Program	82.40%	192
Personal/Family Funds	7.30%	17
University Scholarship or Assistantship	7.30%	192
Other	3.00%	7

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Stress Related to Cultural Differences

The results indicated that 54% of students experienced stress associated with difficulties in understanding the American culture at least at times; 61% experienced difficulties with the English language, and 56% experienced difficulties in accustoming to the American food. Approximately 33% experienced stress related to the negative experience with discrimination of Muslim students, while 37% experienced some level of stress associated with feeling unsafe in the environment they live or go to school or caused by differences in dressing and apparel. (See Table 2).

Table 2

*Frequency of Stress Experienced Due to Cultural Differences*

Stress Factor	Never	Almost Never (less than an hour per week)	Some of the time (less than two hours per week)	Most of the time (three days per week)	Always (five days per week)	Mean	SD	N
Difficulties in understanding the American culture	23.08%	23.08%	39.16%	11.89%	2.80%	2.48	1.06	286
Difficulties with the English language	12.59%	26.22%	41.96%	14.34%	4.90%	2.73	1.02	286
Difficulties in accustoming to the American food	22.26%	21.91%	28.62%	18.37%	8.83%	2.70	1.25	283
Negative experience with discrimination of Muslim students	35.69%	31.45%	20.49%	7.42%	4.95%	2.14	1.13	283
Difficulties related to differences in dressing and apparel	42.14%	21.07%	22.86%	9.29%	4.64%	2.13	1.19	280
Feeling unsafe in the environment where students live or go to school.	40.99%	22.26%	18.73%	12.72%	5.30%	2.19	1.24	283
Difficulties related to religious differences	40.78%	24.11%	21.28%	9.22%	4.61%	2.13	1.18	282

*Note: Item means were calculated using the following Likert scale ratings: 1=Never, 2= Some of the time; 3=Most of the time, 5=Always.*

Approximately 60% of the surveyed students considered that the stress caused by cultural differences had negatively affected their academic performance. Of the students who had this opinion, however, only 7% thought that this type of stress had influenced their performance to a great extent. (See Table 3).

Table 3

*To what extent had the stress caused by cultural differences affected your academic performance?*

Answer	%	N
No impact	40.59%	110
To some extent	52.40%	142
To a great extent	7.01%	19
Total	100%	271

#### 4.2 Stress Related to Lack of Social Integration

The survey results also revealed that 66% of students experienced stress related to difficulties in making new friends at least some of the time; 47% had a negative experience with staff/administrators interactions, and 67% had trouble socializing with American students. Approximately 63% of students experienced some stress because of homesickness and feelings of loneliness and disconnect.

In addition, 53% of the students surveyed experienced feelings of stress due to the lack of social events for international students, 57% due to the lack of campus-sponsored social activities for international events and their families, and 67% because of the difficulty to find time to participate in social activities on campus. (See Table 4).

Table 4

*Frequency of Stress Experienced due to Lack of Social Integration*

Stress Factor	Never	Almost Never (less than an hour per week)	Some of the time (less than two hours per week)	Most of the time (three days per week)	Always (five days per week)	Mean	SD	N
Difficulties in making new friends	18.04%	16.08%	30.98%	23.53%	11.37%	2.94	1.25	255
Negative experience of interactions with the staff or administrators	21.74%	31.62%	28.85%	11.86%	5.93%	2.49	1.13	253
Difficulties in socializing with American students	14.29%	19.05%	28.97%	24.21%	13.49%	3.04	1.24	252
Homesickness	16.93%	19.69%	32.68%	17.72%	12.99%	2.90	1.25	254
The lack of social events for international students on campus	21.91%	24.70%	26.69%	15.14%	11.55%	2.70	1.28	251
Feelings of loneliness and disconnect	19.12%	18.33%	34.66%	14.34%	13.55%	2.85	1.27	251
The lack of campus-sponsored social activities for international students and their families	18.40%	24.80%	29.60%	16.80%	10.40%	2.76	1.23	250
Impossibility to find time to participate in social activities on campus	12.80%	20.00%	25.60%	27.60%	14.00%	3.10	1.24	250

*Note: Item means were calculated using the following Likert scale ratings: 1=Never, 2= Some of the time; 3=Most of the time, 5=Always.*

An estimated 66% of the surveyed students held the view that the stress caused by the lack of social integration affected their academic performance. Of these students, only 12% thought that this type of stress had impacted their performance to a great extent. The majority (54%) considered that this type of stress influenced their academic performance to some extent (See Table 5).



