AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

ON THE INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

A doctoral thesis presented
by

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Abstract
The subjects of this qualitative research study are seven undergraduate international students between the ages of 18-25 at an urban, private university in the northeast of the United States. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the methodology employed in this study. The data was analyzed by using Pettigrew’s (1998) reformulated contact theory. This study sought to understand and make sense of the intercultural experiences of international students. The population of international students studying in colleges and universities in the US has significantly increased over the years. Many international students are attending higher education institutions in the US because of the high quality of education and increased job opportunities after graduation. Participants in this study reported difficulties with adjusting to their new environment. Because of changes in the higher education landscape, it is imperative for administrators, faculty, and staff to develop strategies to assist this population of students. This study indicated that more research needs to be done on ameliorating the social, academic, and cultural experiences of international students.

*Keywords: international students, higher education, intercultural experiences, challenges, support, contact theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis*
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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study is to understand the intercultural experiences of international students at an urban, private university in the Northeast. This study explores how international students perceive and make sense of their intercultural experiences—the interaction between people from different cultures. At this stage in the research, international students will be generally defined as foreign students coming from outside of the United States. Knowledge generated is expected to provide practitioners with more strategies that could be used to increase engagement among international students. Engagement is defined by social and academic interactions that enhance the experiences of students. It is important for colleges and universities to engage international students as their population is rising significantly (Terzian and Osborne, 2006).

Context and Background

The number of international students studying in the US has increased significantly over the years. According to the Friendly Relations Among Foreign Students, there were only 10,341 internationals students attending US colleges and universities in 1945. The Institute of International Education (IIE) reports that the population of international students in 2012-2013 was 820,000. This rapid increase of international students made it difficult for higher education institutions to support them (Terzian and Ozborne, 2006). However, many international students choose to study in the US for the high quality of education (Goralski, 2015). Additionally, there is a belief among international students that obtaining a degree from the US would lead to more job opportunities and financial stability (Kwadzo, 2014). Although international students continue to enroll in higher education institutions across the US at high rates, they experience academic, social, and cultural challenges in their new environment.
International students bring different perspectives to colleges and universities in the US. They come from a multitude of countries from around the world. However, many international students tend not to interact with students from their host country (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). Lacina (2002) states that international students encounter serious social and cultural problems. Issues with language, stereotypes, and misunderstanding attribute to the social isolation that international students experience (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007; Leong, 2015; Valdez, 2015). Many of the students who they interact with do not have any prior knowledge about their culture, which leads to constant frustration (Lacina, 2002).

**Rationale and Significance**

It is important to understand the intercultural experiences of international students as more of them are attending universities in the US (Arkoudis, 2013; Mamiseishvili, 2012; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). International students travel to the US to experience a new culture and society in addition to obtaining an American education (Tidwell and Hanassab, 2007). The literature brings to light that more effort must be done to support the social, emotional, and intellectual needs of international students in order for them to succeed (Bista, 2015; Carr, Koyama, & Thiagariajan, 2003; Lacina, 2002). While studying in the US, international students experience challenges revolving around language, cultural differences, and social norms (Lacina 2002). It is difficult for international students to develop meaningful relationships as the notion of friendship differs from country to country (Lacina 2002). As stated, “Because America is a highly individual-oriented society, friendship is sometimes viewed as less permanent than in other cultures” (Bulthuis, 1986, p. 22). Understanding the concept of friendship in the US is one example of the challenges that international students experience. This research will shed light on
the experiences of international students and how they make sense of these experiences, which
will inform how faculty, administrators, and staff could support them.

International students add value to US colleges and universities and offer insight on ways
to approach problems from a global perspective (Carr, Koyama, & Thiagariajan, 2003).
International students provide diverse perspectives that contribute to the learning experiences of
American students. Allan Goodman, the president of the Institute of International Education
(IIE) highlights the importance of assisting international students (Zhao et al., 2005). Goodman
states, “International students presence in our classrooms strengthens our own understanding of
global issues and improves the changes for peace and development around the globe” (Carr,
Koyama, & Thiagariajan, 2003). International students have become a vital component of the US
higher education system.

The importance of pursuing research on the intercultural experiences of international
students is important for various reasons. First, the number of international students studying in
the US has increased rapidly making it imperative for faculty, administrators, and staff to
enhance their efforts in supporting them (Bista 2015). The literature reveals that there is not
enough support for international students in the US. Second, understanding the experience of this
population would contribute to the social and intellectual community on campuses throughout
the US. Third, international students provide US higher education institutions with a rich
understanding of the world; therefore, it is important to support them in an academic
environment. Understanding their personal as well as academic needs is crucial given the fact
that the international student population is increasing rapidly at US colleges and universities
(Carr, Koyama, & Thiagariajan, 2003).
Statement of Problem

International students suffer from social isolation because of the lack of intercultural contact with their peers (Carr et al., 2003; Leong, 2015; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007; Valdez, 2015; Zhao et al., 2005). Social isolation leads to challenges that prevent international students from participating in their surrounding community. Studying the intercultural experiences of international students would provide greater understanding for practitioners in improving their engagement. There is minimal research on strategies to ameliorate the intercultural experiences of international students who study in the US. Findings reveal that it is difficult to target international students as they come from many places. These elements make it challenging to pinpoint support and resources that would assist them. Much of the research around international students are found in countries outside of the US (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Dominguez-White & Sing, 2015; Kim, 2016). Qualitative investigations into the perceptions of international students would provide helpful information to the research problem. Research in the area of international student engagement has been lacking, however, there are previous studies that attempt to understand the needs of international students.

In previous research, Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005) explore how international students utilize resources on US campuses. The authors compare the level of engagement between international students and American students by using research that is “related to student learning, personal development, and satisfaction in college.” (Zhao et al., 2005). Zhao et al. (2005) investigate the degree in which students perceive the support and resources at their universities in being effective. Tidwell and Hanassab (2007) assessed students by using questionnaires at a university in the western part of the US to understand the needs and experiences concerning international students. The authors gauged important indicators
pertaining to immigration, adjustment, academics, and sociocultural matters (Tidwell and Hanassab, 2007). C. Rose-Redwood (2013) and R. Rose-Redwood (2013) examine the patterns of social interaction among international students at a large research university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the US and identified different types of social interactions that international students experienced.

Faculty and academic advisors are critical elements for international students to succeed. They support students in navigating through academic, career, and personal goals (Bista, 2015; Mamiseishvili, 2012). Bista (2015) points out that there are numerous ways that faculty could enhance the intercultural experiences of international students. Encouraging cooperation with local American students or structuring their lessons by incorporating information from different countries are some effective strategies (Mamiseishvili, 2012). The role of advisors is also important in supporting international students as they assist students in “realizing their maximum potential through communication and information sharing.” (Tinchu, 2009). There are a variety of key stakeholders that attribute to the success of international students.

This study would be informative to campus stakeholders such as faculty, administrators and staff. Furthermore, this study could change how universities understand international students and inform how they deliver academic services. The importance of pursuing research on the intercultural experiences of international students is important for various reasons. The population of international students studying in the US has increased over time. Additionally, understanding the experience of international students would contribute to the overall environment on college campuses as they provide an important perspective on the world. The literature illustrates how more support for international students in the US is needed.
Research Problem and Research Question

International students suffer from social isolation due to the lack of intercultural contact with their peers, which leads to sociocultural challenges that prevent international students from participating in their surrounding community. Studying the intercultural experiences of international students would provide insight into increasing their engagement at colleges and universities. The purpose of my study is to understand the intercultural experiences of international students at an urban, non-traditional college in the Northeast. Additionally, understanding how international students perceive their intercultural experiences will be explored. The research question for this study is the following:

- How do international students make sense of their intercultural experience at an urban private university in the Northeast?

Definition of Key Terminology

**Adjustment:** the process of making personal, academic or social changes to adapt to a particular space

**Contact:** involves the communication between individuals on a verbal and physical level

**Engagement:** social and academic interactions that are facilitated by a higher education institution to enhance the experience of students

**Environment:** a place where a person functions and lives around others

**Foreign student:** student who spent the majority of their life in a country outside of the US and identifies with that country

**Intercultural:** the interaction between students from different cultures

**Intergroup:** the interaction between different groups of people
Prejudice: a negative preconceived notion of a person or group of people based on race, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc.

The following section of this chapter will include a description and discussion of intergroup contact theory, which will serve as the theoretical lens for this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

Intergroup contact theory is the theoretical framework for this study. The framework has been deployed by social psychologists to determine the optimal conditions for intergroup contact (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). In particular, contact theory has been applied to decrease the negative sentiment among different racial groups. Allport (1954), an American psychologist and the foundational researcher in contact studies explored matters pertaining to prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination among other elements that were manifested in American society. He initially gained inspiration from exploring the optimal conditions for black and white workers to cooperate in the 1930s and 1940s (Pettigrew, 1998). These optimal conditions led to more positive racial sentiment among blacks and whites. Allport (1954) argued that contact between individuals from different races and ethnicities would reduce prejudice among them. As stated, “A person’s prejudice is unlikely to be merely a specific attitude toward a specific group; it is more likely to be a reflection of his whole habit of thinking about the world” (Allport, 1954, p. 175). In this study, optimal conditions through Pettigrew’s (1998) contact theory framework will be used to understand and make sense of the intercultural contact among international students at an elite, private non-traditional college.
Pettigrew (1998) argues that in addition to the four conditions of optimal contact—equal group status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and authority support—a longitudinal element that incorporates friendship is imperative to intergroup contact. Pettigrew (1998) states that “friendship potential” is important because it activates those conditions for optimal contact. Therefore, Pettigrew (1998) proposes that optimal contact theory contain a fifth condition that gives individuals the opportunity to become friends. The opportunity for individuals to develop friendships suggests that individuals consistently make contact with one another over a period of time. This allows for time to develop meaningful relationships.

According to Pettigrew (1998), these five conditions for positive intergroup contact lead to “less negative stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination” (p. 76). The figure below illustrates Pettigrew’s (1998) model for intergroup contact. Box (A) represents the five conditions for optimal intergroup contact. Box (B) reflects an individual’s experiences as well as characteristics in a societal setting (Pettigrew 1998). Box (C) represents the initial contact between individuals in groups. Box (D) represents established contact among individuals in a given group. Box (E) represents the ideal situation that leads to a minimal amount of discrimination and prejudice. The process for optimal intergroup contact is illustrated through a continuum. Pettigrew (1998) argues that the five conditions and time are essential components to optimal intergroup contact.
Critics of Theory

Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux (2005) argue that there are limitations to optimal contact theory. First, contact theory affects interpersonal perceptions as opposed to intergroup perceptions (Dixon et al., 2005). Second, contact theory does not take into account institutional elements that attribute to discriminatory interactions. Third, contact theory tends to focus on the prejudiced individual’s experiences rather than the individuals with whom they are in contact. Furthermore, Dixon et al. (2005) calls for contact theorists to examine the everyday or “mundane” interactions between people.
Dixon et al. (2005) provide a social psychological framework on intercultural contact that allows the researcher to explore the everyday “mundane” experiences of people. As stated, “We advocate that more research be conducted on the mundane, seemingly unimportant, encounters that constitute the overwhelming majority of everyday contact experiences. This type of research would entail “thick description” of unfolding interactions between groups in ordinary situations” (Dixon, et al., 2005, p. 703). Understanding the experiences of international students from a micro-level is revealed by using this framework. Exploring the daily interactions that international students encounter would glean important information on how they interact with various groups of people, including other international students and American students. Dixon et al.’s (2005) framework built off of Dixon and Durrheim’s (2003) framework as well as other contact theorists to understand the interactions between races in post-apartheid South Africa. The authors examined the integration and segregation patterns in the country. Instead of focusing on particular races, this study will look at the interactions of students based on nationality. This study will look at the interactions of student based on nationality rather than race. Although the theoretical framework that was developed by Dixon et al. (2005) was initially created in the context of post-apartheid South Africa; it can be applied to a variety of contexts.

Dixon et al. (2005) argue that the contact hypothesis is only effective if specific optimal conditions are met. For instance, investigating contact theory under conditions that are rare is important. As stated, “The reformulation of lay understandings of contact in terms of a generic typology of ideal dimensions, and the use of shifts in personal prejudice” would garner further in-depth understanding into contact theory” (Dixon et al., 2005, p. 697). The question of how contact theory would apply to spaces where racial prejudice and inequality exist was questioned by the authors as there is not a great deal of research around these types of conditions.
Furthermore, Dixon et al. (2005) state that contact literature generally contains the following elements in optimal contact:

- Contact should be regular and frequent
- Contact should involve a balanced ratio of in-group to out-group members
- Contact should have genuine “acquaintance potential”
- Contact should occur across a variety of social settings and situations
- Contact should be free from competition
- Contact should be evaluated as “important” to the participants involved
- Contact should occur between individuals who share equality of status
- Contact should involve interaction with a counter stereotypic member of another group
- Contact should be organized around cooperation toward the achievement of a superordinate goal
- Contact should be normatively and institutionally sanctioned
- Contact should be free from anxiety or other negative emotions
- Contact should be personalized and involve genuine friendship formation
- Contact should be with a personal who is deemed typical or representative

Erasmus (2010) argues that contact theory is not enough to increase intercultural contact. Erasmus (2010) suggests that a political element be infused in contact theory involving psychometric imaginary and attention to White privilege. Miller (2002) extends the notion of contact theory arguing that it should contain more elements, “For instance, consideration of the more molar political, historical, and geographical variables that are important for real-world
intergroup relations” (p. 407). Although there are counterarguments to contact theory, many scholars have employed this theory in their research.

Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins (2006) also point out that optimal contact theory affects a majority group more positively than a minority group. Pettigrew (1998) argues that friendship is a key factor in contact theory. However, Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins (2006) highlight that although a majority group “liking” a minority may be seen as success in optimal contact theory, it may not be enough for the minority group (p. 246). Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins (2006) suggest that categories are typically used to assess whether contact theory is effective but argue that a more comprehensive study is needed to understand the experiences of groups. Moreover, Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins (2006) explore the concept of tokenism and how it leads to stereotyping and negative perceptions of minority groups.

According to Brown and Turner (1981), contact theory does not fully address racial or prejudicial problems that are manifested in societies (as stated in Connolly 2000). Connolly argues that there needs to be a change in how intercultural contact is studied. For example, contact theory essentially argues that the more contact that individuals have with one another, the more that they will understand as well as garner an increasingly positive view of one another. In turn, stereotypes and prejudice would be alleviated. Connolly (2000) states that societal and institutional factors must be considered when investigating contact theory. Individual interactions are beneficial but are not enough to ameliorate the intercultural interactions of people. Interestingly, Connolly (2000) brings to light how contact theory is popular among government circles because contact theory puts less pressure on them to change the way that society functions. As stated, “There is a need to effectively challenge the existing conceptions of racism and ethnic divisions that underscore the Contact Hypothesis and to replace them with a
more nuanced understanding that locates racial and ethnic relations in the context for wider social processes and structures, while also recognizing the complex, contradictory and contingent nature of these processes.” (Connolly, 2000, p. 172). Sigelman and Welch (1993) reinforce Connolly’s (2000) argument insofar as optimal contact must go beyond individual contact (as stated in Connolly, 2000). Having friends of a different race or living in a place where interracial relationships are the norm does not necessarily mean a larger societal issue is improved. In conclusion, Connolly (2000) argues that contact theory needs to take into account the socio-economic and political contexts. In addition, researchers should explore the nature of racism and prejudice as well as why particular forms of contact are better than others.

The importance of defining and interpreting the interactions of a cultural group is not addressed by contact theorists (Dixon et al., 2005; Halualani, 2010). Furthermore, the experiences of individuals should be examined more deeply by contact theorists. The conditions that contact theorists have laid out tend to shape the experiences of intergroup contact. However, the factors regarding how contact is defined and understood are not examined in the literature (Halualani, 2010). Halualani (2010) sheds light on the importance of how intercultural interaction is specific to culture. Intercultural communication is a key element that should be considered in contact theory. As stated, “The importance of understanding and unpacking how communication is lived and viewed from the perspectives of minority group members already situated in power-laden contacts of majority-majority and in-group—out-group relations” (Halualani, 2010, p. 250). The way that groups understand and define interactions is imperative. According to Halaulani (2010), the way that particular cultures understand and make sense of their intercultural interactions is lacking in the body of work in contact studies.
Intergroup contact theory has been employed in various studies. Bruening et al. (2014) applied contact theory to a sports management course designed for children to understand leadership, health, and other topics. Bruening et al. (2014) used contact theory to promote cooperation and address negative stereotypes. Stough-Hunter, Guianan, and Hart (2016) applied contact theory to improve teaching methods. The authors used three different methods and assessed the cultural competency of each method. The method that allowed for student interaction and partnership showed an increased understanding of cultural competence. Intercultural contact theory could engender critical change in understanding the experiences of international students.

Rationale

Pettigrew’s (1998) intergroup contact theory is employed in this study as it provides insightful information about different stages of contact. Additionally, Pettigrew’s (1998) framework for contact theory contains a strong emphasis for process. As stated, “The original hypothesis says nothing about the processes by which contact changes attitudes and behavior. It predicts only when contact will lead to positive change, not how and why the change occurs” (Pettigrew, 1998, p. 70). Therefore, this study seeks to understand as well as make sense of the experiences of international students through the lens of Pettigrew’s (1998) reformulated contact theory.

Pettigrew’s (1998) reformulated contact theory is conducive to this study for various reasons. First, the model explores the experiences of individuals on a micro-level. For instance, the experiences of individuals before and after intergroup contact is a focus in this framework (Pettigrew 1998). Pettigrew (1998) offers a framework that analyzes each of the contact processes and how they are activated in each stage. Second, the situations in which intergroup
contact is manifested will be explored. According to Pettigrew (1998), societies shape how contact affects individuals. In this study, the campus community, in addition to the wider community, will be investigated insofar as how they influence the contact around international students. Pettigrew’s (1998) framework calls for a researcher to study elements of contact. Therefore, a variety of data collection methods are conducive to this framework—observations, interviews, surveys, and questionnaires among other methods. By also using a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of my subject (Ponterotto, 2005). I observed the interactions of students in various spaces where they convene on campus such as the student center and study lounges. I, too, attended events to gain more insight on the intercultural contact among international students.

