SAUDI STUDENTS’ EXPECTATIONS, MOTIVATIONS, AND EXPERIENCES AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-LA CROSSE

A Chapter Style Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Education- Professional Development

Abdulrhman Almotery

College of Liberal Studies
Master of Education- Professional Development

December 2009
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Abdulrhman Almotery

We recommend acceptance of this thesis in partial fulfillment of the candidate's requirements for the degree for the degree of Master of Education.

The candidate has completed the oral defense of the thesis.

Robert Krajewski, Ed.D.
Thesis Committee Chairperson

Margarita Olivas, Ph.D.
Thesis Committee Member

Eric Kraemer, Ph.D.
Thesis Committee Member

Gary Willhite, Ph.D.
Graduate Program Director

Thesis accepted

Vijendra K. Agarwal, Ph.D.
Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs
ABSTRACT


This qualitative study investigated Saudi students’ expectations, motivations, and experiences at the University of Wisconsin –La Crosse. The study explored the following: First we investigated Saudi students’ academic/social expectations prior to arrival at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. Secondly, we explored these students’ motivations in coming to the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. Finally, we investigated these students’ experiences at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, including student/faculty interactions, interactions with their colleague male/female students, and their involvement in on-campus activities. Participants comprise four female (undergraduate) and nine male (six undergraduate/three graduate) currently enrolled students in both undergraduate and graduate programs. Each student has studied more than two years in the U.S. The constant comparative method of data analysis had been adopted by the researcher to analyze the interview data. Participants’ expectations were met in most cases, and families with friends were their prime motivation to enter the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. Participants’ academic and social experiences were positive with few exceptions. Recommendations were made for both students and faculty in addition to further research on Saudi students’ studying abroad experiences.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE PAGE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SIGNATURE PAGE</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

- Introduction: 1
- Statement of the Problem: 3
- Purpose of the Study: 4
- Importance of the Study: 5
- Chapter Summary: 6

## CHAPTER 2: DEFINITIONS AND KEY AUTHORS

- Definitions: 7
- Key Authors: 9

## CHAPTER 3: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- The Islamic Religion in Saudi Arabia: 12
- Saudi Arabian Educational Systems and Curriculum: 15
  - Introduction: 15
  - General Education: 16
  - Primary Education: 16
  - Middle Education: 17
  - High School: 17
  - Adult Education: 17
  - Special Education: 17
Girls’ Education...............................................................................................18
Vocational Education..........................................................................................18
Universities and Colleges.....................................................................................18
Saudi Arabian Curriculum....................................................................................19
The United States and Saudi Arabian Relationship.............................................19
Pre-9/11................................................................................................................20
Post-9/11................................................................................................................22
Acculturation Theory and International Student Sojourners.............................24
Saudi Arabian International Student Experiences..............................................30
Chapter Summary................................................................................................33

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY .............................................................................35
Research Design...................................................................................................35
Participants..........................................................................................................36
Instrument of the Study.......................................................................................36
Interview Data Collection Procedure.................................................................36
Data Analysis Procedure.....................................................................................38
Confidentiality......................................................................................................39
Chapter Summary...............................................................................................39

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS ..........................................................................................41
Educational and Social Expectations...................................................................42
Academic Expectations.......................................................................................41
Social Expectations............................................................................................44
Motivation for Study in the U.S..........................................................................48
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Expectation-Related Conclusions

Expectation-Related Recommendations

Motivation-Related Conclusions

Motivation-Related Recommendations

Challenging Experiences -Related Conclusions

Experience-Related Recommendations

Further Study

REFERENCES

APPENDICES
# LIST OF APPENDICES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APPENDIX</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Institutional Review Board Approval</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Interview Questions</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. E-mail to Participants</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Beginning in 1928, the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia began to provide thousands of Saudi students scholarships affording them opportunities to study in the United States of America (USA) and other countries. At first, Lebanon and Egypt were geographically as far away from home as Saudi students were willing to study. Then in 1951 the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM) was established in New York City in order to meet the academic and cultural needs of Saudi students wanting to study in the United States (U.S.).

During that year, forty-eight Saudi students officially enrolled in universities and colleges in the U.S. By 1984, the main SACM office was located in Washington, D.C, with four supported branches in Los Angeles, Denver, Chicago, and Houston. The supported branches were all closed due to new strategies (SACM, 2009). From the very start, the goal for sending students to study in other countries has been for the acquisition of knowledge and useful skills that prepare the students to assist in improving the economic, social, and political development of their home country (SACM, 2009).

Since 1951 the U.S. has been the first priority of Saudi students studying abroad, with thousands of them attending and graduating from American universities prior to the 9/11. After 9/11 the number of international students attending U.S. universities and
colleges declined. However, the most noticeable student populations dropping out were Saudi Arabian students, whom, as a result of strict visa regulations and safety concerns, sought admission to universities located in European countries (SACM, 2009). Consequently, in the 2002/03 academic year Saudi students’ enrollment dropped 25.2% and continued to decline until 2005/06.

In 2005, a new era of the Saudi Arabia/United States relationship began as a consequence of negotiations between King Abdullah (King of Saudi Arabia) and President Bush resulting in an increase in the number of Saudi students seeking to attend American colleges and universities (SACM, 2009). Thus, in 2005/06, the number of Saudi students enrolled in U.S. universities rose 14% from the previous academic year to a total of 3,448.

Although the new Saudi scholarship program, best known as the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, has given both males and females opportunities to study in China, Japan, Germany, New Zealand, Australia, United Kingdom, Canada, France, and Spain, just to name a few, the majority of Saudis prefer to attend U.S. institutions of higher learning. Hence, in the 2006/07 academic year the number of Saudi students in the U.S increased dramatically by 128.7% and further increased by 25.2% in 2007/08. The program provides 15,000 scholarships at all higher education levels in the U.S and 3,000 in Asian countries (SACM, 2009).

Currently Saudi Arabia is the ninth-leading place of origin for students coming to the United States and is ranked first among Middle Eastern countries, exclusive of Turkey, in number of students studying in the United States. According to the Saudi
Arabian Cultural Mission (2009), of the total number of Saudi students enrolled in U.S universities during the 2007/08 academic year, 58.5% held undergraduate status, 23.4% were graduate students, seven percent (7.0%) were in optional practical training, and one percent (1.1%) were listed as “other.”

**Statement of the Problem**

International students who are enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UW-L) have different expectations, motivations, experiences, and challenges in their new educational environment. Although all international students have difficulty adjusting to their new environments, it stands to reason that Saudi Arabian students may have a more difficult time transitioning to their new environments. A major reason they may encounter more difficulties is that unlike most international students, Saudi Arabian students come from a traditional, single-sex educational system. In other words, men and women attend separate, yet equal, academic institutions throughout their academic careers.

Furthermore, while each Saudi student has individually based motivation and personal goals, the adjustment to the U.S. educational system may be more problematic for women than it is for men as a consequence of attending co-educational universities and colleges for the first time in their lives. Additionally, both Saudi female and male students experience difficulty in acculturation (Al-Jasir, 1993), since they have little exposure to U.S. citizens and mainstream cultural norms prior to coming to the U.S. Thus, their immediate immersion into the U.S. university system places them at an extreme disadvantage in that they face different expectations than they are used to in the
Saudi Arabian educational system. Due to the differences in the educational system, culture, and communication styles between the U.S and Saudi Arabia, it may be that U.S. educators may be adding to the challenges Saudi students face during the acculturation processes.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to determine the expectations, motivations and experiences of Saudi students enrolled at (UW-L). Since the population of Saudi students attending University of Wisconsin (UW) System universities (and in the U.S in general) is growing, this study is necessary to better meet the needs of this population, as well as to provide insight about their culture, educational background, and acculturation challenges on predominately European-American U.S. university and college campuses.

As noted above, a major challenge for Saudi students is attending co-educational systems after having attended single-sexed and culturally traditional Saudi educational system. In order to better understand why they would choose to study in a country so different from their own, this study will first investigate their academic/social expectations prior to arrival at UW-L. Secondly, this study will explore these students’ motivations for coming to the UW-L. In an effort to assist administrators, staff, and faculty to better meet the needs of Saudi students, this study will also investigate these students’ experiences as they work to acculturate to UW-L cultural norms. This will be accomplished through exploring students/faculty interactions, interactions with male/female students, and involvement in on-campus activities.
Importance of the Study

Many international students enter the U.S with preconceived ideas about social life; when their expectations counter reality they get traumatized. Many international students’ unrealistic expectations are compounded when there is an absence of university officials who can assist in the transition to the host country. Hence, they tend to rely on other students from the same country for mostly everything, including social and academic issues (Klomegah, 2006).

Saudi students often feel rejected by citizens of the host country, resulting in more hardship in terms of adapting to the new educational environment. As noted earlier, after King Abdullah and President Gorge Bush met in 2005 to rebuild the relationship between their respective countries, the number of Saudi students has increased dramatically throughout the U.S.; yet, American universities continue to lack the information necessary to assist in the academic success of Saudi students. American faculty and academic staff need to know more about the Saudi educational system, Islam, Arab culture, and acculturation challenges Saudi students may face as they acculturate to U.S educational systems.

This study will add to a growing number of studies exploring challenges faced by international students from around the world, while helping to fill the gap in research particular to Saudi students on U.S. university and college campuses. When taking into account the tremendous challenges international students face when studying abroad one cannot deny the need for research on the subject. Due to the lack of previous research on Saudi students in the U.S, this study is important to the educators in the U.S universities,
and especially at UW-L where the number of Saudi students attending the university is growing.

Chapter Summary

The number of Saudi students is increasing rapidly in the U.S. in general and particularly in the UW system. These students have certain needs as international students first, and as Saudi students second. These students come from a different educational system and cultural background. This study will provide UW-L faculty, staff, and administrators with essential information about these students’ cultural practices, educational background, and acculturation challenges. This goal will be accomplished through investigating the expectations, motivations, and experiences of participants as they seek to accomplish their academic goals at UW-L. Although these findings are particular to the UW-L Saudi students participating in this study, they provide insights that can assist in serving the needs of other Saudi students located on predominately European-American U.S. university and college campuses.
CHAPTER 2

DEFINITIONS AND KEY AUTHORS

Definitions

To assist the reader in understanding terminology that may be foreign to them in this study, I have included definitions of key words used within this thesis.

**Abrahamic Religion**- All religions that follow the teachings of Abraham, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

**Academic Needs**- Concerns that involve studying and writing skills, reading, speaking in class, using the library, adjusting to courses and professors, and learning about university and community services.

**Allah**- The Arabic name of God, used by all Arab people including Jewish, Christian, and Muslim people.

**Culture Shock**- New situations, jobs, relationships, or perspectives requiring a role adjustment and a new identity.

**Hadeeth**- All of the words or deeds that Prophet Muhammad said or did in his lifetime.

**King Abdullah Scholarship Program**- King Abdullah Scholarship Program is a governmental program, which gives opportunity for Saudi students to study across the globe.
**King Abdulaziz**- The founder of Saudi Arabia; he was born in 1876 and died in 1953.

**King Fahd**- The fourth king of Saudi Arabia (1920-2005); his father appointed him Education Minister in 1953.

**Muhammad**- The founder of the religion of Islam; he was born in Mecca (Saud Arabia, 570 AD). Muslims believe that he was the last messenger from God, and they follow his deeds and words. In 632 AD he died after establishing the first Islamic country in Arabia.

**Mosque**- The place of worship for Muslims; it is attended five times a day and is also used to educate people.

**Quran**- The central religious text of Islam; it is read and memorized by Muslims. Muslims believe the Quran was revealed to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel.

**Saudi Arabia**- The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia occupies four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula; Islam is the official religion upon which all laws are based.

**Saudi Students**- Students who are originally from Saudi Arabia and have studied in the Saudi educational system for their K-12 schooling.

**Social Needs**- Concerns about cultural differences, friendships, and the interactions with individuals both in school and the community.