Table 5

*To what extent has the stress caused by social integration affected your academic performance?*

Answer	%	N
No impact	34.15%	84
To some extent	54.07%	133
To a great extent	11.79%	29
Total	100%	246

#### 4.3 Stress Related to the Academic Environment

According to the survey results, 68% of students experienced stress caused by a difficult curriculum at least at times; 50% experienced inadequate administrative/staff support from the department; 49% were concerned that their program of study might be irrelevant to their work upon return to their home country, and; 48% claimed they received insufficient administrative/staff support from the university.

Approximately 43% of students experienced stress because of difficulties in understanding how American universities are organized, 56% were stressed due to difficulties in building academic relationships with faculty, and 46% had trouble with understanding instructors in class (See Table 6).

Table 6

*Frequency of Stress Experienced due to the Academic Environment*

Stress Factor	Never	Almost Never (less than an hour per week)	Some of the time (less than two hours per week)	Most of the time (three days per week)	Always (five days per week)	Mean	SD	N
Difficult curriculum	15.09%	17.24%	39.22%	15.95%	12.50%	2.94	1.20	232
Concerned about the idea that my program of study might be irrelevant to my work upon return to the home country	24.35%	26.96%	26.96%	12.61%	9.13%	2.55	1.24	230
Inadequate administrative/staff support from the department	20.78%	29.44%	24.68%	16.02%	9.09%	2.63	1.23	231
Insufficient administrative/staff support from the university	21.40%	30.57%	25.33%	14.85%	7.86%	2.57	1.20	229
Difficulties in understanding how an American university works	23.14%	34.06%	20.96%	13.10%	8.73%	2.50	1.22	229
Difficulties in building academic relationships with the faculty	18.42%	25.44%	25.88%	21.05%	9.21%	2.77	1.23	228
Difficulties with understanding my instructors in class	19.38%	34.80%	31.28%	12.78%	1.76%	2.43	1.00	227

*Note: Item means were calculated using the following Likert scale ratings: 1=Never, 2= Some of the time; 3=Most of the time, 5=Always.*

An estimated 66% of the surveyed students considered that the stress caused by their new academic environment had affected their academic performance. Of these students, only 20% thought that this type of stress had impacted their performance to a great extent (See Table 7).

Table 7

*To what extent has the stress caused by the academic environment affected your academic performance?*

Answer	%	N
No impact	34.23%	76
To some extent	45.95%	102
To a great extent	19.82%	44
Total	100%	222

#### 4.4 Stress Related to Inadequate Orientation

Approximately half of the respondents reported stress associated with difficulties in accessing information about studying in the U.S. at least at times. Fifty-eight percent had limited training to improve their English skills, and 54% experienced difficulties in accessing adequate assistance with paperwork (for example, applying for a social security card and/or driver license). In addition, an estimated 51% experienced stress related to the inadequate assistance with housing, and 46% were stressed due to inadequate assistance with locating schools or daycare for their children. (See Table 8).

Table 8

*Frequency of Stress Experienced due to Inadequate Orientation*

Question	Never	Almost Never (less than an hour per week)	Some of the time (less than two hours per week)	Most of the time (three days per week)	Always (five days per week)	Mean	SD	N
Difficulties in accessing information about studying in the US	22.37%	27.85%	28.77%	12.79%	8.22%	2.57	1.20	219
Limited training to improve English	18.26%	23.29%	29.22%	14.61%	14.61%	2.84	1.29	219
Inadequate assistance with the paperwork (e.g. social security card or driver license)	20.74%	25.35%	25.35%	13.36%	15.21%	2.77	1.33	217
Inadequate assistance with housing	21.20%	27.65%	23.04%	13.36%	14.75%	2.73	1.33	217
Inadequate assistance with finding schools or daycare for children	33.03%	20.64%	18.35%	12.84%	15.14%	2.56	1.44	218

*Note: Item means were calculated using the following Likert scale ratings: 1=Never, 2= Some of the time; 3=Most of the time, 5=Always.*

According to the results, approximately 61% of the surveyed students considered that the stress caused by an inadequate orientation affected their academic performance. About 19% thought that this type of stress impacted their academic performance to a great extent. (See Table 9).

Table 9

*To what extent has the stress caused by the inadequate orientation affected your academic performance?*

Answer	%	N
No impact	38.86%	82
To some extent	42.18%	89
To a great extent	18.96%	40
Total	100%	211

#### 4.5 Discussion of Results

This study revealed that Saudi students studying at the U.S. universities do experience stress related to cultural differences. These students tend to feel culturally isolated because of the challenges they face in interacting with other culture and learning the English language. In addition, the findings point to the cultural struggles that Saudi students experience before they assimilate into American life in terms of their successful learning. This finding supports the existing literature; for instance, Woodall et al. (2014) found that language was the most significant barrier for most Saudi students at American universities.