**Applying Theory to Study**

Intergroup contact theory attempts to understand the optimal conditions required for groups to interact. The aim of intergroup contact theory is to understand the conditions that lead to a reduced prejudice (Pettigrew, 1998). This study attempts to understand the intercultural experiences of international students at a non-traditional elite college in the Northeast. Pettigrew’s (1998) reformulated contact theory applies to this study as it explores the opportunity for participants to be friends. The close contact of international students will be investigated in this study. Additionally, Pettigrew’s (1998) reformulated contact theory allow the researcher to explore the elements leading to optimal contact. For instance, the elements leading to optimal contact—equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, support of authorities, law or custom, and friendship are analyzed through different stages. Pettigrew (1998) argues that understanding the different stages of optimal contact informs the researcher of the ideal conditions for intercultural contact.
The literature reveals that international students studying at US colleges and universities lack interaction with their peers (Carr et al., 2003; Leong, 2015; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007; Valdez, 2015; Zhao et al., 2005). Many international students interact with students from their respective countries or with other international students (Rose-Redwood, C., 2013; Rose-Redwood, R., 2013). International students report difficulty with establishing relationships with American students. Pettigrew’s (1998) reformulated contact theory framework allows the researcher to delve into the nuances of intercultural contact. Furthermore, the dimensions of contact within this framework applies to the experiences of international students as it explores the situations and factors that are attributed to intercultural contact.

Conclusion

Students from around the world choose to attend school in the US for reasons revolving around academic rigor, job opportunities, and lifestyle (Kwadzo, 2014). The population of international students at colleges and universities in the US is increasing significantly (Terzian and Osborne, 2006). However, international students experience a number of obstacles. For example, it is reported that some international students experience a sense of social isolation because of their weak command of the English language as well as cultural differences (Zhao et al., 2005). Additionally, research reveals that international students have a difficult time adjusting to life in the US as they are living away from their family and friends (Andrade, 2006). There is a lack of research on the international student experience in the US. The following chapter provides discourse on the experiences of undergraduate international students in the US. Furthermore, the literature review provides insight on the social and cultural experiences of international students as well as programs and resources that universities have implemented for them.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The United States is the leading country for students to study abroad (IIE 2011a). Many students from around the world study in the US for a multitude of reasons revolving around academics, culture and career opportunities. International students study in the US because of the high quality of education as well as the belief that attending school in the US would bring financially stability and a prosperous life (Kwadzo, 2014). The diverse nature of these students calls for an enhanced effort for colleges and universities to support international students as many of them struggle with adjusting to US society. Some of the obstacles that international students experience involve language, culture shock, and learning a different education system (Bista, 2015). As a result, a significant number of international students report feeling a sense of isolation. Many of them have a difficult time forming relationships in their host institutions (Zhao et al., 2005). International students are an important population for US colleges and universities. They enhance the experience for American students and contribute to the social and intellectual community on campuses throughout the US. It is critical to understand the international student experience as they provide an important perspective for US higher education institutions.

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the intercultural experiences of international students at US colleges and universities. I will attempt to address the following three questions in my literature review: What is the intercultural experience of international students at colleges and universities in the US? How do higher education institutions provide the necessary programs and resources for international students to flourish at their institutions? How are international students coping with social, personal, and academic matters? The answers to these questions will provide a nuanced understanding in conceptualizing the intercultural
experiences of international students. It is imperative to learn how to effectively support this growing student population.

This chapter is organized into three streams of literature. First, I will provide an overview of the issues impacting international students. Second, I will explore the element of social isolation among international students at colleges and universities in the US with some examples from universities outside of the US. Third, I will investigate strategies that education institutions have implemented to engage international students. Lastly, I will present a summation and provide recommendations for future research based on the information and findings that are produced in this literature review.

**Historical Context**

The history of international students studying in the US is important to understanding the international student experience. The Fulbright Act of 1946 served as a major catalyst for bringing international students to the US. It also marked the beginning of an influx of international students who sought to pursue their studies in the US. Subsequently, the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 and the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961 extended the scope and federal funding for international students pursuing their degrees in the US, which included graduate students and faculty (Terzian and Osborne, 2006). Terzian and Osborne (2006) note that Senator William Fulbright was instrumental in passing these policies as he felt that international students were important in maintaining peace and security. As stated, “If large numbers of people know and understand the people from nations other than their own, they may develop a capacity for empathy, a distaste for killing other men, and an inclination to peace” (Vestal, 1994, p. 22; Terzian and Osborne 2006, p. 288). There were ideological reasons for encouraging international
students to study in the US. It was a method to inculcate understanding among people from all around the world.

The decision to allow more international students in the US was a result of the Cold War (Terzian and Osborne, 2006). In an effort to influence foreign countries, having international students study in the US was a way to spread American values, popular culture, and ideals on a global scale (Bu, 1999; Geinow-Hectht, 2000; Terzian and Osborne, 2006). Kramer (2009) describes the intercultural exchange between American students and students from other countries. The exchange programs were less about American students learning about a new culture and society and more about international students critically examining their own way of life. Kramer (2009) writes, “With the exception of many professor and teacher exchanges, the other programs are predominately “one-way streets” i.e., they primarily encourage the export of American technical knowledge and the development of better understanding and more friendly attitudes toward the United States” (p. 779). Exchange programs were used by Americans to influence those who studied in the US. Kramer (2009) also explains, “Only secondarily, if at all, are they concerned with the understanding of other nations or the import of technical skills and cultural values from which the United States, as a nation, might profit” (Kramer, 2009; p. 779). The US encouraged international students to study in the US for a number of strategic reasons.

The international student population significantly increased in the second half of the 20th century (Terzian and Osborne, 2006). According to the Friendly Relations Among Foreign Students, in 1945 and 1948, only 10,341 international students attended colleges and universities in the US. As stated, “These numbers continued to increase, ballooning to 154,580 in 1974-1975, 342,113 in 1984-1985, 453,787 in 1995-1996, and 547,867 in 2000-2001, composing 3.9% of the population” (Butler, 1992; IIE, 2001; Terzian & Osborne, 2006, p. 290). In 2012-2013, the
number of international students grew to 820,000 (Institute of International Education, 2013a). Goralski (2015) found that one out of every two international students was from China, India or South Korea. Terzian and Osborne (2006) argue that the rise in the population of international students put a strain on the resources at many US colleges and universities because US students, too, needed to be accommodated.

Figure 2. Reformulated Contact Theory
Adapted from Terzian & Osborne (2006, p. 290).

Many international students were interested in attending school in the US for a variety of reasons. According to Goralski (2015), there are great advantages for international students to study in the US. For instance, students from developing countries with a western degree are more marketable and have the opportunity to earn higher wages than others (Goralski 2015). As stated, “It is a general notion that students who are educated in western countries can transfer advanced knowledge and forward-looking ideas back to their home country.” (Goralski, 2015, p. 62). In some countries, a degree from a US institution is weighed higher than a degree from one’s own
Therefore, international students are at an advantage when competing for jobs. The reasons for international students studying in the US revolved around academic, career, and other opportunities.

**Issues Impacting International Students**

The international student experience is complex. International students come from all walks of life with varying perspectives and experiences. Unlike immigrants, they only stay in their host country for a limited amount of time (Lacina, 2002). International students travel from their home country to experience a new set of customs and norms, but their main reason for studying in the US is to earn a college degree (Lacina, 2002). However, they learn a great deal while encountering challenges such as language, discrimination, and cultural differences (Lacina, 2002). With the number of international students increasing, it is important for college administrators to understand the challenges that this population faces. Furthermore, college administrators must address these challenges in order to provide effective solutions. The following sections provide an understanding of some of the experiences that international students encounter.

**Social and Cultural Differences**

The differences in the academic nature of education in China versus the US were explored in this study, in which 15 Chinese students were interviewed. According to Valdez (2015), China sends the most students to Anglophone countries out of any country in the world. In the US, 235,597 Chinese students studied at various universities in the 2012-2013 academic year (Valdez, 2015). In a study by Hsieh (2007), the experience of female Chinese students was a topic of discussion. A student who was interviewed talks about her experience feeling “invisible” to American students stating, “You know, like a group of American students and you
are the only foreigner in that group, then you become like isolated, and you become ignored; you cannot get into their groups or their conversations. I think this is very frustrating” (Hsieh, 2007, p. 384). The social isolation that international students experience in the US was a common theme in this literature review.

When international students arrive in the US, one of the most significant obstacles that they encounter are language barriers (Lacina, 2002). Some of them are not fluent in English, which signals that they are not native to their host country. According to Lacina (2002), “Language discrimination hinders many international students from adapting to a new social environment. Even though the United States has a long history of bilingualism, Americans remain xenophobic” (p. 22). There are some Americans who do not openly listen to individuals who do not speak fluent English. For instance, they may be afraid of their accent because it is not familiar to them. Additionally, some international students misinterpret common phrases or words that Americans use. For example, “taking a bus” could be wrongly construed as stealing a bus (Lacina, 2002). This was also the case for international students in Canada. Palmer (2016) highlights the story of an international student in Canada who did not understand the type of English that was used. As stated, “There are language problems sometimes he tell us some jokes but I do not know the words or I do not understand the point of laughing. Why do you laugh? I do not understand, so you feel you are left out sometimes. They are talking about these movies, bands, musician and we do not understand, you feel you are left out sometimes” (Palmer, 2016, p. 229). Language barriers are an obstacle that many international students experience. If not addressed properly, these obstacles could become problematic, making it difficult for local students to interact with domestic students (Arkoudis et al., 2013).
The international student experience could be both overwhelming and stressful. In a study by Urban et al. (2010) the beginning of the international student transition is difficult for a number of reasons. For instance, new student orientation, placement exams, and heavy course loads all attribute to the stress that many international students encounter. Urban et al. (2010) studies the challenges of students from the Dominican Republic and states, “In addition to these challenges, Dominican students related the pressure placed on them by the requirements of the scholarship, which allowed them to study at a US university. Maintaining a high GPA of 3.0 while experiencing the aforementioned emotions and language difficulties was very difficult but achievable for the participants” (p. 237). Academic requirements are a point of difficulty for many international students. Mamiseishvili (2011) further states, “Faculty can also contribute to successful academic integration of international students by incorporating more cooperative learning activities into their classes to help them develop friendships with other students” (p. 15). The research shows that there are some mitigating solutions that colleges and universities should consider.

Bista (2015) argues that international students lack access to student advisors, which prevents international students from seeking advising. Studies reveal that there is an increased workload for international student advisors because of administrative changes pertaining to immigration changes (Boyd, 2008; Bratichko, 2009, Davis, 2011). Furthermore, the implementation of systems such as SEVIS redirected the attention of advisors away from students and instead to data monitoring and reporting. An “increased overall workload and increased levels of stress and anxiety were among negative social impacts of SEVIS” (Bista, 2015, p. 92).
Simultaneously, Carr, Koyama, and Thiagarajan (2003) state that certain students, such as Asian students, do not use counseling centers. The authors further state that there is a stigma among Asian students in seeking help. These are some of the issues that prevent Asian, as well as other, international students from seeking counseling. The cultural elements to counseling and advising must be considered when working with international students. They come from different backgrounds, education systems, cultures, and religions. Some institutions make the mistake of treating international students like local students (Bista, 2015). Yet they have special circumstances and needs that call for an additional level of support. The literature reveals how colleges and universities should investigate exactly how international students are using its services and resources to mitigate these issues.

A study by Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing (2015) reveals that students from non-Western countries experience more discrimination than students from the West. Some international students are assaulted verbally, physically, or culturally. As stated, “International students of colour in the US report more perceived discrimination and more culturally-based verbal and physical assault than their white counterparts” (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing, 2015, p. 81). These discriminatory elements are also manifested in academic settings. International students have reported that they sense prejudicial sentiment as well as a lack of empathy from their professors (Dominguez-Whitehead & Sing, 2015). Discrimination among international students is not limited to the US. In a study on the experiences of international students in South Africa, international students, especially from other African countries, are also encountering these problems. They are perceived as wanting to immigrate to South Africa to take jobs and resources away from local citizens (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing, 2015). These
misconceptions lead to unnecessary injustices. It is interesting to note the commonalities among international students in the US and South Africa. The similarities warrant further exploration.

**Cultural Norms**

Carr et al. (2003) as well as Alhazmi and Nyland (2013) shed light on the cultural norms of international students. In a study at a large midwestern university, Carr et al. (2003) established a support program specifically for Asian women. According to the authors, the goals of the program were to assist Asian women in adjusting to US society, provide counseling support, and establish community (Carr et al., 2003). The group would meet once a week to discuss topics such as family, friendship, and academics. As stated, “Some Asian students may see counseling as shameful and embarrassing because a cultural stigma is often attached to emotional expression in their societies. In their cultures, interdependence and collectivism are highly valued, along with maintaining harmony, “saving face,” and respecting familial authority” (Carr et al., 2003, p. 131). There is a stigma around counseling in some Asian communities. However, it is important that students feel supported by their peers and by the university. Cultural norms was also a concept explored by Alhazmi and Nyland (2013).

In a study by Alhazmi and Nyland (2013), the experiences of Saudi students studying in Australia were illustrated through seven interviews. The topic of gender separation and mixing were discussed. Gender segregation in public and private spaces is the norm in Saudi Arabia; therefore, the mixing of genders in college was a new phenomenon for many of these students. The aim of that study was to investigate the experience of Saudi students in an environment where there is interaction between genders. The authors sought to explore how their environment influences their cultural identity. As elaborated by a Saudi student, “In Saudi Arabia, I don’t do anything…we [as girls] are dependent on men completely…[here] I am forced to deal with
things myself. [So] every time when I get something done, I feel happy…No one in my family
would imagine that [Zahra] I could do that, No one would imagine that [Zahra] travelled along,
and [Zahra] is dependent on herself” (Alhazmi and Nyland, 2013, p. 356). It is not the norm for
women in Saudi Arabia to be independent. While studying in Australia, many Saudi students
expressed gaining a sense of freedom. Another student in the study remarks, “Mixing gender is
the best learning environment because it is the natural…I prefer living in a mixing society as I
am one of those people who do not like that any one restricted their freedom, in Saudi Arabia
there is kind of freedom restriction therefore I prefer the learning to be in a mix-gender
environment” (Alhazmi and Nyland, 2013, p. 357). These are some examples of the international
student experience. In this case, students from a conservative Muslim country were introduced to
cultural norms that were not their own. Their experience studying away from their home country
forced them to re-evaluate their cultural norms and understanding.

Kim (2016) explores the cultural norms of South Korean students and how they translate
into the higher education setting in the US. In a study of seven Korean students at an
undergraduate business school, the author sought to examine how their cultural backgrounds
attributed to their learning experience. The questions that were explored were the following:
“Does Korean culture influence students’ initial group work participation, and if so, in what
ways? In what ways does group work in a US business school effect student’ adjustment
process?” (Kim, 2016, p. 402). Similar to Carr et al. (2003), Kim (2016) notes that “saving face”
is important to Korean students. According to Kim, “Korean students in this study use strategies
to avoid direct confrontation, such as politeness, and face-saving strategies, which are centered
on listening and implicitness” (Murphy-LeJeune, 2003; Kim 2016). A Korean student who was
interviewed by the author gives an example of not wanting to appear confrontational. As stated,
“I try not to stand out by saying something wrong without enough evidence. If I feel that I made a comment that is out of context, I look at the facial expression of my peers…When no one responds to my comment, I get a little embarrassed; I feel I could even lose face and be perceived as an outsider” (Kim, 2015, p. 410). The ability for some Korean students to gain approval from classmates or peers was found to be important in this study. In addition to the way Korean students are perceived in the classroom at US institutions, the cultural differences in learning were also brought to light. Kim (2016) indicates that open classroom discussions are not common in the education system in Korea as the notion of a professor’s authority is different than in the US. This is demonstrated in an interview by Kim (2016), “There’s a difference in the culture and educational background where we come from. Here [in the US] asking lots of questions is a natural part of learning; it’s different. We’re used to being quiet and listening to the teacher’s comments” (p. 411). The student further explains, “[In Korea] If you must speak out you should always raise your hand, because other students will listen and judge your comments. So usually we would think that if you are speaking out it means you must have a really important comment to make” (Kim, 2016, p. 411). The classroom expectations for Korean students were different from their home country. In the US, students are often times encouraged to engage in discourse while in Korea, students reported that it is not the norm to speak out unless an important point is to be made.

**Social Isolation**

International students have reported feeling a sense of social isolation at US colleges and universities (Carr et al., 2003; Leong, 2015; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007; Valdez, 2015; Zhao et al., 2005). There are a number of sociocultural challenges that international students encounter in the US. Many international students experience a degree of culture shock when adjusting to their
new environment. Adapting into a learning environment and academic culture could be frustrating for international students. These feelings are sometimes met with anxiety and depression as well as stress and isolation (Carr et al., 2003; Zhao et al., 2005). Additionally, international students constantly grapple with how they are perceived by others such as their American peers and professors. Valdez (2015) describes this phenomenon as a “double consciousness,” a term coined by sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois referring to how African Americans perceived themselves and how mainstream society perceived them. Valdez (2015) argues that some international students look at themselves through the perception of others. The literature reviewed in this section discusses the elements that attribute to social isolation experienced by international students.

**Integration and Adjustment**

According to Andrade (2006), international students face greater integration and adjustment challenges than local students. Hechanova-Alampay et al. (2002) argue that international students have a difficult time adjusting to college because of factors such as homesickness and loneliness (as stated in Andrade, 2006). This leads to the inability for international students to connect with domestic students. Andrade (2006) highlights how domestic students have an easier time adjusting to college as they have more friends and social networks than international students. Rientes (2011) et al. agrees with Andrade (2006) insofar as students who feel at home report a better experience in college. Making friends, getting involved with extracurricular activities, and establishing close relationships with faculty and staff is important to the adjustment of international students. Tinto (1982) argues that social skills are imperative for the success of students. Moreover, institutional programs that facilitate social interaction provide students with the ability to integrate into the social and academic life of an
institution. As stated by Tinto (1982), “The concept of integration as an essential element in educational persistence seems to apply equally well to individuals and to programs that serve individuals” (p. 692).

