Global and Domestic Nomads or Third Culture Kids:  
Who Are They and What the University Needs to Know  

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This article, based on a professional paper of the same name, attempts to provide an overview of the needs and advantages of Global Nomads or Third Culture Kids, as well as applying these needs and advantages to the university setting. Student Affairs professionals, professors, and other support personnel can use a knowledge of this growing group to better support and utilize these individuals in their collegiate experience. Current practices and societal trends are briefly discussed as well as some general recommendations for implementing minor changes to university procedures to better identify and understand this often hidden population.

"Few of us live any longer in a monocultural world. We work with people from other cultures, live next door to them, study in class with them, or teach them. They may be our customers, our competition, or our in-laws" (Storti, 1999, p. 1).

As United States (U.S.) and international universities continue to reflect this growing trend, it becomes vital that student affairs professionals understand the needs of the student population as it becomes increasingly culturally diverse (Storti, 1999). Many are coming to college as truly multicultural individuals, having developed a "third culture," one not entirely like either their home or host culture. These individuals can be referred to as Third Culture Kids (TCKs) or Global Nomads. (Smith, 1991) Many other subgroups, such as "missionary kids," "absentee Americans," or "military brats" fit within these larger terms, and share many of the same experiences and challenges (Smith, 1991; McCaig, 1991). Another group that can also be said to share many of the same needs and challenges with TCKs are "domestic nomads," those who have not traveled between different countries but who have lived among different cultures within one country. By the time an average global nomad TCK reaches adulthood, he or she has lived in six different countries, "his cultural identity becoming gradually unglued from that of his monocultural parents and forming into a new sensibility" (Killham, 1994, p. 56). A TCK's life is a balance of challenges and benefits, some similar to those of domestic students, some more like those of international students, and some uniquely their own.
As a result, TCKs need some of the same kind of support structures that are already in place in universities, but may also need some additional support structures that are as unique as they are.

**Culture and Identity**

Culture is one factor in the way a person identifies within society or within the world. It is "like an onion, with many overlapping layers. And when you peel an onion to get to the 'core', nothing is there" (Seelye & Wasilewski, 1996, p. 69). The inability to examine culture on all levels simultaneously reflects a person's multiple identifications with society and with the different levels of culture. Becoming part of a culture, and identifying with it, means "depend[ing] on others around you, and on their social system, for satisfying your basic needs" (p. 66). There are other factors that influence a person's identity. Some are external to the person, shaping him or her through cultural tradition, custom, environment, atmosphere, location, or climate. Other factors are internally realized and less tangible. These factors can include comfort levels with difference or ambiguity, extroversion or introversion, cultural mediation skills, and adaptation skills, among others (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). It has been argued that both nature and nurture have roles in personal identity development. Whether it is the nature of these individuals or their families to take an active role in culture, or the nurturing of the children growing up between cultures or in many cultures, TCKs often combine the beneficial attributes of their many cultures in their later life dealings, often while remaining a marginal participant in any particular culture. (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001)

Global Nomads can be loosely defined as individuals who have spent at least a portion of their formative years living overseas, due to a parent's career and life choices (McCaig, 1991). The benefits of this upbringing are unique and far-reaching. "In an era when global vision is imperative, where skills in intercultural communication, linguistic ability, mediation, diplomacy and the ability to manage diversity are critical, global nomads are probably better equipped than others" (McCaig, 1994, p. 33). Linked closely to Global Nomads is the concept of "Third Culture Kids" (TCKs). TCKs, who may be adults regardless of the name, have grown up between home and host cultures (Hill Useem & Downie, 1976). In another sense, a TCK is someone who has grown up in a culture other than his or her own, but who can relate to all cultures. This cultural
difference allows the TCK to take parts of different host cultures, and combine them into his or her own unique value system and lifestyle (Pollock & Van Reken, 1987). There are also individuals who have moved between cultures within one country, who may be called Domestic Nomads. There are several professions that logically connect to this concept of domestically mobile families, including hotel and resort management, oil exploration, or military training (Bruce LaBrack, personal communication, September 25, 2000). One can also include children of parents in aerospace engineering, forestry service, government, or entrepreneurs in this group. While global nomads may see the world in terms of larger cultural units like countries or regions in comparison to each other, "domestic nomads are more impacted by crossing distinctive internal regions which have easily identifiable speech patterns and vocabulary" (Bruce LaBrack, personal communication, March 14, 2002).

