MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SPOUSES AND
THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY SUPPORT SYSTEMS

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Abstract

There is more global student mobility occurring than ever before, especially when it comes to international students arriving in the United States. More international students are enrolling in degree programs in American higher education institutions, not just coming by themselves for short periods of time anymore. Because of the longer length of stay, many international students are bringing their spouses and families with them during their time abroad. The spouses of international students and how their visa status affects their lives while in the United States is an emerging problem of practice in higher education. In spite of the lack of literature available on the subject, this research study is hoping to change that.

For this study, the researcher used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine how international student spouses perceived support services at an urban private institution of higher education located in the New England region of the United States. A qualitative research approach was used to address the following research question: What role do international student spouses perceive institutions of higher education have in terms of offering support services?

This particular research study focused on a total of five international student spouses who had come to the United States originally on a F2 dependent visa sponsored by an urban institution of higher education located in the New England region of the United States. In order to provide the data for this particular study, the researcher used in-depth interviews in open-ended format when interacting with the participants. The primary research question in addition to the interview questions were based off of John Berry’s (1992; 1997; 2003; 2005; 2006) acculturation theory which provided the theoretical framework for the research study which was used to analyze the findings.
The qualitative data from the study resulted in four major conclusions which in turn answered the research question. The first finding noted the need for better communication between spouses of international education and the institution. Second, the institution needed to provide more opportunities for international student spouses to integrate into the campus community. Third, there was an immediate need to provide more on-ground support through the creation of an administrative role which would handle any concerns or questions spouses of international students might have during their time as part of the campus community. Lastly, this study unearthed new findings including how highly educated dependents were, need for affordable housing, and switching from an F2 dependent visa to F1 student visa status. All had not been talked about in prior literature.

This particular research study is significant because it used Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to gain extremely detailed accounts on what support services international student spouses expected to receive in relation to, in this specific case, the lack of services which were provided to them in actuality. The results of this research study can be used to inform international program offices at institutions of higher education across the United States which support services benefit and should be provided to help with the acculturation of international student spouses.
Acknowledgements

I stumbled upon my research topic purely by accident during my Legal Issues in Higher Education course I was taking, when an article came up focusing on the spouses of international students. The more I read the more I was intrigued to find out more about this little researched demographic. Since I am an academic administrator, the topic is particularly relevant to my work since I deal with international graduate students on a daily basis.

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Lastly, to my parents: Thank you for not thinking I was crazy when I said was going to do a doctorate program and allowing me to talk about my love of international education to no end.
Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the individual experiences of international student spouses in order to understand their perceptions of what support institutions of higher education should provide them during their time in the United States. Knowledge generated from this particular study can be used to inform not only international program offices at institutions of higher education, but those who are interested in the recruitment, retention, and success of the international student demographic. This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, also known as IPA, to illustrate the unique phenomenon under research.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to the spouses of international students in higher education to provide context and background to the study. The rationale and significance of the study is discussed next, drawing connections to the potential beneficiaries of the work. The problem statement, purpose statement, positionality, and research questions are presented to focus and ground the study. Finally, the theoretical framework which served as a lens for the study is introduced and explained.

Statement of the Problem

International education has grown dramatically over the past decades leading more international students and faculty to come to the United States in search of better opportunities. This also includes bringing family with them for the duration of their stay. While there has been much research focused on international students themselves, the idea of focusing on the spouses of international students is a fairly new concept. Because of that, there is not much research available on the topic.

The context of the proposed study was to focus on the spouses of international students and what institutions of higher education could do to better support them during their time in the
United States. Structurally, this research study was qualitative in format specifically interviewing spouses of international students enrolled in an urban institution of higher education in the New England area of the United States. These spouses were found through snowball methods including word of mouth and cooperation with the institution’s international program office in addition to support groups available in the local community for this demographic. The problem this research study focused on was the lack of institutional understanding and support of spouses of international students as they adjusted to living in the United States. This could lead to spouses not being able to access support systems to help with adjustment issues, leaving them to suffer on their own which oftentimes leads to international student retention issues due to lack of academic progress.

This issue is significant to both micro and macro audiences for various reasons. On the micro level, it is easy to see how administrators working directly in international program offices would consider this research significant as they deal directly on a daily basis with international students. Spouses have been found to have a direct link to retention rates of international students (Bista & Foster, 2011) so international student advisors in particular would be interested in learning more about acculturation issues faced by this demographic so international program offices could become better equipped to deal with these issues. This will only help to increase retention rates and create a better campus community when it comes to recruiting international students and their families.

On a macro level, there were two different ways of looking at the significance of this research study. In terms of higher education, institutions would be able to have a better understanding of recruitment and retention issues relevant to their international student demographic. With information from the study, the institution can then work with other
departments outside of international student offices such as student affairs and academic departments, to help make other administrators and faculty members more aware of how to better support not only international students but their spouses as well. Therefore, this study sought to understand individual experiences of international student spouses to understand their perceptions of what support services institutions of higher education should provide them during their time in the United States

**Significance of the Research Question**

The rationale for this study was the interest of the researcher in how spouses of international students perceived what support systems institutions of higher education should provide them in stark contrast to what was provided to them in actuality. This study focused on the spouses of international students and how institutions of higher education could better help them during their time here in the United States. While there was already a lack of research on the spousal experience, there had also been a lack of research in regards to the available literature on how universities could better help and support spouses of international students that attend their institution. In addition, available research had focused primarily on those in the Midwestern region of the United States in rural universities while this study focused on those attending an urban university located in the New England region of the country. This study added to the gap in available research and therefore increased knowledge in the significance of the issue.

