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# The Adaptation of the Horn of Africa Immigrant Students in Higher Education

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## The Adaptation of the Horn of Africa Immigrant Students in Higher Education

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges first generation immigrant students from the Horn of Africa encountered in their college learning in the United States and the strategies they used to succeed. The participants in the study were ten first generation immigrant students from the countries in the Horn of Africa. A case study was used as a qualitative methodological approach and three data sources namely questionnaire, intensive interviews, and observations were used to collect and analyze data. The results revealed that language difficulties, financial problems, lack of culture awareness, time constraints, and inadequate guidance are challenges the first generation immigrant students encountered. The participants used socializing with classmates, socializing with people from their own counties, ignoring or denying anything that causes them discomfort, and attending college events as coping mechanisms to overcome the challenges in the colleges they are attending in the United States.

### **Keywords**

The Horn of Africa, Immigrant Students, Challenges, Strategies, Adaptation

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## The Adaptation of the Horn of Africa Immigrant Students in Higher Education

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### Introduction

The Horn of Africa, a sub-region of East Africa, also sometimes called North Eastern Africa includes Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan (Feyissa & Hoehne 2010, Woodward, 2006). The Horn of Africa has been an unstable sub-region for ages due to the divide and rule policy of colonialists, wars among the countries and within the countries, the unfair interferences of superpowers, and natural calamities including droughts and famines. Bariagaber (2006) described the sub-region as one of the most conflict-ridden regions in the world and as a huge source of refugees and immigrants. Border disputes and displaced populations are the norms in this region. Hence, a large number of people have migrated from this sub-region to different parts of the world, especially to the United States of America, beginning at the end of the 1970's.

The Horn of Africa is believed to be a cradle of human beings. Thus, it is one of the areas in the world that has been first inhabited by man (Fattovich, 2001). Its proximity to the oil rich Middle East, to the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean, which are important trade routes, makes it an important strategic region in the world. It is also a source of a large number of immigrants due to the continuous wars and the consequent natural calamities (Bariagaber, 2006). Among the immigrants are college students who aspire to continue their studies and improve themselves.

These immigrant students usually come to their destination with a lot of hope and ambition to change their lives for the better. However, immigrating to another country is not easy, as it has many ups and downs. Immigrant students face the same problems as other immigrants but have the added stress that comes with being in a new educational learning environment and the rigorous learning experience of higher education. Jaffe-Walter and Lee (2011, p. 281) noted that "recently arrived immigrant students face multiple issues related to linguistic and cultural dislocation."

As Pike and Kuh (2005) stated, the term “first generation college students” is defined in different ways. They defined first generation to mean the student is the first one in his/her family to attend college. In this study, first generation refers to the immigrant students who are the first in their families to go to college in the United States after their immigration, irrespective of their parents or siblings’ education levels and/or the immigrant student’s attendance of a college in his/her home country. Thus, this study is different from other first generation college students which explore the experiences of students who are the first to go to college among their family.

First generation immigrant students have various factors that motivate them to persevere and graduate from college. Peguero and Bondy (2011, p. 167) also argued that, “...first generation immigrant youth arrive in the United States with higher levels of educational aspirations, commitment, and determination for success and progress.” But at the same time, there are many pitfalls that would hinder them from graduating or even attending college. They may take longer to graduate than the average years that it takes non-immigrants to graduate or they may encounter some challenging experiences. As Brilliant (2000) indicated, immigrant students are usually older than the traditional college age student because they spent a lot of time in the process of immigration, for some in refugee camps, and many need to work in order to save money to start school.

Isolation and lack of identity is more pronounced among immigrant students. Hutchison in Hutchison, Quach, and Wiggan’s study (2009) shared his experiences of a similar situation when he was asked in his home country if he is an African American and his experience in the United States. He underscored that “... back in the United States, I am never mistaken for a U.S.-born native, owing to (what I thought was) my ‘unmistakable’ African accent and parlance. It is important to note that when in the United States, I am first of all, black until I speak. When I speak, I become “African” (p. 170). This made him a stranger both in his native country and in the United States, at times creating a feeling of homelessness.

Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) also noted that immigrants try to identify themselves with their country of origin while they live in the adoptive country but they feel that they belong to the new country when they visit their original country showing a shift of identity in different situations. This is similar to what immigrant students experienced around their colleges and in their general life situations. They are not included as the same group with their fellow students although they have the same identity of ‘studentship’. Hence, they cannot identify themselves as part of the students among those they interact, live and learn with, and they lack the proximity and daily contact with the people they left behind.