**Cultural Adaptation and Integration**

Many nomads describe themselves as chameleons, able to quickly adapt to a new culture. "I am, by inmost nature, a chameleon, a sponge, a being of multiple selves. When I arrive anywhere I observe the mores and values of the place and then seek to mimic them, becoming in a sense, each time, someone new" (Mansfield Taber, 1994, p. 46). Others take a split sense of identity from their experiences, (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001) meaning that they may feel as though they are different people in different cultures. Still others hold tightly to their own personal definitions of who and what they are, even when these identities cross country lines (Smith, 1996). To feel more alien upon arriving in what is supposedly one's home culture than in a 'foreign country' is a common trend among TCKs (Smith, 1991). Some TCKs act out by making emotional gestures, or by "alternately repudiating and courting [...] peers" (Shames, 1997, p. 73). Bureaucracy and formal paperwork, requiring nationality or citizenship to be identified, often challenge this sense of identity. The idea that "I am who my Passport says I am" is a political reality, but doesn't necessarily address the personal identity questions that face a TCK (Seelye & Wasilewski, 1996).

It is the individual's experience that shapes the formation of the TCK life. "Although a precise profile of a global nomad cannot be developed without running the risk of stereotyping, there are some identifiable tendencies that provide a basis for self-
evaluation, self-explanation, and self-esteem" (Pollock, 1994, p. 72). TCKs have two prevailing factors in common: they are raised in a genuinely cross-cultural world, and they are raised in a highly mobile world (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Other factors that are common to TCKs but not necessary within the TCK definition are an expected repatriation into the 'home' culture, a privileged lifestyle distinct within the host culture, and an identity with some overarching system, such as the military, or other expatriate community structures. (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001) Since expatriate groups within a city or nation may include people who have moved to that area from their home country for work, school, family, or any other reason, these groups vary in size, organization, and purpose. Based on the two prevailing factors, children brought up within a domestically mobile family can also have true TCK characteristics. Domestically mobile groups or relatively isolated sections within the U.S. society, such as military or Native American reservation subcultures, are so unique within civilian U.S. society as to provide a similar cross-cultural experience, especially when the individual reenters the dominant culture on a full-time basis (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001).

A TCK may have an unclear sense of where exactly "home" is (Storti, 2001). Many do not feel a distinct link to any one place or set of traditions. So the concept of "home" is often described more as an emotional location than a geographical location (Pascoe, 2000). This type of marginality can prove to be both a benefit and a detriment, depending on the TCK's view of the situation. "One can be marginal in at least two ways: as 'alone-in-the-corner-sucking-my-thumb' marginality, or as 'let's see…my-daily-rate-as-an-international-consultant-is…' marginality" (Seelye & Wasilewski, 1996, p. 83). Questions like "where are you from?" place the nomad at a disadvantage in cultural situations. To ask the person to choose the quick answer requires that the nomad ignore the rest of his or her background. To give a longer answer may be boring to the listeners, or seemingly snobby of the nomad (Smith, 1991). Hiding the truth about one's childhood can be painful. Even more painful than hiding the truth is not being able to put the truth about one's experience into words. It is often difficult for the TCK who does not feel that he or she can be categorized, as well as for the host culture peers, in trying to understand how the TCK fits into the host culture's understanding of the world (Seelye & Wasilewski, 1996).
TCK Issues

"When a tree is transplanted too often, its roots can never grow deep. So it is with these young people. Some TCKs refuse to get involved in a new place because they fear that liking this new place would mean betraying the friends and places they have known and loved before. Others don't settle in as a protection against being hurt again in a future move they know will inevitably come. If they refuse to make close friends, it won't matter when they have to say good-bye next time" (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001, p. 71).

This tendency to protect oneself from hurt in saying goodbyes is held by many nomads, and includes the tendency to either remain aloof in social situations or to quickly establish new friendships. Approximately 40% of TCKs struggle with creating close friendships or intimacy (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). In fact, the nomad's greatest weakness may revolve around his or her difficulty in trusting others and in confiding in those whom the nomad has not known for a long time (Bell, 1997).

Part of the difficulty in connecting to peers in a host culture situation may be a lack of experience in social settings with people from that specific culture. Some difficulties may be related back to the sense of identity, or lack thereof. Many of these situations occur before TCKs "have completed the critical developmental task of forming a sense of their own personal or cultural identity" (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001, p. 39). Regardless of the nomad's maturity, the new cultural setting may make him or her feel like a child (Piet-Pelon & Hornby, 1992). The TCK's broader worldview will be challenged when "sometime- for the first time- they meet peers who haven't moved, haven't had to make new friends, haven't learned how to adapt [...] when internationally mobile children come up against this situation, they tend to withdraw, retreat, marginalize" (Bell, 1997, p. 63).

Higher Education

TCKs attend colleges and universities at approximately four times that of domestic U.S. students, half of those going on to complete a graduate degree (Hill Useem & Baker Cotrell, 1993). A considerable number of these students take time off before completing a degree, or drop out to take advantage of other, usually international, opportunities (Hill Useem & Baker Cotrell, 1993). The average TCK will change colleges twice during his
or her undergraduate education (Hill Useem & Baker Cotrell, 1993). Some leave the college because they never feel welcome, some because of the desire to travel, and some because they cannot connect to the institutional culture. They may come to college more mature or cosmopolitan, and with a far greater knowledge of the world than their domestic counterparts (Kohls, 2001), but also less proficient in dealing with their peers (Shames, 1997).