**Sunnah**- The way and manners of Prophet Muhammad, including his actions, words, and religious practice.
Key Authors

Among the many scholars I used in this study, the following is a brief listing of the key authors (name, field of study, and school) that inform this study.

Weaver, Gary- In the past forty years Dr. Weaver worked as faculty member in the School of International Service at American University in Washington, DC. Each year he presents more than 100 lectures, training seminars, and workshops to many universities, professional organizations, and governmental agencies within the U.S and abroad. His topics of study include cultural shock, cultural diverse community, and cross-cultural negotiation. He published many books such as “This Cutthroat College Generation” and American Identity Movements and Understanding and Coping with Cross-Cultural Adjustment

Asmar, Christine- This Professor is currently in Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne, Australia. She specializes in researching with Muslim students in Western higher education systems. Dr. Asmar published one book: Doing Postgraduate Research in Australia, coauthored three books, and wrote more than ten articles.

Achoui M. Mustapha- This professor is in the Department of Management and Marketing at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, Saudi Arabia. He has written and published more than 20 research studies related to the Saudi family, Saudi students’ motivation, Saudi values and Arab life style.

Dina Birman- This associate professor is in the Department of Psychology at the University of Illinois, Chicago. Her research specialties include (a) acculturation
and adjustment of refugee and immigrant adolescents, adults, elderly, and families; (b) mutual accommodation of newly arrived refugee students and schools, and the development of school-based interventions; and (c) refugee mental health services for diverse refugee children, adults, and families.
CHAPTER 3

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to present a review of the literature related to the participating Saudi students’ cultural and religious backgrounds, Saudi Arabian education and educational systems, a history of U.S. pre-/post-911 relationships between the U.S. and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, relevant international student acculturation research findings, and past research of Saudi international students. In short, this chapter reviews the following:

- Islam religion
- Saudi Arabian Educational Systems and Curriculum
- Pre-/Post-9/11 United States and Saudi Arabian relationship
- Acculturation theory and international student sojourners
- Saudi Arabian International Student Experiences
The Islamic Religion in Saudi Arabia

Islam varies by branch, country, and culture and has different interpretations with different Muslims revering different religious leaders. Since the Quran’s injunctions are open to many interpretations, Islamic laws are practiced differently in different countries; for instance, the practice of Islam in Saudi Arabia is different from the practice in elsewhere. In other words, Muslims follow their scholars and their interpretations which can be also different from one another (Carpente, 2001).

In this research, the information provided about Islam is drawn from Islam as practiced in Saudi Arabia. The religion, therefore, cannot be generalized as to apply these specific practices and beliefs to Muslims from other countries. Islam requires that individuals educate themselves: Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave. This education can include religion, politics, science, human rights, gender regulations, freedoms, and individual’s relationship with his society (Halstead, 2007). Islam is a monotheistic, Abrahamic religion. Translated in English, “Islam” means submission, surrender.

Islam is composed of three main areas: utterance, faith, and deeds. Education’s first propose in Islam is to teach people to believe in Allah as the one and only God, and Muhammad as his messenger. Islam not only addresses religious issues, but also social issues including family, society, politics, ethics, the legality of situations, human rights, and so on. Islam asks each individual to teach himself in religious studies (El Azayem & Hedayat-Diba, 1994).
The everyday cultural practices of Saudi students are affected by their religious beliefs, among other factors. According to the Islamic point of view, every Muslim should completely obey his Lord, Messenger, and the person in authority, like the king. The culture in Saudi Arabia is a collectivist culture that cannot be understood without fully understanding Islam.

In Islam, as practiced in Saudi Arabia, men are the leaders of the family. Although not viewed by all in this manner, the majority of mainstream Saudi Arabians do not view the role of the male as leader as a form that denies rights to women, but rather puts more responsibility onto the men in terms of providing all needs of the family including shelter, food, clothing, etc. Women in Saudi Arabia are encouraged to work but have the exclusive responsibility to take care of the family (Al-Hibri & Habti, 2006). Women have their right under Islam to be educated as well as men. (El Azayem & Hedayat-Diba, 1994).

Islam prohibits racial discrimination among all people in the world (Halstead, 2007). This belief is one reason why some people of varying cultures around the world turn to Islam. Additionally, as taught by the Quran and the messenger Muhammad, establishing good relationships with people of other religions is highly important (Asani, 2003). Muslims should respect others’ religion and never look down at or discriminate against any religion.

Although there are restrictions based on Islam imposed on women in Saudi Arabia when it comes to gender relations, for many living in the U.S., every day life activities are not restricted except when they break Islamic law or others’ rights; therefore
the culture of peoples of Islam might change from time to time and from country to country. For example, religiously and culturally, a Saudi female is not permitted to be alone with strange men. As a result Saudi female students in the U.S. are accompanied by a male family member as a condition of being given the governmental scholarship. The debate about the hijab is a controversial topic among religion scholars, feminists, and women, in addition to governmental laws. As women from different religions convert to Islam they begin wearing the hijab even when it is not required by the country, such as the U.S. On the other hand, feminists, including some Muslims, claim that it is not necessary since the custom has more traditional roots more than religious and it restricts women from gender relations (Carpente, 2001).

The Sunnah is the second curriculum after the holy book (the Quran) used in Islam and it teaches what Prophet Muhammad said or did in his lifetime. Muslims try to imitate Muhammad’s actions and way of life. The Sunnah is a strong curriculum in Islam that stemmed from the writers who transcribed the biography of Prophet Muhammad, including his death (Aldeeb, 1996). “Hadeeth” is the name of his biography that includes his teachings and is read by most people. The Hadeeth is taught in the Islamic curriculum as the second book besides the Quran.
Saudi Arabian Educational Systems and Curriculum

Introduction

Education in Islam is very important; every single person regardless of their sex is required in Islam to educate themselves (Halstead, 2007). In Saudi Arabia men and women receive an equal education, but in order to eliminate harassment of women, they are not allowed in the same school. This is carried over into many other activities in life, such as in the Mosques or at formal dinners. Female education in Saudi Arabia has always been taught by mothers or female teachers, whether it was at home in early Islamic generations, or at private schools nowadays. For the most part the curriculum in Saudi education is the same in every school, with a few exceptions for female schools (El-Sanabary, 1994). For instance, there are no physical activities in female school.

Modern Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 by King Abdulaziz bin Abdelrahman Al-Saud. In that time, education was not accessible for everyone, and was mostly related to religious education. According to the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, “The objectives of Saudi educational policy are to ensure that education becomes more efficient, to meet the religious, economic and social needs of the country and to eradicate illiteracy among Saudi adults” (Ministry of Education, 2009). In 1953, there was a reform of the education in the country with the founding of the Ministry of Education by King Fahd, who is called the father of the modern Saudi educational system. This system allows free education for everyone and for all educational levels, in addition to thousands of scholarships to allow students to study around the world (Krieger, 2007).
There are various types of educational systems in Saudi Arabia, with each segregated by sex as below:

**General Education**

Kindergarten: Children start at the age of five, but can begin as early as two years of age. There are three levels within the kindergarten level, which include infant groups (four years old), nursery (four to five years old), and preliminary (five to six years old). Until the end of the preliminary level, kindergarten is considered a sort of child “daycare”, or care system. There are also special programs offered for students who are “gifted”. Their class day generally runs from 8:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. (Ministry of Education, 2009).

**Primary Education**

Primary Education begins at the age of six. This runs from 7:00-11:00 a.m. Here we see the formation of the curriculum in which Arabic, mathematics, geography, science, and art education are introduced. There are major differences in the education of boys and girls. Early on, girls are guided to a more home economics route while the boys enjoy physical education (which is not offered for the girls). Students at the primary level must pass in all areas appropriate to their sex to “graduate” from the primary level; these exams are nationally standardized. The school year consists of two semesters, including a two-week exam period. Students begin to learn the English language at this level (Ministry of Education, 2009).
Middle Education

Students are now at age’s 12-15 years old. English is now a required subject with an increase in the number of classes compared to primary (Ministry of Education, 2009).

High School

The last stage of general education is high school, which is three years. Students are in school from 7:30 a.m.-1:00 p.m. The first year generally consists of “general education” classes. After this first year, students begin to focus on different fields in which they choose to study. Fields include science, arts, economic, administrative, medical, and engineering (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Adult Education

The Adult Education in Saudi Arabia is committed to provide educational opportunities to all illiterate citizenship. There are well-established, large numbers of adult education schools in every part of the country. The Kingdom's literacy rate is above 90% for men, and just over 70% for women (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Special Education

Special Education provides educational opportunities for special needs students. In general special education students have their own school called Hope Institute for Special Education. Blind, deaf, physically and mentally handicapped students are attending these institutes for free. In addition, older handicapped people can attend other institutes (Ministry of Education, 2009).
Girls’ Education

Girls’ Education is providing an educational opportunity for all Saudi Arabian girls. This education includes kindergarten through 12th grade (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Vocational Education

Vocational Education in Saudi Arabia offers a golden opportunity for those who have the desire to work after middle school. Training programs for three years grant students certificates to start their own businesses. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs supports and operates most of the Kingdom's vocational training centers, in addition to the higher institutes of technical education (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Universities and Colleges

Higher education in Saudi Arabia includes seven universities for men and women with several colleges for women, an institute of public administration for men, in addition to 17 teacher-training colleges for men. The Ministry of Higher Education regulates six of the seven universities. The seventh, the Islamic University of Medina, is administered by the Council of Ministers (Ministry of Education, 2009). Almost all of higher education is funded by the government, which provides financial aid and free housing for all students. They also provide meals, transportation and books at a subsidized cost.
**Saudi Arabian Curriculum**

Saudi Arabian curriculum does not include any anti-Islamic idea. The foundation of the curriculums based on four resources (El-Sanabary, 1994): 1) Islam and Arabic language; 2) social, economic, and environmental conditions; 3) advances in science and technology, and 4) the Saudi developmental needs.

These policies have been consistent throughout the educational system, but have been modified depending on the global situation (Al-Mermish, 2002). The objectives in the curriculum include, but are not limited to; Islamic law, cognitive development, skills, scientific reasoning, moral development, social behavior and habits, and an appropriate social values system (Prokop, 2003).

The educational system in Saudi Arabia, for example, requires students to memorize a whole page of books such as the Koran, or poetry. A comprehensive exam is required to graduate from high school; the Ministry of Education sends these exams to all schools in the country (Flaitz etd, 2003). Students in the Saudi high schools are required to make a strong decision for their future by choosing to study Art or Science; students are encouraged to make this decision before they finish their first year in high school (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Teachers are highly respected by students; for example, students cannot interrupt teachers at all. Students must raise their hands to answer questions or leave the class; teachers have the right to ask students to leave the class, even in higher educational
institutions. Saudi students have a formal relationship with their teachers, in or out of school environments (Sami Almarshad, personal communication, May 2, 2009).

The United States and Saudi Arabia Relationship

Pre-9/11

According to the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington, D.C (1996) the root of the U.S.-Saudi relationship has always been oil. This relationship goes back nearly seven decades. King Abdul Aziz, the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, gave permission to Standard Oil of California to explore for oil in Saudi Arabia in 1933 (Branson, 2007). This company became one of the significant oil companies in the Middle East. The company's mission was to explore Saudi Arabia for potential oil reserves. After a few years, Standard Oil of California had agreed to merge with several companies in Saudi Arabia (Branson, 2007).

On May 1, 1939, King Abdul Aziz boarded the tanker D.G. Scofield in Ras Tanura to turn the valve that let the first barrel of Saudi oil enter a tanker for export (Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington, D.C, 1996). In 1948, the joint venture was known as ARAMCO – the Arabian American Oil Company. ARAMCO, which is the largest oil corporation in the world, became one of the most important U.S.-Saudi collaborations. Americans bought Saudi Arabian oil, and Saudis bought American technology, including planes, weapons, education, and security. From this exchange, the U.S-Saudi relationship was born and expanded bringing spectacular success to the U.S.-Saudi relationship.
In addition to economic ties, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States proceeded to develop a political relationship. In 1945, King Abdul Aziz met President Franklin D. Roosevelt for the first time at the Great Bitter Lake in Egypt. Branson (2007) wrote that there were several reasons behind this meeting. Oil was clearly a very significant factor in this meeting since its importance had been shown earlier in World War II. Another result of the meeting was that Saudi Arabia thereafter permitted the Allies to utilize Saudi Arabian airspace. Clearly, this meeting drew a strategic future for both countries. As noted by Klare (2004) who wrote “President Franklin Roosevelt declared that the defense of Saudi Arabia was a vital interest to the United States” (p. 33).