In addition, most immigrant students indicated that compared to American students, they do not get enough assistantships, scholarships, or any other support. They also have difficulty gaining employment while studying due to various factors, like not being familiar with the environment and culture, and having heavy accents. The students interact less with the host community because of their cultural background and newness to the environment, and this could be misunderstood by others as a lack of interest in anything and ultimately serves as a hurdle in their integration and academic achievement. Orelus (2011) writes that many transnational subjects of color living in the United States have been treated as aliens regardless of their legal status and how long they may have been living in the country.

Immigration has different effects on different ethnic and age groups of people. Rong and Preissle (2009) indicated that “transnational migration affects people differently because of their pre and post social class, their race-ethnicity, their country of origin, and the conditions of their exit; these differences result in considerable inequities...” (p. 10). Alfred (2004) noted that immigrants have different economic backgrounds and speak languages other than English. The opportunities and challenges for the different immigrant groups thus

vary depending on their background and ethnicity. Overall, most migrants are said to be in an unenviable situation and face a lot of difficulties. However, beyond the difficulties and uncertainties the migrants face, they have internal zeal and aspirations for a better life. To fulfill the aspirations, the pathway is usually a college education (Alfred, 2004, Kim, 2009). However, access to college is not easy for many immigrants, and once admitted they often face formidable challenges. School life becomes challenging from different aspects for those who secured admission. First, like other international students, they have different learning styles and cultural backgrounds as compared to the mainstream American students. Secondly, they have to deal with many new cultural and life conditions which are challenging (Birnbaum, Cardona, Milian, & Gonzalez, 2012, Rong & Fitchett, 2008).

In the field of instructional design and technology, learner analysis is one way of identifying the needs, problems, and strengths of learners so that educators could prepare lessons and approaches that fit and address the learners' needs and problems. When conducting learner analysis, the main objectives are to know the general characteristics, the specific entry level, and the learning styles of the learners (Morrison, Ross, & Kemp, 2007). Hence, the application of the principles of instructional design could help identify and solve some of the problems immigrant students face in higher learning institutions.

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges first generation immigrant students from the Horn of Africa encountered in their college learning in the United States and the strategies they used to succeed. Through exploring these issues, this study attempted to create awareness among the host society and higher learning institutions as well as provide recommendations to new immigrant students. The two research questions that guided this study are:

1. What are the challenges first generation immigrant students from the Horn of Africa face in their college learning in the United States?
2. What strategies do these immigrant students use to overcome the challenges of college learning in the United States?

## **Methodology**

### **Research Setting**

We conducted this study in a metro area in the western part of the United States. The metropolitan area has a considerable number of immigrants who have immigrated to the United States in different ways. According to estimates of some members of the communities from the sub-region, the total number of immigrants is close to 40,000 in the study area of this research.

This is a descriptive qualitative research using case study methodology to discover the perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of immigrant college students from the countries in the Horn of Africa about their education and life experience as immigrants in the United States. Stake (1995) identified case study in terms of a unit of study and defines it as "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi). Furthermore, Merriam (2009) stated "A case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 40) and "the unit of analysis, not the topic of investigation, characterizes a case study" (p. 41). In this study, the unit of analysis is each research participant from the Horn of Africa that characterizes a case study.

The case in this study was ten immigrant undergraduate college students from the Horn of Africa. It is the unit of analysis as each one of the participants was the focus of the study. The typicality and commonness of the experience of each participant was analyzed to

describe each experience and to identify a theme or themes commonly expressed by the research participants. The end product of the case study research was thick description of the perceptions, interpretations, and lived experiences of the immigrant students.

### **Researcher Stance**

Tekleab was the primary researcher in this study who collected and analyzed data with the assistance and guidance of the second author Heng-Yu. We follow with a personal introduction of both authors in relation to the study.

Tekleab: As a graduate student in two American universities and as an immigrant from the Horn of Africa, I know and I have experienced what is like to be a student in the higher education system of America. Having the opportunity to research the experiences of immigrant students from the Horn of Africa, I looked at their college learning experiences with a goal of trying to avoid being influenced by my own personal experience so that I could describe and interpret the experiences of the research participants. But as I analyzed the data I found it to be a reflection of my own experience in many aspects. However, unlike my research participants, I was in the United States as a graduate student fully sponsored by my then home country and I did not experience the economic hardships that most of my research participants had encountered. It is only during my doctoral study that I joined a university as an immigrant student. During that time, I experienced many of the issues that other immigrant college students from the Horn of Africa experienced in this study.