Academic institutions have focused their desired outcomes more on the concept of internationalization (Kuteeva, 2011) which included the enrollment of international students on American campuses. One way institutions could incorporate internationalization on campus would be the goal of diversifying the student body through the enrollment of international students (Buttar, 2004). Since support from their spouses was found to be important for
international students (Sakamoto, 2006), this research will help institutions of higher education decide what support they can offer the spouses. This will also improve the retention rate of their international student demographic. Lacina (2002) echoed this sentiment when they found when institutions acknowledged how important the campus environment was to the international student demographic, both groups won due to climbs in both retention and satisfaction rates. Once equipped with this information, universities, in particular those in the urban New England region, would be able to offer uniquely designed support to help international student spouses at their institution.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

The number of international students studying in the United States has grown every year at an astonishing rate (Mamiseishvili, 2012) and has become an integral part of higher education systems (Bordoloi, 2015). Some of these international students relocated with spouses and family members, not just themselves in order to keep their family together (Kim, 2006; Sakamoto, 2006). While international students benefited greatly during their time abroad, not much has been understood about how this time affected their spouses (Bordoloi, 2015). Emotional support and encouragement was found by Lynch (2008) to be major factors in graduate student success and many relied on this type of support from their spouses. Because of their link to international student retention, and therefore the financial health of institutions, it is important to learn more about these spouses, what issues they experience, as well as what can be done to better support them during their time in the United States. The problem being faced was the lack of institutional understanding and support of the spouses of international students as they adjusted to living in the United States. This has led to spouses not being able to access support
systems to help with adjustment issues, leaving them to suffer on their own which oftentimes leads to international students having issues in their academic progress.

The following research question had been developed for this study: What role do international student spouses perceive institutions of higher education have in terms of offering support services? The following section of this chapter will include a description and discussion of acculturation theory which served as the theoretical lens for this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

Acculturation theory is a framework important to many researchers who wish to study international education. It was particularly useful when trying to learn more about the cultural experiences faced by spouses of international students while adjusting to life in the United States. This theory is perhaps one of the most used theories by scholar-practitioners in the field of international education so it would be familiar to them rather than other potential theories used in higher education. Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, and Szapoczik (2010) argued research in the area of acculturation generally focused on immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers which all wished to stay permanently in their new homeland instead or returning to their country of origin. While not all international students and their families plan on staying in the United States for the long term, they still go through the acculturation process. Therefore, it was the theory in which would make the most sense for this research study in order to understand the unique experiences of this demographic.

In order to know more about acculturation theory, it was important to understand the meaning of the word acculturation. Gibson (2001) defined acculturation as “the process of cultural change and adaptation that occurs when individuals of different cultures come into contact” (pg. 19). For Chirkov (2009), acculturation was a process experienced by individuals
after integrating themselves into a new community culturally different than the one they were born into. Going a step further, Berry (2005) defined acculturation theory as a dual process, which included both cultural and psychological change, which took place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members. Having an understanding of what both acculturation and acculturation theory meant provided better context when conducting this research study.

**Berry’s Acculturation Theory Model**

John Berry (1992; 1997; 2005) is widely considered a seminal author when it comes to acculturation theory when dealing with adjustment issues. While Schumann (1986) is well known for developing an acculturation model, it was developed to be focused solely on second language acquisition. While language barriers do play a major part in the adjustment of international student spouses, it is not the only issue. The same can be said about other authors such as Yue and Le (2012) who focused on the culture shock component of acculturation. Berry’s (1992; 1997; 2005) research on acculturation is different as he took a more holistic approach instead of focusing on a specific area of the acculturation process.

According to available literature on acculturation theory, there are two different model processes: unidimensional models and bidimensional perspective (Castro, 2003). Berry (2006) argued the unidimensional model of acculturation theory dealt with the migrant person as they experienced changes in their life such as attitudes, behaviors, and values which oftentimes become more aligned to the new host culture they had immigrated into. The goal of this particular model according to Castro (2003) was for immigrants to fully assimilate into the new culture and successfully forgoing their old culture and traditions in the process. While the unidimensional model focused on allowing for an immigrant to have one culture and therefore
when they move, having to give up their old culture in order to embrace the new culture they had moved into, the bidimensional perspectives model is different. Ryder, Alden, and Paulhus (2000) argued, in this case, acculturation could happen and still allow immigrants to shift their identities with both their home culture and their new culture they are experiencing. The end result was people could still forge a bond with their new culture while holding onto their connection with their home culture (Castro, 2003).

There are many factors which affect the acculturation process, both individual and group related. Individual factors include age, cultural distance from host culture, education, gender, reason for migration, and socioeconomic status (Berry, 1997). When it came to group factors, it depended on how welcoming the new culture was to those immigrating to it. A society which was comprised of multiple cultures would be more likely to accept immigrants and make the acculturation process easier for them and provide services which were culturally sensitive (Bornstein & Cote, 2006).

Lastly, how someone dealt with acculturation was identified into four specific areas (Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989; Schwartz et al., 2013). This included assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Assimilation was defined as the process on either a group or individual level distancing themselves from their birth culture and integrating completely into the new culture they had immersed themselves in (Berry, 2006). Separation occurred when the immigrant held onto their home culture by interacting only with those from their original culture and avoided interactions with those in the new host culture. In terms of integration, the immigrant managed to keep aspects of their home culture as well as some from the new culture they were experiencing. Lastly, marginalization was when little interest was shown by the immigrant in either both their home culture and their new host culture.
Which strategy was chosen by the immigrant had been found to affect the amount of acculturative stress one experienced (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Moke, 1987). While many studies (Berry, Kalin, & Taylor, 1995; Berry & Kim, 1988; Lambert & Taylor, 1989; Zheng & Berry, 1991) had shown integration strategy was the best in terms of lowering acculturation stress, they also found marginalization and separation resulted in the highest level of acculturation stress. However, Cemacilar and Falbo (2008) found there was less acculturation stress for specifically the international student population when they utilized the separation strategy instead of the others. This might be due to the fact many international students planned on returning to their home country after their studies and potentially might have been more drawn to interacting with those from their home culture as a sense of security.

**Critics of Acculturation Theory**

Schwartz et al. (2010) suggested available research on Berry’s acculturation theory was not without criticism. Rudmin (2003) argued by using the four classifications defined by Berry, there were assumptions that all classifications existed and were equally valued, leaning more to a one size fits all system. This led to the criticism of believing all four classifications were found in every sample population when there was a chance multiple subtypes might have existed within those classifications which Berry did not take into account (Schwartz et al., 2010).

One of the classifications which had the strongest criticism is marginalization. As mentioned previously, marginalization was the strategy in which the immigrant distances themselves from both this home culture and their new host culture. Schwartz et al. (2010) argued the likelihood that a person would create a sense of self in cultural terms without drawing on either their birth culture or new culture was highly unlikely. Prior research (Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995; Unger, Gallagher, Shakib, Ritt-Olson, Palmer, & Johnson, 2002) had shown
scales developed to measure marginalization had been found to be poor in terms of both reliability and validity compared to those created for the others due to small sample sizes in the studies which identified with the marginalization strategy.