Since the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States had been in alliance, the two countries had signed an agreement that allowed for the U.S. to construct a military base in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia in 1949 (Branson, 2007). The U.S.-Saudi relationship was under a lot of strain during the Arab-Israeli War. Since the United States had given its support to Israel throughout the war, the Saudi Arabian government was not pleased with this action. Smitha (2002) noted that as result of the American support of Israel, Saudi Arabia's King Faisal announced an embargo on oil to the United States in 1973. Consequentially, the Arab-Israeli War of 1973 spawned the 1973 oil crisis. King Faisal's decision influenced the U.S. military strategy in Vietnam. Nevertheless, King Faisal later agreed to discreetly provide oil to the U.S. In 1974, the Arab-Israel war ended and the oil embargo was lifted.

The most recent war in which the United States and Saudi Arabia were allied was the Gulf War in 1991 (Branson, 2007). After the Iraqi military invaded Kuwait, the
Saudi Arabian government feared for its safety. In response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia requested that the United States intervene militarily. The United States responded to the Saudi’s call, which led to a coalition of western forces participating in Operation Desert Storm. Beside the cooperative military operations between the U.S. and the Saudi army, this war demonstrated the mutual respect between the two countries (U.S. Department of State, 2009).

The U.S.-Saudi relationship has included political, military, and economic ties that have fostered interpersonal relationships between Americans working and living in Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabia’s citizens. The Harvard International Review (2006) has shown that in the 1930s Americans who initially came to Saudi Arabia to explore Saudi oil fields were the basis for the relationship between the two governments. Saudis have since come to the United States to experience American culture and study in different academic fields.

Post-9/11

As a result of the fifteen Saudis who were involved in 9/11, it may seem reasonable that some American rage has focused on Saudi Arabia. For the first time in the history of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, Saudi citizens and their government were put under the microscope by the American media and many sectors in the United States (Otherman, 2003). There may have been suspicion as to whether or not the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia itself had anything to do with 9/11. Due to the fact that some important sectors in the U.S. were blaming Saudi Arabia, there was a rapid change in the U.S./Saudi relationship. The cordial historical relationship quickly transformed into a tense
situation. The strong bridge that President Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz had established back in the 1930s was brought down by misconceptions.

The growing American and Saudi concern over their declining relationship was noticeable after 9/11. Each party had a perspective about the terrorist attacks. The American public came to be suspicious of the entire Kingdom of Saudi Arabia due to the 15 terrorists. Besides the strain that occurred in political ties, the human relationship between the American and Saudi people has in fact been damaged (Otherman, 2003).

For Saudis who lived in the U.S., their normal lives also changed. Fawaz Al-otwi who lived in Wisconsin at that time, shared his experience during a 2009 personal interaction of the impact of 9/11 attacks on his life. Fawaz, who is majoring in Finance at the UW-L, noticed tremendous changes in the life of every Saudi he knew living in the United States. He heard everyday stories of mistreatment and hostility toward Saudis. Thus, men started to shave their beards and women decided not to wear the scarf so that they would not be recognizable to the angry Americans. At the airports, "I felt I was a criminal", Fawaz said. He spent hours inside the American airports for security checks and was investigated.

As a consequence of the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government has issued special regulations governing new visas for Saudis. Before 9/11, Saudis had privileges and easy procedures for entering the United States (Branson, 2007). These new strict regulations have negatively affected Saudi visitors to the United States. According to the Saudi Cultural Mission in the U.S (2009),"Nearly four years after the Sept. 11 attacks, the number of Saudis visiting the U.S annually continues to decline compared to prior 2001".
The new regulations caused disruption for Saudis trying to return to the U.S. for college or medical care. Many voices inside the U.S. shouted out to boycott Saudi Arabia. At that time, the pillar of the U.S.-Saudi relationship had fallen, However, the negative fallout from 9/11 may be temporary as common goals have since been established and great strides have been taken towards mending this relationship.

Since Abdullah became the King of Saudi Arabia, he has provided great opportunities to the Saudi people within and outside of the Kingdom. After King Abdullah met President Bush in 2005, they both agreed to establish a new educational program that provided for Saudis to study in U.S. colleges and universities. It aimed to expand the understanding between the American and Saudi citizens. Thousands of Saudis have enrolled at American universities.

**Acculturation Theory and International Student Sojourners**

Acculturation is the process of one’s cultural change resulting from interaction with a different culture, and adapting to new cultural environment at an individual or group level (Berry, 2003). Every immigrant and international student faces some forms of acculturation anytime they enter the borders of their new host country (Kim, 2001) and often experience culture shock. For many international students studying in a new country, culture shock can be the most challenging experience of their intercultural journey. In the early stage of their studying overseas students mostly feel stressed, worried, nervous, scared, afraid, and sleepless (Brown & Holloway, 2008).

International students typically encounter academic, personal, and social problems. One of the most devastating outcomes of failing to adjust in the new culture of
the host country can lead to these students damaging their identities among family members and friends in their home country (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Culture shock ranges from students not seeing others who look like them on campus to not understanding cultural norms. Due to the difference between cultures and customs, acculturation includes the changes that happen to an individual and the sociocultural levels that they encounter (Trimble, 2003). Typically immigrants and international students face different types of changes such as language, food, lifestyle, and communication with people from the host culture (Berry, 2003).

Individuals with some familiarity of the culture, life styles, and language of the host country and their population have been found to have an easier time acculturating than do those with no exposure (Birman, 1998). Unlike immigrants living in the U.S. on a permanent basis and thus have an opportunity to relatively slowly adapt to the host culture, international students are under extraordinary pressure to acculturate or assimilate quickly to the American university campus. In other words, acculturation is not an easy process to overcome during a short-term experience. Discrimination, homesickness, fear, and guilt are some of the first-hand barriers international students must deal with in their intercultural educational journey, a journey they often embark on alone (Berry, 2003: Kim, 2001).

For international students’ to achieve success, they must adapt themselves to the American educational system along with overcoming cultural shock (Chen, 2000). Every day, international students find themselves having to communicate differently in American universities’ classroom compared to how they communicated in their home
country. For example, international students mostly come from traditional lecture format educational systems, whereas in the U.S. many professors are moving to more interactive classroom settings (Jung & Hecht & Wadsworth, 2007). Thus, international students will tend to seek out classes taught in a more traditional fashion because they feel less comfortable participating in open class discussion, largely as a result of not feeling comfortable with their English speaking skills.

Unfamiliarity with the new educational system and limited English proficiency reduce international students’ adjustment especially in the first year. According to (Jung & Hecht & Wadsworth, 2007), by becoming acculturated into the new educational environment and learning about the expectation of the academic setting in the United States, international students can succeed in their goals of socializing with Americans (students & people) so as to better negotiate social and cultural differences.

Students’ study-abroad experiences are moderated by both individual and environmental factors, the individual factors such as students’ age, gender, nationality, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic, personality, communication style and past experiences (Weaver, 1993). Environmental factors as the host culture demographic, academic institutional culture, attitude toward international students, social and academic support, as well as communication efficiency, and length of stay in the host culture play significant role on the student’s acculturation (Kim, 2001).

According to Segawa (1998), international students studying in the U.S. struggle in trying to adjust to the way of life in the Western culture. Students who failed to adjust to the new life system often succumb to the barriers by seeking refuge among other
international students from their home countries, thereby negatively impacting their learning. Living among and learning about other cultures is a difficult challenge; therefore, stress and loneliness accrue when students are confused about the academic system, customs, and interpersonal relationships (Aubery, 1991). These extraordinary stress factors often result in international students using the health services more than their U.S. student peers during their attempts to transition from their own culture to the host culture (Ebbin & Blankenship, 1986).

Although coming to different conclusions, Hayes & Lin (1994) similar to Ebbin and Blankenship (1986) claim that many international students have high levels of anxiety, isolation, dissatisfaction, and pessimism. They argue that students from less developed countries attach a high value in continuing their culture’s principles at home or abroad. Thus, in order to buffer these stressors, international students need social contacts with people in their host country. This contact can be rewarding for both the students and their newly found friends (Khoapa, 1987). Most international students feel satisfied with the amount of schoolwork they have, and they believe the subjects they study are not as challenging as in their home country (Xiaoqiong, 2008).

Crossing cultures during a study abroad experience needs more understanding from both students and educators to decrease unwanted results that may accrue during the transition. Harrel (1994) theorized four stages students experience during study abroad: (a) predeparture; (b) entry; (c) adjustment to the new environment; and (d) reentry into the home culture upon the end of the educational journey. Leong (1984) referred to three areas of personal adjustment all international students face, which include (a) unique
stress as a result of the differences between student’s new culture and their culture; (b) the academic demand which students must deal with and achieve (c) the demand on having to rapidly adapt to meet goals within a short time. In other words, international students are aiming to adapt to their host culture as soon as they can, with the belief they must do so to more easily achieve their academic goals.

Studying abroad experiences have an impact on students in different ways (Landis, Bennett & Bennett, 2004). First, they increase a student’s knowledge in the major area. Second, they promote a student’s intellectual development. Third, they enhance a student’s global perspective. Fourth, they enrich students’ attitudes toward their homeland and attitudes toward other cultures. Finally, study abroad impacts career interests, self-reliance, self-growth, self-awareness, and an increased ability to make decisions.

Bates (1997) studied the impact of intellectual development, personal development and global perspective on 14 American students studying abroad and 35 American students who study at the local U.S. campus. He found significant changes in the 14 students’ attitudes toward themselves, in addition to a positive understanding of the global and the host culture. These findings are in line with an earlier study conducted by Carlson and Widaman (1988) with American students both in U.S. universities and students overseas. The researchers found that students who study abroad have more global understanding, more concern about political issues, and more critical attitudes toward their country than do students who studied in the home country.
Study abroad provides international students with first-hand knowledge of different cultures they encounter; in fact students learn more about themselves and their own culture during their sojourn. Martin (1987) noted in his study that students who have long prior intercultural experience are more astute in noticing differences in culture than students who have no intercultural experience. In other words, language, values, and interpersonal communication seem to be easily demonstrated by students with previous overseas experience. Herman’s (1996) study looked at the impact of study abroad on students’ psychosocial development; his findings indicate that short-term (4-6 weeks) study abroad for both males and females may have no impact on students.

Other factors impacting sojourner experiences lay with the type and the duration of study abroad as it relates to significant changes in lifestyle and educational involvement. Koester (1985), who studied the impact type and duration of study abroad had on students, found that students with one to three month experience show insignificant change in lifestyle and educational involvement when compared to students who have three to 12 month study abroad experiences. In other words, the longer the study abroad experiences the greater the impact on student acculturation.

Long-term impact of study-abroad experience has a huge impact on students’ career advancement, appreciation of different culture, in addition to personal accomplishment (Wallace, 1999). On the other hand Riskedahl (1996) studied the impact of short-term on students, and found a change in students’ personality, and perceptions of education. Study-abroad experiences were also found to enhance student understanding of other religions. In short, students who study abroad become more understanding of
people with different religious beliefs than students who have no such experience (Beers, 1999).

**Saudi Arabian International Student Experiences**

A study conducted in 1972 by Jammaz involved exploring the academic experiences of Saudi students studying in the U.S. In terms of the academic challenges, Jammaz (1972) found that Saudi students face various academic challenges associated with cultural adjustment; in other words, he found a high degree of correlation between Saudi students’ adjustment in the U.S and their academic achievements. Students with fewer academic difficulties were found to be more likely to adjust to the American culture. For instance, he found that students who are majoring in sciences, or engineering fields were more satisfied than other students who were majoring in social studies or humanities. He also found that there was no significant relationship between students’ academic performance and their satisfaction. Also, he found no significant relationship between Saudi students’ ability to speak the English language and students’ satisfaction. Another finding was a high correlation between the university campus size, and the Saudi students’ adjustment.