Heng-Yu: I am a faculty member who has the privilege to work with many international students in a university setting. I grew up and was educated in Taiwan. Then, after my military service, I decided to pursue my education in the United States. I started my journey in the United States as a foreign student who enrolled in the American Language and Cultural Program, then as an undergraduate student, a master's student, a doctoral student, and now a faculty member in the United States. Similar to Tekleab, I also experienced many of the similar issues that other immigrant college students from the Horn of Africa experienced in this study.

### **Participants**

The study participants were selected from countries in the Horn of Africa that have immigrant college students in the selected research site. As Merriam (2009) highlighted, maximum variation in terms of sites or participants increases the range of the applicability of the study. The potential research participants were selected from different colleges in the study area and from the different countries of the Horn of Africa to get maximum variation.

Ten first generation immigrant students from the Horn of Africa participated in this study. Three participants were from Ethiopia (Sara, Almaz, and Kebede), two participants each were from Eritrea (Hana and Michael), Sudan (Ali and Jemal), and South Sudan (James and Sam), and one participant was from Somalia (Salah). In addition, among the ten participants, five of them immigrated to the United States as refugees, four of the participants immigrated through the Diversity Visa Lottery, and one immigrated through family reunion. Four participants are married and six are single, and their ages range from 25 to 34. All the participants' names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

## **Methods of Data Collection**

Three data sources:

- 1) questionnaire,
- 2) interviews, and
- 3) observations were used in this study.

### **Questionnaire**

A questionnaire is a printed form that participants fill out in a study. Questionnaires are useful in capturing participants' experiences, opinions, values, and interests (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2008). The questionnaire was created by both authors to answer the research questions. The 20-item questionnaire was given to each participant to complete first, then the questionnaires were collected and analyzed. The information collected using the questionnaire was used to describe the participants' demographic and background information. Questions such as participant's age, gender, marital status, and country of origin were asked.

### **Interview**

Qualitative research describes and presents multiple views and this is done through interviews that one uses to collect perspectives about an issue from different participants of the research (Stake, 1995). The first author developed the initial interview questions and finalized them with the second author. The interview questions contained 20 open-ended questions so that respondents would have opportunities to explain their experiences in totality. Sample questions such as "What challenges did you face in your college learning experience in the United States?", "Whom do you ask for help?", and "What do you do when you face some difficulties in your study?", "What does your relationship look like with your teachers and peers?", and "With whom do you socialize?" were asked. In this study, we used the one-on-one interviews and all the interviews were conducted in English. Each participant was interviewed two times and each session of interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

### **Observation**

Observation is another tool that we used in the data collection. A skilled researcher, observing systematically can collect reliable data by paying attention and describing what is observed (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Thus, wherever we had the opportunity during the interview, we carefully observed and recorded participants' way of life, artifacts they keep and use, and music they listen to. Stake (1995) also asserted that observation leads the researcher towards a better understanding of the case, making the finding more concrete. Therefore, how each participant reacts to the interview questions in terms of body language was also observed and recorded.

### **Procedure**

In this study, criteria for selecting a case is that the case must be a first generation immigrant student from one of the countries of the Horn of Africa who is attending an undergraduate college in the United States. Thus, we used the criterion sampling to identify

potential participants. The cases of interest were identified and included through snowball sampling. Snowball purposeful sampling involves identifying a few key informants that meet the criteria established for selecting research participants. After the Institutional Review Board approved the research plan, we identified and selected the first two participants. We requested these two participants to refer other immigrant students from the sub-region that they know. As the result, eight more first generation immigrant students from the Horn of Africa were selected and included as participants.

All the participants signed the consent form first and then scheduled time with us to fill out the questionnaire. The whole interview process took about three months. The interview was conducted at two different occasions with the participants and each interview session lasted 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews were tape recorded first and then transcribed verbatim. Each recorded interview was transcribed before the next interview was conducted. The field notes taken during each interview were compared against the transcribed notes and this helped us visualize the interview process and improve the next interview (Wolcott, 2005). Then the transcribed and compiled information was given to each participant to check for accuracy. Information collected through observation was recorded on the field notes and was organized following each observation episode.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is a process of making meaning or sense out of the data collected (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995). To make sense out of the data, we described, classified, and interpreted the information collected from the participants. The interview questions are grouped into two parts, each part answering each of the two research questions. We categorized the data into groups based on the transcripts of the interview questions. In data analysis, we deconstruct the information and we give meaning to the parts considered important (Stake, 1995). We also looked for relationships between the different parts. Individual experiences of each participant were first analyzed and interpreted, and then each of the experiences that fit with each other was aggregated.