Triana (2015) gives an insightful perspective on international students and argues that it is imperative for colleges and universities to integrate international students as much as possible. If not, it could lead to negative public diplomacy ramifications in the future. Triana (2015) writes about how fundamental changes at an institution could lead to a worthwhile college experience for international students. The author uses the experience of the former president of Egypt, Mohamed Morsi, to illustrate how positive interactions with American society could lead to better governmental affairs as some of these international students will pursue careers in government and diplomacy in the future. Morsi attended college at the University of Southern California and earned a Ph.D. in materials science in 1982. Hammer (2012) states that Morsi did not attempt to understand the US. As stated, “Although he [Morsi] admired the American work ethic, he chose to insulate himself from American society, spending much of his time with a small circle of fellow students from Arab countries…by the time he returned to Egypt in 1985 he was dedicated to the [Muslim Brotherhood], a changed man” (Triana, 2015, p. 390). Triana (2015) argues that Morsi’s isolation attributed to negative perceptions of the US and lead him to take conservative stances regarding culture and politics in Egypt. Cultural understanding by social immersion is an integral part of the international student experience. The literature reviewed reinforces this notion.

Learning a new way of life is an adjustment that international students struggle with understanding. They are introduced to different cultures, philosophies and norms causing them to re-evaluate their own thinking and ideologies. (Tidwell and Hanassab, 2007). Lacina (2002)
notes how these issues may prohibit international students from making meaningful relationships as the concept of friendship is viewed differently depending upon the culture. For example, Bulthuis (1986) states that, “Because America is a highly individual-oriented society, friendship is sometimes viewed as less permanent than other cultures” (p. 22). Tidwell and Hanassab (2007) highlight regions in the world where students experience personal changes. African, Middle Eastern, Oceanian, and Southeast Asian students reported “philosophies, cultures, and way of life” as primary areas of adjustment while studying in the US, according to ANOVA (Tidwell and Hanassab, 2007, p. 319). Moreover, religion was an area where international students experience having difficulties. Certain parts of the US are quite religious. Lacina (2002) states that many Americans are not receptive to religions outside of Christianity. This would make it difficult for students of other religions to practice their religion openly.

**Perceptions of Interactions**

Kim (2016) highlights the social challenges of undergraduate Korean students at a US university. A group of seven students was seen as being “silent” participants. They were perceived as not being engaged in group work because of their lack of verbal participation. In counterpoint, C. Rose-Redwood (2013) and R. Rose-Redwood (2013) investigated the social interactions between international students and local American students. They found that some international students were perceived as being “self-segregators” because of their natural inclination to interact with individuals from their home countries. Kim (2016) and C. Rose-Redwood (2013) and R. Rose-Redwood (2013) argued that the adjustment into the mainstream culture at US universities was difficult for many international students, which leads to different forms of social isolation.
According to C. Rose-Redwood (2013) and R. Rose-Redwood (2013), the phenomenon of international students self-segregating served as a type of coping mechanism for many international students. Self-segregation was viewed both positively and negatively. C. Rose-Redwood (2013) and R. Rose-Redwood (2013) argued that a disadvantage of international students only interacting with their co-nationals prevented them from interacting with American students. C. Rose-Redwood (2013) and R. Rose-Redwood (2013) suggest that international students who rarely interacted with their host culture experienced social isolation and negative perceptions of American students. In contrast, Furnham and Alibhai (1985) highlight the positive impact of international students socially interacting with students from their home country. International students are able to form a network and support system in addition to gaining a sense of pride in their cultural identity by self-segregating (Rose-Redwood, C., 2013; Rose-Redwood, R., 2013).

The literature reveals that international students tend to not interact with those from their host country for a number of reasons that include language, cultural barriers, and discrimination. Although C. Rose-Redwood (2013) and R. Rose-Redwood (2013) highlight some of the positive elements of international students interacting with one another, a major issue for international students is how they are perceived by their host country. Sherry, Thomas, and Chui (2009) found that international students at the University of Toledo felt that American students may not feel comfortable with interacting with them because of their dress, language, or customs. These elements prevented a meaningful relationship between international students and Americans. Similar to C. Rose-Redwood (2013) and R Rose-Redwood (2013), Sherry et al. (2009) argues that instead of international students building relationships with American students, they tended to establish relationships with other international students. C. Rose-Redwood (2013) and R.
Rose-Redwood (2013) describe these students as “global mixers” or those who interact with co-nationals as well as students from countries outside of the US.

**Conclusion**

The literature revealed that there are many elements to consider in assessing the international student experience. Understanding the social and cultural experiences of this population is imperative. The authors of the studies in this section agree that more work needs to be done in supporting international students. Additionally, there are significant misconceptions about them. Lacina (2002) brings to light the language obstacles that many international students experience. The articles reviewed provide an interesting perspective on the experiences of Saudi Arabian, Korean, and Egyptian international students. Ultimately, more US and non-US scholars should collaborate in order to learn more about their work with international students.

How do colleges and universities integrate international students without them sacrificing their identity? What are the benefits of allotting more resources for international students? Why is it important to keep this population safe? These are some of the questions that the authors in the literature review attempted to address. With the significant influx of international students in the US, colleges and universities must develop more ways to promote intercultural awareness.

**Engaging International Students**

It is important for colleges and universities to think strategically about different approaches to support international students. The methods that institutions have used to assist international students have changed over time. For instance, advisors were initially designated by universities to focus on the needs of international students. The duties of advisors were mainly concerned with administrative issues such as immigration and visa matters (Bista, 2015). During the 1970s and 1980s faculty were primarily responsible for advising international students (Bista,
2015). Many colleges and universities have now established entire offices and departments to assist international students to gain access to a variety of resources on campus. With the growing population of international students studying in the US, it is important to learn about the programs and resources that they need to succeed.

**Academics**

According to Valdez (2015), the academic experience of many Chinese students studying in the US was positive. Many of them enjoyed the “active” learning environment in the classroom (Valdez 2015). As stated by a student in the study, “Teaching style in the US is more like discussion based, where there are often times when we have group discussion, group homework, group project, whereas in China is more like spoon-feeding” (Valdez, 2015, p. 193). The student infers that the teaching style in the US is more dynamic than in China. Another student mentions, “In China, generally, I don’t go to professors’ office hours or ask questions because they give you plenty of instructions, more than you really need to know, so you don’t have to go to their office hours” (Valdez, 2015, p. 193). The Chinese students interviewed for this study were laudatory towards the teaching methods in the US.

There are various ways for international students to be successful in college. One of the factors that contribute to international student success is academics. Han and Hall (2012) write about the importance of academic libraries in higher education institutions. The library is a place that international students are intimidated to use, as they are unfamiliar with the resources that are being offered. Han and Hall (2005) argue that the library needs to be demystified for international students. As stated, “A very recent focus group conducted by Ganster (2011) at the State University of New York at Buffalo confirms this finding.” Kamhi-Stein and Stein (1998) argue, “Library-related terminology is a third language” (Han and Hall 2012, p. 291). Some
international students have preconceived notions about the library. In their home countries, librarians have a low social status and students believe that they know more than librarians. However, in the US, librarians are extremely knowledgeable and often times have advanced degrees (Han and Hall, 2012). According to Jackson (2005), international students obtain information for research primarily through the internet. Furthermore, Hall and Han (2012) believe that online library guides are a tremendous resource for international students as many international students use them in their home countries. Online library guides serve as an easy way for students to obtain information because librarians could organize information effectively.

According to Mamiseishvili (2011) there are a number of studies on the barriers and challenges that international students experience. Mamiseishvili (2011) argues that there are not enough studies devoted to the persistence of international students. In this study, the author uses data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study data set and sampled 200 international students (Mamiseishvili 2011). As stated, “Survey interviews were administered in three modes: web-based self administered interview, computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI), and computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI)” (Mamiseishvili 2011). Through these surveys, a significant amount of information was gleaned. Academic performance was an important factor to the persistence of international students. Additionally, a proficient command of the English language as well as a clear path to graduation was conducive to the persistence of international students. Interestingly, the research does not necessarily indicate that social integration was a factor in persistence. However, the author does note that this may be attributed to how social integration was measured in this study (Mamiseishvili 2011).
Different Approaches of Engagement

Offering international students programs and services that are relevant to them is crucial. Colleges and universities should promote programs that are geared towards international students. Sarkodie and Mensah (1998) suggest that, “Making international students aware of available services helped them overcome difficulties with college adjustment” (as stated in Newell, 2015, p. 41). Newell (2015) further notes that “Remedial English writing and finding jobs in the United States and abroad, and special financial aid officers who address issues of student employment and sources of internal and external funding” (p. 42) is imperative. Because international students are only in the US for a short period of time, they must identify and pursue opportunities early in their academic career. This is a challenge as international students are not only transitioning to a new country and education system, but they also feel the pressure to prepare for post-graduation life.

Providing opportunities for international students to interact with their host culture is key to their overall experience. Fleischman, Raciti, and Lawley (2014) conducted a study on Australian universities and found that universities should attempt to engage students on various levels. Shalabi (2014) discusses her experience studying in the US and taking a service-learning course for her graduate program. The first component of the course required students to take part in discussions relating to the topic of the course. The second part entailed field trips to a non-profit organization to learn more about its environment. Shalabi (2014) argues that the service-learning component of her studies allowed her to learn more about the US. It changed her perspectives on American life. For instance, the author previously thought that everyone in the US led an easy and carefree life. Yet through service learning, she found that Americans had diverse experiences (Shalabi, 2014). Another example of an effective approach to engage
international students is through sports. Graham (2013) states that sport facilities are a major vehicle for engaging international students. According to a study of universities in the UK, 60% of students did not participate in sports clubs or teams (Graham, 2013). The author argues that through sporting activities, international students are able to integrate with local students and learn more about their host country’s culture. Undergraduate institutions should delve into different approaches in engaging international students (Fleischman, Raciti, & Lawley, 2014).

Similar to Shalabi (2014) and Graham (2013), Kwadzo (2014) also argues that an extracurricular component to the experience of international students is beneficial. In Kwadzo’s (2014) qualitative study, he explores the effects of work in enhancing the international student experience. There are some students in his study who report that working allows them to engage with local students, develop new skills, and stay focused on their studies. At a northeastern university in the US, the author studied 20 international students who were both working and studying. The anecdotes from the students are insightful. One student reveals, “Right now I am working at a computer laboratory. I normally work 20 hours a week. I’m a computer attendant. If any student has a problem using the computer, I help to solve that problem. Working in the computer laboratory has helped me to gain professional experience. This work is less stressful. The situation allows me to work my own school assignments” (Kwadzo, 2014, p. 284). The ability to gain professional experience while working and going to school was highlighted. Another student from Malaysia sheds light on the opportunity to meet other students while working in a dining hall. The student notes, “Besides working in the dining hall to make money, I also have the opportunity to meet a lot of nice people and I learn a lot from them. Sometimes, I see many people coming in and out to buy things from you to eat. I meet all sorts of people in the US, and it is a good experience for me as an international student” (Kwadzo, 2014, p. 285).
Although some of the participants in this study mentioned how working could be stressful while pursuing their studies, they also mentioned the opportunity to interact with people from their host country, which is an important element in the international student experience. Graham (2013), Kwadzo (2014) and Shalabi (2014) reinforce the notion that colleges and universities must take steps in finding more ways to get international students into spaces where they could interact with American students in order to enhance their experience.

**Who Should Support International Students?**

The roles of academic advisors, faculty, and staff are critical elements for international students to succeed (Mamiseishvili, 2011). They support students in navigating through their studies in addition to academic, career, and personal goals (Bista, 2015). There are multiple ways that faculty could enhance the experiences of international students—encouraging cooperation by grouping international students with local students in projects or structuring their discussions from a different lens by referring to information from their respective countries (Mamiseishvili, 2011). The role of academic advisors is important in supporting international students. Tinchu (2009) suggests that, “Advising is also a decision-making process which guides students in realizing their maximum potential through communication and information exchange” (p. 22). Newell (2015) highlights the significance of developmental advising when working with international student-athletes. She argues that advising should involve supporting students from a holistic standpoint. As stated, “They characterized developmental advising with seven principles that served as an operational definition: It is undertaken throughout the student’s academic career and is goal driven; addresses human growth; promotes a personal, caring, and empathetic relationship; features the advisor as a role model and mentor; demands collaboration between academic affairs departments; and encourages the utilization of all campus and community...”
resources to best support the student” (Newell, 2015, p. 40). Ultimately, all of these elements should be considered when working with international students.

In contrast, Urban et al. (2010) explained how it is beneficial for international students to form community within their own communities. For Dominican students, the importance of finding community within their community was conducive to their transition to universities in the US. As stated, “Community building and peer mentoring constituted the most successful strategies Dominican students utilized to learn about the US. education system, campus resources, dining facilities, and cultural challenges, particularly those related to differences in the definition of personal space, female-male interactions, and time orientation” (Urban et al., 2010, p. 238). The ability to communicate with someone about similar challenges from the same home country was an element that was brought to light. Mamiseishvili (2011) argues that faculty and administrators should support international students while Urban et al., (2010) highlighted the importance of strong peer support. The importance of faculty and staff as well as proper training for them was revealed in the literature. Urban et al., (2010) stated, “It is ever more important for higher education intuitions to augment their efforts to create a welcoming campus atmosphere through appropriate multicultural competency training of student affairs professionals and faculty interacting with these students.” (p. 245). This quote exemplifies how important faculty and staff are to ameliorating the experiences of international students. Notably, faculty and staff should be trained to work with students from different countries. The need for community and effective support was exemplified in the literature.

Zhao et al. (2005) focuses on the extent in which international students are receiving educational resources. The authors compare the experiences of international students with American students. Moreover, the study looks at the particular ethnic background of
international students and how it would correlate with their experience. According to Zhao et al. (2005), “Different mixes of students, curricular requirements and campus cultures could produce varying patterns of engagement that deviate from the results in this study. In addition, given the limited amount of research on the experiences of international students, many other instructive questions could be asked” (p. 225). The research revealed that the international student experience is nuanced. More research needs to be done to explore the variations of experiences that international students encounter, as the authors argue that there is not enough research to make conclusions.

Conclusion

The literature illustrates that supporting international students is multidimensional. The opportunity for international students to interact with local students is imperative. The research describes how developing opportunities to increase the level of interaction among international students and American students is beneficial. Providing international students with work and internship experiences is another way for international students to engage with their host community. A theme that was evident in the literature was the fact that international students tend to be more academically oriented; therefore, traditional extracurricular activities such as joining clubs or playing sports may not resonate with them. Research opportunities, jobs, and internships may be a better strategy to engage some international students. According to the literature, administrators and staff should collaborate with one another to identify the resources that best support international students (Newell, 2015). Researchers agreed that providing international students with a close-knit, familial environment would help them in transitioning into college.
Summation

The international student population has increased significantly in the US during the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century (Bista, 2005; Terzian and Osborne, 2006). The US government sought to use international students to improve diplomacy with other countries as well as to spread its values and culture all over the world (Terzian and Osborne, 2006). With the mass influx of international students, colleges and universities must further understand their intercultural experiences, as they are different from the mainstream population of students. International students provide an important dimension to the US higher education system. The literature reviewed was insightful insofar as the studies delved into the personal experiences of students from a wide-range of countries. Moreover, there were many similar experiences that were revealed—language obstacles, cultural differences, and academic adjustments. Furthermore, a number of researchers investigated strategies that higher education institutions could implement in order to enhance the overall engagement for international students.

There were some limitations in the literature reviewed. First, more research needs to be done to assess the needs of international students. For instance, much of the literature focused on individual universities (Carr et al., 2003; Kim, 2016; Kwadzo, 2014; Leong, 2015; Mori & Takeuchi, 2016). A comprehensive assessment of the overall international student experience at various universities would be informative, though difficult to pursue given the diversity of this population. Specific information by country could provide a better understanding of the needs of international students. Second, a deep understanding of the intercultural experiences of international students would assist faculty, administrators and staff in planning initiatives that would allow this population to successfully adjust to universities in the US.
This qualitative study will investigate the intercultural experiences of international students. Furthermore, this study seeks to understand how international students make sense of their intercultural experiences. The findings in this study would assist universities in providing the proper type of support and resources for international students. Additionally, it will bring to light effective strategies on how to ameliorate intercultural interactions between different groups of students. Lastly, the findings of this research could improve the retention and persistence at the university where I currently work.
Chapter Three: Research Design

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study is to understand the intercultural experiences of international students at an urban, non-traditional college in the Northeast. This study explores how international students perceive their intercultural experiences. The conceptual framework, qualitative methodology, and author’s intellectual pursuits attributed to the research question under investigation. The research question for this study is the following:

- How do international students make sense of their intercultural experience at a private non-traditional college?

This chapter provides an overview of the research design for this study. The subsequent sections of this chapter highlight important components that informed this research. First, an understanding of the strategy of inquiry employed in this research will be discussed. For instance, background information of the methodology used in this study and how it shaped the types of questions asked will be explored. Second, a description of participants as well as the procedures for how interviews were conducted will be discussed in detail. Third, the criteria for the quality of research including ethical considerations, credibility, transferability, self-reflexivity and transparency will be covered. Finally, the limitations of this study will be examined.

Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research methods were employed in this study which used general inductive analysis. The intercultural experiences of international students were investigated in this study. Ponterotto (2005) argues that qualitative methods are conducive to understanding the experiences of a subject in everyday language and in their own words to understand a particular
phenomenon. Chenail (1995) states that a degree of openness is imperative to qualitative methods. Clearly articulating what would happen in a qualitative research study creates a trust between the researcher and the reader. In addition to qualitative methods, the general inductive approach was applicable to this research insofar as the approach moves from specific details to generalizations. In inductive reasoning, specific observations are taken into account and patterns are formulated. Conclusions and theories are then identified based on these observations (Trochim, 2006). Qualitative methods as well as the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm was an effective strategy for this research.