Research shows that proficiency in the English language is a fundamental factor that helps international students in the new educational environment adjust to their academic issues, social lives, and their interactions with people in the host country. Mustafa (1985), a scholar who investigated the academic problems encountered by Saudi students at Western Michigan University, found English language proficiency significantly correlated to attrition among Saudi students in the U.S. This scholar also found that Saudi students who have strong English skills are more likely to have fewer
academic or communication difficulties with faculty and other students than those who have poor English skills.

Another study similarly found that international students who spoke English prior to coming to the United States tended to be significantly more capable of adapting to their new environment than those who have language barriers (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Saudi students also experience academic difficulties in writing term papers, taking and organizing notes, and participating in classroom discussions (Mustafa, 1985). The academic factors are the most significant problems for Saudi students based on what was found in the study above.

Another important study on cultural perception and attitudinal differences among Saudi Arabian students in the United States was conducted by Al-Khedaire (1978). Al-Khedaire found that marital status did not play any role in students’ cultural perceptions or attitudes; on the other hand, students majoring in sciences showed a clearer cultural perception of the American culture than other students majoring in other fields such as the social sciences.

Al-Jasir (1993) conducted a study to investigate the social, cultural, and academic factors associated with the adjustment of Saudi students in the United States, and found no significant relationship between the sex of the student and their satisfaction, personal growth, or change in values. Furthermore, he found no significant correlation between age of students and their satisfaction; however, he found a negative correlation between the length of time in the U.S. and students’ satisfaction and that students’ age had no effect on their academic performance. In addition, the marital status of Saudi students also was found to not have an effect on their academic adjustment (Mustafa, 1985).
Contrasting Al-Jasir’s (1993) findings regarding the impact of one’s sex on educational satisfaction, there is ample evidence in more recent studies that indicate attending a coeducational institution can have a negative effect on women, and in particular Saudi women. For example, in recent study conducted by Landis, Bennett, and Bennett (2004) women were found to have more difficulty assimilating to a new culture than men. Additionally, they found that young people can more easily adapt to a new culture than the elderly. Women also tended to have less support in coeducational environments (in academic and social forms), which the authors claim had a negative impact on their learning and personality. The authors claimed the negative relationship between campus environment and students’ personality development could negatively affect these students.

Women of color are the most negatively affected by the coeducational environment because they are still treated as a minority. Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, Umbach & Kuh (2007) found that women in single sex-colleges are more likely to succeed than women in coeducational colleges. Furthermore, women who attend women’s colleges are 50% more likely to earn baccalaureate degrees in fields such as science and math compared to women who attend coeducational colleges (Miller, 1993). Undoubtedly, there is an absence of women in science, mathematics, and other more scientific fields (e.g. Pascarella, 2001).

Women in single-sex educational settings have been found to achieve higher levels of cognitive work, academic involvement, self-confidence, and intellectual development than women in coeducational environments (Tidball, 1980). Women in
women’s colleges, claims Tidball, tend to be more content with their interactions with faculty and are happier with their college experiences. The environment in single-sex education apparently provided students with social support that encouraged these students to do well (Asmar, 2005). Other studies suggest that when women attend coeducation institutions, they tend to be negatively impacted. For instance, African American and Asian Pacific Americans have been found to be interacting less with faculty than in the past. In addition, they were found to not be as active as their white peers in learning activity. As a result, non-white students have a low academic achievement (Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, Umbach & Kuh, 2007). These findings suggest that Saudi women may indeed be more challenged than their male counterparts in efforts to acculturate while attending coeducational universities such as UW-L.

Chapter Summary

The main purpose of the literature review in this chapter was to provide vital background about the Saudi educational system, Islam, the Arab culture, and other issues related to international students during their study abroad experiences. As noted through the literature review, the number of Saudi students in the U.S. has greatly been influenced by the diplomatic relationship with the U.S. The rise in the number of Saudi students in the U.S. has followed the increase of scholarships awarded by the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (SACM, 2009). These students have different values and come from traditional, single-sex educational systems; educators in the U.S. do not have enough understanding of the new students’ religion, educational system, and cultural background to fully understand their needs. The literature on international students’
challenges in the U.S. and the impact of study abroad on students was covered to help the reader understand what factors impact Saudi International acculturation processes and academic success. Also the educational system and the curriculum in Saudi Arabia were addressed since these play important roles in these students’ lives.

According to past research, adjusting to the coeducation environment and learning the English language are the two greatest academic obstacles that Saudi and other international students have to deal with in their academic experiences in the U.S. Additionally, cultural shock and adjusting to the American life style are significant factors that these students must rapidly overcome for it to be possible to continue their studies in the U.S. The duration of the study abroad is a key factor in determining the final understanding of the host culture, as literature has indicated that students with long term study abroad experience have a deeper understanding of the host culture and a more global world view than those who have a short-term study abroad experience.
CHAPTER 4

METHODLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate Saudi international students’ expectations, motivations, and experiences at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse (UW-L). This chapter describes the participants, the instrument that was used in the study, and the data collection and analysis procedure.

Research Design

This study has been conceptualized as a qualitative research study. Corbin & Strauss (2008) study found the following: Qualitative research allows researchers to get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables” (p.12).

Taking into consideration that this study seeks to investigate the expectations, motivations, and subjective experiences of participants a qualitative approach seems most appropriate. Qualitative method can provide the researcher with deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences, their needs, and the reasons for their perceptions as they engage in their educational journal more than a quantitative study can provide (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). According to Fetterman (1989) “Informal interviews are useful throughout an ethnographic study in discovering what people think and how one person’s perceptions compare with another’s” (p.48).
Participants

The total population participating in this study comprised 13 undergraduate and graduate international Saudi students who were enrolled in Spring 2009 at UW-L. There were four females and nine males; three students are graduate students while 10 are undergraduate students. All of the students have studied more than two years in the U.S. Students who are still participating in English as a second language (ESL) courses were eliminated from this study; as they are still have no full academic experiences outside the ESL program. Two of the 13 students have transferred to UW-L from other universities within the U.S.

Instrument of the Study

The main instrument of this study was questionnaire utilized for face-to-face formal interviews. Formal interviews were 30 to 40 minutes each. With the participants’ permission, the interviews were tape-recorded. Through a review of international students’ literature, the researcher, with committee consultation, developed a set of twenty-four questions in English Language (see Appendix B) to be used during the interviews. When transcribing the interviews, I coded each transcript by assigning a letter, A through M, to each of the participants. I also noted whether the participant was male or female (see confidentiality section before for more details).

Interview Data Collection Procedure

After a careful review of the literature and discussions with UW-L faculty and the Cultural Mission of Saudi Arabia located in D.C about the importance of the study, the researcher sought and received permission from the UW-L Institutional Review Board (IRB) to begin this study Spring 2009.
The researcher met with Mr. Fawaz Al-otwi, the president of the UW-L Saudi Student Club, at the start Spring semester 2009. Mr. Al-otwi was asked to provide the researcher with names, phone numbers, and length of study in the U.S. of all the Saudi students who were enrolled at UW-La Crosse in Spring 2009. The club is recognized and valued by the U.S. Cultural Mission of Saudi Arabia as a support system for Saudi students. The Club provides a social and academic support for Saudi students at UW-L.

The data provided from the Saudi club allowed the researcher to identify his participants, then an e-mail was sent to the Saudi students at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse who were enrolled in Spring 2009 (see Appendix A). Thirteen students responded to the e-mail and were willing to participate in the study. Note: (These numbers are somewhat representative of the Saudi students in the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. In Spring 2009 there were 39 international Saudi students enrolled at UW-L. Participants in this study make up 33 percent of the total UW-L Saudi student population reflecting a good representation of these students.

Students who agreed to participate in this study were provided with the study questions (see Appendix B) via e-mail prior to the interview in order to help participants know more about the study. The researcher gave further explanation regarding the study when it was requested via e-mail or was provided in person right before the interview. All the interviews were held in Spring 2009, and participants were free to decide when and where the interview should take place. Three interviews were held in the participants’ houses while 10 interviews were held at UW-L Murphy Library. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, the participant’s native language, to provide a more comfortable interviewing atmosphere for them.
Data Analysis Procedure

As noted earlier, 24 questions were developed in order to investigate Saudi students’ expectations, motivations, and experiences at UW-L. Since the interviews were conducted in Arabic, it was necessary to translate the tape-recordings from Arabic to English for the purposes of extracting excerpts from them for the data analysis provided in Chapter 5.

As noted by Corbin and Stauss (2008), the analytic process, like any thinking process, should be relaxed, flexible, and driven by insight gained through interaction with data rather than being overly structured and based only on procedures (p.12). I chose to utilize the constant comparative method of data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to analyze the interview data since I find this method to provide a more relaxed, flexible, and insightful interaction with the data. Constant comparison allows the researcher to compare interviewee responses regardless of whether the data is similar or different. All interviewee responses should be constantly compared. Then, transcribed interview data is grouped and used to establish themes and categories.

After reviewing the literature, I listed themes within each major category related to the expectations, motivations, and experiences of the subjects. In addition, the categories emerged from the data. Throughout the data analysis students’ responses for each question were compared with those provided by other students who answered the same question. Quotes from the exemplar excerpts were drawn from the transcribed interview data and were listed under each category.

As a Saudi student myself, I shared with these Saudi students knowledge of cultural practices, values, and customs, and so it was somewhat easier to interview these
students as an insider of the cultural group than someone without a Saudi identity. Since I have gone through very similar experiences as the participants in this study, I could relate to the findings of the research. Though I held similar experiences, I made certain to keep an impartial eye in evaluating the data by using only the data that was provided during the interviews and not state to any personal experiences.

Confidentiality

In order to mask the identities of participants, their identifying characteristics, such as their names and ages, are not provided in this study. Since I address issues related to co-educational experiences, it was necessary to provide the reader with the sex of each interviewee after each of the excerpts provided. The recorded interviews were erased as soon as the researcher transferred data from the tape recorder to the coded text file as described earlier. Participants are personally known to the researcher, which helped both the researcher and the participants to trust each other; thus, adding to the willingness participants had to be part of this study.

Chapter Summary

This qualitative study was designed to probe the Saudi students’ expectations, motivations, and experiences at the University of Wisconsin –La Crosse. Participants are Saudi students who enrolled in spring 2009 at UW-L. A total of four female and nine male students participated in one-on-one interviews. Students were asked to answer twenty-four questions, which were drawn from the literature review (see Appendix B). Data was analyzed using constant comparative method of data analysis, and categories
were established based on the literature review, with those earlier identified emerging from the data. The results of the interview analysis are discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

In this chapter I provide insights about the impact that Saudi students’ cultural and religious backgrounds, language skills, and campus involvement have on acculturation processes. These insights are provided through the use of excerpts reflecting Saudi students’ academic and social expectations prior to coming to the UW-L, and their experiences during their studies at UW-L. In short, this chapter begins with highlighting Saudi students’ expectations about UW-L, the city of La Crosse, and American people prior to their arrival. Next, this chapter explores students’ motivations for wanting to study abroad. Finally, I provide insights to the challenging experiences faced by UW-L Saudi international students. Included in this section are students’ perceptions of their interactions with faculty, academic advisors and other students. Out of respect for students’ confidentiality, each participant is labeled alphabetically, with an indication as to whether they are male or female, throughout this chapter. Capturing the participants’ expectations, motivations, and experiences below are themes that evolved from the interview data.
Educational and Social Expectations

Academic Expectations

Participants generally noted that since prior to coming to the UW-L they have been excited about the academic opportunities offered (bachelor and Master degrees) in the United States. Furthermore, participants reported that the United States offered more academic opportunities than were offered by their home country. Thus, participants coming to UW-L expected they would engage majors that would better equip them for advanced opportunities when they returned to their home country. Participants mentioned the following programs of study:

- Masters degree in Business Administration, Education, and Adapted Physical Education.
- Bachelor degrees in Finance, Computer Science, Nuclear Medicine Technology, and Accounting.