In order to validate the final data, we also used triangulation, member checks, and thick description as Merriam (2009) suggested. The triangulation was done by using different sources. For member checks, we asked for feedback on participants' interpretation of the interview results. Finally, to address thick description, we described the research participants, their perceptions and interpretation of the challenges they face, and the strategy they use to prevail in detail quoting verbatim from their interviews, questionnaires, and observations. We obtained an Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval from our university to conduct the research and collect information from the participants. We followed the IRB guidelines closely and respected the rights of the participants. We included the information that they agreed we can include and we showed them what we observed.

### **Findings**

Based on the major emphasis that each participant provided in the questionnaire, during the interview, and our personal observations, a number of clustered ideas under each of the two major themes emerged.

### **Challenges and Difficulties**

The participants mentioned a number of challenges and difficulties they encountered in the United States and the colleges they attend. Among these are language difficulties (Ali,



Jemal, Sam, Almaz, Kebede, Sara, Michael, and Salah), financial problems (Ali, Jemal, James, Kebede, Sara, and Hana), lack of culture awareness (Jemal, Sam, Almaz, Kebede, and Salah), time constraints (Ali, Jemal, James, and Michael), and inadequate guidance (Jemal, Sam, Kebede, and Michael). In the following, a few excerpts directly quoted from the participants are presented.

### **Ali's story**

Ali explained the challenges and difficulties he encountered in his learning endeavors and life as:

English language was one of the problems I had when I came to the United States and in my school experience. In Sudan, Arabic was the medium of instruction. The other problem I had was financial issue to pay for my tuition fee, to help my family, and for living expenses. Time constrains to go to school and to work was another issue affecting my academic performance. (This indicates language difficulties, financial problems, and time constraints)

### **Jemal's story**

Jemal extensively discussed the challenges and difficulties he encountered and any immigrant may encounter as a student in a new system and environment. He narrates his experience and possible scenarios other immigrants may face as:

In my country, the medium of instruction is Arabic. Thus, English language was one of the difficult things I encountered in the beginning. The other problem was financial issue. Other difficulties I encountered included the examples given in the classroom which are all from the American context only. The accent and the slangs were difficult because they were cultural and I do not have them in my culture. In addition, for an immigrant student to catch up with the mainstream students, he/she has to study three to four times more because of the language problem and the newness to the teaching-learning system. This creates a lot of challenges to the immigrant student financially and time wise. (This indicates language difficulties, financial problems, lack of culture awareness, and time constraints)

The other problem Jemal mentioned was lack of guidance from the college he attended. He said, "I wanted to study computer science and then I changed a couple of times. I finally ended up studying accounting and this is mainly due to lack of guidance in the college for immigrant students." (This indicates inadequate guidance)

### **James' story**

James explained concisely the problems to an immigrant student in the United States as:

Here I work, I go to school, and I support my family and myself, pay my rents and tuition fee. At one time a non-profit organization helped me pay part of my tuition fee but now it is closed. There is always money and time

constraint. Life is very difficult... (This indicates financial problems and time constraints)

### **Sam's story**

Sam raised and highlighted many challenges he faced and other immigrant students may be facing. He narrated the challenges as:

One of the problems I faced when I came was learning the electronic devices. The other problem was the accent. Adjusting to the new environment, learning the culture, and learning the new learning materials were a challenge. The other difficulty is many immigrant students remain frustrated even after graduation because they do not get jobs and this worries me. Lack of proper guidance of what to study and what fields have good job market affects immigrants. (This indicates language difficulties, lack of culture awareness, and inadequate guidance)

### **Almaz's story**

Almaz narrated her experiences and the challenges she faced in the college she is attending in the United States as:

At first how to use the technologies and how to effectively communicate using the English language were challenging. I had to learn what is correct culturally and it also takes me longer time to understand the learning material compared to the mainstream American students. It takes me more time to complete my assignments and class works compared to those born here. Classroom discussion is challenging because you need to know what you say is culturally appropriate. (This indicates language difficulties and lack of culture awareness)

### **Kebede's story**

Kebede also recounted a number of fundamental challenges and difficulties that he encountered in the following manner:

I had a problem adapting the United States' college teaching-learning system, the social interaction, and I had financial problems. Here, the accents and the slangs are difficult and the examples they give are also what I did not know. Adapting the way of life in here and making friendship with people was another problem. I have had a hard time to express my ideas in a way they can understand me using the English that I know. Therefore, I remain quiet. I also remain quiet because I do not know what is offending and what is not, because I do not know the culture. Also, the English as Second Language (ESL) instructors are not trained teachers. They just speak the language and what they teach does not help much to improve the English language for immigrant students. (This indicates language difficulties, financial problems, and lack of culture awareness)

Kebede also stated, “In my culture we follow our elder brother, our father, or our friend, but here they know from childhood what they want to do and what they want to be.” This is another problem related to the insufficiency of guidance to immigrant students in the colleges. (This indicates inadequate guidance)