According to Ponterotto (2005), the constructivist-interpretivist approach serves as the foundation for qualitative research methods. The constructivist-interpretivist approach contains a hermeneutical element as the research approach allows for deep reflection (Ponterotto, 2005). Merriam (2009) argues that interpretive research focuses on “process rather than outcome or products.” Merriam further questions, “How do certain things happen? What is the ‘natural’ history of the activity or event under study? What happens with the passage of time? Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning—how people make sense of their lives, what they experience, how they interpret these experiences, how they structure their social worlds” (Merriam, 1988, p. 19). Butin (2010) argues that reality is subjective and could be analyzed through diverse perspectives. The research question developed in this study directly aligns with the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. The goal of this study is to understand the intercultural experiences of international students at an urban, non-traditional college in the Northeast. Understanding how international students perceive their intercultural experiences will also be explored. The constructivist-interpretivist approach to inquiry fits the research design for this study.
Methodology

The methodology employed in this study was IPA. IPA is a relatively new research tradition developed by Jonathan Smith, a psychology professor at Birkbeck, University of London. IPA explores an individual’s lived, in-depth experiences. Brocki and Wearden (2014) argue that IPA is an effective approach to understanding the experiences of individuals and notes that IPA gives clear guidelines and is “highly accessible.” For instance, IPA uses guidelines and language that is straightforward while other qualitative methodologies might be difficult to comprehend (Brocki and Wearden, 2014).

Smith (2004) too argues that the strength of IPA is in its ability to examine the individual experiences of participants. One of the main differences between IPA and phenomenology is that IPA “accepts participants stories” while phenomenology interprets from a place of suspicion (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009). The level of questioning and in-depth analysis sets it apart from phenomenology. Smith (2014) argues that exploring individual cases in IPA studies illustrate a sense of “shared humanity.” Brocki and Wearden (2014) argue that implementing a theoretical framework may be difficult for researchers employing IPA as it is hermeneutical and interpretative by nature. A pre-existing theoretical framework could impact the information collected in IPA studies. Smith and Osborn (2014) agree with Brocki and Wearden (2014) and state, “There is no attempt to test a pre-determined hypothesis of the researcher; rather the aim is to explore, flexibly and in detail, an area of concern” (p. 53). IPA makes sense of a participant’s experiences by using in-depth analysis. It is important to understand the foundation of IPA studies. The theoretical underpinnings of IPA are in phenomenology, idiography, and hermeneutics (Smith, 1996).
**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology traces its origins to Germany before World War I (Dowling, 2005). IPA draws from phenomenology as it is concerned with how a subject makes sense of their lived experiences through descriptive and interpretative approaches. Phenomenological philosophy provides a researcher with the tools to understand the lived experiences of individuals. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are the major philosophers who developed the concept of phenomenology.

For Husserl, the detachment of researchers to their subject is imperative. For example, Husserl was concerned with researching subjects “as they appear” without interpretation or preconceived notions (Dowling, 2005). Husserl’s phenomenology was concerned with the everyday experience of research subjects. As stated by Husserl (as stated in Smith et al., 2009), “Focusing our experiencing gaze on our own psychic life necessarily takes place as reflection, as a turning about of a glance which had previously been directed elsewhere. Every experience can be subject to such reflection, as can indeed every manner in which we occupy ourselves with any real or ideal objects—for instance, thinking or in the modes of feeling and will, valuing, and striving” (p. 12-13). Furthermore, Husserl argues that the experiences of individuals before they process and reflect upon phenomenon is critical to his conception of phenomenology.

Heidegger was a student of Husserl’s who took a different approach to phenomenology. Instead of focusing on the experiences of individuals as they appear, Heidegger emphasized the practicality of phenomenology. Heidegger sought to ground his work into “the world of things, people, relationships, and language” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 16). The importance of meaning was key to Heidegger’s notion of phenomenology. Heidegger sought to make meaning from an individual through understanding process and perception as well as awareness and consciousness.
(Smith et al., 2009). For Heidegger, the meaning or understanding was more important than description, which was a critical component to Husserl’s theory of phenomenology (Dowling, 2005).

Merleau-Ponty built off of the phenomenological conceptions of both Husserl and Heidegger. Like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty reinforces the importance of understanding one’s being in the world; however, he also agrees with Heidegger in wanting a more contextual version of phenomenology. Larkin, Eatough, and Osborn (2011), emphasize the importance of how the body shapes one’s understanding of the world. Merleau-Ponty states, “The body no longer conceived as an object in the world but as our means of communication with it” (as stated in Smith et al., 2009, p. 18). Understanding how the body shapes the relationship that an individual has with the world is a fundamental component of Merleau-Ponty’s conception of phenomenology.

**Hermeneutics.** Another major component of IPA research design is hermeneutics. Heidegger introduced hermeneutics to hermeneutic phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger was concerned with understanding the lived experiences of individuals (Dowling, 2005). Hermeneutics explores one’s lived experiences through reflection and interpretation. In contrast to Husserl, Heidegger strongly felt that understanding the lived experiences of individuals was more important than understanding descriptive elements. As stated by McLeod (2000), “Understanding is always from a perspective, always a matter of interpretation” (as stated in Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011, p. 324).

The hermeneutic circle is a concept that assists with understanding hermeneutic theory. The concept derives from the notion that the whole and part are essential to understanding phenomena (Smith et al., 2009). For example, to understand a given part, one must look at the
whole. In juxtaposition, to understand the whole, one must look into its parts. This relationship reflects the iterative nature of the hermeneutical process insofar as the researcher goes back and forth in each step of analyzing data. The hermeneutic circle deviates from the strictest understanding of phenomenology as it is seen as “revisioning” the concept (Dowling, 2005). Phenomenology purists would argue that hermeneutics does not fit into the phenomenology framework. However, Dowling (2005) highlights that deeper meaning is drawn when hermeneutics is incorporated into phenomenology.

The role of the double hermeneutic is important in IPA studies. The double hermeneutic offers the researcher with two different lenses to approach the experience of a participant. According to Smith et al. (2009), “The researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (p. 3). In IPA studies, the primary focus is to understand the experiences of the participant with the secondary focus on interpreting or making meaning of the experience of the participant. Therefore, the concept of the double hermeneutic reinforces the need for IPA studies to draw from a small number of participants. IPA studies focuses on the in-depth and detailed analysis of subjects, which takes a significant amount of time for each case. Understanding the role of the double hermeneutic is important in IPA studies as it provides a nuanced approach to qualitative research.

**Idiography.** Idiography entails in-depth and detailed research that allows the researcher to extrapolate important themes and patterns. IPA studies collect information through a detailed analysis of a case (Smith, 2004). According to Smith (2004), closure is a key element in idiographic studies. Once closure is gained in a particular case, the researcher could move forward with analyzing and cross analyzing other cases for relevant themes and patterns. Smith et al. (2009) state that IPA allows the researcher to investigate individuals in a particular context
and develops its methodology in a focused as well as cautious manner. The importance of the single case study is highlighted in idiography.

Lamiell (1987) was skeptical of conducting research on a case-by-case level. Lamiell (1987) believed that findings in individual cases could not apply to many cases. As stated, “Individual differences research cannot possibly be suited to the task of establishing general laws or nomothetic principles concerning individual behavior /psychological functioning. That is, the empirical findings generated by such research cannot logically establish that something is the case for each of many individuals” (as stated in Smith et al., 2009; 1987, 90-92). However, Smith (2004) feels that it is important for researchers to use a smaller sample size when employing IPA as it allows the researcher to closely engage in the analysis and interpretation processes of participants. Smith et al. (2009) argue that to illustrate a case how it is could inform existing frameworks. With the in-depth and detailed research that idiography provides, a great deal of important information could be extracted from one case. Therefore, idiography is an important element in IPA.

In this study, the intercultural experiences of international students in the US as well as how they make sense of their experiences are investigated. IPA is an effective strategy because it focuses on personal meaning and sense-making and how it translates into a particular experience of a given population. IPA aligns with this study because it uses a small sample size and encourages constant reflection and interpretation. IPA brings personal, detailed, and in-depth elements to this study.
Participants

The participants for this study were undergraduate international students between the age of 18-25 years old in good academic standing. International is defined by a participant who was educated outside of the US for primary and secondary school. A diverse sample was sought in this study. International students from various countries and geographic regions were recruited. Additionally, a balance of male and female participants was represented. Interviews were conducted until a diverse sample of students represented a wide range of regions. The final sample comprised of students from Asia, South America, and Europe.

The following table lists the participants in this research study. There was a total of 7 students who were interviewed. The table is broken down by gender, nationality, race or ethnicity, year of study, and major—key demographic information used in this study. Each of the participants were given a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Students are listed in the order in which they were interviewed. Brief descriptions of the participants are given in this section.

Table 1.

Participants’ Key Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality, Race or Ethnicity</th>
<th>Year of Study</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chimeg</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mongolia</td>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>Economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Contemporary Culture and Creative Production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>Undeclared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview 1: Chimeg

Chimeg is a female fourth year student from Mongolia majoring in Economics. She transferred to the university from a community college in the Midwest. Chimeg felt that her community college was not very challenging and wanted to move somewhere that would inspire her. Chimeg was raised in Mongolia where she took care of her grandmother until she was 15 years old. She feels that this experience shaped her as an individual. Chimeg states, “I have difficulty with making friends who are my age. I make friends with older people, like 40 years. I have friends who are 40 years, 30 years old. I think it’s because I grew up with my grandmother and then passed when I was 15.” Chimeg is grateful for having many opportunities in the US but is anxious about finding a job after graduation.

Interview 2: Sophia

Sophia is a female first year student from Brazil. She was born in the US and raised in Brazil. Sophia has a concentration in Contemporary Culture and Creative Production and spent her first year studying in Italy as part of a special program within her university. Before coming to college, Sophia had the opportunity to spend a summer at an elite private university in the Northeast. Additionally, she spent a summer in Puerto Rico engaging in community service. Sophia describes herself as outgoing. When she is not in class, she works on campus and
babysits. Sophia states, “I babysit, which is really nice because I get to know a little of the
different aspects of American culture. You get to see the dynamics of adults who are married
because that’s also different from what it is back home. Also, you get to see how kids are raised,
which is nice because it makes me understand better how they come to be people of my age.”

Interview 3: Manuel

Manuel is a male student from Peru. He is in his first year of college and is an undeclared
major. Manuel chose to study in the US for a new experience as well as the freedom to study
different interests. He visited the US a few times for vacation before college. He states, “It’s very
different, I wouldn’t know how to explain it, just like the people are very friendly, like very
direct. They come up to you and say hi, my name is whatever, nice to meet you.” Manuel
describes himself as shy but confident. He enjoys spending time with his friends and listening to
music.

Interview 4: Rachel

Rachel is a female student from Denmark. She is in her first year majoring in psychology.
In the ninth grade, Rachel studied in New Jersey for one year. Rachel was encouraged to attend
college in the US by her father who now lives here. A significant reason for Rachel to study in
the US was for potential career opportunities after college. Initially, Rachel had a difficult time
with how she was perceived by other students:

I think they were very surprised when they first met me. I became kind of known as the
Danish Girl instead of Rachel. People would refer to me as the girl from Scandinavia, or
the girl from Denmark and I think they were drawing a picture of me from the beginning
from the culture I came from. And they would refer to me as being very tall, like “Oh
you’re so tall, that’s all the Scandinavian people.”
Rachel describes her new environment as “community based.” She mentions how college in the US is different from in Denmark. In the US, students are “interactive” and are part of a supportive community while college students in Denmark live more independently.

**Interview 5: Alisa**

Alisa is a female student in her first year from Russia majoring in East Asian Studies and International Relations. Alisa was born in the US but was raised in Russia. For secondary school, she attended boarding school in the United Kingdom. After secondary school, she took a gap year spending time in China, Japan, and Greece. When asked about her experience attending college in the US, Alisa responded:

Well, I like the college life here because it’s quite free. I live in a dorm. I make my own schedule. Nobody’s pressuring me to do anything unless I want to do it. I went to boarding school before. So there we lived in the school all the time. So we’re always under the teachers’ watch. Like teachers were always watching us. Are we doing our work? Are we handing things in? Here it’s different because here, if you don’t do your work, the professors don’t care.

Alisa enjoys the educational approach in the US because it allows her to study various subjects, which would not be the case in Russia. As stated, “In the US, if you’re studying politics for example, you could study psychology or economics or something else at the same time. I like that aspect of universities in the US.”

**Interview 6: Aditya**

Aditya is a first year male student from India majoring in Computer Science and Mathematics. He chose to study in the US because of educational and job opportunities that he would not necessarily have in India. Aditya visited the US once before when he was younger. He
was initially afraid to attend college in the US; however, he has acclimated quite well. Aditya has attributed being from a big city like Mumbai, as well as staying in contact with his parents, in easing the transition into college. Aditya loves playing sports, especially soccer. He has made many friends through playing soccer. Studying in the US has affected how Aditya feels about himself. He feels a great sense of independence and states, “I just didn’t think that I would handle independence so well because, for example, back home I would never wake up on time for school. There were things like that. I managed to do small things like that much better than back home.” Aditya further adds, “I could do what I want and make a schedule to do what I want. It’s not as monotonous as back home. School was on a schedule. I compare this life to back home and appreciate that I have this opportunity.”

**Interview 7: Hua**

Hua is a female student from China in her third year of college. She is majoring in Journalism and Cinema Studies. Her parents initially wanted her to major in something more practical like business or mathematics, but they were supportive in whatever she wanted to study. After college Hua plans to pursue a career in television and attend graduate school. Her first time in the US was when she was 12 years old while on a cruise around the Caribbean. When she was applying to colleges, she had Chinese friends who studied in the US and had good experiences. Upon arriving to college, she made many friends in her residence hall. As stated:

I tried to make friends with the people on my floor. My friends are Indian, Korean, and American—very diverse. I have Chinese friends too but not in my close circle because I didn’t actively go out and look for Chinese people to find that familiar sense. So, I just stayed with my natural born friends and we mainly talked English. I guess that’s a big reason why my English is okay.
Hua describes herself as “realistic,” “hardworking,” and “friendly.” She enjoys watching American television, shopping, and hanging out with friends.

**Data Collection**

In tradition with the IPA methodological approach, a small sample size was collected that was composed of seven participants. Smith (2004) argues that a small sample size allows the researcher to obtain in-depth information about participants. According to Reid, Flowers, and Larkin (2005), 10 participants is at the higher end for most IPA studies. Smith et al. (2009) argue that IPA is most effective for “participants to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences” (p. 56). There are a variety of ways to collect data for IPA studies (Smith et al., 2009). In this study, data was collected by taking personal accounts using semi-structured interviews. Snowball sampling was employed to obtain future participants from the network of current participants (Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010). Moreover, participants engaged in semi-structured, 70-minute interviews making it possible to understand their detailed lived experiences.

Semi-structured interviews provided my participants the opportunity to share various aspects of their intercultural experiences without limitation. It led to insightful personal accounts of their lived experiences. In addition, semi-structured interviews gave participants flexibility, which allowed for an open conversation. IPA’s narrative or personal approach provided an in-depth understanding of the intercultural experiences of international students. The data collection components of IPA significantly informed this study.

**Data Analysis**

The data analyzed in this study was in the form of transcribed interviews, field notes, and reflective memos. The audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed by Rev.com. Larkin and
Thompson (2012) state that the analytic methods used in IPA comprise of close coding of the participants associated in a particular study. After the coding stage, the researcher looked for themes and patterns that were prevalent in the data collected. A dialogue between the researcher and coded data commenced as dialogue is important to the interpretative development of the data (Larkin and Thompson, 2012). The importance of the organization of themes, development of narratives as well as reflection of the researcher’s perception were constantly explored throughout the data analysis process. Smith and Osborn (2003) agree with the data analysis process that Larkin and Thompson (2012) describe and suggest a more detailed account of these methods. For example, Larkin and Smith (2012) recommend that the transcript be read repeatedly and that notes be taken during the transcriptions, which all occurred in the data analysis process of this study. Themes were clustered according to concepts and ideas that were brought to light during the interviews. Additionally, patterns and reoccurring themes were noted. A close examination of the analysis process is imperative to an effective IPA study (Smith and Osborn, 2003).

**Procedures**

In order to proceed with this study, approval from the Northeastern University Internal Review Board (IRB) was granted. Interested students were initially contacted through email. A list of international students was collected by the college and a recruitment email was sent to them. In the recruitment email a questionnaire and letter were included. The questionnaire was used to hone the background of the participants by major, nationality, age, gender, and year of study. Furthermore, the letter fully described the study at hand. After the questionnaires were reviewed, eligible students were contacted via phone for a 10-minute conversation to further clarify the aims and expectations of the study, and to answer any questions that the potential
participants wanted to ask. All of the students contacted were assured that the research conducted would be confidential. The data for this study was analyzed by using basic inductive techniques (Trochim, 2006). First, I created a research question that guided my interview questions. My research question is the following: How do international students make sense of their intercultural experience at a private non-traditional college? This question aligned with my interview questions. I developed a list of 15 questions. The first five questions of the interview were meant to establish rapport with my participant. Moreover, the first five questions provided important information about the participant’s background. The second set of 10 questions was concerned with learning about the participant’s experiences as well as observations of international students. I wanted to learn more about the intercultural experiences or occurrences that the participant had with this population.

The time allotted for the interview was 70 minutes. The interviews took place in open, but private spaces on campus, such as a study space in a library. The interview was captured on a recorder while I was taking notes. After the interview, the recordings were stored in a password locked computer and sent to a transcription company called Rev.com. Once the interviews were transcribed, the analysis process was done by using data coding techniques. In vivo coding and descriptive coding were employed in the data analysis process. Recurring themes were extrapolated from the transcriptions. Additionally, sub-coding variations were used to hone in on the participant’s experiences.