**Rationale**

Acculturation theory had been applied in qualitative formats, normally formed in the shape of individual or group interviews. This format allowed the researcher to get more involved and gain deeper understanding through having the chance to ask follow up questions based on the original answers given by participants. However, the format of interviews vary from study to study. Some studies (Chen, 2009; Kim, 2006; Kim, 2012; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012) were conducted by using in person interviews which were taped and transcribed after speaking with their subject pool. Others such as Lei et al. (2015) set up their study in the format leading to surveys which did not allow the opportunity for follow up questions to gain more information. This flexibility in interview styles allowed the researcher to adjust their strategy when dealing with the needs of each unique participant of the study. Since this research study planned on touching upon issues relating to adjusting to a new culture, this theory worked well in terms of helping to focus what information was being looked at to be obtained during the interview process.

One of the most recognized bidimensional model of acculturation comes from the research of Berry (1997, 2003) and takes into account the various ways acculturation affects migrants and how they respond to it, including different strategies, which reflected how they felt about both their home culture and the one they were adjusting to as their new home (Organista, Marin, & Chun, 2009). This was especially important when dealing with spouses of international students as research had shown in the review of available literature that each spouse was unique
in terms of how they handled the acculturation experience with some studies (Chen, 2009; Kim, 2006; Zhang et al., 2011) showing participants reported having negative experiences while others (Campbells & Prins, 2016) reporting positive adjustment experiences.

The lack of available research on the topic of international student spouses made it hard to find studies, in particular a decent amount of contemporary studies less than ten years old. However, it was not impossible. Most recently three studies had been published which helped move the research topic forward. These included Akanwa (2015), Bordoloi (2015), followed by Campbell and Prins (2016). Akanwa (2015) used acculturation theory to review research studies of previous scholars in the field of international higher education when dealing with international students from a historical perspective. While Bordoloi (2015) mentioned using feminist research strategy, the results of their study talk about issues faced by international student spouses as they adjusted to their life in the United States. Campbell and Prins’ (2016) study was guided by acculturation theory by being focused on qualitative formats and focusing their interview questions on topics relating to adjustment to the United States when talking to international student spouses in rural university settings.

**Applying Theory to Research Study**

The bidimensional model of acculturation worked well with this study as it involved international students and their spouses. Since the spouses of international students were oftentimes in touch with family and friends still in their home country (Park, Song, & Lee, 2014), it was easy to assume they would still hold on to cultural aspects of their homeland and their new country for the duration of their stay. This specific acculturation model allowed the researcher to take those experience into account while collecting data.
Acculturation theory shaped the interview questions for this research project in various forms. First of all, the questions were formed to focus directly on the participants’ experiences of coming to the United States. By focusing the questions on their own unique experiences, information could then be provided to institutions of higher education to help better prepare both the institution and the international program offices in general in how to better recruit and retain international students and their families. This could include the creation of specific procedures and programs relating directly to this demographic.

As previously mentioned, research on the spouses of international students is still a new area. In fact, there was a lack of available research on this topic, whether recent or past decades. Due to this lack of research, any new studies would be able to greatly contribute to the field as it gains more interest to international education scholars. The results of this particular research study hopefully provided more insight into this constantly evolving topic of study in the field of international higher education. Institutions of higher education are longing for new information on international education so that they can keep up with constant increase of international faculty and students coming to their campus every academic year. This study allows them to keep current on international education issues.

**Conclusion**

By using theoretical frameworks to design a research study, it allowed the researcher a chance to take a different look at how to obtain information. Looking over previous research studies also allows scholar-practitioners a blueprint to help develop their own research project, whether in a different or similar field of study. This is becoming increasingly important as the field of international education is constantly changing, leaving higher education administrators as well as faculty looking for new ways to incorporate the international student demographic and
their families into campus culture and make sure retention issues are addressed in a timely manner sensitively to each unique culture.

The implications are massive when dealing with spouses of international students as well as the field of international education as a whole. Since this is still a relatively new research area in the field, the more information studies can bring to the surface, the better off academia will be. It will also allow for other scholar-practitioners who might not originally be considering going into the field, develop interest in conducting their own research projects to help further academia’s understanding of the topic. The more information coming from research studies will only lead to improvement of any potential adjustment issues faced by international students as well as their families. To do so, the next chapter will focus on reviewing and analyzing the available literature on the topic of international student spouses.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

International students have become an integral part of American higher education in past decades (Bordoloi, 2015). Research on migration has generally focused on permanent relocation even though the majority of migrants come to the United States for a more temporary stay (Dreher & Pourvaara, 2011). While international students benefit greatly during their time abroad, not much has been understood about how this time affects their spouses (Bordoloi, 2015). Much research has been done on international student experiences but little has been done for their spouses such as their own personal experiences of cultural adjustment (De Verthelyi, 1995). This literature review will discuss barriers faced by international student spouses in the United States, the results of these barriers, as well as new directions in research for international student spouse support systems.

Barriers Faced by Spouses of International Students

It is well known that international students face multiple types of barriers upon arrival in the United States. It is only logical their spouses face these same barriers along with additional ones unique to them. Bin et al. (2014) showed global mobility has made the unique stressors which happen due to acculturation coming to the forefront of global health initiatives. International students themselves experience issues such as language barriers, cultural shock, financial issues, and lack of friends and social support (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). For the spouses, available literature showed being left out of the initial decision making process, lack of institutional support, cultural barriers, visa restrictions, shifts in their relationship balance within their marriage, and language issues were all considered barriers.
Left Out of Initial Decision Making Process

Dreher and Poutvaara’s (2001) research found many international students had been influenced by friends who had studied abroad in the United States which led to a link between foreign students and immigration flow. Once the partner decided they wanted to move abroad, the next step was to convince their spouses to move with them or at least accept their decision. De Verthelyi (1995) found two reasons why the majority of the wives agreed to move. This included the social prestige of obtaining a degree abroad as well as the traditional expectation of wives following their husbands’ career interests regardless of where it took them. In addition, many wives believed their presence would help their spouse feel more secure in the new culture and be more academically successful. International student spouses tended to move to the United States to keep their family together (Kim, 2006; Sakamoto, 2006). When it came to deciding to move abroad, it was primarily the student who made the decision to move abroad for the family (De Verthelyi, 1995) and available funding had a major factor on where the student decided to study (MacFadden, Maahs-Fladung, & Mallett, 2012). Spouses rarely had major influence in the decision making process of moving. Interesting enough, Campbell and Prins’ (2016) research found the exact opposite with many spouses having emphasized taking on an “active role in the relocation decision and the opportunities they gained” (p. 439). Perhaps this discrepancy had something to do with cultural backgrounds of the spouses used as part of the research as Kim (2006) and Sakamoto (2006) focused mainly on those from Asia while other research did not limit the population taking part.