Generally speaking, participants hold a common belief that the education in the U.S. offers the best in the world, as noted in the exemplar excerpt below:

We do not have this major (Adapted Physical Education) in Saudi Arabia; so I will be the first teacher with this major in my University. I learn how to improve both special and physical education teachers to help kids with disabilities. I believe the USA is the best country in the education and business fields (Interviewee A, male).

While all the students were pleased with the expected variety of major choices, they expressed experiencing anxiety prior to their arrival due to fear of the unknown.
However, according to participants, most of the stress related expectations they held did not materialize. For example, one student claimed that he was afraid that everything will be completely different and more complicated than back home. In fact, I was concerned about my GPA which was not good enough for me attend health school back home, but since I came here, I found supportive educational environment (Interviewee E, male).

Interestingly, the student above believed his GPA to not be “good enough” to meet his academic needs in his high school back in his home country, yet, he finds himself accomplishing his academic goals in a rigorous Nuclear Medicine Technology program at a U.S. four-year institution. The fact that he found a “supportive educational environment” has provided a buffer from stress he may have encountered during his acculturation to his new academic environment due to not believing in his GPA as “good enough.” This student builds his expectation according to the system in his home country, which requires a high GPA for medical school entrance.

The idea that American university schoolwork would be harder to accomplish academic work than back in their home country was also expressed by Interviewee L, male, who “thought American universities would be really tough. I thought professors would use technology more.” His fear stemmed not only from his expectation of “tough” coursework, but also of the use of technology in the classroom. This fear stems from the fact that the Saudi educational system technology is not commonly used in schools or higher education institutions.

Participants also held a common fear of coming to study in the U.S. due to a lack of English language proficiency. For example Interviewee K, a female, stated: “I thought
it would be hard because it will be in English.” While this student expected her studies to be challenging due to her lack of English skills, a male student expected he would have an easier time due to having taken English classes back in his country: “I was expecting I would not need to take English for more than one year since I studied English before. I like the way I take ESL and academic classes” (Interviewee B, male). This student referred to an important fact that students in upper ESL levels can take some academic classes along with one or two ESL classes. As a result students do not have to be “full time” in their first semester of academic classes.

Generally speaking, participants indicated that their academic expectations were met, with one exception; a few students could not enter the Master of Business Administration Program as a result of not meeting the required examination (Graduate Management Admission Test). In short, one student switched to Education, and two changed to the Recreation Management Program.

Social Expectations

Since 9/11 Saudi students have had a hard time being accepted in the U.S., as was discussed in chapter three. As a result, some students are afraid of discriminatory actions against them. Segawa (1998) indicated that the social struggle that international students face while they are trying to adjust to Western culture can negatively impact learning. The degree to which a student is able to acculturate is impacted by their expectations about their host culture. When addressing the question about social expectations prior to coming to the U.S., participants’ responses indicate they were: 1) excited about meeting American people, or 2) anxious about meeting and developing relationships with
American people. Those who were excited anticipated Americans would be “friendly people.” On the other hand, some participants worried about experiencing a “different culture.” For example one student stated: “I have heard that Americans are friendly people; beside I am a social person” (Interviewee F, female).

Another stated: “I was excited to come to the states and meet new people with a different culture” (Interviewee K, female). Expecting that Americans would not be as willing to assist him as might the students from his home country, another student sought to find other Saudi student who would assist him in better understanding his major better. “I was looking for any Saudi student from my country to help me understand my major. But later, I had great American friends and we still contact each other” (Interviewee A, male). As a consequence of the willingness of American students to assist this Saudi student, he views them as lifelong friends with whom he plans to keep in contact.

While some participants expressed excitement over meeting Americans, others worried about making “real friends” or about being negatively judged on the “basis of my color or religion.” The following two exemplar excerpts reflect these concerns: “I thought that it would be very hard to make real friends in the states. So, I was thinking to myself, “how can I get to know Americans so as to make friends” (Interviewee D, male). “I thought all American people would judge me based on my color or religion” (Interviewee L, male). This latter student also expected to find American families to be “close to each other” and students still living with their parents”. In Saudi culture sons and daughters live with their families, even when they are enrolled in a university, in other words, it’s rare to find someone living in a dormitory unless he/she came from a different city.
Participants who seem to have negative expectations or who worried about the new life in the U.S. had never visited the U.S before. In fact, many stated in informal interactions with me that they (similar to myself) constructed stereotypical images about the U.S and the people who live here from movies and the news back in their home country, as well as from interactions with other Saudi who held stereotypes.

I was kind of shocked when I arrived here. As a man coming from conservative society, at first it was very difficult for me to get along with the American people; but after a couple weeks I got used to it (Interviewee B, male).

Two other students who expected La Crosse to be a relatively big city were shocked by the small city size and lack of knowledge area students have about what the world is like. These students knew nothing about the U.S. except what they watched in movies; they imagined La Crosse would be something like California.

America was the movies I watched. I was shocked by the size of La Crosse. I used to believe America was the way California is shown in the movies. People here have no idea about the World (Interviewee L, male).

Whether accurate in their expectations or not, all participants experienced culture shock in one form or another as a consequence of their holding such stereotypes. I will go into more detail about culture shock when I get to the “Challenging Experiences” section of this study.

While participants were concerned with adjusting to American culture, with some excited to meet American people, some participants, in particular the males, noted that their families worry that they will adapt too much to American culture and that they will never return home. In addition, there is a fear among families that male students will marry American women.
My mother always thinks that I’m going to marry American woman white, blond, etc. That’s why she wants me to come back as soon as possible so she can make me marry a Saudi woman. My father is really proud that I study in the U.S and so is the rest of my family (Interviewee L, male).

While Interviewee L’s mother is proud of him studying in the U.S. her concern about her son marrying a white American woman adds to the stress he is already under while adjusting to American culture. On the other hand, there was not similar fear among family about the female students since the policy of the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia requires a male accompany all female students. Although the majority of families adhere to this policy, not all do. In other words, religiously and culturally, a Saudi female is not permitted to be alone with strange men.

Participants generally noted that they expected it to be hard for them to build relationships with American people. Furthermore they realize that good English skills promote a successful social adjustment and this is basis for building relationships with Americans. Participants with relatives or friends in La Crosse felt safer and expected easier social lives than those who had no relatives or friends. In other words, the sojourner students who had family and/or friends already in the La Crosse area prior to coming to UW-L expected to have an easier time due to having someone who could translate for them, arrange accommodations, and introduce them to other students. Also participants with previous study abroad experiences have more positive social expectations than those with no such experiences.
Motivation for Study in the U.S.

Findings reflect that self-improvement, better career opportunities, understanding American culture, and family support are the major factors that motivate Saudi students to study in the U.S.; these findings confirm past research regarding Saudi students (Al-Jasir, 1993; Al-Kedair 1978). Motivations to come to a small city and to a good university were the only findings not mentioned in the previous research. Like other international students, Saudi students believe America provides equal opportunity education for all and that gaining such education can change their lives for the better. The majority of the participants in this study came to UW-L through friends or relatives who had recommended it as the best option for acquiring their degrees. In fact these students were motivated for particular programs of study regardless of the schools. Below are findings from this study that lend support to past research findings.

Professional Advancement

One of the most significant reasons for Saudi students to come to the U.S. is professional advancement, with the hope that they will return to their home country and find better jobs. Students often realize these opportunities as a consequence of having had family members who engaged in studies abroad.

I decided to quit my schooling back home and come to the U.S. because the opportunities I will have when I graduate from here are greater. I was enrolled in Business Administration at King Saudi University. When I got the scholarship, I chose to come here with my family’s support. Both of parents graduated from George Mason University (Interviewee L, male).

The government of Saudi Arabia established the Study Abroad Program in the last half of the past century. Students who came here and graduated from the U.S. hold significant
positions in the country, and as a result they inspire their sons and daughters for more professional advancement in studying in the U.S.

A few of the participants came to the U.S. with the support of their employers (university, hospital) in order to complete an advanced study in a particular academic field that is not available in their home country. Furthermore, there is a desire to experience a different educational system for those who work in higher educational institutions.

I have to complete my Master and Ph.D. degrees as a condition to be professor in my University. In addition, I wanted to have first-hand experience at a different educational system (Interviewee A, male).

Participants are generally involved in the national program (King Abdullah Scholarship Program) that requires students to study in a special field. All participants in this study have a governmental scholarship from the Saudi government and choose their majors according to the needs of their country as determined by the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education.

**Personal Growth**

“I’m not the same person I was before,” these are the words one participant answered when asked about what studying aboard had provided him so far. This was not surprising since nine participants in this study indicated they decided to study in the U.S. because they were looking for personal growth and better education.

When I was in New Zealand in 2005, I changed my mind about education when I saw an old man at the library reading some books. I promised myself I should have a better education (Interviewee J, male).
This student was in New Zealand studying English Language; he realized the importance of education “even old people go the library and read books”. Since then he changed and started to plan for further education. This was available for him through King Abdullah Scholarships Program in 2006. Another student stated: “What motivated me is achieving my dream and making my family proud of me” (Interviewee B, male). His dream, he stated, is to learn how to manage his own business, which will make his “family proud”.

The two participants above had attended higher education (undergraduate) in Saudi Arabia prior to deciding to study in the U.S. However, they stated that they chose to come to the U.S. because they believed by doing so they would enhance their communication skills in addition to broadening their global understanding, while also working to fulfill their career goals.

**Family and Friends**

Family seemed to be a big motivation for students to study abroad; however, families tended to worry when their children first leave their homes they supported their efforts to study abroad. After a while families worried less and encouraged their sons and daughters to complete their studies abroad.

My family supported me. They helped me to come here to have a better education and go back home with a better chance to have a good job (Interviewee K, female).

My father never minded it. My mother and the rest of the family just miss me. The bottom line is that all of them support me (Interviewee E, male).

I decided to go to school here because they have a variety of majors and the educational system is better [than in her country]. It was my dad’s idea since my older brother went to school here (Interviewee I, female).
While family is the biggest motivation for most of the participants in this study, friends also played a big role in motivating participants to come to UW-L. Three participants were motivated by their friends. Below is an exemplar of the importance of having family and friends who motivate and support participants in their efforts to acculturate.

I was happy to come here, my brother is studying here since 2004 and he always talks about how safe it is here. He also talks about how professors are more prepared than the ones back home. I knew many things about the life style in the U.S. When I arrived my brother and other friends show me everything around the area. They told me about the ESL teachers and what I should do to more easily adjust to the new educational system. (Interviewee F, female).

Students who have relatives or friends at UW-L or in the La Crosse community seem to have more positive experiences and an easier time adjusting to culture than those that do not.

**Small City and Good University**

The majority of the participants were motivated to come to UW-L due to the small city environment, which was reminiscent of home for some students. Other students said they came due to UW-L’s good reputation. Participants indicated that UW-L is one of the best universities for their field of study and tended to believe the university has an excellent ranking nationwide.

La Crosse is like my city and also, in my major, this university is one of the best. (Interviewee D, male).

It is great opportunity to be a student in UWL. UWL has an excellent ranking among regional public universities and across USA (Interviewee M, male).

It’s the top school nationwide in my major (Interviewee E, male).
As students traveled around the U.S. and met other students in big cities they appreciated La Crosse more since the cost of living is reasonable for them. In addition, they are able to buffer stress of being in a small town with minimal Saudi residents by traveling to larger cities like Chicago and Minneapolis.

**Challenging Experiences**

Participants expressed experiencing anxiety from the first moment they contacted the international office. Most of these students did not speak English prior to their arrival to the campus. Most started their international academic journey by enrolling in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. None of the participants in this study came to UW-L to study only the English language. In other words, the goal of coming to UW-L is to receive a degree in their chosen field of study, not to just learn English. Generally speaking, the participants were found to be more concerned with achieving their academic goals than they were in learning about U.S. culture and the people.