Criteria for Quality Qualitative Research

This section details the criteria for quality qualitative research. Openness is a key element in qualitative research (Chenail, 1995; Creswell, 2013). For example, researchers must present the “story” behind their research methods and findings (Chenail, 1995). However, it is
imperative for the researcher to do so in a trustworthy fashion. The following elements are discussed in this section—ethical considerations, credibility, transferability, self-reflexivity and transparency as well as an internal audit. The limitations of this research study will be discussed at the end of this section.

**Ethical Considerations**

The ethical standards of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) was strictly followed. Academic integrity as well as the protection of the participants in this study was a priority. All participants in this study were given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. Participants signed a waiver stating that they understood the purpose of the study and willingly participated. Additionally, participants were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. All data associated with this study—transcripts, audio, and other material—was kept in a lockable file cabinet or password protected computer that was only accessible to the researcher. Data will be saved for a period of one year after the completion of this study. At the end of one year, all data will be destroyed.

**Credibility**

Validating findings was extremely important in maintaining the credibility of this study. In order for research to be credible, accuracy of the findings must be consistent. Strategies such as member checking and triangulation are effective strategies to increase credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation involves the researcher using evidence from a variety of data collecting techniques to reinforce the credibility of data. For instance, cross checking memos, field notes, and interviews were used to validate patterns or themes in this study. Multiple sources were analyzed to ensure that the findings and interpretations in this study were accurate (Creswell 2012). Member checking, the process where a participant reviews the
recollection of accounts in their interview, was also utilized to maintain the credibility of this study.

**Transferability**

The idiographic focus of IPA studies calls for in-depth and detailed research. IPA focuses on personal meaning and sense-making and how it translates into a particular experience. Additionally, IPA employs a small sample size and encourages constant reflection and interpretation. A significant amount of detail regarding the context of the participants and findings is contained in thick descriptions (Creswell, 2007). Meanings, feelings and actions all contribute to thick descriptions (Ponterotto, 2006). Although IPA strives to understand the experiences of participants, thick descriptions of participants’ lives will always be incomplete (Kuntz, 2010). However, thick description enables the conclusions that would be drawn to be transferable to other contexts.

**Internal Audit**

To document this study, an internal audit was used. An internal audit was composed of the research question, field notes, journals, memoing, annotated transcripts, tables of themes, as well as the final report. The purpose of an internal audit is to maintain evidence of the research throughout the entirety of the research process.

**Self-reflexivity and Transparency**

There are many elements to consider when conducting academic research. For example, being too close to the research study or believing that one is unbiased could be problematic (Parsons, 2009). It was important for me to realize that my background and experiences may differ from the students whom I was researching. The notion of an interview from a student from a non-Western country might be different than someone from the West. Moreover, some of my
students come from cultures where it is not appropriate to talk about feelings, especially to someone considered an authority figure. Lastly, some international students do not yet have a strong command of English, which could lead to communication issues. My background provides me with a lens that is particular to me as an individual. It is important to be aware of my personal biases that may potentially influence my study.

To manage potential bias, I was mindful of how I presented myself to the participants in this study. I did not present myself as an administrator at the university, but as a graduate student conducting research. As an administrator in the college, I did not interview students whom I advised. Regarding potential communication issues, I was cognizant of my tone and speech. I spoke clearly to my participants and avoided unnecessary jargon. These rectifying steps are critical in an IPA study as students should be comfortable with telling “their own stories, in their own words” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57).

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. For instance, the theoretical framework employed in this study was Pettigrew’s (1998) model for intergroup contact. A component of Pettigrew’s (1998) model calls for understanding intergroup contact through a longitudinal continuum. However, the scope of this study does not track its participants through an extended period of time. The interviews provide insightful information on the intercultural experiences of international students. It would be interesting to follow the perceptions of international students in US universities through the duration of their time as an undergraduate student.

The intercultural experiences of international students were brought to light in this study. A wider sample of international students would be the next step in this research. Because of the nature of IPA methodology, a smaller sample size was sought (Smith, 2004). IPA emphasizes the
importance of an idiographic focus and this work is intended to reflect some of the experiences of seven participants who experienced the phenomenon under study. Therefore, a smaller sample size was conducive to this study. Understanding the intercultural experiences of international students is difficult as there are students represented at US universities from a multitude of countries. More data obtained from students who represent a wider range of countries would be informative. Another limitation in this study pertains to the transferability to like institutions. For example, this study specifically focuses on international students at an urban private university in the Northeast. A comparative analysis of the intercultural experiences of international students at similar institutions or at public universities would be beneficial.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to understand the intercultural experiences of international students at an urban, private university in the Northeast. This study explored how international students perceived and made sense of their intercultural experiences. Participants and important demographic data for this study is listed in Table 1. The analysis of transcripts yielded three superordinate themes, eight sub-themes, and one other finding. The superordinate themes and sub-themes are illustrated in Table 2. The superordinate themes of this study are Importance of Strong Relationships, Internal Conflicts, and Challenges in Interacting with Americans. The eight sub-themes collected were the following: Establishing Community, Finding Common Ground, Maintaining a Sense of Self, Assimilation and Integration, Gaining Acceptance, Cognizant of Stereotypes and Misconceptions, Adjusting to an American Social Environment, and Difficulty with Language. The other finding was Navigating Career Opportunities in the US. The themes resulted from collecting equal or similar statements given by participants.

Table 2.

Superordinate Themes, Sub-Themes, and Other Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Strong Relationships</th>
<th>Internal Conflicts</th>
<th>Challenges in Interacting with American Students</th>
<th>Other Finding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishing Community</td>
<td>Maintaining a Sense of Self</td>
<td>Cognizant of Stereotypes and Misconceptions</td>
<td>Navigating Career Opportunities in the US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding Common Ground</td>
<td>Assimilation and Integration</td>
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Importance of Strong Relationships

The first superordinate theme, *Importance of Strong Relationships*, exhibits the necessity for deep and meaningful relationships with others. The majority of participants reported having strong relationships with peers from their home country. Many of these relationships were formed over a long period of time. Having family, friends, and mentors accessible during times of hardship and transition were brought to light. Participants revealed that it was difficult to make friends upon arriving to the US. Furthermore, participants characterized many of their new relationships as acquaintances rather than friendships. The first sub-theme, *Establishing Community*, illustrates the importance for participants to meet people to confide in as well as make meaningful connections. The second sub-theme, *Finding Common Ground*, exemplifies the effort that participants would give to effectively communicate with their peers to find mutual interests.

Establishing Community

The participants reported establishing community as an important component to their new environment. Participants were concerned about the difficulties with finding substantive relationships with their peers. For instance, many of them stated that they attended primary and secondary school with the same classmates and attended the same school throughout their lives. Therefore, participants were not used to forming new relationships. In addition to transitioning to a new culture, participants had to understand what it meant to establish community in a different society. The data suggests that participants longed for a sense of familiarity. According to Manuel:

> What do I tend to think about? I think a lot about what’s going on back home. I talk to my friends, what’s new? I miss home a lot. I do tend to think I would like to meet more
people, like I got my friends that I started with. I feel like I have a couple of friends that are cool to hang out with, like what I have back home is just, I guess, really like solid friendship and I really am looking forward to getting to those here. That’s kind of like my first goal. The most important thing that I am looking for.

Manuel typically keeps in touch with his friends from Peru through social media applications such as WhatsApp and Snapchat. It seems that he is experiencing a sense of homesickness. Manuel expected to meet people who were similar to his friends at home. He states, “I really thought that I would meet with people that were similar to my friends. People are so different than them, and I can’t really put words to it, so it just feels different.”

Alisa, too, believes that it is important to form community in her new environment. However, she finds it difficult to establish meaningful relationships with others, particularly American students. As stated by Alisa:

I have friends, but they’re not as friends that they’re like lunch friends, or they’re not friends that I’m going to go and talk to about something. They’re connection friends. I’d say like that. They’re friends for the future. I don’t have real friends that are Americans, white Americans. I do have some Asian American friends that I’m relatively close to, but they are under the influence of Chinese or Korean cultures as well as other American culture. I find it easier to talk to them because I feel like the Asian cultures and the Russian cultures, they have certain commonalities basically.

Alisa suggests that her friendships with American students is superficial. She describes her American friends as acquaintances and feels like she does not have much in common with them.

It is easier for her to make friends with those from countries similar to Russia. For example, both
China and Russia share particular communist ideologies; therefore, she feels that the people from those countries have similar mindsets.

Rachel thinks that establishing community is important but feels slightly different from Manuel and Giovanni. For instance, both Manuel and Giovanni argue that community is important, but believes that is it difficult to establish strong relationships in college, whereas Rachel suggests that college in the US is highly community-oriented. Rachel states:

Definitely that it’s very community based. You are becoming a part of a community that cares a lot about you and you live in dorms, so you interact with different students. And that’s something we don’t have in Denmark. You usually live at home when you go to college and then you go to school throughout the day. So that was definitely something I noticed, that people seemed to, not only have their academic life in school, but also life outside of their classes, the people they were interacting with were all students at the university.

Rachel believes that there is more community in her college in the US than in Denmark because much of the lives of students revolve around college. She explains that college students in Denmark typically live at home. A major difference between the higher education system in the US and Denmark, she argues, is that many of the students do not live in residence halls. It could be inferred that Rachel wanted to study in the US because of the ability to interact with other students. However, it seems that college students in her home country are more independent.

Hua compares her experience with establishing community in China and the US. She felt that a sense of community was lacking in college and reflects back, “When I came here I’m just like okay, I don’t know anyone yet. I just talked to my roommate and then before we know it, we don’t talk together because we don’t study the same thing. So, I go to talk on my cell and then
nobody will talk to me or anything like that or no one was present, so I would just go back to my dorm.” Hua felt a sense of loneliness during her time in the residence halls. In this case, she reflects about wanting to interact with her peers, but it appears that she does not know how to approach them. She further notes, “Then people on my floor, we have floor meetings and stuff in the dorm, but it’s not like you would have a very long, deep conversation and people don’t necessarily have to know each other, so we wouldn’t put in the effort.” Like Manuel, Hua had the same classmates in primary and secondary school. There was a strong sense of community. She states, “You know everyone. I can remember everyone’s first names. You do everything together and you take exams together and your scores, everyone knows everybody’s scores.” Hua compares her educational experience in China with the US. She illustrates the closeness of her academic environment at home. It is in stark contrast to her college experience. It sounds like she misses the familiarity with her peers at home.

Finding Common Ground

The data in this study indicated that finding common ground was essential in developing relationships. Participants found it useful to point out similar experiences with their peers in order to have a baseline for initiating their relationships. This required effective social skills as well as an awareness of the culture of others. Participants reported that finding common ground was imperative to establishing nurturing relationships.

Aditya found that connecting with others through sports was effective in finding common ground. Before arriving to college, Aditya was worried about being away from his family. He spent his entire life in India and did not know what to expect. Aditya learned that there were many students like himself in college, which made the transition easier. When asked about the people who he normally interacts with on a daily basis Aditya responds, “I make it generally
with Indian friends who I met over here. It’s much easier to gel with them because we have a lot more in common than classmates. I interact with roommates and I spend time with them as well. We chill in the room or watch matches.” Aditya describes who he generally interacts with at school. He finds it easier to engage with other Indian students with a similar cultural background, but also has friends from other countries. His roommates are from the US, which allows him to further experience American culture. Aditya describes himself as a “sporty” person. He feels that sports could foster more intercultural interaction among students and states, “I would like a lot more sporting events. I found that sports isn’t as big of a culture than other universities. I’d like to see sports to be a bigger part of not just the life here but for cultural experience. For instance, they could have soccer matches between cultures.” Aditya highlights the importance of sports in his life. He particularly finds community with those who have an interest in soccer.

In counterpoint, Rachel too sought to find common ground with her peers, specifically with other international students who were experiencing college in a way that was similar to her experience. She tends to find commonality through culture. Rachel states:

Yes, because I definitely do sometimes seek out people from different cultures because they understand what it’s like to be international in college. So as I said before, I’m in the European Club, so I meet with people from France and Germany, and we get together and even though they are very different, because they are from a different culture than Denmark, they are just not from America.”

Rachel describes how the European Club served as a space to meet other students with similar interests. The differences but similarities in a wider culture allowed students to find common ground. Rachel felt more comfortable with other European students who shared the same experience. Additionally, her statement indicates that some of her American peers may not
understand what it is like to be an international student. She further expresses how her experience with other international students from Europe was different from her experiences with Americans:

They exposed me to understand me in a way that Americans typically don’t do here, because they know the process of going through college as an outsider—someone from the outside and trying to integrate into the norms that are here. So they’re familiar with that whole challenge, and we can kind of bond over that and talk about it.

Rachel describes feeling like an outsider and wanting to integrate into American society. Interestingly, other international students assisted her with the integration process. The members of the European Club understood what Rachel was experiencing. She found a community to confide in as well as share her feelings of being in a different society.

**Conclusions.** Participants reported having a strong connection with their friends and family in their home countries. Many of the participants described having the same friends growing up. For instance, participants had the same classmates in primary and secondary school; therefore, formed strong bonds with their peers through time. Their home environment provided a sense of safety as well as familiarity. Furthermore, participants leaving their home country was a difficult adjustment as establishing friendships in the US proved to be challenging. Because participants are in a new country without a social network, obtaining friendships was imperative. The participants wanted to establish deep and meaningful relationships with their peers. Even though participants were in spaces such as their residence halls and classrooms where they could find other students, they felt that these interactions were on a superficial level. They sought friendships by finding common ground with others through culture, sports, and clubs. Finding commonality with their peers assisted the participants in developing meaningful relationships.
Internal Conflicts

Coping with internal conflicts is one of the superordinate themes identified in this research study. Internal conflicts, in this case, refers to a psychological struggle with identity. The data collected revealed that participants experienced internal conflicts as international students in the US. Participants struggled with understanding social and cultural norms as they are different from their home countries. Maintaining a sense of self was also important to participants. Additionally, participants reported having difficulty with assimilating and integrating into mainstream US society. Because of factors such as language and culture, participants experienced challenges with integrating into their new environment. Participants wanted to gain a sense of acceptance among their peers to establish positive social interactions. The following sections will examine the participants’ experiences in college. The first sub-theme, Maintaining a Sense of Self, illustrates ways that participants tried to understand and maintain their individuality. The second sub-theme, Assimilation and Integration, describes how participants assimilated and integrated into their new environment. The third sub-theme Gaining Acceptance reveals how participants sought to find acceptance among their peers.

Maintaining a Sense of Self

Alisa is used to interacting with people from a variety of places. During a gap year, she traveled to China, Japan, and Greece. She takes elements from different cultures and applies them to herself. For instance, Alisa takes what she has learned from cultures to inform her interactions. As stated, “I try to adjust as much as I can and understand a different culture so that it’s more comfortable for them.” Alisa explains how she adjusts to the culture of who she interacts with to make it easier to communicate. However, it is sometimes challenging for Alisa to maintain a sense of self. As stated, “I get really confused personally because I have all these

different norms and then my identity is like which one is this? So when I encounter another person, I don’t know how to present myself because I don’t have myself because I’m an international student and all those international experiences, all these international norms intertwine.” As an international student, Alisa has a difficult time with determining how she should approach others. Alisa’s experience in different cultures and contexts makes it challenging to choose which norms she should utilize in her interactions.

Rachel describes how being perceived as an international student makes it difficult for others to see her as an individual. She is often times labeled as an international student from Denmark instead of as a person. Rachel states:

It makes me kind of annoyed because I am so much more than just being an international student. So sometimes I wish that people would not just see me as the international girl, but more as the person I am. So in Denmark, I feel a bit more like Sarah, like the person I am, a very big personality. Where here, I feel a little bit smaller and more into a box or just being the Danish girl, if that makes sense.

Being labeled as an “international student” affected Rachel’s interactions with others. She felt a sense of frustration as her international status limited what people thought of her. When Rachel is in Denmark, she does not stand out because the majority of the people there are Danish. In the US, her identity as an international student supersedes her personality.

**Assimilation and Integration**

Another sub-theme that was extrapolated from the data was assimilation and integration. Participants reported trying to both assimilate and integrate into the US by either changing or adjusting how they presented themselves through language as well as different sociocultural norms. Rachel explains how she would attempt to emulate an American accent to fit in with her
peers. She points out that people had preconceived notions about her when they would hear her Danish accent. Rachel states, “I have an accent when I speak English and it is kind of annoying me because if I meet someone new, after two minutes they will be like “Oh, so where are you from? “And I’ll know that they picked up on my accent and know that I am not from America. So I’ve been trying to adapt a more American way of speaking English.” Rachel describes how she tries to integrate into US society by speaking American English. She is also mindful of various types of cultures. As stated:

I’m not the only international person, there’s a lot of other cultures here. So it’s definitely been quite a challenge trying to learn what is acceptable to behave like with other people who are from New York, or from China, or from India and not offend anyone. That has been a very big concern for me, that I try to act neutral toward everyone and then get to know them and then start to interact how they would like me to interact towards them.

Although Rachel tries to integrate into US society by changing certain aspects of herself, she is also aware that there are different approaches to interacting with others. She notes that there are many international students in college, which makes it difficult to determine how she should act. Rachel tends to make adjustments in how she interacts with her peers depending on culture. She further adds:

I would say that I try to change my personality for the different people I am talking to, if they’re from Germany or if they’re American. I try to keep my way of speaking kind of the same, even though I might unconsciously change it a bit. So, for example, for Americans, I might become a little more outgoing, as I said, try to mirror their own way of acting. Whereas if I’m talking to my friend from France I might let me actions come out a little bit more because I am not as conscious about it and be a little more myself
because I know that is something she can struggle with too, so it’s more acceptable to just say the things you feel and talk about the stuff that is more important to you.