This finding is vital since it emphasizes the importance of teaching English to Saudi students in their home country as early as possible. According to Yakunina et al. (2013), orienting and guiding students before their admission to foreign universities will play an instrumental role in boosting the adjustment to the host country. Improving language skills should be a key part of this orientation process. Overall, the literature shows that the poor academic performance of international students is caused by an inadequate understanding of the language and the challenges associated with building social relationships.

Second, this study indicated that Saudi students face significant challenges in establishing social relationships in their host country. For instance, 66% of the respondents have a challenge in establishing social interactions with new friends. This finding suggests that, because of differences in cultures and languages, Arab students find it challenging to interact with other students and members of the faculty and staff. Oftentimes, the challenge of establishing social relationships could also be caused by the discrimination that some of the Arab students perceive. Earlier research conducted by Rienties et al. (2013) asserted that social integration is one of the most challenging aspects for international students, especially because of the low engagement they face in the new culture. In line with this finding, Stromquist and Monkman (2014) emphasize that it is vital for international students to prepare themselves to fit into different cultures with the view of developing positive social relationships. These findings emphasize the significance of preparing students to succeed in the 'global village.' Therefore, certain challenges with social interactions are normally expected because of wide cultural differences; however, they can be mitigated by the early preparation for such issues.

Third, this study found that a majority of Saudi students experience a number of challenges in the U.S. universities related to differences in the academic environment. The main challenge is associated with the inability to understand how American universities are organized and function. For instance, international students have to deal with issues that they did not expect to appear in the program or have challenges with understanding the curriculum. The stress associated with the thought of the applicability of the academic programs to the career field in their home country is also significant. That is, students lack confidence in their ability to land good jobs after graduation; these thoughts can become another source of stress. In addition, support from the faculty and administration is always a significant motivation for international students to achieve academic success, without experiencing stress. Similarly, in the recent literature, Gu et al. (2010) noted that international students should live in a friendly environment, so that their satisfaction and academic performance can be enhanced. Rienties et al. (2012) also emphasized the difficulties that these students have with the transition from their home to a new learning environment. The transition is always challenging especially because international students move to a new country where they are unfamiliar with the organization of the higher education institutions. This change affects their academic performance because of the stress that they suffer because of this unfamiliarity. Both the existing literature and the findings of the current research confirm that stresses in the new learning environment lead to unsatisfactory academic performance for international students. This finding suggests the importance of developing a supportive learning environment for international students.

Lastly, the study revealed that, when they arrive to the U.S., Saudi students encounter difficulties in locating information, finding housing and schools or daycare for their children, and have limited opportunities to improve English. These are important sources of stress for Saudi students and they are typically caused by inadequate orientation programs. According to these findings, inadequate information provided in orientations can hinder the extent to which international students assimilate into their new environments in the host country. It is vital for students to possess the required information or know where to find it in order to have an opportunity to adjust to their new environment and prevent the development of stress and its consequences. Zhang and Goodson (2011) support the findings of the current study by sharing the view that training and orientation are critical for students who move to foreign countries to study. Orientation is important because it presents the needed information in terms of expectations that are to be met once they arrive in the new country. More so, an effective orientation gives these students the opportunity to gain confidence about their new environments and teaches them how to handle the unexpected events that might arise in their new environments. Therefore, the findings of this study are helpful in advocating for a more effective orientation of students, before their departure to the host country.

Several recommendations emerge as a result of this study. These include the need to improve interactions between the staff/administrators and Saudi students, expanding programming and social events for Saudi students and their families, increasing efforts either in or outside the class for the creation of opportunities for Saudi students to interact with American fellows (i.e., assigning Saudi students to work alongside American students on group projects), improving the relevance of degree programs and courses for Saudi students by customizing assignments and projects that have relevance to the home country, providing adequate administrative support to Saudi students, developing quality mentorship relations, and designing effective orientation programs both before and after arriving in the U.S.

## Conclusions

Overall, based on the findings of the study, it could be concluded that Saudi students face numerous challenges that must be addressed holistically by different stakeholders. These challenges range from cultural differences and language barriers to inadequate orientation programs. It is evident that more is to be done in terms of helping Saudi students accommodate and overcome the stresses that they face in their new academic environment. This approach will contribute to improved academic performance and social integration for the Saudi students studying in the U.S. Leaving these problems unaddressed will be rather disadvantageous to international students and their host universities since the status quo might discourage new applicants from going to study in the U.S.

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