### **Sara’s story**

Sara attested the challenges and difficulties she faced in her college learning in the United States as:

Education here is very expensive. To pay all these expenses one has to work fulltime and sometimes overtime creating time constraint. I do not have any English problems except the accent and slangs some use. Sometimes because of the accent difference they keep on asking you ‘what?’ and this create uncomfortable feeling among the immigrant students. Some instructors get fed-up with students that have accent. This really causes discomfort among the immigrant students. (This indicates financial problems and language difficulties)

### **Hana’s story**

Hana thinks that non-academic responsibilities can negatively affect immigrant students’ learning experiences. She explained these responsibilities as:

The courses are not very hard but there are other responsibilities that affect the learning, such as paying tuition fee and other bills. At home there are no tuition fees and you get support from family and the only thing you do is go to school as a student. (This indicates financial problems)

### **Michael’s story**

Michael detailed the problems he encountered as a first generation immigrant student as:

The English language courses are not enough to prepare the immigrant students. The English language was one of the difficulties I had, and I had to study more hours to come to the same level with other students. Time is one of the difficulties that hinder me to fully use the available help and resources. Getting the right information and guidance is not easy for the first generation immigrant students. (This indicates language difficulties, time constraints, and inadequate guidance)

### **Salah’s story**

Salah described the challenges he encountered extensively as:

During the first few months the language, the accent, the new environment were making me feel that I lost something. Particularly girls wearing miniskirts and sitting near you was something I had no imagination. In my culture it is unthinkable to see a female’s thighs open and this made me

uncomfortable in the beginning. The language, particularly the students' accent, was very difficult. (This indicates language difficulties and lack of culture awareness)

### **Coping Mechanisms and Strategies**

The coping mechanisms that the first generation immigrant students from the Horn of Africa use to overcome the challenges and hurdles include socializing with classmates (Sam, Almaz, Kebede, Hana, and Salah), socializing with people from their own counties (Ali, Jemal, James, Almaz, Kebede, and Hana), ignoring or denying anything that causes them discomfort (Ali, Jemal, Sam, Sara, and Hana), and attending college events (Hana, Michael, and Salah). A few direct quotations from the participants are presented in the following to highlight some specific experiences.

#### **Ali's story**

Ali narrated his strategy of how to avoid things that he does not like and with whom he associates as:

I do not attend social events in the college because they use alcohol and other stuff and I do not like these. I have a different perspective to such stuff from the other students. So mostly I socialize with my country people and with people in my work place. This way I avoid what I do not want. If someone sees me differently I do not bother. But I do not feel that I am different. It is the problem of the one who see me differently. I just ignore it and I stop bothering about it. (This indicates socializing with people from their own counties and ignoring or denying anything that causes them discomfort)

#### **Jemal's story**

Jemal commented that he did not experience discrimination from most of the people that he came across. However, he stated that with those who show discrimination, he acted as if they are not doing any discrimination. He said he acted as if he did not see what they are doing, or as if he did not understand their acts. He said, "I did not face much discomfort with most people in terms of discrimination. For the few who try to show and make you feel the discrimination, I ignore what they do." To avoid any feeling or experience of discrimination "I socialize with my community and with people neighboring Sudan. I try to stay away from some American culture." (This indicates socializing with people from their own counties and ignoring or denying anything that causes them discomfort)

#### **James' story**

James uses the strategy of grouping himself and socializing with people from his own country. He also entertains himself by listening to music from his country. He expressed his strategy as, "I feel more comfortable at home with friends because we speak the same language and we have the same culture. I do not socialize or go to any event in the college. I listen to the music from my country so that I could remember my culture." (This indicates socializing with people from their own counties)

### **Sam's story**

Sam described the mechanism he uses to avoid any discomforting situation in terms of a few strategies. The strategies he uses are interaction, association, or ignoring whatever he sees or feels. Sam said,

I interact with my classmates and they are eager to learn my culture. It is an interaction while in the classroom. Whenever I have any discomfort in school and in work place, I do not give it attention. People develop different perception on you depending, for example, on your accent. I avoid those who do so and also avoid any negative thing from my mind. (This indicates socialize with classmates and ignoring or denying anything that causes them discomfort)

### **Almaz's story**

Almaz uses certain strategies to overcome her perceived challenges. Almaz said "I socialize with my country people and also with people in the place where I work." But concerning her relationship with her peers, she said that "I do not have close contact with my peers; it is only with those whom I take a course with that I sometimes ask specific question about the course", and with the time constraint she said "I do not attend social events in the college due to time constraint and I feel the classroom interaction is enough to learn about the culture." (This indicates socialize with classmates and socializing with people from their own counties)