Mustafa (1985) found that Saudi students who have strong English skills (speaking and writing) are more likely to have no academic or communication difficulties with faculty and other students when compared to those who have poor English skills. In addition, he found that students with poor English skills are more likely to drop out of school. Jung & Hecht & Wadsworth (2007) found that international students (who came to study in the U.S.) mostly came from traditional lecture format educational systems, and that they prefer to have similar classes as they have in their home country.

In this study Saudi students have the same fear other international students have. Since the educational system in Saudi Arabia is still traditional, Saudi students feel less
comfortable participating in open class discussion or in giving their political opinions, especially those who have difficulty learning the English language.

Carlson and Widaman (1988) found that students who study abroad have more global understanding, more concern about political issues, and more critical attitudes toward their country than do students who studied in the home country. In this study participants indicated that they appreciated their country more, since they have full scholarships which include tuition, medical care, and living expenses. At the same time they noted that they learned new skills and become more independent than before while they were living in their home country with their families.

I believed my way of thinking changed since I came here. I feel like I am a more independent person since I have to cook, clean, and do almost everything for myself (Interviewee K, female).

After studying here for three years, I think I have changed in every way. I have started to appreciate my country more since we have free education and free health care. Living in the U.S. was a dream for many people, but not for me (Interviewee D, male).

All thirteen participants in this study indicated that they plan to return to their country and work with others to develop their country. In addition they are so proud that they are from Saudi Arabia.

**Academic Programs**

Three of the graduate students who participated in this study indicated that they had changed majors, from a pursuit of a Master of Business Administration to another major (Education and Recreation Management) as result of not passing The Graduate Management Admission test (GMAT). They claimed that UW-L Business School should have preparation classes and expressed dissatisfaction with the fact they had to go
elsewhere to prepare for this examination. For example, one of them went to Chicago for six months, while the other two had to drive for three months to Madison to take preparation classes. Yet, despite all of the time and money those students spent in traveling in order to prepare for the examination, they failed and thus could not enter the Master of Business Administration program.

I came here in 2006 to do my Masters degree in Business Administration, I was enrolled in the ESL classes and I worked hard to master the English Language. Before the last semester in the ESL program I applied for the Master degree, I was shocked when they asked me of the GMAT exam since I had no idea about this exam before that. I asked, “How can I prepare myself for this examination?” They told I have to transfer to another institution. I had to transfer to Chicago, an institution that provided such program. For six month I studied for the GMAT. Then I took the exam two times and I could not score high enough to be accepted in the Business School here. As a result I found myself empty-handed. The international office asked me to leave the country since I completed the ESL program and could not find academic admission. Instead, I applied for a Masters in Education, which was not my interest. This happened to me due to the lack of knowledge about the degree requirement. The international office should notify students about all degree requirements before they come here (Interviewee D, male).

Adding to the stress associated with acculturation, this student also had to deal with extra expenses living in Chicago and with the possibility of returning home without a degree. Such failure is unacceptable in Saudi culture regardless of the reason behind it. Nothing will happen to the students in such case, but people will never forget that once he was in the U.S. and returned without success in his educational journey. This student had to choose a different major since he cannot go back home empty-handed.

Another student expressed his concern with not having been prepared in his home country for achieving the business degree in the U.S. “I started to realize how the education in Saudi Arabia is not good; it does not prepare us as students for the college
life” (Interviewee C, male). Five of the participants interviewed are undergraduate Business majors. Each expressed difficulties in meeting their course requirements and expressed concerns that by the end of their degree programs, they will have the same problem that the students above had with the GMAT exam.

**Language Difficulties**

According to Hayes & Lin (1994) language difficulties are the largest barrier for international students. As noted earlier, the majority of participants in this study enrolled in English language courses through the UW-L ESL program. Moreover, five of the participants had studied English elsewhere prior to their arrival at UW-L. In general, students believe they spent a long time in the ESL program (almost two years). Students who are fully enrolled in the academic classes believe they still struggle with English due to the lack of their sufficient vocabulary. The instruction of writing seems not well understood by the majority of the students due to the difference between Arabic and English languages, this finding supports past research (e.g. Al-Jasir, 1993; Jammaz, 1972). The excerpt below voices the despair of all participants who are challenged to meet writing requirements in their classes.

Writing in English language is the hardest I deal with in my all assignments. It also takes me a very long time to complete in-class examinations that require writing. I need time to edit all my papers; usually I take my paper to the writing center when there is someone to help me. When I was in ESL, I thought I’m qualified to start my Masters degree, but when I entered the program I realized how difficult it still is for me (Interviewee D, male).

Another student noted his difficulty despite having studied the English language for two years before coming to UW-L.
I studied the English language for two years prior to coming here I thought one year of studying English will be enough; however, I found that to be in a science major, I think I need more time to master the language (Interviewee E, male).

Students appear to rely heavily on the writing center to help them with their class assignments. Moreover, in-class examinations seem to be challenging for Saudi students. On the other hand, participants claim to have less problems with their English speaking skills than they do their writing skills, which produces less stress than when attempting to complete writing assignments.

Culture Shock

In the beginning of their educational journey international students deal with many different types of difficulties; for example, discrimination, homesickness, fear, and guilt (Berry, 2003; Kim, 2001). These experiences often lead to students experiencing culture shock, with some students dropping out of school. In general, all students who were participating in this study indicated adjusting to American life has been a hardship. The excerpts drawn from responses to a question about difficulties participants face, reflect that the hardships participants face are associated not only with language barriers, but also with “adjusting to American life” (Interviewee B, male), meaning campus culture, negative perceptions of them, and/or “cultural misunderstandings and religious issues” (Interviewee J, male).

When attending college, many American students tend to join student organizations that help them transition from their homes to academic life. In the Saudi Arabian educational system student organizations do not exist; as a result, Saudi students have a hard time getting involved in student organizations due the lack of such experiences in Saudi schools. Nonetheless, the fact that Saudi students founded the Saudi
student organization in 2008 shows that they are working to build a social support network at UW-L through adopting the practice of developing student organizations. Additionally, they are also joining student organizations particular to their field of study.

All but two participants hold membership in the Muslim Students Association and Saudi student organization, with eight of the participants holding membership in different organizations related to their majors. Only two participants were not involved in any student organizations. These two students claim they are not involved in an organization due to a lack of time and their perceptions of student organizations not being “as good as they used to be,” findings reflected in the following two excerpts.

No, because I'm so busy and I don't have time (Interviewee A, male)

No. I think all of them are not as good as they used to be and they don’t make wise judgments (Interviewee I, female).

Although participants are members in these student organizations, four of the participants stated they do not attend organizational events due to a lack of time. Three of them are graduate students who claimed they have a heavy amount of schoolwork to do; on the other hand, one student indicated that these organizations would not benefit her since they are run by unskilled students. Undoubtedly, not being involved in campus organization activities had negative impacts on Saudi students’ acculturation and ability to build relationships with Americans and international students.

Another factor adding to culture shock is the idea of opening discussing topics that run counter to Islam. Saudi Arabian curriculum does not include discussion of any anti-Islamic ideas (El-Sanabary, 1994). As a result, when topics such as homosexuality and alcohol use are discussed in classes, Saudi students often feel that their views about
such topics are not appreciated, leading them to believe that American students do not accept different points of view. Homosexuality and alcohol are both forbidden in Islam, thus, when these practices are openly discussed in the classroom, Saudi students who conform to Islamic beliefs feel uncomfortable and perceive that Americans do not understand their points of view.

Some people will not accept other ideas based on my religious beliefs. I have a different view about gay marriage and alcohol, which is prohibited in Islam (Interviewee D, male).

In addition to culture shock stemming from differing worldviews, participants reported that they have difficulties with practicing their religion. For instance, participants found it hard to fast during the holy month, known as Ramadan. Ramadan is the month when Muslims do not eat, or drink from half hour before sunrise until the sun sets. The participants appreciate that their professors give them time to break their fasting during the holy month (Ramadan). For instance, professors gave participants ten to fifteen minutes to break their fasting if they had classes that continued through the sunset, the time at which Muslims break their fast. As a consequence of having to answer people’s questions about their religion in and out of class, six of the participants indicated that they had learned more about their religion through their time at UW-L than when they lived in Saudi Arabia.

Overall, participants seem to care about their beliefs and traditional way of life that is drawn from Islam and Arabia cultures. Participants suggested that professors and other students (American and international) should be aware of others’ cultures and respect them.
Off Campus and On Campus Experiences with Discrimination

The majority of the participants had negative experiences with stereotypes about their home country and about Saudi people, in addition to misunderstandings about Islam; participants view this negative stereotype as shared among professors, other international students, and American students. Below is an exemplar passage reflecting the sentiments of participants.

 Usually, I give speeches and talk about my country and some people think we are barbarians. Furthermore, because my name is .... I have been rejected by some people and they could not understand that I am a different person (Interviewee D, male).

Participants who had dealt with negative stereotypes indicated that those that hold those stereotypes have no idea about Saudi Arabia, Islam, or even the Middle East. One student mentioned that some people think that Saudi Arabian people are still riding camels and that they live in deserts. The stereotypes Saudi participants have encountered have lead them to believe media provides negative images about their country, beliefs, and nationality, just as they acquired stereotypes of Americans through media images.

Additionally, the majority of participants experienced some form of discrimination both off campus and in the classroom. One student stated he especially felt uncomfortable “when I go to the bars” (Interviewee L, male). While all participants in this study answered they feel safe as far as when they are on campus those that go to bars do not feel safe, as noted by Interviewee L.

As long as I am around the campus, yes, I feel safe. But when I go out to the bars, I do not feel that way because many people get drunk and tend to be aggressive (Interviewee L, male).
In addition to feeling uncomfortable and unsafe in La Crosse bars, another student mentioned how he felt discriminated against when dealing with airport security at airports around the U.S.

I have faced some difficulties in the airports. Before I got my driving license from here, every security person freaked out when they saw my green passport (Interviewee E, male).

One female participant explained that she often feels discriminated against due to misunderstandings about the use of her Hejab. Hejab is a piece of cloth which covers a female’s head and all adult female Muslims should wear it according to the Islamic belief. Historically Muslims, Jews, and Christians share this belief that women should cover their hair around men outside their immediate family.

Americans don’t care about our traditions, and they think that we don’t have our rights as Saudi women. In addition to they usually ask me about my (Hejab): if it too hot for me or if I can take it off (Interviewee G, female).

Carpente (2001) found some Americans think that Muslim women are oppressed, lack rights, and are forced to wear the hijab; however, according to Carpente (2001)

Scholars stress, Islam is the most progressive of all religions when it comes to women’s rights. The Quran permits them to own their own businesses, to inherit wealth, choose marriage partners or divorce them, although those freedoms have been severely curtailed in some countries, depending on local customs and traditions (p.4).

While not everyone would necessarily agree with Carpente’s evaluation, it is important to note that the permissions granted to women in the Quran in the 7th century did represent a considerable advance for women at that time. So, it should not
automatically be assumed that a given practice that is sanctioned by Saudi Islamic tradition is necessarily anti-woman.

Wearing the hijab seems to make it impossible for Muslim women to socialize in bars since it is widely known that Muslims do not drink alcohol. One female participant stated that she has come close to making American female friends. However, when they begin to get close, they invite her to go out to bars. When she tells them, “I cannot go out at night with them to the bar, they start to ignore me” (Interviewee F, female). Since alcohol is prohibited in Islam, socializing in a bar is not an option for observant Muslim students. Additionally, Muslim women cannot date prior to marrying and these actions inevitably take place in bars.

Although participants feel uncomfortable when stared at, stereotyped, or discriminated against due to apparent ethnic differences and/or the use of the Hejab, they realize that the size of La Crosse and lack of diversity in the area make some people look at them in strange ways. Additionally, despite their experiences the participants did not report any cases of verbal or physical violence while in the La Crosse community.