There were differences when it came to spouses’ experience of how long they had to prepare in regards to when the decision to move abroad was made and when it actually happened. De Verthelyi (1995) reported some wives had time to discuss and prepare for the
move while others had little time to adjust and prepare for a cultural shift. Sakamoto’s (2006) research showed the goals of international students were negotiated along with the goals of their spouses. This could include the amount of time abroad, the location of study, and when they would join their partner in the United States.

The length of time abroad was considered a major factor when it came to making the decision to move abroad. Some spouses knew from the beginning they would be returning to their home country after their partner completed their studies while others had no set timeframe in which they would stay in the United States or return home (De Verthelyi, 1995). Based on the length of stay, spouses could decide how much of an effect their time abroad would have on their career aspects as well as social needs. However, Kim (2015) found married international students intended to remain in the United States for a longer period of time than unmarried students which could be due to putting less priority on their family back in their home country.

What is interesting to note is the lack of available research on why international students did not include their spouses in their decision to go abroad. It appears from the literature many decide on their own accord and then announce this decision to their spouse without giving an afterthought on how this could affect their relationship and family if children are involved. Finding why spouses were not included in the decision process is certainly an area of great potential for further research.

Lack of Institutional Support

In general there appears to be a theme throughout the available literature focusing on the lack of institutional support not only for international students but their spouses as well. Research conducted by Galloway and Jenkins (2005) uncovered disconnections between what was considered issues by international students and what the institution believed to be issues.
Even when able to meet with an advisor, confusion still happened. For instance, Akanawa (2015) found many international students appeared to be left to figure out themselves what support services were available and how to access them with little to no support from their academic institution. This confusion could also happen to international student spouses as they often emphasized lack of institutional support (Campbell & Prins, 2016). Two major themes came up as a result of lack of institutional support for spouses. These included lack of information regarding visas restrictions as well as domestic violence issues.

**Lack of information regarding visa restrictions.** When an international student makes the decision to enroll at an American university, they did not always pass along important information to their spouses. De Verthelyi (1995) found there were variations between the spouses when it came to how much prior knowledge about what it would be like moving to the United States before arriving. This might be due to the fact, as Bista and Foster’s (2011) research showed, many international students were not given much information in regards to visa restrictions in advance of arriving on campus. Some researched information from consulates while the majority of the spouses received their information from general knowledge, descriptions from previous travelers, as well as mass media presentations from television shows and movies (De Verthelyi, 1995). Even if the spouse tried to find out information on visa restrictions themselves, accessing proper information was found to be extremely difficult and organized in a confusing manner (Bordolo, 2015).

There has been wide disparity between the spouses when it came to their knowledge of immigration restrictions. Bordolo (2015) found many of the spouses were removed from the entire visa process which affected their knowledge on the subject including the restrictions placed on them, and any information they received was filtered through their partners which
might be inaccurate. However, Campbell and Prins’ (2016) research found many spouses did indeed have prior detailed knowledge of visa restrictions before arriving on campus. Having the correct visa restriction information is extremely important as Bordoloi (2015) argued many of the spouses might have decided against moving to the United States if they had been made aware they would not be able to work.

Gaps in available research became apparent when it comes to important information provided by higher education institutions. While literature shows information is not being provided to the spouses, there is no research on why this is happening. There are two components which came up: why were institutions not providing information to international students and therefore their spouses and on the other side, if this information was indeed being provided, why are the students not passing along this vital information to their spouse? The field of international higher education would greatly benefit from learning more about this particular issue as having vital information can only help with international student retention and easier acculturation of their spouses into the United States.

**Domestic violence issues.** Domestic violence is now being recognized as a global social, health, and human rights issue (Joshi, Thomas, & Sorenson, 2013) and oftentimes is described as emotional, physical, economic, and sexual abuse (Urias, 2005). International students and their spouses are not immune to being victims or assailants. However, both institutional and cultural barriers can come between victims receiving the help and support they need when it comes to the campus community. Directors of international programs realized more needed to be done to educate international students on what was acceptable behavior according to United States standards when it came to domestic abuse (Joshi, Thomas, & Sorenson, 2013).
Joshi, Thomas, & Sorenson (2013) found little contact was made by international program offices in regards to domestic abuse cases and there were not many cases of domestic violence because it was either infrequent or simply not disclosed to the university. This is contrary to Urias’ (2005) argument which stated directors were aware and have dealt with domestic violence issues, but have no consistent way of providing important information to victims. There was a belief among office directors interviewed by Joshi, Thomas & Sorenson (2013) that domestic violence was not considered a priority for them as the primary focus of the department was immigration and visa related issues, especially since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

International offices tended to only hear about domestic violence cases when they were approached by police or by victims seeking assistance (Joshi, Thomas, & Sorenson, 2013). Urias (2005) argued cultural or religious beliefs played a major factor in the abuse oftentimes making the victim appear as the instigator. In addition, abuse such as marital rape, often stemmed from culturally traditional male/female stereotypes such as men being aggressive and females being passive and seductive (Adinkrah, 2011). Joshi, Thomas, and Sorenson’s (2013) research found directors of international programs offices believed many assailants of domestic abuse did not see anything wrong with their behavior, labeling it a misunderstanding while some directors would not use the term “domestic abuse” as they believed it was an issue primary concerned with marriages and therefore not campus related.

Domestic violence is an important issue for higher education in general. While there is a lot of research available in terms of domestic student relationships, there is not much available in terms of the international student demographic. This gap in available literature is something
scholar-practitioners, especially in the field of international higher education, should focus further research on.

**Cultural Barriers**

Yakunina et al. (2013) noted coming to study in the United States could be challenging and stressful. Spouses, especially those from childless families, experienced shock when transitioning into a new role which was majority of the time not as simple as they would like (De Verthelyi, 1995). Some spouses had idealized their view of what life in the United States would be like for their families (Kim, 2006). Having a family tradition of pursuing education, especially internationally based education, was found to help ease cultural adjustments (De Verthelyi, 1995). However, if there was a lack of such tradition, it made it harder for spouses to adjust to their new surroundings and oftentimes led to separation anxiety (De Verthelyi, 1995). Yu et al.’s (2014) research also showed differences in the amount of stress felt moving to the United States depended on where international students and their families originally came from. For instance, people from East Asia were found to have a higher level of acculturation stress and culture shock than those from other areas (Yu et al., 2014).