Similar to Rachel’s experience, Manuel also attempted to change aspects of how he presents himself to his American peers in order to better relate to them. As stated, “I feel like with the intercultural barrier, I have to change my personality.” When asked why Manuel felt this way he responds, “Not my personality, but just like the things I talk about, the humor I use, the way I express myself, because of the language.” He further states, “Yeah, I try to be American around them, so I can like adapt to them, because if I were to really translate how I am, how I speak, my sense of humor, the things I do, I feel like people will not want to talk to me.” Manual reveals that he adjusts different elements of his personality to assimilate to American culture. In a sense, he fears that his peers will not accept him if he does not accommodate to their social or cultural norms.

**Gaining Acceptance**

Gaining acceptance was a sub-theme that emerged from this study. Participants reported wanting to feel accepted by their peers. Additionally, they sought to be recognized for the unique experiences that they brought to college. According to Chimeg, a sense of understanding is important in cross-cultural interactions. She believes that it is difficult for people from different backgrounds to interact and states, “For me, a person is a person. I understand even though I have difficulties, maybe I would be having difficulties making that connection. Once I speak to you and I feel like you’re okay, you accept me as who I am or whatever. You’re just a person to me.” The notion of acceptance is brought to light by Chimeg. She notes that it is difficult for people to make initial connections. However, she acknowledges that she too has difficulty with
taking the initiative in interacting with other people. Chimeg states that once there is a sense of acceptance among individuals, it allows for greater understanding and interaction.

Alisa finds it difficult to find peers to identify with in college. When asked about how much Alisa thinks about being an international student she responds that it would be when she is alone. As stated, “That’s when I started thinking about being an international student because I’m like, “Oh, well, I don’t know who I identify with. Who is my group of people that I should hang out with? Because I’m very different.” Alisa’s comments indicate that she was looking for a group to identify with in college but found it difficult because she is different. Alisa has challenges finding a group of peers to socialize with because of her background. Sophia agrees with Alisa insofar as she does not feel that she does not fit into the culture in the US. Sophia notes, “Sometimes I feel like I don’t fit in and that’s bad in a way, but in Italy, I did feel like I fit in. So I feel like maybe, because, the thing is back in Brazil I don’t feel like I fit in either, but here, I don’t feel it. So it’s just very conflicting to feel like, “Why don’t I fit in anywhere?” During Sophia’s first year in college, she studied in Italy and felt more of a connection there. Interestingly, she does not feel like she fits in at home in Brazil or in the US.

The nature of the university makes it difficult for Manuel to find community. He believes that having a large, open campus prevents students from interacting with each other. After being asked about the main challenges that students face on campus, Manuel replies, “So many challenges, specifically in this university. It’s not like a campus. It’s a really open place. I feel like people are spread out. It’s difficult to find a sense of belonging or like a group of people, groups of friends, like really solid. That’s challenging.” Manuel indicates that he is experiencing various challenges in his new environment and wants to find a “solid” group of friends. He feels
that his campus is not conducive to meeting others. He also believes that the university should
design more programs and activities for international students to meet each other.

**Conclusion.** Attending college in the US was confusing for participants. For example,
participants had to adjust to a new society and learn new cultural norms. While making these
adjustments, participants attempted to maintain a sense of self in their new environment. In other
words, participants strove to keep various facets of their own cultural norms while living in the
US. However, participants reported trying to assimilate and integrate into mainstream
American society. For instance, participants adapted a more American way of speaking English
or presented themselves as being more outgoing in order to blend into their host society. Making
these changes to their persona when approaching their peers made it easier for their peers to
accept them. Participants had to accommodate to their host society in order to gain acceptance
because they understandably wanted to feel a sense of belonging in their new environment.

**Challenges in Interacting with American Students**

The third superordinate theme, *Challenges in Interacting with American Students*, reveals
some of the obstacles that participants reported in this research study. All of the participants
described challenges in interacting with American students. Yet, several of the participants also
reported having positive interactions with them. Although participants were motivated to study
in the US, they encountered social and cultural differences. It was revealed that some of their
American peers had preconceived notions of participants’ home countries. Furthermore,
language was a source of misunderstanding for participants in this research study. The first sub-
theme, *Cognizant of Stereotypes and Misconceptions*, illustrates the awareness of misconceptions
that others had of participants. The second sub-theme, *Adjusting to an American Social
Environment*, highlights the changes that participants made in their approach to socializing in
college. The third sub-theme, *Difficulty with Language*, describes some of the communication challenges that participants had with English.

**Cognizant of Stereotypes and Misconceptions**

The participants in this study reported being cognizant of stereotypes and misconceptions about elements revolving around nationality and culture. In some cases, participants learned that they were the first person who their peers had met from their home country. Participants were both surprised and hurt by some of the comments made by others. For instance, Sophia from Brazil faced obstacles with being stereotyped for being Brazilian. She states, “Everyone on campus knows that Brazilians are known for samba, soccer, and butts.” Sophia found that some of her peers described her by physical appearance and states, “Like butts and literally everyone was like “Oh, yeah, The Brazilian. Oh yeah. The one with the big butt.” It’s just so ingrained. Like I was probably the first Brazilian that many of them knew and yet, they all said that I have this aura that exhales sexuality and I’m like, “You don’t even know me.” During a community service trip to Puerto Rico with a group from the US, Sophia further recalls conversations with others who held misconceptions about her lifestyle and notes, “I knew some of them would be stereotyping me. Like I’ve had people asking me how do you go to school? Do you have cars? I’m like, “No, I go with my pet monkey. He helps me.” Or, “Oh do you have internet? Do you have Facebook?” I’m like, “No, we only use pigeon carriers.” The type of questions that you’re asking me is so uncultured.” Sophia was shocked to hear the perceptions that some of her American peers had about Brazilians. Although she approached these situations with humor, she felt a deep sense of disappointment. Alisa also experienced being stereotyped in college.

Alisa describes feeling a sense of xenophobia when others learn that she is Russian. Some people who she has encountered in the US held negative views of Russia. As stated by
Alisa, “Sometimes people don’t trust me because I mentioned once that I’m Russian to somebody. Then I made a joke about mafia, me being in a mafia and the person actually got scared. I was like, “I’m joking. Like I might be related to them, but I might not be,,” and the person actually believed me, and they were very scared.” Alisa reflects how she felt when others learned that she was from Russia. She sensed negative sentiment towards Russians. In another instance, Alisa recalls a professor who misinterpreted a YouTube video that she showed of Russian pop artists performing a routine while holding a picture of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin. She tried to explain to the class that the performance was a parody to show that Putin was into pop culture. However, Alisa states that the professor “Got really worried and scared because he started asking me questions about whether the Russian government might be using pop culture to promote anti-American sentiment.” She then states, “Because we all think, there’s general fear of Russians I feel like. Yeah, I felt like there’s a very big distrust towards us.” Similar to Alisa’s experience, Rachel felt that her peers held preconceived notions about her, which lessened over time.

According to Rachel, she was known as the “Danish girl” among her peers. For example, students held stereotypes about people from Denmark. Rachel did not know where these ideas came from as she has not met another Danish student on campus. However, Rachel expressed how the misconceptions of her culture subsided once her peers got to know her. Rachel states:

Yeah, I feel like as I get to know someone, for instance the girls in my dorm, while they might have seen me as being foreign and kind of putting the views they had on Denmark upon me to make an impression of me, it started to fade as the school year went on and they actually started to get to know me. So just time and having conversations with each other, that definitely broke some of the stereotypes they had about me from the
beginning. So they will be “Oh Sarah, she doesn’t only eat rye bread, even though she is from Denmark. She likes other foods too.”

Rachel expressed feeling like a foreigner in the US. When people found out that she was from Denmark, they automatically generalized about how Danish people should behave. Albeit, Rachel notes that as the school year progressed, so did the perceptions of her friends. There was a direct correlation between time and perception. The longer that her friends got to know her, the better that they understood her.

Chimeg remembers being seen differently from her American peers during an orientation activity that she facilitated as a transfer student ambassador. She recalls an activity with 15 students who were asked various questions. One of the questions was whether students felt comfortable in speaking with international students. If they did, they would move to the right side of the room and if they did not, students would move to the left side of the room. Chimeg noticed that there were many Americans on the side that did not feel comfortable with speaking with international students. She states, “They feel that we are different people. They also don’t want to take the effort. They’re almost like afraid or do not want to take the initiative to speak with us. That was very different. I never thought American students would feel like we’re different people for some reason.” Chimeg does not understand why the American students were not inclined to speak with international students. She seemed a bit surprised by the reaction of her American peers.

Adjusting to an American Social Environment

In this research study, participants reported having to adjust to an American social framework. For instance, participants had to understand as well as adjust to society in the US. Participants reported having difficulty with learning the social norms of a new country. The data
showed that participants felt a sense of confusion when initially encountering their new environment. Interacting with Americans proved to be a challenge. Participants learned how to make adjustments in their speech and routine. Furthermore, they learned new social norms in order to accommodate their American counterparts.

Hua notes that the concept of socializing in the US is different from in China. For example, the idea of a party in the US is not the same as in China. As stated:

We don’t really have this party idea back in China. Say if it’s my birthday, we would do a celebration but what we do is we all go out to dinner and then like probably karaoke afterwards or a movie but no like, Come to my house. I’m gonna throw a party. No. If we say to friends “Come to my house” it’s like I’m gonna make dinner. We all have dinner and talk. It’s like a very different kind of concept. I don’t know. I’m too lazy to dress up and go to a party. What’s the fun? It’s so noisy and there are so many people and I don’t understand the attraction.

Hua describes the social environment in college. She does not enjoy loud parties, but states that she has been to a few “not that crazy” parties for friends’ birthdays as well as the Super Bowl. She does not find large get-togethers appealing. Hua finds socializing back home more casual and intimate.

Manuel reported a similar experience as Hua. He describes how the social scene in college is different from back home and states:

Yeah for example, in terms of social gatherings here, like I have been to a couple and people just go and cramp themselves into a dorm, just drink alcohol and talk to each other and there is real live music. I feel like nobody would do that back home like we would
get an open space, different kind of music, yeah that’s like one of the cultural clashes, social gatherings.

Manuel describes an example of the social gatherings he has experienced in college. He further shares that socializing with friends back home is more relaxed. As stated, “For example back home, like one thing I used to do a lot just hang out with them, just drink beer and chill. That’s not something you do here, partly because its illegal here, but when they do drink it’s like they’re trying to win a race of something and I don’t like that.” Manuel finds social gatherings in the US different from Peru, specifically around drinking. This was a significant adjustment for him. The social environment in college prevents him from meeting other students. Developing peer relationships in casual spaces is Manuel’s preference.

The issue of drinking in college was also reported in Alisa’s interview. She states, “Well, in terms of drinking, it’s very different because the American students have just come out of home, away from their parents. They go all out.” According to Alisa, in Russia, the social scene around alcohol is different. Alisa further states, “Because our drinking age is lower, I feel like, and because drinking is more socially acceptable in Russia and because the alcohol is cheaper, I think the main thing is alcohol is cheaper. So it’s not such a big thing for us.” Alisa agrees with Manuel in the sense that drinking alcohol is not such a big deal in their home countries. They attribute this to a lower drinking age in Peru and Russia. Both Alisa and Manuel felt that their peers in college would drink excessively.

In addition to discovering how many American students socialize in college, Hua also revealed that college in the US raised her awareness on societal issues. For instance, she learned about sociocultural constructs that were not deeply discussed in China. In the US, Hua states:
We have to talk about topics like gender politics, races, things like that. It’s not like we don’t talk about it back in China but not as heavily and this is such a liberal school. I learned a lot about it and then problems that I probably didn’t even realize because back in China we have this one race and that’s it. We don’t have a lot of diversity, so we don’t experience problems like racism. When I first came here I didn’t understand the problem or the importance of it but then through reading, you know, and movies, cause I’m also studying cinema students, and even conversation with my roommate. I think of it on another level, from a very different perspective. When I go back and see problems within my family or problems within my own city, I can see it from a different level.

Hua explains how she learned about topics such as race and gender in college. She notes that these subjects are not discussed extensively in China. Interestingly, Hua states that she looks at things much differently when she travels back home. Hua’s college experience has raised her awareness on particular topics. It is evident that her college experience in the US has influenced how she sees the world.

**Difficulty with Language**

Difficulty with language was a sub-theme in this research study. Participants reported that difficulty with language was a challenge in college. Many of the students had a proficient command of English; however, participants found that speaking and writing in an academic setting was challenging. Additionally, participants being able to express themselves when communicating with their peers was frustrating. Much time and effort was put forth for participants to feel comfortable with communicating in English.

Sarah recollects having difficulty with English in one of her political science classes. It was quite difficult for her to understand what her professor was teaching. As stated:
“Of course the language, from the beginning, was kind of a challenge. I remember going to my first lecture and the teacher was talking about. It was a political science class, and she was talking about democracy, and she was talking so fast and I just could not comprehend what she was saying.” Sarah further states, “I learned to understand what my professors were talking about, but it is definitely something that I wish I had been a bit more prepared to do.” Sarah’s comments demonstrate her desire to learn on her own. Even though Sara initially had difficulty with English, she did not ask the professor for help. Sarah’s first language is Danish; therefore, it took her some time to acclimate to the fast pace of lecture. Thinking back, Sarah feels that she would have benefited from more preparation.

Sophia notes that attending an English-speaking university was especially difficult because she attended secondary school where Portuguese was the language of instruction. As stated, “So I feel like with writing class, it was quite a challenge in the beginning and also some classes like astronomy class, which I was required to take. I’ve learned all of that in Portuguese. So just translating it in my brain, it just makes it an extra step and it adds to the difficulty, but on the other hand, I’ve been really comfortable in the classes.” Sophia had to translate English into Portuguese to understand her work, albeit she earned a 3.8 grade-point-average after her first semester in college. Sophia states that overall, she felt comfortable in her classes. Hua also had difficulty with language.

Language was a challenge that Hua faced as an international student. As a first year student, Hua took a literature course that was tough for her to get through. According to Hua:

I enrolled in an American literature class so when I was doing the reading I was like “What?” It’s real hard for me to read right now, to stay 100% focused when I read really complex work in English, so I was like “What?” There was a lot of them and then when I
have to write a paper it was really hard. How I coped was I would go to my professor when he had office hours a lot and then tell him that I obviously have no idea. So, they would be pretty generous with me cause they were like, “Okay.” Freshman year and international.

This scenario reveals the difficulty that Hua was experiencing in her literature course.

Fortunately, she approached the professor who normalized her experience by indicating that other students were also having trouble. The professor was sympathetic because Hua was a first year international student. The reassurance given by her professor made Hua feel better.

Language was initially a significant obstacle for her.

The way in which some of Hua’s peers used language took some time to understand. She states that watching American television shows helped her to a certain extent. As stated by Hua:

What I really had trouble with was a lot details like, let’s just say, instead of saying talk to you later someone would say TTYL and then I was like “What?” When I first came here people were like “Oh, Hi. How are you?” And in China we just go “Hi”, like nobody asks how are you and here I was like “Huh, should I actually tell you my problems?”. So, usually I was just like “Hi.” They would be like “Huh” because they usually say how are you too back but to necessarily for you to think and add something, so yeah, I was really confused about that. I was like “What should I do?

Some of the nuances of American spoken English is revealed by Hua. The use of acronyms such as TTYL was unfamiliar to Hua. Additionally, she was confused by some of the greetings that Americans used. Eventually, Hua became more aware of the language norms surrounding American English.
Manuel enjoys attending college in the US, but feels a lack of connection with his environment, which he attributes to language. For instance, Manuel feels that he is unable to express himself because of a language discrepancy. When asked to elaborate upon his experience with communicating in English, Manuel states, “I don’t know it’s different. I feel like, maybe it’s because of the language, like I can’t really express myself in the same way I do in Spanish back home. I think it’s that, because my English is good when I write it, but when I try to speak it, it’s not that good, so I don’t feel like a connection with the people like I do back home in my language.” Manuel expresses how he is more confident with writing than speaking in English. His command of language is preventing him from feeling a sense of connection with his new environment. Furthermore, Manuel is cognizant of how people know that he is not from the US when they hear his accent. When asked whether he tried to hide his accent, Manuel responds:

No, I don’t try to hide it that much. I just feel like, because I have to think what I’m going to say much more because I don’t want to sound silly when I say it. Sometimes I know it sounds bad when I say things, so yeah, I think my words more like just to knock down, in a sense it is like a bit like trying to hide it because I try not to sound badly amongst my peers, I have to think a lot about what I’m going to say.

Manuel tends to spend too much time thinking about what he is going to say when communicating in English. He explains that he does not want to sound bad in front of his peers. This may make Manuel reluctant to communicate with Anglophone speakers. When he speaks with friends from other Latin American countries he states, “I get to talk in Spanish and it’s so different because I don’t have to think about what I’m going to say. It’s just natural.”

**Conclusion.** Participants reported a number of challenges when interacting with students and faculty in the US. Stereotypes and misconceptions about their home countries was a cause
for concern. Participants did not expect the stereotypes and misconceptions that they encountered and wanted others to have a greater understanding of their cultures. In the classroom, participants reported having difficulty with how lectures were delivered. According to participants, their professors assumed that English was the first language of all of the students in their courses. It could be argued that participants wanted their professors to be aware of the needs of international students. Other issues with language such as the use of acronyms when speaking was brought to light. In addition, the notion of social gatherings was different for participants and tended to revolve around alcohol. They wanted a more casual and intimate setting to socialize with their peers. Lastly, participants felt that American students made assumptions about them and wanted to be understood as individuals.

**Other Findings**

All of the non-first year participants reported a focus on career opportunities after graduation. For instance, participants were interested in finding jobs and internships. The non-first year participants expressed interest in finding employment in the US. However, they mentioned being open to career opportunities outside of the US, especially because of the obstacles presented to them as international students. Two of the participants stated that it was challenging finding jobs and internships in the US because many career opportunities were not open to international students.