In addition to feeling uncomfortable, stereotyped, and/or discriminated against when off campus, four of the students who participated in this study felt they are unwanted as group members during class discussions or group projects. The participants believe that their American peers are not prepared to work with international students who speak English as a second language. Reflecting the sentiments of the students who perceived this to be the case for them, one student responding to the question: “Have you ever felt unwanted as a group member during class projects?” stated that he “sometimes”
felt that “some American students think I cannot get the work done as good as they do” (Interviewee L, male).

Female participants seemed to feel unwanted more than male participants, especially when they have to work with American female students. One of the participants stated in response to the question above: “Yes, all the time, American students think I cannot get the work done as good as they do, especially girls” (Interviewee I, female). The lack of preparation programs for American students and their behavior towards international students cause students to feel unwanted in class projects.

In short, it appears that participating students feel as if their intelligence and their abilities to perform are questioned simply as a result of being ESL students. The fact they are not accepted only adds to their apprehension about not being able to make friends with Americans. Nonetheless, as noted in the following exemplar, the majority of participants during their interviews reported that with time,

American students start to know us and respect the way we are. For instance, wearing the traditional cloth [Hejab] was something new to many students, but after awhile they change their attitude toward us (interviewee I, female). Since the Muslim community in the area is very small, people in general and students in particular view the Hejab as a strange custom; however, when they begin to become involved with females who wear it, they realize the pride the women feel from wearing the Hejab and they become used to it.
Male participants feel that American female students seem to be more supportive in the classroom than are males, as participants reported. On the other hand, female participants feel that American female students are less supportive during class projects.

**Coeducational Environment**

In Saudi Arabia females and males students attend different schools and never had any coeducational institutions. The majority of male students found the coeducational environment a distraction. In other words, participants found the coeducational environment to be a new and strange experience. At first, such experience was not acceptable, but with time they became accustomed to it.

I would say it was something new at first, but with the time I got used to it. It is a distraction for us as males but we have to deal with it (Interviewee E, male).

It was a little distracting having girls with me in the same class, but I got used to it fast (Interviewee C, male).

I was told that I would go a school where boys and girls are in the same classroom, but honestly it is very distracting (Interviewee J, male).

Communicating with the same gender is different: it’s traditional in Saudi Arabia for men to welcome each other with hand shaking and kisses on the cheek, which may be unusual in the U.S. (Achoui, 2006). Women also shake hands and kiss the cheek of the woman they are greeting. A woman meeting male family members would provide the same greeting but would be reserved if she was meeting a male out of the family.

Two other male participants in the study stated they enjoy the coeducational environment, even its differences, and the fact that it is a new experience in their lives. One of these students claimed that the experience was not only new, but greatly different.
from “Saudi educational system. Here you feel you learn for real and you can interact with the opposite sex” (Interviewee B, male). The other participant indicated that he prefers the coeducational system since there are nice and helpful female professors. One student noted that he believes “the coeducational system is better than single-sex educational system, not because there are girls in the classes but because there are nice female professors” (Interviewee B, male).

Due to holding strong cultural values, three females who participated in the study reported that they never do any physical activities on campus; in short, they cannot play nor do any physical activities in front of strange males.

As a woman I would like to do some physical activities, but in the Recreation Center while there are a lot of males I cannot. I wish they could understand that females need privacy more than males (Interviewee K, female).

Generally speaking, for the same reasons women wear their Hejab, Saudi females will not engage in physical activities that require wearing revealing clothing, such as sportswear or that require them to be in a room filled with males.

Nonetheless, one female student reported that she was participating in physical activities in the Recreational Eagle Center on campus.

Yes. Actually, I’m in a fitness class because I’m trying to stay at a certain weight and be healthy (Interviewee I, female).

The fitness class was for women only, which allowed this student to attend it. However, she did not wear any traditional cloth while studying at UW-L.
During the interviews it was obvious that some participants seem to be more liberal than others who have more conservative attitudes, which helps to explain why some drink alcohol, why some women do not engage in wearing Hejab while others do, and why at least one woman would be willing to engage in coeducational physical activities on campus.

**Building Relationships for Academic and Social Support**

The majority of the participants in this study receive help from their academic advisors. In addition, participants claim to seek academic support from other Saudi students who are in the same major. Participants claim they turn to their professors for academic assistance, with a few of the participants claiming to ask the international office to intervene when they are having difficulty with their professors.

There is a professor who is very close to me; I usually go to him when I need any academic assistance (Interviewee D, male).

I always turn to my professors for help, and most of the time they are helpful, other times I go to the international office (Interviewee L, male).

Two other participants either prefer to use the tutoring center for academic support or go to the tutoring center as supplemental to professor assistance as noted in the two exemplar excepts below.

I think most of regular classes have a tutoring center so I go there when I have any difficulties (Interviewee J, male).

I always turn to my professors for help, and most of the time they are helpful. I rarely use the tutoring center (Interviewee F, female).
All participants spoke positively about being able to find academic support on campus. With only one exception participants reported that they have good relationships with faculty members and staff. Furthermore the majority of the participants indicated that they have close friendships with professors.

Most of professors I met are friendly and they always consider my situation as a foreign student (Interviewee C, male).

I know some professors in the college of business since my major is finance. I usually stop by their office to say hello and chat for little bit. Sometimes they ask me about the economy in Saudi Arabia and stuff like that (Interviewee L, male).

My friendship is mostly with Professors (Interviewee J, male).

One of the participants indicate that professors know nothing about the Middle East, in addition they generalize their experiences with one student to others

If one student was not good as student or did not submit his work on time some professors believe that all Saudi students are the same, and treat us as lazy students (interviewee B, male)

Five participants indicated that their relationships with American students are limited to classes only, while they have strong relationships with both international and Saudi students.

I have friends mostly from Saudi Arabia and international, less with Americans, only in classes (Interviewee C, male).

Friendships with other Saudi Arabian and international students remain relatively strong throughout their academic careers at UW-L largely as a result of participants having taken ESL classes where they have been able to bond with International students, whether from their country or not. Nine participants stated they spend more time with
international students than they spend with the American students both in and outside the classroom.

I spent two years in the ESL program with other students from Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. They are my friends who I talked to every day for a long time, because they share the same goals, and they know how I feel (Interviewee H, male).

Due to the fact that most international students have similar interests, one can understand why the participants would build stronger relationships with other international students than they would with American students. Consequently, the strongest interpersonal relationships among participants are with other Saudi students. Eight of the thirteen participants in this study emphasized relationships with Saudi students as helpful to them. One participant echoed the words of other students who stated Saudi students tend to speak Arabic when they are together.

When the Saudi get together they speak Arabic even if there are students from different countries (Interviewee F, female).

It is important to students that they keep up their Arabic language skills since they plan to return to their home countries once they complete their education. Five students pointed out they like to be with other international friends from different countries or with their American friends to practice their language and to be involved in the American way of life. The participants made it clear that there should be a balance in relationships with students from the same country and other students whether international or domestic students.

I balance my social life with Saudi, American, and international students. In fact, one of my roommates is Saudi (cousin) and the other one is American. My uncle used to say, “Give everything its time.” So I believe that I give time for the three (Interviewee L, male).
I do have friends from all over the world. Most of my friends are Saudis, a few are Americans and the rest are international. I usually hang out with Saudi friends and once a week or so I go out with my American friends (Interviewee D, male).

I know most of the Saudi students and I have good communication and understanding with some of them. It is more interesting for me to know about the others’ cultures; so I try to make friends as much as possible with American and other international students here at UWL. The only obstacle for me is the age gap between most of the students I know and me (Interviewee M, male).

Although the majority of participants have relationships with American students, it is clear they share more interests with other international and Saudi students. Unsurprisingly, this study found that participants mostly relied on other Saudi and/or international students or family members for social support. Interestingly one of the participants indicated he used Facebook to meet his social needs, while another student claimed he had no one to go to.

Usually I go to ask one of my close friends who have been here longer than me (Interviewee D, male).

I use Facebook network for any social needs, Facebook allowed me to communicate with other students and friends in the U.S. and back home (Interviewee C, male).

I balance my social life with Saudi, American, and international students. But I hang out with internationals the most because I learn from them a lot (Interviewee I, female).

In general, participants depended on family members or friends, in addition to students who came here before them.
Summary Findings

Participants had different expectations prior to their arrival to the U.S., and they reported that the United States offered more academic opportunities than were offered by their home country (Saudi Arabia). Participants were concerned with adjusting to American culture, with some excited to meet American people; some participants, in particular the males, noted that their families worry that they will adapt too much to American cultures’ that they will never return home. Also participants with previous study abroad experiences have more positive social expectations than those with no such experiences.

Self improvement, better career opportunities, understanding American culture, and family support are the major factors that motivate Saudi students to study in the U.S. All participants are involved in the national program (King Abdullah Scholarship Program) which requires students to study in a special field according to a national plan. Family seemed to be a big motivation for students to study abroad, and friends also played a big role in motivating participants to come to UW-L. Participants expressed experiencing anxiety from the first moment they contacted the international office. Most of these students did not speak English prior to their arrival to the campus.

None of the participants in this study came to UW-L to study only the English language. The international office should notify students about all degree requirements prior to their arrival. The majority of participants in this study enrolled in English language courses through the UW-L ESL program. Participating in this study indicated
adjusting to American life has been a hardship. In addition, Saudi students have
difficulties to participate in student organizations due the lack of such experiences in
Saudi schools. Participants are joining few student organizations particular to their field
of study. Only two participants were not involved in any student organizations.
Participants suggested that professors and other students (American and international)
should be aware of others’ cultures and respect them.

The majority of the participants had negative experiences with stereotypes about
their home country and about Saudi people, in addition to misunderstandings about Islam.
This negative stereotype is shared among professors, international students and American
students. The participants believe that their American peers are not prepared to work with
international students who speak English as a second language. Female participants
seemed to feel unwanted more than male participants, especially when they have to work
with American female students. On the other hand, American female students seem to be
more supportive than males as male participants reported.

The majority of male students found the coeducational environment a distraction
and a new experience to which they accustomed after a while. The majority of the
participants in this study received help from their academic advisors. In addition,
participants claimed to seek academic support from other Saudi students who are in the
same major. Participants spoke positively about being able to find academic support on
campus. Participants indicated that their relationships with American students are limited
to classes, while they have strong relationships with both international and Saudi
students. Furthermore, the participants reported that during ESL classes they know most
of the International students from other countries with whom they build strong relationships. The gap between older participants and younger students seems to be the biggest barrier in making new friendships.

None of the students who participated in this study were satisfied with services provided by the international office. Participants claimed there is disrespect toward them by the international students’ advisor who recently started her job and appears to have no experience dealing with international students. Most of the students are satisfied with the size of the university and the city. The academic level (graduate/undergraduate) does not affect students’ social experiences with students at UW-L. The same result was found by Al-jasir (1993). Generally the participants reported high levels of satisfaction in both academic and social life.

Limitations of the Study

The following were limitations of the study:

- Participants were limited to Saudi students who were enrolled at UW-L in spring 2009.

- Due to the cultural norms dictating Saudi male/female relationships and opposite sex communication, female participants may not have revealed some personal experiences or opinions that they may have shared if the interviewer had been female.
• Participants might not have shared exclusively genuine feelings or experiences to me, the interviewer because we are acquaintances and they would not want me to think ill of them as a fellow Saudi.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study reports on findings related to the expectations, motivations, and experiences of 13 international Saudi students. In addition to a summary of findings, this chapter includes recommendations based on the research results in addition to students’ suggestions expressed during informal interactions. Furthermore this chapter includes implications for future research based upon the study findings.