The spouses in De Verthelyi’s (1995) research had very little experience in regards to adjusting not only to a new culture but to new living conditions as well. For many spouses, their travel experience had been limited due to political and economic situations as well as visa policies. This led to many of them having strong feelings of culture shock and wanting to return home in the initial stages of the move abroad. However, spouses who took part in Campbell and Prins’ (2016) research had opposite reactions. Many of the spouses interviewed exhibited strong desire to live abroad, some for the first time, and make the most out of the experience. In
addition, the majority of these spouses described a lack of difficulties and did not find the adjustment to life in the United States hard.

Even if spouses made friends with others from their home country, there was often a level of distrust and fear as they did not want them to gossip about their families and many found themselves lonely as they were stuck at home most of the time while their partner was on campus (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Research by Campbell and Prins (2016) added onto this sentiment by finding many international students spouses found it hard to make friends with American families.

**Visa Restrictions**

Bordoloi (2015) equated spouses of international students as being labeled second class citizens with no capability to participate in American society because of restrictions put upon them due to their visa making the spouses dependent upon the status of their partner’s academic plans. This meant the spouses could only stay in the country as long as their partners were enrolled in full-time academic programs. When it came to visa restrictions, lack of professional development and financial issues for spouses of international students were a direct result of these visas restrictions placed upon them while in the United States.

**Lack of professional development.** Spouses experienced multiple barriers when it came to accessing educational and professional opportunities upon arrival in the United States. They expressed concerns about how these restrictions would affect their career goals (Bordoloi, 2015). This could be a major factor, especially if these spouses had specific certifications which could lapse while they were abroad. Since they are moving abroad to support their partner, many international student spouses might give up potential professional development opportunities which had been available to them if they had stayed in their home country. Because the spouses
were viewed as legal dependents to their academic partners, their options were limited, forcing them to focus more on house and family care which created professional problems if they decided to return to their home country to work (Bordoloi, 2015). Many of these spouses might not be used to staying at home and therefore become easily bored and frustrated. Feelings of frustration, as Kim (2006) found, were not directed at their student husbands, but towards the immigration laws in regards to being confined at home.

Financial issues. The visa restrictions put financial hardship onto the families and has been found to be a major issue to the international student demographic (Crano & Crano, 1993; Harman, 2003). Research has shown tuition as well as general cost of living fees were up to four times higher for international students than for their domestic counterparts (Arthur, 1997). In addition, international students did not qualify for financial aid (Yan & Berliner, 2013) which led many from this demographic to fall into financial hardship due to unforeseen financial costs upon arrival (Alkandari, 2014). Lack of funding led many international students to look for part time work in order to help supplement their income (Harmon, 2003) which was hard to find due to the work restrictions of their visa status (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Both research by Sherry, Thomas, and Chui (2009) as well as Yan and Berliner (2013) showed international student families also had significant issues paying for required health insurance due to lack of options available to them. As Arthur (1997) pointed out, all these financial stressors oftentimes led to international students taking their priorities off academics. There was also stress in the fact many spouses could not maintain the same lifestyle they were accustomed to back in their home country (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Zhang et al (2011) found spouses were unhappy and became concerned with having no way to make their own income. De Verthelyi (1995) discovered when it comes to financial issues, it was not simply a case of having
less to spend but was more culturally complex. For instance, some spouses were resentful of the current financial situation because they would have been much better off if they had stayed in their home country.

**Shift in Relationship Balance in Marriage**

Gender roles became more pronounced upon arrival in the United States due to visa restrictions (Bordoloi, 2015; Sakamoto, 2006). In addition, the current system was found to assign gender roles such as husbands being in the public academic sphere while their spouses were delegated to the private sphere of homemaking (Bordoloi, 2015). Tennant, Saqr, and Stringer (2014) found traditional values and expectations in regards to the role of women at home still mattered and also impacted spousal behavior upon arrival in the United States. In addition, Tennant, Saqr, and Stringer (2014) argued from some cultural perspective, the men were expected to have an education and career while women were expected to get married. For instance, some spouses felt pressure to conform to specific cultural gender norms which sometimes left them feeling inadequate because they believed they were not doing what was best for their husband (Sakamoto, 2006).

Myers-Walls et al. (2011) found marital conflict occurred when couples were so dependent on one another to meet many needs due to the new dynamic. It was found that international student spouses relied heavily upon their husbands for providing them information about gatherings and existing programs on campus and oftentimes only found out about it from other international spouses (De Verthelyi, 1995). This was a drastic change from the spouses’ lives in their home country where they had more independence and did not rely on their partner.

While the literature addresses gender roles, it does not address specifically those international students and their spouses which come from a more conservative culture and living
in the more progressive, liberal areas of the United States. It would be interesting to see how the female spouse of a male international student would react to having more individual freedom than they were used to and how their husband responded to them exercising their right to this social freedom compared to back home. Differences in gender roles could be a potential area for future research that would add value to the field.

**Language Barriers**

Language barriers were a critical obstacle for international students and their families (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Chavajay and Skowronek’s (2008) study found language skills were strongly associated with successful acculturation while Poyrazli and Kavanaugh’s (2006) study found English language proficiency predicted how successful international students would be academically. International student spouses considered being able to speak English as an indispensable skill as it was needed to do daily functions from grocery shopping, communication with the university, and dealing with utility companies (Kim, 2006). Galloway and Jenkin’s (2005) research showed every increase one experienced in regards to language skills translated into a third or two-thirds increase in other problem areas they experienced. Therefore it does not come as a surprise research showed English language skills were related to spouses’ life satisfaction and social connectedness during their time in the United States. (Lei et al., 2015).

The individual characteristics of each spouse determined how each spouse dealt with the language barrier (De Verthelyi, 1995). Language concerns were increased even more when children were involved as now the spouse had to be able to communicate with teachers and other administrators (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Universities do not have any language requirement for the spouses of international students so the spouses must, in a way, evaluate themselves and
decide whether they need to improve their English language skills and few thought the language barrier would have a big effect on day to day life (De Verthelyi, 1995).