Sophie feels that she is in a different mindset than her peers because many of them are interested in socializing. She mentions how she already went through that phase. As stated, “They’re just like, “Let’s go clubbing every day,” and I’m just like, “I took a gap semester and I used to club five times a week. I did that for a solid eight months. I do not want to do that again.” Sophie is in a different phase of her life and is more interested in planning for her future career.
She further states, “Like I’m more focused on my job. I’m more focused on my career, whereas most of my friends, they’re like “Oh, my God. We’re in college. We need to live life to the fullest right now.” The maturity level between Sophie and her peers is brought to light in this quote. Her peers are going through a stage that she has already experienced. Instead of going out to parties, she is focused on what she will pursue after college.

The ability to secure a job after graduation is brought to light by Chimeg. She hopes to work in the US after graduating from college. Thus far, it has been challenging to find employers who hire international students. Chimeg states:

Because a lot of the companies are saying they don’t want international students, it’s challenging for me to find an internship or a place to work full-time. If you tell them you’re an international student, their website they say if you’re an international student, do not apply for this job. We do not accept it or something like that. Are you authorized to work in the United States? Will you be needing sponsorship in the future?

Chimeg reveals that finding a job is her biggest challenge as an international student. She also explains how both her father and mother have green cards and live in the US. Chimeg is fine with living in Mongolia or anywhere else, but she is afraid that if she goes back home, she will not be able to live with her mother again. Throughout the interview with Chimeg, finding a job in the US was a recurring concern. She is in her fourth year of college and will be graduating soon. Finding a job is a significant issue. According to Chimeg:

Having the challenge of getting a job, that could affect me as a person I think. I’m always thinking about it. You know what I mean? That definitely affects maybe the conversation that I would be having with others. They would be more towards oh, do you know places where they hire internationals? My conversations are more career-based, finding a job
because I’m an international student, because of those challenges. Yeah. Yeah, I’m always thinking about it. I think that affects me a lot every day.

Finding a job in the US is on the forefront of Chimeg’s mind. It may be preventing her from forming relationships with other students as her conversations are centered on finding a job. She seems to be aware of how her worries with finding a job affects her everyday interactions.

Hua has similar frustrations as Chimeg but does not necessarily feel pressured to find a job in the US. Her immediate concern is finding summer internships in the US. The requirements around obtaining a position is cumbersome. As stated by Hua:

When I go to my internship, I constantly have this fear that will they say something I don’t understand, and then will I read a script and know what it means or like when I try to find an internship. Am I going to get paid? Is it purely for credit? My original idea was to stay here for the summer because this was my last summer in college, probably. I can stay in New York for once I can find an internship and stay here but then I realized in order to do that I have to be enrolled in a class, so the internship will give me credit. That means I have to pay to work for someone for free. That doesn’t make sense. A campus job, I can do it but they are mostly reserved for the students who got internships, but they have to do work study or federal work-study. So I have no choice, what am I going to do here? So have to go back home.

Hua feels frustrated with finding summer internships. There is a sense of hopelessness in her comments. She feels that it is unfair for employers to not pay interns. They require her to register for internship credit through her university. This means that Hua must pay in order to pursue an internship. Additionally, Hua was interested in working on campus during the summer; however, the jobs were mainly for federal work-study students, which she does not qualify for as an
international student. The differences in opportunities among American students and international students is exemplified by Hua’s statements.

**Conclusions.** Working in the US after graduation is an option for many of the participants in this study. Although they experience some challenges living in the US, they acknowledge that there are many career opportunities here. The participants sacrifice much time, energy, and resources in studying away from their home countries. It is frustrating for them because many companies will not hire international students. One of the participants expressed how both of her parents have green cards and how she will have to move back home if she does not find a job. The concept of an internship was new to another participant who could not understand why she had to pay tuition at her university to work for a company. The participants have a difficult time navigating their post-graduation plans given their visa status.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this IPA study was to understand the intercultural experiences of international students at an urban, private university in the Northeast. This study explored how international students perceived and made sense of their intercultural experiences. The interview data was closely examined in this research study. The findings generated three superordinate themes—*Importance of Strong Relationships, Internal Conflicts, and Challenges in Interacting with Americans*. There were eight sub-themes, which included *Establishing Community, Finding Common Ground, Maintaining a Sense of Self, Assimilation and Integration, Gaining Acceptance, Cognizant of Stereotypes and Misconceptions, Adjusting to an American Social Environment, and Difficulty with Language* with one other finding, *Navigating Career Opportunities in the US*. 
The data revealed that participants experienced particular challenges upon arriving to college in the US. First, participants yearned for friendships as well as a sense of belonging in their new environment. Many of them reported having solid relationships with their peers and family members at home. Additionally, participants had long lasting relationships with their friends in their home countries making it difficult for them to find new ones. For instance, participants noted how they nurtured friendships from as early as primary school. Second, participants were disappointed when they were not able to establish meaningful relationships. They tried to adapt to a more American way of presenting themselves—assimilating to American cultural norms and making adjustments to their speech—in order to make others feel comfortable with them. Albeit, at the cost of hiding elements of their own identity. Some participants tried to hide their accents as well as understand American mainstream culture by asking questions, watching popular American television shows, and attending social gathering among other things.

Participants were disappointed with the lack of understanding from peers, faculty, and administrators. For instance, participants were approached with misconceptions or stereotypes about their home countries. They found that many people were not knowledgeable about their culture. Furthermore, it seemed like their relationships were one-sided, meaning that participants tried their best to understand their host culture without reciprocation. For example, they discovered that their American counterparts did not try to understand their culture. But overall, participants were grateful in having the opportunity to study in the US. They reported having opportunities that they would not necessarily have in their home countries. They also admired the American higher education system insofar as they now have the ability to study a breadth of academic subjects. Nearly all of the participants wanted to stay in the US to pursue careers or graduate school opportunities after college.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this research study was to understand the intercultural experiences of international students at an urban, private university in the Northeast. This study explored how international students perceived and made sense of their intercultural experiences. Intergroup contact theory was the theoretical framework applied in this study. The framework determined the optimal conditions for intergroup contact (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). Contact theory was used to learn how to combat negative sentiment among different racial groups during the 1930’s and 1940’s (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). Furthermore, qualitative research methods were employed in this study using general inductive analysis. Qualitative methods are conducive to understanding the experiences of a participant in everyday language and in their own words to understand a particular phenomenon (Ponterotto, 2005). The methodology utilized in this study was IPA as it explores an individual’s lived, in-depth experiences. IPA was an effective approach to understanding the experiences of participants as it gave clear guidelines and was “highly accessible” (Brocki and Wearden, 2014).

The findings of this study generated three superordinate themes—Importance of Strong Relationships, Internal Conflicts, and Challenges in Interacting with Americans. There were eight sub-themes, which included Establishing Community, Finding Common Ground, Maintaining a Sense of Self, Assimilation and Integration, Gaining Acceptance, Cognizant of Stereotypes and Misconceptions, Adjusting to an American Social Environment, and Difficulty with Language with one other finding, Navigating Career Opportunities in the US. Superordinate themes and sub-themes were identified by three or more participants (see Appendix F). The following chapter is organized based on the findings in this study with reference to the theoretical framework. First, how the findings are situated within the current
literature will be examined. Second, the implications of the findings and how they could be used in practice will be explored. Lastly, recommendations for future research will be discussed.

**First Finding**

**Importance of Strong Relationships.** The first finding of this study highlights the importance of strong relationships. The existing literature supports this finding. Participants sought deep and meaningful relationships with their peers. The literature reinforced the need for international students to form bonds with others in order to establish a sense of community. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of finding common ground as a way to develop friendships. Participants discussed *Establishing Community* and *Finding Common Ground*.

**Establishing Community.** Participants described how they wanted meaningful relationships with their peers in college. According to the participants, establishing community was an area that proved to be difficult. Many of them cultivated friendships during their formative years and wanted to find similar relationships in their new environment. Pettigrew’s (1998) reformulated contact theory states that friendship potential is imperative to optimal contact. Participants discussed how residence halls in their university served as a space to establish community. Through their residence halls, participants engaged in floor meetings and other opportunities to meet students. However, participants felt that they were not able to have meaningful interactions with their peers. The existing literature illustrates the need for international students to engage with their host culture on a multitude of levels (Graham, 2013; Fleischman et al., 2014; Kwadzo, 2014). For instance, students should engage in various types of activities in different settings to increase the likelihood of interactions.
Despite experiencing challenges with establishing community, some of the participants noted that they developed friendships with other American students. Though, one of the participants reported not having any American friends, while another participant preferred to socialize with peers from his home country. Existing literature describes how some international students naturally prefer to interact with students from their home country. According to Urban, Orbe, Tavarez, and Alvarez (2010), the ability to communicate with someone who is facing similar challenges is helpful in transition and adjustment. Mamishishvili (2011) agrees with Urban et al. (2010) insofar as strong peer support is critical for international students to establish community. Urban et al. (2010) explains the importance of faculty and administrators in providing a welcoming environment for international students. These elements assist students in establishing community.

**Finding Common Ground.** The data collected in this study indicated that finding common ground was essential in developing relationships. Because participants did not have prior contact with anyone in college, finding commonality allowed them to develop shared experiences. The literature supports this finding by stating that shared experiences would assist international students with making connections with others (Graham 2013; Fleischman et al., 2014; Kwadzo 2014; Shalabi 2014). Additionally, Pettigrew’s (1998) theoretical framework reinforces how finding common ground is necessary for positive intergroup contact. Shalabi (2014) maintains that service-learning opportunities would allow students to learn about life in the US. For instance, volunteering in the local community with other students would provide international students with more insight into the daily happenings of their immediate surroundings. Shalabi (2014) argues that some international students have misconceptions about their host environment and service-learning could aid in dispelling them.
Participants reported getting involved with extracurricular activities as well as jobs and internships. This was a way for them to meet other students. In addition, participants were able to establish relationships with others who had similar interests. Graham (2013) agrees with this finding and suggests that sports allow international students to learn about their host country’s culture. Moreover, participating in sports engages students outside of the classroom leading to conversations revolving around personal life. Kwadzo (2014) further reveals how jobs and internships provide international students with another perspective on their host country. For example, students are able to interact with Americans through working with them. In many cases, international students work collaboratively to solve problems, which provides another opportunity for them to connect with local students. Involvement in campus organizations, jobs, and other activities are productive methods for international students to find common ground with their peers. The importance of strong relationships was the first finding of this study, while internal conflicts is the second finding.

**Second Finding**

*Internal Conflicts.* The second finding of this study is that international students experience internal conflicts when introduced to their host culture. The existing literature supports some aspects of the second finding as discussed in the following sections. Participants expressed feeling a sense of confusion as they adapted into a new culture and society. For instance, participants reported wanting to integrate into American culture, but at the same time attempted to maintain the culture and traditions of their home country. This proved to be challenging. Participants discussed *Maintaining a Sense of Self, Assimilation and Integration,* and *Gaining Acceptance.*
Maintaining a Sense of Self. The data gathered described how participants grappled with their identity on various levels. Living in a new society exposed participants to social, cultural, and political perspectives that they did not encounter previously. These elements made it difficult to determine how to approach and interact with their peers. Kim’s (2016) study discusses how learning in a new context affects students academically. Specially, Kim (2016) describes the learning style of Korean international students at a university in the US and the relationship between communication and culture. According to Kim (2016), it is not the norm to challenge teachers or peers in the classroom because it could be interpreted as a form of impoliteness and disrespect. However, the data in this study did not make a direct correlation between identity and academics. Participants were primarily concerned with identity as it pertained to sociocultural matters.

Furthermore, participants maintaining a sense of self was of importance in this study as their attitudes, beliefs, and traditions were internally being questioned. Participants noted that they did not spend a significant amount of time in the US before attending college. It was imperative for participants to maintain a sense of themselves through music, language, and food among other things. In the case of Saudi students, Alhazmi and Nyland (2013) suggest that exposure to western society may have a negative effect on cultural identity. Yet, participants did not report that their experience in the US negatively impacted them. Although participants reported confusion with adjusting to their new environment, they did not feel that they were negatively affected. Interestingly, it was the opposite as participants were able to interact with different types of people given their background and experience in their home country and in the US. Two of the participants spent significant time outside of their home countries and note its positive impact on their personal development. Alhazmi and Nyland (2013) assert that the
identity change and impact of students studying in the US would be determined once international students returned to their home country. The participants felt that their experience studying in the US was enlightening. When they visited their home countries during academic breaks, they highlighted how their relationships with their friends and family did not necessarily change, but they viewed their society in a different light.

**Assimilation and Integration.** The participants’ responses suggested that they acclimated to college by attempting to assimilate and integrate into their new environment. It was difficult for participants to integrate socially as many of their close relationships were in their home countries. In addition to trying to integrate, some of the participants reported making adjustments to their speech and how they presented themselves to their host culture. For instance, participants changed particular aspects of themselves to appear more American. Andrade (2006) mentions how it is easier for local students to integrate into college as they have more social networks than international students. Furthermore, the participants who reported making changes to their persona were aware of assimilating and integrating into their new environment. One of the participants noted that she would change her approach with her peers depending on who she interacted with in college. For example, the participant tried to emulate the social norms of her peers to make them feel comfortable. Tinto (1982) argues that social skills are important in assimilating to a college setting. In contrast, Triana (2015) argues that it is the university’s responsibility to create an environment for international students to thrive.

The data revealed that participants wanted to make connections with their American peers. Participants thought it was necessary to establish relationships with local students. However, many participants in this study stated that assisting in the assimilation and integration of their new environment was not a responsibility of the university. As young adults, they felt
that they should be able to meet other people on their own accord. In juxtaposition, Mamiseishvili (2011) argues that universities must take part in successfully acclimating international students into college. Additionally, Mamiseishvili (2011) suggests that faculty play a critical role in developing learning environments that are beneficial for international students, specifically with encouraging cooperation among both local and international students. In turn, this would assist students in developing friendships with one another.

In the data collected, participants suggested that their overall society—political, cultural, economic, and social dimensions—at home correlated with the degree of difficulty in assimilating into the US. In other words, it was easier for participants to interact with those who came from societies that were similar to theirs. For example, one participant from Russia noted how the difference in political systems attributed to the difficulty in adjusting to American society. The participant stated that it was easier to interact with students who were from other communist countries because they had a similar mindset. Additionally, four of the participants revealed that the way in which their American peers socialized with one another was quite different from theirs, making it difficult to integrate into their new environment. Tidwell and Hanassab (2007) reinforce the participants experience in this study. In Tidwell and Hanassab’s (2007) study, students reported “philosophies, cultures, and way of life” as elements of adjustment while studying in the US. Being introduced to a new way of life was a challenge for the participants in this study.

**Gaining Acceptance.** The data indicated that participants sought to gain acceptance in college. As international students, they wanted to be feel accepted into their new community. The literature describes how international students who have a difficult time acclimating to life in college experience a sense of social isolation (Carr et al., 2003; Leong, 2005; Tidwell &
Hanassab, 2007; Valdez, 2015). Furthermore, social isolation could lead to mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Carr et al., 2003; Zhao et al., 2005). In addition to participants experiencing social isolation, they also reported challenges with how they were perceived. For instance, participants were concerned with how their peers and professors thought of them. Valdez (2015) described this phenomenon as “double consciousness,” a concept coined by sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois in the early 1900’s. Du Bois explored how mainstream society viewed African Americans and how African Americans would view themselves through the eyes of mainstream society. Essentially, double consciousness is a psychological concept on how one looks at themselves through the eyes of others. In this case, international students reported an awareness of how they were perceived by their American peers. The data revealed that participants were constantly grappling with concerns about how they fit into college in the US. Moreover, participants found it difficult to find a sense of belonging in such a large campus. In addition to internal conflicts, participants reported challenges in interacting with American students.

**Third Finding**

**Challenges in Interacting with American Students.** The third finding of this study highlights significant challenges reported by international students. The existing literature supports the notion that international students were aware of stereotypes and misconceptions. Yet, this study contradicts some of the existing literature’s perspectives on adjustment and language difficulty. Sociocultural challenges were prevalent in each of the interviews that were conducted. Lack of understanding the culture and society of participants were brought to light. Moreover, three sub-themes were collected. Participants discussed *Cognizant of Stereotypes and Misconceptions, Adjusting to an American Social Environment, and Difficulty with Language.*
**Cognizant of Stereotypes and Misconceptions.** The data collected revealed that international students were cognizant of existing stereotypes and misconceptions about their home countries. Upon interacting with some of their peers, participants noticed an apprehension about particular topics being discussed with others. At times, participants were directly confronted with general stereotypes and misconceptions about their home countries that were prevalent in US media and popular culture. The literature supports the notion that American students initially thought of international students negatively because of their “dress, language, or customs” (Sherry et al. 2009; Rose-Redwood, C. 2013; Rose-Redwood, R., 2013). Being cognizant of stereotypes and misconceptions that were primarily made by American students discouraged international students from establishing relationships with them. Sherry et al. (2009) argued that international students tended to form relationships with other international students.

Stereotypes and misconceptions about foreign countries lead to prejudice and discrimination against international students (Domínguez, et al., 2015). Pettigrew (1998) argues that established contact alleviates prejudice. Domínguez et al. (2015) suggests that international students of color were more likely to experience discriminatory issues. Moreover, these problems were found in academic spaces. For instance, Domínguez et al. (2015) reported that international students experienced prejudicial sentiment and lack of empathy from their professors. In this study, one student reported experiencing prejudicial sentiment from a professor. However, all of the participants shared stories about stereotypes and misconceptions that others had about their home countries.

**Adjusting to an American Social Environment.** Participants reported having to adjust to the social environment in the US. For instance, participants had to learn the social norms of their host country, which was difficult for many of them. Learning a new way of life was an
adjustment to participants. Being introduced to different norms, philosophies, and cultures helped students reflect on their own way of doing things. In addition, participants were introduced to socializing in a different context. Existing literature sheds light on how new concepts of socializing, as it pertains to developing friendships with others, is perceived differently among international students (Bulthuis, 1986; Tidwell and Hanassab, 2007). For instance, five of the participants in this study came from societies that valued collectivism over individualism. Bulthus (1986) argues that these students would find it particularly difficult to adjust to American society as friendships are generally “viewed as less permanent than other cultures” (p. 22).