Welcoming the TCK student into the educational setting and providing necessary cultural information is often enough to assist the TCK in the adaptation process. The TCK may need support in the creation of a positive self-image, or in peer communication, in order to feel connected to the host culture (Harrell, 1986). One solution is to provide the TCK with a mentor, peer or professional (Gillies, 1998). The mentor may be able to vocalize impressions and cultural norms with the TCK, and provide basic survival skills within the new culture (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Understanding professionals or concerned individuals can help TCKs to accept the validity of their feelings and find the support and comfort that they need (Van Reken, 1988). Support structures that may help ease the transition include student clubs, faculty knowledge of the TCK profile, a multicultural curriculum, transition programs aimed at cultural identity, or other programming that will help to affirm their whole identity both culturally and as a TCK (Schaetti, 1996; Pollock 1996). Student affairs professionals are logically in positions where they can provide both the mentoring role and many of the support structures to TCKs within the university.

As of 1988, there were over 2 million Americans living overseas, "with an estimated 230,000 of them American students attending overseas [primary and secondary] schools. About 10,000 students graduate from such schools each year" (Killham, 1994, p. 56). Many TCKs get their first opportunity to live within the United States and experience the culture for themselves when they enroll in college (Kohls, 2001). The TCK living overseas must prepare to function independently at college, even more so than the student who can drive home for the weekend. Some international schools are able to help with the process of adapting to a college setting by providing seminars, discussion groups, or workshops on cultural entry or re-entry, and on cultural orientation (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). TCKs may also find support from elsewhere in the
expatriate community, including some resources available on the Internet, or in governmental or organizational publishers offering advice to the TCK "returning" to the United States (Roman, 2001; Planetexpat.com).

**Media Resources and Support**

Beverly Roman's *Footsteps Around the World: Relocation Tips for Teens* (2001) provides lists of things to do before leaving the host culture, and tips for adjusting to the new culture. Alma Daugherty Gordon's *Don't Pig Out on Junk Food: The MK's Guide to Survival in the U.S.* (1993) provides humor and tips from nomads, specifically "missionary kids" (MKs), who have experienced the same type of emotions. Ruth Van Reken's *Letters Never Sent* (1988) is her own memoir describing many international moves and life changes. Written as a series of letters, this account may mirror what TCKs are feeling. Mainstream books, like Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) also provide perspective for the TCK. Additionally, there are TV shows and movies that show both well adapted and developing TCKs, predominantly domestic, like the movie *Mermaids* or the television show *The Promised Land*.

It appears that the advent of the Internet has made a permanent "on-line home" a stable feature in the lives of many TCKs. Now, family members across the globe can keep in touch while avoiding lengthy waits for mail or the high costs of communication. Many websites have developed into extensive communities, tools to search for international school friends, or ways to provide advice to others in globally mobile situations (Planetexpat.com, Militarybrats.com). Many TCKs admit to relying on virtual communication to get their news, to keep up with their former host cultures, and to remain in touch with others (Roman, 2001). Finding a "home" online may provide many TCKs with more of a sense of belonging within the host culture.

**University Systems**

Just as no one university or program will work the same for each domestic student, no cookie-cutter ideology will work for all TCKs. If a university wants to take advantage of the benefits of adaptation or cultural understanding that multicultural, and often multi-lingual individuals bring to the campus, support should be made available to these TCKs. For example, this may be allowing them to waive a foreign language requirement, or allowing TCKs to opt out of the freshman live-in requirement to live in
University apartments. These accommodations may be more in depth, such as providing mentors, or training staff to understand the profile. Faculty training may also encourage the curriculum to change or adapt in order to better represent the students and the changing world population (Bruce LaBrack, personal communication, March 14, 2002).

**Recommendations for Higher Education**

Increasing awareness of the TCK profile will help higher education professionals to identify those students who may benefit from understanding more about their unique background. These benefits are not only in regard to the TCK profile, but in a more personal experience with a culture’s customs, and in a potential ally for cultures that may be underrepresented on the campus. As university student personnel staff become more familiar with the profile, the campus will likely begin to show respect for a different kind of diversity. By providing these students with choices appropriate to their experiences, the university should also be able to improve retention of this group that is so likely to transfer. (Hill Useem & Baker Cotrell, 1993) While no current resources deal specifically with recommendations for universities, the author has compiled a list of suggestions based on the expressed needs and concerns and challenges from the available resources.