English language was the main barrier preventing spouses from accessing important services provided by universities and knowing what support services were provided (Lei et al., 2015). Limited vocabulary prevented spouses from communicating clearly and would limit their social interactions as much as possible to others from their home country (De Verthelyi, 1995). Some spouses found they had issues adjusting to English language courses even if their language skills were considered advanced (Campbell & Prins, 2016). When it came to academics, it was common for spouses to not attend orientation sessions with their partners as they believed most information being provided would be relevant to the university. The spouses did not believe universities thought adapting to a new culture as a whole in addition to language barriers were important to spouses of international students when it came to receiving information (De Verthelyi, 1995).

Conclusion

The spouses of international students encounter many barriers when they move to the United States. The most common barriers that come up in literature are being left of the initial decision making process, lack of institutional support, cultural barriers, visa restrictions, shifts in their relationship balance within their marriage, and language barriers. Spouses are not part of the initial decision making process to go abroad and there is a gap in the literature in why this is the case. Information is not clearly provided to the spouses whether due to institutions not providing it or their student spouse not passing along the information they received and warrants more research in finding out why this is the case. This is both in terms of support of acculturation issues as well as more serious issues such as domestic violence. When it comes to domestic
violence there is a need for more research on how it affects the international student population and their spouses.

Spouses of international students are not allowed to work or attend educational programs for credit under the visa requirements. This was a big issue for spouses as many of them gave up lucrative careers in their home country to move abroad with their partners. They were not used to being homemakers and oftentimes depended more on their partners for support than they did before. It would also be interesting for more research to be done on how those international families coming from a more conservative culture react when integrated in a more progressive, liberal one in the United States. Language barriers isolated spouses even more as it made it harder for them to integrate into their new surroundings. This barrier also prevented them from taking part in many services available in order to improve their time abroad. Next the results of these barriers will be discussed.

**Results of Barriers**

Individual personal variables played a large part in how international student spouses handle their time in the United States (De Verthelyi, 1995). Self-esteem was found to be a significant predictor of marital satisfaction when it came to international students and their families (Zhang et al., 2011). Research showed shifts in professional identity, need for deeper relationships, and developing coping mechanisms were the most important results of these barriers.

**Shifts in Professional Identity**

Yakaboski et al.’s (2014) research found many international graduate students looked to advance their education abroad as a way to improve future opportunities. This was not true in regards to their spouses. Bordoloi (2015) found spouses believed visa restrictions meant their
professional career aspirations were in jeopardy regardless if they planned to stay in the United States or return to their home country. Deciding to leave their career to move abroad was not an easy decision but all wanted to stay with their partners and made it clear they were putting a hold on their personal career goals for a specific amount of time (Chen 2009). This led to many spouses who struggled when it came to redefining their new roles in the United States (Zhang et al., 2011). Similar findings came from Campbell and Prins (2016) which showed international student spouses changed how they identified themselves within their community and social situations due to transitioning from a professional to supportive spouse in the United States.

Kim’s (2006) research showed spouses did not actively seek out to be homemakers when they arrived but resorted to it due to not having other alternatives. Since most of the spouses had full-time jobs before they arrived, many had very limited experiences being a housewife and called it an “undesirable compromise” (Kim, 2006, p. 172). Chen (2009) found sometimes spouses did not consider themselves housewives because what was required of them did not constitute as “work” as there was no economic return. Some spouses took on a corporate-like negative view of being a housewife as being one would not improve their professional skills (Kim, 2006). Some even felt it was impossible for women with a good education to stay at home to be housewives and they needed to get a job (Zhang et al., 2011). Interesting enough, Campbell and Prins’ (2016) research differed in the respect many of the spouses actually enjoyed and “welcomed the break” (p. 440) from working full time jobs back in their home country.

Many of the spouses taking part in De Verthelyi’s (1995) research were working full-time back in their home country before they left to come to the United States in which their visa status required them to change their role from active professional to a traditional female role of homemaker and described the period of adjustment as painful which led to feelings of low self-
esteem as well as depression. The majority of Bordoloi’s (2015) participants worked full-time before going abroad, struggled with the loss of professional identity upon arrival, and remarked how not being able to work or study significantly impacted both personal and professional goals as visa restrictions did not leave them with any choice in how they could grow professionally. One of the wives in Sakamoto’s (2006) study went as far to say the only reason she wanted to return to Japan was because she could not get a job under her current visa status. However, other research showed while realizing all what was given up upon moving to the United States, many spouses focused on such feelings as pleasure, excitement, adventure, and other opportunities as a result of the relocation (Campbell & Prins, 2016).

**Need for Deeper Relationships and Support**

Boredom was a common theme from the spouses in Chen’s (2009) study as their new life contrasted greatly with life back home while many in Bordoloi’s (2015) study expressed a desire for a public life outside of being a homemaker. Mamiseishvili’s (2012) study found international students devoted considerable amount of time and energy to their studies which left little time to family. Lack of social support was found by Yan and Berliner (2013) to be a result of financial issues so it was important for this demographic to find free or low-cost alternatives to social events. This related to Myers-Walls et al.’s (2011) findings in which spouses needed to perform their new role as housewives alone without any support from friends and family. Some spouses were surprised by how much they longed for close friendships (De Verthelyi, 1995).

Rice et al (2009) found many international graduate students were dissatisfied with their advising relationships which led to frustrations taken out on their families. In addition international students who had not been awarded scholarships and other financial assistance were found by Kono et al. (2015) to suffer from depression and therefore affect their spouses. Park,
Song, and Lee’s (2014) research found communication with family and friends from one’s home country and lives in the United States was associated negatively with psychological well-being. This fits in perfectly with Myers-Walls et al.’s (2011) study which found it was not automatic that people from the same country will feel supported and comfortable around each other. In general, stressors encountered during time living in the United States was found by Banjong (2015) to lead to depression and anxiety among other issues.

Coping Mechanisms

Two main strategies used by spouses when it came to coping with stress were the recognition of personal strength and involvement in meaningful activities (Kim, 2012). Cho, Lee, and Jezewski’s (2006) research showed international students spouses went through many phases of adjusting to American life. Positive thinking was another coping mechanism spouses used to help adjust to their new life (Chen, 2009). The two mechanisms brought up the most in literature were focusing on personal projects and relying on marriage and family for support.