Expectation-Related Conclusions

Participants in this study were asked to answer questions related to their academic and social expectations prior to arriving to the U.S. and the UW-L. The areas of study most common to participants were the business school for a Masters of Business Administration (MBA), Education, and Science. In general, Saudi students’ expectations regarding their academic majors and affordability of the majors seem to be realistic and clear since all participants were supported by the Saudi Cultural Mission and all have governmental scholarships. In other words, students must study only their intended major and they are not allowed to change that major unless they have permission from the Saudi Cultural Mission in the U.S. Thus, there was little uncertainty about what they would be studying prior to arriving at UW-L. The uncertainty came more with the particulars of what would be required to accomplish their majors or degrees.
Participants expressed worrying about the new educational environment since it was their first time studying in the U.S. Moreover, participants with a low grade point average (GPA) had negative expectations, feeling that they would not be able to enroll in a major such as Computer Science and Medical School. On the other hand, participants who had friends or relatives in the La Crosse area seem to have more positive academic expectations than those who did not have these connections. One participant indicated that she felt very comfortable about the transition to an American educational system due to the fact that her brother was studying here and she had learned all she needed to from him.

Largely as a result of a shortage of English class offerings in Saudi’s educational system, not surprisingly, conquering the English language was one of the most common negative expectations that Saudi students had prior to coming to the U.S. Participants believed it would be challenging for them to study here due to their poor English skills and the cultural differences between their home country and the U.S. Additionally, Saudi students had the expectation that studying in the U.S. would be complicated because they thought professors would use technology more in all classes.

Participants’ social expectations varied greatly from one person to another, but there was consensus that they would have problems making relationships with Americans. Females especially had negative expectations and felt it would be challenging for them as Muslims and as Saudis. Furthermore, participants believed that Americans would judge them based on their color and religion. Additionally they had expectations about U.S. American culture and held stereotypes of Americans based on
images from American films they had seen, which they realized were unrealistic. Participants expected to meet few Saudi students and to be able to meet many people from different cultural backgrounds. Only two participants mentioned that they expected American people to be friendly and that they did not expect to have difficulties making positive relationships with Americans. Ten participants were uncertain as to what to expect while only one participant stated that he held no expectations.

**Expectation-Related Recommendations**

Since these students are part of national plan implemented by the Saudi government, Ministry of Higher Education along with Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission in the U.S., it is highly recommended that these entities provide workshops and pre-departure orientations for students participating in these efforts. Saudi students, male and female, who had studied in the U.S., should be a focal part of these programs to provide these students with first-hand experiences.

**Motivation-Related Conclusions**

Based on the analysis of data, Saudi students’ reasons for coming the U.S. can be categorized into three major categories: 1-Professional development, 2-Family and friends, and 3-The reputation of UW-L and the surrounding La Crosse community. Three participants came to the UW-L seeking a graduate degree that was not available in their home country; in addition, two of them were sent by their bosses to get an advanced degree in Adapted Physical Education and Occupational Therapy.
The majority of participants were motivated to study abroad by their family members and/or friends who were currently attending or who had previously attended UWL; in sum, five participants came to study at La Crosse because someone in their family was enrolled here. Furthermore, all four females who participated had a male family member, usually a brother, studying at UW-La Crosse already. One female had two brothers and her mother there. Since in Saudi Arabia women are accompanied by a male family member while traveling and staying in a different place for any period of time, having this available in La Crosse was a motivation for some Saudi female students.

In addition to motivations driven from professional development and family/friends, the UW-L itself was viewed by all participants as one of the best schools nationwide, in particular when it came to acquiring majors in Education, Nuclear Medicine Technology, and Business Administration. The La Crosse city being a small town and having a low cost of living were also positive motivators, as was hearing previous to coming to UW-L that the area has friendly people and is safe.

**Motivation-Related Recommendations**

Findings suggest that the International Office has a great opportunity to bring more Saudi students to campus by working more closely with current students to motivate more students to attend the university. In short, seeing as how Saudi students at UW-L largely came to the university because of friends and family members, students who are enrolled at the university can help the international office promote education to other family members and friends back in Saudi. These students can help to decrease
concerns and worries of students and families, and provide accurate information about La Crosse and life in the U.S.

**Challenging Experiences - Related Conclusions**

Saudi students’ challenging experiences can be categorized into two major themes: 1-Academic experiences with their study and 2-Social experiences with Americans and international students. Overall, Saudi students are satisfied with their academic experiences with few exceptions. One of these exceptions is that some students had to change their major from a Master of Business Administration as result of failing certain entrance examinations, like the Graduate Management Admission Test. Most participants felt they had a negative experience with the ESL program as part of their educational experience. They claimed that, though they were studying English in the program for two years or more, they did not feel comfortable with their English ability in their regular classes after having graduated from the program. They felt they needed more advanced language skills in order to meet the academic requirements in classes.

Furthermore, Saudi student participants were concerned about the coeducational environment since it was their first time taking classes with the opposite sex; however, it took little time for them to become comfortable. None of the participants were working, either on campus or off, but believed it would be beneficial if they were able to work off campus to gain first-hand experience in their fields of study. However, due to student visa regulations, this is not possible. On the other hand, students are able to complete an internship relating to their field of study at the end of their studies here.
Saudi students’ social experiences seem to be more of a challenge to them than their academic experiences. Their social experiences were reflected through themes addressed in the previous chapter including discrimination, not being chosen as a group member during class projects, and stereotypes held about their country, all of which are experienced in their daily lives. Participants also had a difficult time fitting in to their schedules their five daily prayers, and found fasting during their holy month of Ramadan very challenging.

In general, Saudi students have a strong relationship with each other, which provides strong social support to them, as well as having strong relationships with other international students and close relationships with their professors. The gap between older participants and younger students seems to be the biggest barrier in making new friendships.

Making friends with Americans assisted participants in not only their acculturation to his host culture, but also in helping both them and their American friends to better understand each other’s cultures that can help in breaking down stereotypes. Participants in this study reported that they have less interaction with their American peers than their international student peers; furthermore, female Saudi students have no social involvement with their American peers, largely as a result of their differences in socializing atmospheres. When considering that the participants’ educational endeavors are financially supported by the government, it should come to as surprise that they would not mention tuition as a challenge.
These findings reflect a lack of Saudi international student preparation, if not all international students, both in their home countries and at UW-L, meeting both undergraduate and graduate requirements, and in particular for passing the GMAT. In addition, findings suggest that the UW-L International Studies Office is lacking in the area of providing information about requirements and examination processes to students upon their acceptance to the university.

**Experience-Related Recommendations**

It would greatly benefit Saudi students’ well-being if the UW-L International Student Office staff has workshops about Saudi students’ background including a briefing on Islam, the educational system in Saudi Arabia, and the Arabic culture. Since one of UW-L’s goals is to prepare students to work in a more global society, it is even more important to provide such works to students whom interested in learning about Arab culture and Islam. In addition to the international office the Diversity Organization Coalition and the Office of Multicultural Student Services can provide cultural awareness programs, and workshops for faculty and students in the UW-L.

Since the number of international students at UW-L (43 countries-350 international students – 38 Saudi students) is increasing and differences between students from different backgrounds are noted, this could be done through collaborating with staff and administrators that oversee the dorms, student services, student life, and even student organizations. With proper education about Saudi culture and religious beliefs, American students who are interested would be prepared to work with international students and possibly invite them to social gatherings that do not include going to bars, which would
benefit both students. Since Islam plays such a significant role in the daily lives of Saudi students, it is important that American faculty, staff, administrators, and students understand this significance from the Saudi perspective in order to eliminate stereotypes and to help build healthy intercultural relationships.

Furthermore, the international office could establish an orientation for Saudi students to introduce them to the coeducational environment. Saudi students who have had some schooling at the university could be asked if they might be interested in partnering with new students to assist them with acculturation by providing academic and/or social support. Though the sharing of their past experiences as new students, new Saudi students’ expectations can be confirmed for readjusted so as to help with limiting culture shock.

Moreover, the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia could offer Saudi students an English language program with a focus on communication skills prior to their arrival to the U.S. in order to provide them with essential skills that will help them in their educational journey. Female students will benefit from this program, for instance they will be aware of topics related to their traditional cloth or ways of communicating with male professors. Students also need to be encouraged to share their concerns with faculty and administrative staff to help them meet their academic goals and make social adjustment. Additionally, to also help with culture shock, students should be provided with programs to increase their cultural awareness about the host culture, which in this case is the U.S. With the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia working more
closely with the UW-L, students can be made more aware of the journey they are about to take which would lead to more successful outcomes from these study abroad experiences.

Further Study

Possible research can be conducted regarding Saudi students’ study abroad experiences. Additional research could investigate the following:

- Saudi students’ attrition and the quality of students’ academic and social integration within their higher education experiences.

- The academic challenges faced by Saudi students in the U.S. from the beginning to the completion of their academic endeavors.

- The differing effect the coeducational environment has on female and male Saudi students.

- Saudi students’ transition to their home country after they finish their educational journey in the U.S.

- The degree to which the governmental scholarship program meets its goals through engaging students in interviews and/or surveys upon returned to their home country.
REFERENCES


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(Eds.), Hand Book of intercultural training. United Kingdom, London: Sage publications.


APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL
To: Abdulrhman Almotery  
1020 Grove St Apt 16  
La Crosse, WI 54601

From: Bart Van Voorhis, Coordinator  
Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the  
Protection of Human Subjects

Date: March 11, 2009

Re: RESEARCH PROTOCOL SUBMITTED TO IRB

The IRB Executive Committee has reviewed your proposed research project entitled: “Saudi Students’ Expectations, Motivations and Experiences at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse”

The Committee has determined that your research protocol will not place human subjects at risk. The protocol has been approved under expedited review procedures, and declared exempt from further review in accordance with 45CFR46, 46.110(a)(b). However, it is strongly suggested that Informed Consent always be used. Remember to provide participants a copy of the consent form and to keep a copy for your records. Consent documentation and IRB records should be retained for at least 3 years after completion of the project.

Since you are not seeking federal funding for this research, the review process is complete and you may proceed with your project.

Good luck with your project.

cc: IRB File  
Robert Krajewski, Faculty Advisor
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1. What were your academic expectations prior to your arrival at UW-La Crosse?
2. What were your social expectations prior to your arrival at UW-La Crosse?
3. When did you enroll in UW-La Crosse?
4. What is your major/minor, have these changed since you started if so why?
5. Do you have any relatives who attended UW-La Crosse or other college in the U.S?
6. How do you pay your tuition fees?
7. Do you work on campus or off campus?
8. What motivated you to study at UW-La Crosse, (self-interest, an agency, family, friends, other)?
9. Have you been confronted with stereotypes about Saudi Arabia?
10. What difficulties did you face, if any?
11. Have you experienced any form of discrimination or prejudice on campus or off campus?
12. Since you came from a single-sex Saudi educational system, please share your experience in the coeducational environment at UW-La Crosse.
13. Did you have any problems wearing your traditional clothes? (Women)
14. What do you perceive to be advantages to being enrolled in UW-La Crosse?
15. When you find yourself needing academic assistance, where do you go?
16. When you find yourself needing social assistance, where do you go?
17. Tell me about your interactions with UW-L faculty.
18. Tell me about your interactions with UW-L students, with Saudi students, American students, and international students?
19. Do you participate in any physical activities in the Recreational Eagle Center on campus? (Women)
20. How did your family feel about your studying in the U.S?
21. Have you ever felt unwanted as a group member during class projects?
22. Are you member of any organizations on campus; if so which one(s), if not why?
23. Do you feel you are comfortable in the La Crosse community?
24. Do you have any final thoughts or would you like to add anything?
APPENDIX C

E-MAIL TO PARTICIPANTS
Dear Saudi students,

My name is Abdulrhman Almotery, I'm a graduate student seeking a Master’s degree in Education- professional development at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. I’m doing my thesis in expectations, motivations, and experiences of Saudi students at the University of Wisconsin –La Crosse. I have received permission to conduct this study from the Institutional Review Board for Protection of human Subjects at the University of Wisconsin –La Crosse.

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and the questionnaire is completely anonymous, voluntary, and participants are not required to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable answering. You are also able to withdraw from the study at any point.

I’m looking for as many Saudi students volunteers to participate in this research as possible. The major part of this study consists of an hour interview, which will take place at a time and place convenient for you.

If you would like to be part of this research please contact me

Abdulrhman Almotery
almotery.abdu@students.uwlax.edu