### **Kebede's story**

Although Kebede already indicated that it is difficult to have friends from among his classmates, he remains open with his classmates whenever he meets them in the classroom. Kebede said, "Some of the classmates tell me very good things like what you see on the wall." Some of the vignettes on the wall read as, "We got unique perspective of the world, I love your accent" and "Since you came from a different culture you brought something to the class. Nobody would bring it otherwise." Being open and telling his classmates about his culture and talking without being embarrassed about his accent were some of the strategies that Kebede used to have good relationship with his classmates. Otherwise, he stated that, "My relationship is with Ethiopians. It is only in the classroom that I have relationship with the Americans." Another strategy he tried was to improve his English and learn about the American culture. He stated it as, "I requested an English language instructor to group the immigrant students with willing Americans so that we can interact, learn the culture, and improve our English." (This indicates socialize with classmates and socializing with people from their own counties)

### **Sara's story**

Sara indicated in the interview that she balances what she does to the extent that it is required to serve the purpose. Sara mentioned,

I do not attend any social event in the college because I work fulltime and go to school fulltime. Sometimes by looking at you and knowing that you are not one of the students from the mainstream American students, you see it from

their reaction that they do not want you in their group. But I just ignore such things and if I have to do it, I do it and join the group. (This indicates ignoring or denying anything that causes them discomfort)

### **Hana's story**

Hana uses the following strategies that go along with her own characteristics and narrated them as,

I have good relationship with my classmates and I communicate with many people. I am an outgoing person. Concerning instructors, there are a few of them that show unacceptable characteristics on the immigrant students with certain accent, and immigrant students stay away from them. I also stay away from such instructors. I do not bother what they say about my accent and I communicate with different people even if I know that I have a different accent. But most of the time I socialize with people from my country. I attended a social event in my college and was helpful to know many people. The African-Americans are helpful and I shared with them about situations and cultures in Africa. (This indicates socialize with classmates, ignoring or denying anything that causes them discomfort, socializing with people from their own counties, and attending college events)

### **Michael's story**

Michael, like the rest of the first generation immigrant students in this study, employs certain strategies that would help him overcome any problem in his college learning and his social life. He said, "Once the students I tutor see and understand that I can help them, then a good relationship develops between us." Michael also mentioned although he attended some social events in his college but there are things he does not like that go on in the social events. He explained these as:

I attended some social events in the college. Some were good and helpful to meet with people but there are many things that I did not like also. These were like partying, dancing, the use of alcohol and other stuff in a school compound. (This indicates attending college events)

### **Salah's story**

To avoid any discomfort and bad feeling that may come from being alone, Salah tried to be friendly to many people using different strategies. He explained that "My relationship with my peers is good. I also socialize with many of them - Americans and others. But I do not do what the American students do, like drinking and smoking." Salah also explained that he participated in some social events in his college as, "I have attended a few social events in the college like the international day and they were helpful to know other students." (This indicates socialize with classmates and attending college events)

## **Discussion**

The results revealed that language difficulties, financial problems, lack of culture awareness, time constraints, and inadequate guidance are challenges the first generation

immigrant students from the Horn of Africa encountered in their college learning in the United States. In addition, these students employed certain strategies, such as socializing with classmates, socializing with people from their own counties, ignoring or denying anything that causes them discomfort, and attending college events to overcome the difficulties they encounter.

### **Challenges and Difficulties**

All the participants are responsible for themselves and their families in the United States and back in their home countries. Therefore, they have formidable sets of tasks – going to school, finding jobs, working part-time, learning English that would help them to be competitive in school, learning the new culture, keeping in touch with their previous relationships, and establishing new social ties. Oikonomidoy (2011, p. 26) accentuated that “Immigrant students are struggling to learn a new language, a new educational system, and a new culture while simultaneously filtering out the influences that interfere with being successful academically.” Similar to the international students who study in the United States that Ku, Lahman, Yeh, and Cheng (2008) and Birnbaum, Cardona, Milian, and Gozalez (2012) documented, the first generation immigrant students from the Horn of Africa also face a number of issues in the classroom and outside the classroom. Among these are unequal treatment, language barrier, lack of social and financial support, inhospitality from American students and faculty, and cultural shock. These create stress and frustration among the first generation immigrant students as they do to international students. Such stresses could also result into disruption of their education.