**Focusing on personal projects.** Mamiseishvilli (2012) noted international students were determined to complete their goal of earning a degree in spite of any challenges in their way. Unlike their partners, De Verthelyi’s (1995) research found spouses were not expected to achieve any personal goals while in the United States. However, Campbell and Prins (2016) found many of spouses who took part in their research turned to “experiences that evoked happiness and only pleasant emotions” (p. 438). Spouses who created personal projects to do while living abroad were found to be a powerful coping mechanism when it came to dealing with issues of resentment and career stagnation according to De Verthelyi’s (1995) research. The two most common projects chosen by spouses were related to culture, such as traveling the United States
while meeting new people, as well as improving their family’s English language skills (Campbell & Prins, 2016; De Verthelyi, 1995).

**Relying on marriage and family for support.** International student spouses who took part in Zhang et al.’s (2011) research stressed support received from their husbands contributed to bringing their marriage closer and helped them adjust to their new life in the United States. Poyrazli and Kavanaugh (2006) found married international students did not find the need to expand their social circle as they used their spouses as a buffer for support. This seemed to be in agreement with Sakamoto’s (2006) research in which family was found to have the capability to function as a buffer in regards to cultural adaptation.

Sakamoto (2006) highlighted the importance of the spousal relationship upon coming to the United States. Emotional support and encouragement were major factors in graduate student success and many relied on this type of support from their spouses (Lynch, 2008). Some couples were found to have an improved relationship upon arriving in the United States due to the fact they could only depend on themselves since family and friends were far away in their home country while on the other side, some stated the relationship worsened if their partner neglected the family for their studies (Sakamoto, 2006). However, spouses who did not receive support from their partners had a harder time adjusting to their new life (Zhang et al., 2011).

**Conclusion**

As a result of many barriers the spouses face, literature on the subject shows they experienced a shift in professional identity, need for deeper relationships and other forms of support, as well as developing coping mechanisms. Before moving to the United States, many spouses developed a strong career path and were well respected in the working world. Due to visa restrictions, they were not allowed to work which was a stark contrast to their previous life
in their home country. This led to many spouses needing deeper relationships and support systems in addition to their partners who oftentimes were not around as much as the spouse would like due to academic commitments. Mental health issues such as depression could be brought on by lack of social support as well as other stressors.

How spouses coped with the stress and barriers of moving to a new country had a major effect on their well-being during their stay. Many spouses in the literature focused on personal projects such as traveling, improving their English language skills, and meeting new people. They also relied on both their partners and family for emotional support. Spouses relied on their partners more especially if the spouse arrived in the United States after their partners as they had more time to adjust to the new culture.

**New Directions in Research**

Reducing loneliness could improve the spouses’ day-to-day experience while in the United States (Lei et al., 2015). Zhang et al. (2011) found university faculty and administrators should learn more about what spouses of international students experience so they would be better able to help with the adjustment process. Information on English language classes, local transportation, and health care were listed as the most important topics international student spouses would want to learn more about (Lei et al., 2015). Spouses in Lei et al.’s (2015) study also requested more information on social events occurring on campus as well as professional development workshops. Increased institutional support, social support groups and interaction with the local community were common threads in all the available literature when it came to new directions in research.
Increased Institutional Support

Those part of the international student demographic oftentimes did not feel they had been
provided useful information, in particular about finances, and did not know who to speak to in
order to gain clarification (Alkandari, 2014). This falls in line with Gizir and Simsek’s (2005)
research which found departments, especially in institutions of higher education, were prone to
isolationist tendencies which made it difficult for important information to be transmitted
between each other and therefore provide efficient information to students. Olivas and Li’s
(2006) research showed international students had difficulty seeking out help and support for any
issues they were experiencing. It could be said the same about their spouses. Research has shown
important information was clearly not being provided to international students (Alkandari, 2014).

Communication in higher education is unique and cannot be handled like one would do in a
business setting (Gizir & Simsek, 2005). As Varma’s (2011) research showed, open
communication was key in providing support to the spouses.

Members of international program offices were found by Yakunina et al. (2013) to be
used as mentors, counselors, and advisors for their students in regards to almost everything
campus related. Higher education administrators, advisors in particular, need to be able to
modify techniques when dealing with international students (Olivas & Li, 2006) and therefore
their spouses as they have different needs than traditional domestic students and should not be
lumped into one group as each international student has their own specific needs regardless of
their culture (Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008). Olivas and Li (2006) stressed how advisors
covering cultural differences, expectations, and the American higher educational system in
general, would be beneficial to international students. This includes, as Yakunina et al. (2013)
found, being aware of various departments and services which could help this student demographic and their families.

Buultjens and Robinson (2011) noted having a central office for all the needs of the international population of the institution was important to help them navigate support services on campus. Administrators in higher education were found to make a significance difference by Blount (2008) when establishing institutional culture with international program offices especially in need of creating as well as implementing effective solid planning when it came to dealing with the international student demographic (Rudzki, 1995). Fritz, Chin, and DeMarinis (2008) suggested advisors continuously contact international students as this was found to be helpful for assessing progress throughout their time on campus. By having a better understanding of what influences international student enrollment, administrators will be better able to offer services to help with retention (Akanwa, 2015).

**Social Support Groups**

Establishing networks to support spouses was found to be vital to their well-being (Cho, Lee, & Jezewski, 2006). Transitioning into a new culture often came with fear, homesickness, and stress which were all major factors that contributed to international students failing out of or withdrawing from their academic program (Kwon, 2009). De Verthelyi (1995) stressed assisting international student spouses required accounting for intercultural and intracultural diversity as well as being aware of the adjustment stages they go through during their time abroad.

The idea of an international student spouse support group was well liked by the wives in De Verthelyi’s (1995) study, but many were afraid language barriers would get in the way. Providing detailed pre-departure information directed towards spouses, scheduling pre-arrival interviews with international students would go a long way in helping them (De Verthelyi,
This includes clarifying important information (such as visa conditions and restrictions, health care coverage), creating support groups specifically for spouses, creation of peer group activities, and offering multicultural training workshops for faculty, staff, and other professionals that might interact with international student spouses. Martens and Grant’s (2008) research showed spouses of international students had a strong preference for programs related to professional growth. In addition, the wives in Kim’s (2006) study mentioned some took up cooking traditional meals from their home country and began sharing recipes between themselves. This was a great way for the spouses to bond together in a casual way and did not require them to attend academic events on campus.