C Rose-Redwood (2013) and R. Rose-Redwood (2013) and Kim (2016) note that international students are often times misunderstood in their new social environment. Kim’s (2016) study on a group of seven Korean students studying in the US reveals how they were seen in a negative light because they would not always participate verbally in discussions. In Rose-Redwood’s study (2013), it was found that American students felt that international students would “self-segregate” because they would primarily interact with those from their home countries. This study suggests that international students attempted to integrate into their new social environment by making adjustments to various elements of themselves. Participants attempted to be more outgoing by attending parties or other social gatherings as well as finding commonality with their American peers and making themselves appear more approachable.

**Difficulty with Language.** Participants reported experiencing difficulty with language. Participants in this study described challenges with communicating in English as it was not their first language growing up. Academically, participants experienced frustration when attempting to understand professors during lecture because they covered material too quickly. One participant
described how she would understand material in her native language and then translate her native language into English. Difficulty with language was supported by the literature. One of the most challenging obstacles for international students when they arrive to the US was language barriers (Lacina 2002; Palmer, 2016).

Lacina (2002) argues that international students encounter “language discrimination” in the US. For instance, Americans inadvertently chose not to socialize with people who do not speak American English. Lacina (2002) further states that international students are ignored if they do not speak English fluently or with a foreign accent. Although the literature reveals that international students experience a sense of language discrimination in the US, the data in this study did not support these findings. Participants did not report any form of language discrimination, but instead highlight elements such as the difficulty in understanding others, expressing their thoughts articulately, and effectively following lectures. Over time, participants noted that these issues subsided. Pettigrew’s (1998) intergroup contact framework suggest that international students become more comfortable in their new environment over time. Moreover, participants initially encountered difficultly with English, but adjusted as they learned language expectations from their peers and faculty. Another challenge that participants encountered was navigating career opportunities.

**Fourth Finding**

**Navigating Career Opportunities in the US.** The fourth finding of this study is navigating career opportunities in the US. Although this finding was not a theme in this study, it was noteworthy. The existing literature on international students searching for job opportunities in the US was sparse. However, this finding was highlighted by participants in this study. Two participants spoke in-depth about navigating career opportunities in the US. As international
students, they expressed frustration with the lack of employment opportunities for international students. Many companies did not consider international students for jobs because they could not sponsor students to work in the US. Additionally, these participants reported not having enough support in searching for jobs. Existing literature lacked the importance of international students searching for employment in the US. Instead, Kwadzo (2014) writes about how working in the US would enhance the international student experience. Kwadzo (2014) argues that international students working in the US could increase the understanding of the host country and provide opportunities for international students to meet local students.

**Conclusion**

The research question for this study was the following: How do international students make sense of their intercultural experience at an urban, private university in the Northeast of the US? This question sought to explore the intercultural experiences of international students. IPA analysis was the qualitative approach deployed in this study. The theoretical framework chosen for this study was Pettigrew’s (1998) reformulated contact theory, which highlighted important factors necessary for intercultural contact. The findings produced informative information that could be used for solutions to improve the experiences of international students in the US.

Many of the findings in this study corroborated the existing literature. Issues of stereotypes, community, language, and adjustment among other findings were discussed in the literature (Lacina, 2002; Zhao et al., 2005; Rentions et al., 2011; Fleischman et al., 2014; Leong, 2015; Kim, 2016; Palmer, 2016). The findings also illustrated the internal conflicts that international students encounter. The in-depth experiences of participants added an element that was not present in some of the literature. Both findings and existing literature suggest that there is a lack of understanding about the intercultural experiences of international students.
Ultimately, international students need a great deal of support in higher education institutions in the US.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The findings in this study could be useful to various stakeholders at higher education institutions in the US as well as abroad. The scope of the research findings is applicable to different areas of higher education and would assist in ameliorating the intercultural experiences of international students. Practitioners such as faculty, academic advisors, student affairs administrators, and multicultural offices among other stakeholders would benefit significantly from these recommendations. Below are recommendations for practice.

The first recommendation for practice is implementing a peer mentorship program for newly matriculating international students. The peer mentorship program would partner incoming students with existing international students who have demonstrated successful transition into college. Before being paired with a student, peer mentors would undergo extensive training by administrators specializing in cross-cultural transition. The training should cover topics such as language, academics, and forming friendships. Students could be paired by academic and personal interests. Findings in this study revealed that international students experienced difficulty with establishing relationships. A peer mentorship program could quickly introduce incoming international students to the existing friendship circles of their mentors.

The second recommendation of this study is to intentionally partner international students with American students in various capacities. One approach is to assign international students with American roommates. According to the findings in this study, some of the participants did not have opportunities to engage with American students. Importantly, participants desired meaningful relationships with their peers. Living with someone is an effective way to learn about
their culture and background. Furthermore, close interaction provides an opportunity for people to dispel misconceptions that they may have about a particular group of people. Administrators working in residential life would play an integral role in inculcating a sense of openness about different cultures. Moreover, residence hall programs that promote intercultural exchange would be beneficial. Instilling a sense of togetherness for both international students and local US students is imperative.

The third implication for practice is to train faculty in intercultural communication in order to improve instruction. Making sure that faculty possess the pedagogical tools to effectively teach international students is necessary in improving the academic experiences of international students. As part of their training, faculty could learn some of the cultural differences in learning. Findings demonstrate a lack of understanding of the academic experiences of international students among faculty. Participants reported confusion as well as frustration in the classroom as English was not the first language for participants. They reported not being able to understand fundamental concepts in class because of language barriers as well as cultural references that they were not familiar with using. In addition to training faculty in improving instruction, facilitating a classroom space that is conducive to intercultural interaction is imperative.

The literature revealed that many international students did not have the opportunity to interact with those from outside of their culture. Instructors should find more ways for students to work in groups. This may be difficult in large, lecture style courses. Smaller classes would be more conducive to learning in groups. Having students engage in group work with a diverse range of students would be advantageous. Furthermore, students learn how to communicate better in smaller group settings. Pettigrew’s (1998) intergroup contact theory framework suggests
that such interactions be implemented in a controlled environment with established rules and procedures for optimal contact.

The fourth recommendation for practice is to provide faculty mentorship for international students. Findings show that participants in this study had close relationships with their teachers from their home country. This was partly due to participants attending the same schools for both primary and secondary school. Therefore, they were familiar with the teachers who taught them. A faculty mentorship program where international students are paired with faculty members who are from outside of the US is recommended. If the faculty members were also educated outside of their home country, they could provide a sense of consolation for international students by sharing similar experiences. Moreover, faculty could address the academic adjustments that international students should make at a higher education institution in the US.

The fifth recommendation for practice is providing international students with the opportunity to further understand American English. A course that teaches international students about communicating in American English would be beneficial. For instance, universities could design a class for new students, which covers the nuances of American English—regional accents, slang, and American cultural references. Additionally, students could learn strategies in reading, writing, and speaking in English. Some colleges and universities assume that students are proficient in English because of a high score achieved on a standardized English examination such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TESOL), but this may not be the case. Participants in this study reported some degree of difficulty with communicating in English.

The sixth implication of this study is implementing a first year seminar with a focus on intercultural communication for both international students and local students. The seminar would be led by trained faculty or administrators who are experts in facilitating intercultural
dialogue. The goal of the seminar would be for students to learn how to communicate effectively with people from diverse backgrounds. Participants in this study brought to light how they had to communicate by the terms of their host culture. In other words, participants felt compelled to act in a way that would make their American peers feel more comfortable. This initiative would provide international students with the opportunity to shed light about themselves. It would also give students the chance to learn about the culture and tradition of international students and local students.

The final recommendation for practice is to assist international students in obtaining jobs after graduation. The extant literature reveals that international students sacrifice a significant amount of resources to study in the US. In turn, higher education institutions should provide international students with more support in finding career opportunities in the US or abroad.

Of additional note, colleges and universities should advocate for international students to remain in the US to find job opportunities after graduation. For example, international students currently have one year of Optional Practical Training (OPT) in the US. Students who major in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics have the option to extend their OPT. Yet, students who do not fit into the STEM category are at a loss. Higher education institutions should work more closely with the US Department of Education in designating more majors for an OPT extension. Presently, the federal government is implementing policies making it difficult for international students to maintain jobs in the US. Allowing them to spend more time in the US after graduation would alleviate some of the stress that international students experience.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study’s findings revealed important information about the international student experience in the US. For instance, social, cultural, and academic issues were discussed in this
study. Extant literature on the international student experience in the US is limited. There are recommendations for future research that would further assist colleges and universities in supporting this population.

More research should be done to assess the needs of international students. Much of the research involved in the literature that was reviewed focused on individual universities or particular programs within a university. Moreover, research studies tended to be conducted at one university. It would be interesting to incorporate a comparative analysis on a variety of universities—private, public, and elite. Investigating these universities in different contexts could also be insightful. A comprehensive assessment of the international student experience would be beneficial, albeit difficult to pursue given the diversity and scope of this population.

In addition, a longitudinal study that strives to understand the experiences of international students throughout the duration of their time in college would give researchers a holistic understanding of their intercultural experiences in college. In this study, there were noticeable differences regarding the overall experiences of participants depending on their year of study. The evolution of an international student’s experience from the time that they initially arrive on an American campus until graduation would provide researchers with a more comprehensive understanding. Pettigrew’s (1998) reformulated contact theory suggests that time is an important factor in understanding a given subject.

This research study sought to understand the intercultural experiences of international students. This study explored how international students perceived and made sense of their intercultural experiences. An IPA study on the intercultural experiences of American students is suggested for future study. According to the findings in this study, participants inferred that their American peers seemed to not have been exposed to cultures outside of the US. It would be
interesting to know as to what extent that this assertion was accurate. Research on the intercultural experience of American students would approach cross cultural interactions from another angle that could provide solutions to mitigating intercultural misunderstandings.

Because of the methodology used in this study, a small sample size of seven undergraduate students were interviewed. This was effective in understanding the in-depth experiences of international students. Conversely, a larger sample size with students from various countries using quantitative methods could offer another perspective into the research at hand as well as validate or invalidate the qualitative findings of this study. Furthermore, comparative research on international students in countries outside of the US could be informative.

The findings revealed the importance of faculty in ameliorating the academic challenges faced by international students. Participants in this study reported difficulty with transitioning to a new academic environment. Adapting to a different pedagogical approach and adjusting to American English were a few of the issues revealed in this study. A study about the effectiveness of international faculty teaching international students is recommended. The influence of international faculty on the experience of this population should be further explored.
References


doi: 10.1080/03057925.2012.722347


doi:10.1080/13562517.2012.719156


Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear students,

My name is Anthony Ferreria and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am recruiting undergraduate international students to participate in my study on understanding the intercultural experiences of international students. This study aims to explore how international students perceive their intercultural experiences at an American university. I hope that the information gleaned from this research will be informative to faculty, administrators, staff, and students in supporting international students.

Participants in this study will be interviewed for approximately 70 minutes. The interview will be recorded and transcribed, and identities will be kept confidential. Participation is voluntary and students could withdraw from the study at any time. At the end of the study, students will be offered a $10 gift card to Starbucks for participating.

This study requires you to reflect upon your experience as an international student and requires you to communicate in English. If you are interested in participating, fill out the attached Demographics Questionnaire by January 30, 2018. If you wish to volunteer for this study, please email your Demographics Questionnaire to ferreria.a@husky.neu.edu. I will then contact you with additional details. Thank you for your interest!

Sincerely,

Anthony Ferreria
Appendix B: Demographics Questionnaire

Name:

Major:

Please circle year of study:  First  Second  Third  Fourth  More than four

Completed credits (including transfer credit):  0-32  33-64  65-96  97-128

Contact information (email & phone number):

Nationality:

Race and/or ethnicity:

Gender:

Age range:  18-25  26-35

Do you hold an F-1 visa?

Have you had any prior contact with me previously?

If yes, in what context?

Please send this questionnaire to ferreria.a@husky.neu.edu by January 30, 2018
Appendix C: Script for Phone Conversation

Thank you for your interest in my study. You have been selected as a potential participant. I wanted to reach out to you briefly before moving forward with the interview process. As mentioned previously, I am a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University. My research explores the intercultural experiences of international students. You are invited to participate in this interview on a voluntary basis. At any point, you could inform the researcher that you do not wish to participate in this research study.

You will be interviewed for approximately 70 minutes. I will do my best to keep with this time. There will be roughly 6-11 students who will be interviewed for this study. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed, and your identities will be kept confidential. You will be given a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. All data associated with this study—transcripts, audio, and other material—will be kept in a lockable file cabinet or password protected computer that will only be accessible to the researcher. All other materials associated with this study will be destroyed within one year after the completion of this study. Again, participation is voluntary, and students could withdraw from the study at any time. Students will be offered a $10 gift card for participating.

There will be no risks or discomforts with this study. You will be interviewed in a comfortable, open, and private location on campus. Additionally, you could choose a place that is convenient for you. You could end the interview at any time without penalty. For this interview, you must feel comfortable with communicating in English.

Do you have any questions or concerns about participating in this research study?

Would you still like to participate in this study?

If no: Thank you for your interest and for letting me know that you cannot participate in this study.

If yes: I am looking forward to our interview. I will contact you shortly with more details regarding the time, date and location of our interview.
Appendix D: Consent Form

Northeastern University, Department, College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator(s): Brian Bicknell, EdD, Principal Investigator; Anthony Ferreria, Doctoral Student Researcher
Title of Project: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis on the Intercultural Experiences of International Students

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to participate in this study because you are an international student on an F-1 visa in good academic standing.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the intercultural experiences of international students in the US. The researcher would like to investigate contributors to academic success and engagement in order to develop a model that could be analyzed to support international students.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to interview with the researcher. The researcher intends to apply the following research procedures:

Discussion/Questions/Consent Form: 10 minutes
- Discuss the study and respond to questions
- Request signing of consent form

Semi-Structured Interview: 60 minutes
- Check to see if consent form was signed appropriately
- Conduct formal in-person interview

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed at a time and place that is convenient for you. The interview will take 70-minutes.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There will be no risks or discomforts with this study. You will be interviewed in a comfortable, open, and private location. Additionally, you could choose a place that is convenient for you. You could end the interview at any time without penalty. For this interview, you must feel comfortable with communicating in English.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Will I benefit by being in this research?</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, the information learned from this study may assist educators in comprehending the engagement of international students in higher education.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Who will see the information about me?</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interview will be recorded and transcribed, and your identity will be kept confidential. You will be given a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. All data associated with this study—transcripts, audio, and other material—will be kept in a lockable file cabinet or password protected computer that will only be accessible to the researcher. This form will be kept in a lockable cabinet for three years. All other materials associated with this study will be destroyed within one year after the completion of this study.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At any point, you could inform the researcher that you do not wish to participate in this research study.</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th><strong>What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You will not suffer any harm from this research. No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of your participation in this research.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Can I stop my participation in this study?</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?</strong></th>
</tr>
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</table>
| If you have questions about this study, please feel free to contact:  
Anthony Ferreria, Student Investigator—Phone 917-558-4807, ferreria.a@husky.neu.edu  
Brian Bicknell, EdD, Principal Investigator—Phone 617-588-1365, b.bicknell@northeastern.edu |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: <a href="mailto:n.regina@neu.edu">n.regina@neu.edu</a>. You may call anonymously if you wish.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Will I be paid for my participation?</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You will be given a $10 gift card to Starbucks as soon as you complete the study.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Will it cost me anything to participate?</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>No.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Is there anything else I need to know?</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You must be at least 18 years old to participate, an international student on F-1 visa, and comfortable with communicating in English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signature of person agreeing to take part</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Printed name of person above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed name of person above</td>
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</table>
Appendix E: Interview Guide

1. Why did you choose to study in the US?
   Possible prompt: What motivated you to study here?

2. Could you tell me about your first impressions of college in the US?

3. Tell me about your life as a college student here.
   Possible prompt: What is your everyday routine? Who do you interact with? What do you think about during the day?

4. What does the term “intercultural” mean to you? How do you define it?

5. What are some challenges that you have faced as an international student?
   Possible prompt: Were there any personal or academic challenges that you have encountered?

6. Have you had experiences with someone from a different culture?
   Possible prompt: Tell me about a time when you interacted with someone from another culture? How did it impact you?

7. How do you think other people see you?
   Possible prompt: Do you think that people see you differently or as a foreigner?

8. How do you deal with someone from a different culture than you?
   Possible prompt: Do you make adjustments in how you speak or carry yourself when you interact with someone outside of your culture?

9. How would you describe yourself as a person?
   Possible prompt: What sort of person are you? Characteristics: happy, moody, etc.

10. Has studying in the US affected how you think or feel about yourself?
    Possible prompt: If so, how do you see yourself now than before you started studying in the US? How have you changed?

11. How much do you think about being an international student?
    Possible prompt: Are there certain experiences that remind you that you are from another country?

12. Do you see yourself as being different from other non-international students?
    Prompt: Do you think your experience is different from a local student?

13. What are programs that you would like to see to foster more intercultural interactions?
    Possible prompt: Are there any programs that you have already seen or would like to create?

14. Is there anything else that you would like to share?
### Appendix F: Participant Themes

#### Table 4.

**Participant Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Themes &amp; Sub-Themes</th>
<th>Chimeg</th>
<th>Sophia</th>
<th>Manuel</th>
<th>Rachel</th>
<th>Alisa</th>
<th>Aditya</th>
<th>Hua</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Importance of Strong Relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Establishing Community</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Finding Common Ground</td>
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<td>2. Internal Conflicts</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Maintaining a Sense of Self</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Assimilation and Integration</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Gaining Acceptance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Challenges in Interacting with American Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Cognizant of Stereotypes and Misconceptions</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Adjusting to an American Social Environment</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Difficulty with Language</td>
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<td>4. Other Finding</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Navigating Career Opportunities in the US</td>
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