One major challenge as reported by all the participants is the English language in the colleges they attend in the United States. Colburn and Nguyen (2012) argued that students must first understand the words the instructor speaks, and the instructor must enunciate clearly and avoid using idioms or colloquial terms in the classroom learning. The difficulties immigration students had in spoken English coupled with the slow reading pace were other challenges that kept them quiet and passive in the classroom activities. The slow reading pace was a major factor that forces them to spend a lot of time, three to four hours more than the mainstream American students, in doing their assignments and studies. Thus, being less proficient in the English language was one of the challenges the participants of this study confirmed. Many of the participants indicated that learning English was one of their goals when they immigrated to the United States. They know that their academic success and positive social relationships are contingent to their English proficiency. Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova (2008) reported that the participants in their study thought that learning English was important to them and was helpful to be successful. Thus, problems in English language proficiency act as sources for other challenges related with learning and social relationships.

For financial support, most of the participants indicated that there are loans and occasionally grants but no scholarships. Scholarships are mainly offered in high schools and the students come with the scholarships from their high schools thus immigrants do not get such chances. Jiménez (2011) asserted that non-refugee immigrants do not receive federal funding or other funding for integration programs. In addition, according to Orfield (2005), “access to college has been increasingly threatened by large increases in tuition, reduction in state and federal resources, more intense competition for college space, and growing economic inequality in the country” (p. 4). This is another example of the myriad problems that first generation immigrant students from the Horn of Africa face in the United States. Therefore, to be able to cover the tuition fees and other expenses, most of the immigrant

students have to work fulltime and even overtime. This then results into other chains of problems like time constraint, poor academic performance, etc.

Lack of cultural awareness and congenial relationships with their peers and educators also negatively affect their academic performances. Kurlaender and Flores (2005) contend that there are a number of factors that contribute to racial disparities in college attainment. They list these factors as, “chief among them are academic support, encouragement, and positive collegiate experience” (p. 27). Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova (2008, p. 43) also documented that, “social relations provide a sense of belonging, emotional support, tangible assistance and information, guidance, role modeling, and positive feedback.” The immigrant students could also learn the language and culture of the host society from their peers, changing the status quo as Gorlewski (2011) argued. Their inclusion and involvement would also empower them to be solution finders rather than dependents on solutions from others. The first generation immigrant students lack these cultural awareness and congenial relationships, and to compensate what they lack, they associate and socialize with people from their home countries.

Furthermore, lack of guidance and lack of relevant information are other factors that add to the difficulties of the first generation immigrant students from the Horn of Africa. “In several cases, immigrant students reported that academic advisors had a negative influence on their academic adaptation by sending a signal of negative or discouragement” (Kim, 2009, p. 20). Common among the responses to the issues of guidance and information were, as Kebede stated, “I do not go to the academic advisors because they ask you back the question you want them to answer and they do not give you complete information.” As Obiakor and Afoláyan (2007) attest, there is lack of multicultural training of school personnel and this negatively affects the help they provide to immigrant students. The importance of the guidance and the provision of timely and pertinent information to the first generation immigrant students through people who understand their needs and problems cannot be overemphasized.

### **Coping Mechanisms and Strategies**

One of the strategies that immigrant students use as a coping mechanism is by sharing what they know and what they are good at with their classmates. Many participants mentioned they help their classmates in math and science while they also get help from their peers mostly in English. Some participants indicated they occasionally share with their peers about their cultures and countries and their peers loved what they presented. Similar to this, Rong and Preissle (2009) reported that immigrant students bring with them different life experiences and beliefs, cultural communication patterns, languages, and educational traditions. Building on the unique qualities of the first generation immigrant students’ knowledge and ability could be a gain for the society at large and the immigrants, rather than concentrating on their deficiencies. As Rong and Preissle (2009) noted citing Goodwin, Genishi, Asher, and Woo (2005), immigrants not only bring many different skills, strengths, and needs to the classroom, but also represent unique histories, cultures, stories, values, languages, and beliefs diversifying the society and making it competitive worldwide. Immigrant students enrich the cultures of their host societies adding to the ethnic diversity (Arthur, 2010).

The participants also pointed out that they mainly socialize with people from their home countries and with people who speak the same native language like them. Although it could be expected as Suárez-Orozco et al. (2008, p. 372) argued that “...youth growing up today are likely to work and network, love and live with people from different national, linguistic, religious, and racial backgrounds...”, it does not look to be so with the participants



of this study. The ‘you are not one of us’ type of attitude a few educators and others show to the immigrant students, isolates and limits immigrant students to socialize and associate with the people of their home country. Hersi (2012) similarly asserts that immigrant students shield themselves against any adversary by forging and retaining community and family networks, and these networks provide them with social capital and cultural values and traditions.