Some specific examples follow from general recommendations below:

- **Allow for university flexibility in allowing nomads and TCKs to select the support services that are appropriate for their needs**

  The two common factors of TCKs, those of high mobility and of a multicultural life, also lead to individuality of needs (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Perhaps more so than domestic students, each TCK needs to have an active role in determining what support services they will utilize, as well as a need to be provided with available options.

- **Allow for appropriate exceptions to rules to be made (i.e. required courses or housing accommodations)**

  This would allow the unique background of the TCK to be acknowledged. For example, if the TCK already speaks a foreign language, but has not had formal instruction in the language, it may be appropriate to work with the individual to waive a foreign language
requirement, or to substitute a course in American literature or something else that the individual has not covered.

- **Determine a way of tracking the retention and graduation rates of this population**
  So little research has been done regarding this group, which makes it difficult to provide effective support. Through tracking TCKs, student affairs professionals may be more readily able to predict success, assist students, and lower the transfer rates (Stultz, 2002).

- **Encourage TCKs to participate in programming and student organizations**
  Both TCKs and traditional domestic student can benefit from a culturally diverse exchange of ideas through programming or in student organizations. Not only might this provide TCKs with U.S. peer support, it may also provide additional opportunities for both the TCK and the traditional domestic students to see the world from a different viewpoint.

- **Create a method for identifying potential global nomads before matriculation**
  --Add a voluntary question to application materials
  To reach the largest possible number of TCKs, Global Nomads, and others that would fit this profile, like Domestic Nomads, the question might be something general like "How many schools have you attended?" or might provide a check box for self-identification. Many people who fit the profile do not know of it, but can recognize the feelings and challenges associated with a mobile or nomadic lifestyle. (McCaig, 1991)
  --Create a website link describing the TCK profile, and what the University does to support TCKs
  Not only could this link explain the profile to anyone interested, but may show that the university welcomes TCKs. This is likely very cost effective, only requiring the creation of the page and the web designer's time to maintain it.
  --Train the admissions staff to recognize potential global nomad applicants
  Train the admissions staff to recognize overseas addresses, or documents that might indicate a TCK experience, such as an international school transcript or boarding school records. Recognizing the importance of student privacy, the admissions staff could send a form letter to anyone that appeared to fit this profile, or to any prospective student that asked for this kind of information.
· **Use TCK or global nomad profile knowledge and other University resources to make these students feel welcome**

---Formalize a network of faculty, staff, and current students who may be able to assist nomads or TCKs with questions or special needs on campus

A student may approach a staff member because they feel they do not fit in or because of some difficulties or questions regarding aspects of the culture. An informal network may already be in place; guiding the TCK to staff members in different departments who may understand the TCK lifestyle. However, staff members frequently do not know which colleagues may have an interest in this topic, so formalizing a network will make this information more available to both students and staff members.

---Set up an email account that would be available for global nomad questions, and advertise it throughout international schools

Many TCKs overseas attend international schools, and word of mouth is an effective international recruitment tool (Roman, 2001). Students could use this email address to ask questions, which the person who would check this account could then forward on to the appropriate person.

· **Determine the priority of TCK support program implementation at a university level, and take actions accordingly**

· Establish a committee to determine university level support

Create a committee to determine what role the university will play in supporting, recruiting and retaining TCKs. This committee should include all of the offices which may interact with this population, such as Admissions, Housing and Food Services, the Office of International Programs, the Health Center, the Counseling Center, and any other office that has interested staff. Some immediate questions before this committee should be 1) Who will take the responsibility and spearhead the university efforts?, 2) What accommodations and support services are already available and what could easily be changed or accepted?, and 3) What cost effective, but useful items could be done quickly to begin showing this population that the institution respects them and is doing something for them? The responses from the university and from the students will then help to shape what future steps should be made. Again, since this profile is about people, it is constantly changing and shifting in needs, desires, and expectations.
Conclusion
Higher education can benefit from supporting TCKs by the increased diversity, deeper cultural understanding, and international knowledge that they bring to campus. Higher education can also benefit from recruiting and retaining these individuals, who are likely to attend college and complete post-graduate degrees, particularly if the institution can lessen the likelihood of these students transferring to a different college through available support systems, an acknowledgment of the special background of TCKs, and through helping the TCK adapt to the university setting. TCKs benefit greatly from having support systems in place when they arrive at a university, whether for orientation, mentoring, housing, or other needs (Ruhert McMillan, 2001).
The life of a Third Culture Kid involves a lot of personal commitment and change. The current understanding of TCKs is much more developed than it was when the United States Foreign Service began sending citizens and families overseas. There is still much to be learned about these individuals, and even more to be learned from them. In order to help TCKs continue to learn about themselves, society needs to encourage continued research, as well as show respect for the experiences brought by these individuals. TCKs should be able to ask for the support that they feel they need, whether from existing resources or in addition to them, and, with knowledge that they are supported and accepted, will share their experiences honestly and openly with other students.

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