According to Rong and Fitchett (2008), an atmosphere with positive relationship reduces immigrant students’ anxiety and creates positive attitudes towards school, instructors, and peers. When there is no positive relationship and when they feel that they are perceived and treated differently, they ignore what they feel and see as if they do not feel it or see it. This is one of the mechanisms that the participants of this study mentioned that they use. In addition, most of the first generation immigrant students also came with the assumption and information about the dreamland where life is easy, where one can get rich quickly, and where everything is in abundance. But rather than these assumptions, they encounter a tough life, discomfort, and isolation. They do not admit the encounters which are apparent to many others. They know it, yet they act as if they do not know it. When expectations are not met, it becomes easier to act as if they are met. This is one form of denial and it is a defense mechanism.

According to Zerubavel (2006), one form of denial is silence and gives “don’t ask, don’t tell” as an example. Zerubavel further asserts that the causes for silence as fear, pain, shame, unpleasant encounters contrary to expectation and embarrassment. In silence and denial rather than simply failing to notice something, one deliberately refrains from noticing it or if he/she notices it, acts as if he/she did not notice it. It is refusing to acknowledge something evidently present. The defense mechanisms the participants of this study use against the unwanted internal and external nuisances is by acting as if they are not happening or just ignoring them as if they did not see or understand them. The defense mechanism, thus, serves them as a means for coping.

The major limitation of the study is the sample size and its limit to one metro area. It may not be applicable to the perceptions and experience of other immigrant college students from the Horn of Africa in other parts of the United States. The study is exclusively about the experiences of immigrants from the Horn of Africa in the metropolitan areas of one of the Rocky Mountain States which has its own distinct characteristics in terms of the culture of the people and its own peculiar problems. Thus, what these research participants reflected may not be wholly applicable to other immigrants from other regions of the world learning in colleges in the United States.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the data we collected from the participants, the following recommendations would help solve some of the problems immigrant students from the Horn of Africa face in the United States colleges.

1. Instructors have to live by what they preach. Analyzing the learner and knowing his/her strengths, weaknesses, experiences, and needs will equip instructors to better help their students. This is thus one of the duties instructors should perform to execute their responsibilities effectively and to fulfill what the teaching profession demands.
2. Although forging a close relationship with teachers and instructors is not a common practice in the Horn of Africa, immigrant students from the Horn of Africa have to realize that this is not so in the United States.

Immigrant students could benefit more by having close relationship with their instructors. Creating an assertive, mutually respecting, and positive relationship would be beneficial to the students and the instructors. Instructors could know the immigrant students better and would be able to identify where the students need support.

3. Colleges should educate the instructors through timely seminars and workshops about immigrant students and other international students in the college. The instructors should be aware of the cultures, needs, challenges, and strengths of these students whom they will encounter in the courses they offer. This would prepare the instructors to have knowledge about immigrant students in their classes and to be more inclusive and accommodating to all the students.
4. Some of the English as a Second Language (ESL) courses should be redesigned considering the needs of immigrant students. One of the main problems immigrant students has is in English. Thus, by redesigning some of the ESL courses and including relevant topics that attract the learners, the needs of the immigrant students could be met.
5. Colleges should hire immigrant students as assistants in offices like the international office. Hiring someone knowledgeable about other cultures would better serve the immigrant students and others. This can also help a college to attract more students and to help achieve better results among its students. Colleges have to realize also that immigrant students come with some values, knowledge, and skills particularly in fields like math and science as well as some unique cultures. Colleges have to be able to tap such skills and at the same time help the immigrant students.
6. Proficiency in English is a determining factor for success in the United States. Be it in school or at work place, English proficiency is required for success. One has to be able to express himself/herself using the lingua franca. Otherwise, instructors, employers, and the public would judge the individual as if he/she does not know anything no matter how skillful he/she may be. First generation immigrant students have to understand this and strive to improve their English proficiency as fast as they can. Not only in the United States, but also in many parts of the world that proficiency in spoken and written English is a recipe for success.
7. Learning how to balance their lives in this multicultural world of the United States is a strategy that successful immigrants follow. It is by being actively involved and not by withdrawing that first generation immigrant students can benefit from this multicultural mosaic of the United States. Negotiating space within their colleges and claiming their voices rather than withdrawing would put them in a better position. First generation immigrant students, by keeping their hyphenated identities and at the same time acculturating the new environment, can help them keep the best of both cultures.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that educators and colleges are not doing enough to understand the past and present lives and academic experiences of the first generation immigrant students from the Horn of Africa. It is the educators and colleges who have direct contact with the immigrants and they are the ones that can better help them. We

believe that by helping the immigrants, the educators can fulfill their duties and bring understanding, harmony, and development within the larger community.

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