**Interactions with Local Community**

Williams and Johnson’s (2011) research showed only 43% of the American students interviewed reported having one or more international student friendships with 57% stating they had no such friendship. This research can be carried over to working with international spouses as they have been found to feel like they are invisible and not part of their community (Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012). Similarly, Campbell and Prins’ (2016) research found many had difficulty integrated in spite of taking advantage of whatever community resources were available. Research shows how important it is for the local community to have interactions with the international student population which includes their spouses. Both the domestic and international population can benefit from interacting with each other. The interaction which occurs between spouses of international students and the local community, the more likely each will feel comfortable attending various events.
Conclusion

Increased institutional support, social support groups, interactions with the local community were two suggestions brought up in the literature as ways to help the spouses of international students adjust to their time in the United States. There is clearly a need for institutions to offer more support directly to the spouses of international students in various formats. This would not be costly to do as many of the support needed for spouses are already being offered to international students. Support groups are important for the spouses as they help them realize they are not alone in how they feel in their new surroundings. Interactions with the local community also had been shown to have a positive impact for these spouses. Both the support groups and interacting with the local community would help ease the adjustment into a new culture.

Summation

International students have become a major revenue stream for universities (Kwon, 2009) and the world has become more global, including the field of academia, in the past decade (Sakamoto, 2006). With this means taking a look at the spouses who accompany students on their relocation to the United States. Research literature shows globalization has increased the need for countries to analyze current immigration processes as well as the need for universities to take more of an interest in helping out the spouses of their international students. They can do so by making sure important information in regards to visa restrictions, support groups, and campus life is provided and actually reaches the spouses, not just the international students.

Based off of the available research, it is clear there is much to do in terms of legal barriers these spouses face. It might even be time to revise these restrictions to allow them to work or at the very least be able to take classes towards certificates to enhance their professional
skills and goals. Doing so can boost the morale of the spouses whom the literature shows oftentimes feel they are putting their careers on hold so their partners can earn their degrees abroad in the United States. International student spouses can then return to their home country with no resume gap in addition to adding important skill sets and give them a sense of purpose during their time here in the United States.

There are clear gaps in the literature when it comes to spouses of international students. Four areas noted in the review include why spouses were not part of the initial decision making process to move about, why not receiving important information whether from the institution or their student spouses, lack of research on how domestic violence directly affects those accessing international program offices on campus, as well as how marital relations change when coming from a more conservative culture to liberal one. Filling in these research gaps will make a huge contribution to the field of international higher education. However, there is even a bigger gap in the literature which needs to be addressed: gender bias. Even with the very limited amount of research on international student spouses, there is a clear gender bias in regards to the subjects used as they only focus on males being the student and their wives being the non-academic spouse. It is important for future research to look into this gender bias more closely to see if there is any difference in how male spouses deal with the stresses of moving abroad compared to female spouses. The majority of the research focused on heterosexual relationships leaving a gap in learning more about the experiences of same-sex relationships which would be an important avenue to explore.

The spouses of international students need to be taken seriously by higher education, especially in the United States. If institutions of higher education want to take advantage of the financial and cultural benefits of these students, they have to make sure their spouses are cared
for as well. While institutions might feel they are under no obligation to provide services to the spouses of international students, the evidence is clear the spouses have a major impact on program retention. By making sure to decrease stressors the spouses of international students might face during their time abroad, they can also help elevate stressors experienced by their student spouses. This can only lead to favorable retention trends in an ever growing student demographic market for higher education.
Chapter Three: Research Design

According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) “the primary goal of IPA researchers is to investigate how individuals make sense of their experiences” (p. 8). For this particular study, the goal was to be able to explore the unique experiences of spouses of international students in regards to support systems offered by institutions of higher education. This study also sought to understand how these spouses made sense of the support or lack thereof provided to them during their time in the United States.

When it came to deciding on a methodological approach for such study, it was important to use one which would allow for interpretation in order to gain the best information possible. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach allowed the researcher to study how spouses of international students interpret, in particular, their expectations of support systems available to them by institutions of higher education. The research question of the research study was the following: What role do international student spouses perceive institutions of higher education have in terms of offering support services? This chapter will review the research question and qualitative research approach for this study.

Qualitative Research Approach

The research methodology used for this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, also known as IPA. This methodology focused on perspective, context, and interpretation. IPA was defined by Smith (2004) as aiming “to explore in detail participants’ personal lived experience and how participants make sense of that personal experience” (p. 40). In addition, the focus of using this unique methodology was for those taking part in the study to create an understanding of each individual experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). By conducting individual interviews with international student spouses, this research study
uncovered each participant’s personal experiences and what could be done by institutions to better support this demographic. While the method has influences from Husserl’s phenomenology analysis, it was Heidegger who really made IPA his own (Reiners, 2012).

According to Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006), there were three key scholars when it comes to IPA methodology. These were Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For Edmund Husserl, he believed that identifying and removing personal assumptions would lead one to arrive at an understanding of what made a personal experience what it was (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). In addition, he had a belief there were no certain basis in modern science and led to the abandonment of questioning the meaning of life (Tada, 2013). For Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, experience was what framed our being and how we understood the world (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). In particular, Heidegger was credited with broadening the concept of hermeneutics, the philosophy of interpretation, by focusing on the concept of being in the world (Reiners, 2012).

There are many debates between Husserl’s concepts and those of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. According to Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, it was not possible to reach the point of not having personal bias which Husserl required. They argued people were influenced the minute they were born into this world and therefore were impossible to be purely unbiased (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2008). Husserl is considered more phenomenology in style while Heidegger more IPA. The difference between the two comes down to how they look at experiences. In particular, Reiners (2012) noted Heidegger disagreed with Husserl in that regards. For Husserl, it was understanding how we know as humans while Heidegger rejected that notion and believed one should focus on knowing what it meant to be human instead (Reiners, 2012).
This methodology was appropriate for this research study for various reasons. First of all, it allowed one to make sense of a specific general experience. IPA studies call for small sample sizes for studies (Smith, 2004). Due to the small demographic this study would need to find and recruit participants from, there was a limited amount of participants which were found who agreed to take part. Second of all, IPA methodology allowed for the possibility of asking a plethora of questions to the participants which therefore led to multiple perspectives on a single problem of practice.

**Participants**

In order to conduct this research study, the original goal was to recruit between 10 - 12 international student spouses who would be participants. The amount of participants was chosen carefully in order to make sure enough data was obtained in case of incomplete interviews. However, the total amount of interviews conducted for the study was five participants. The small size of the participant pool allowed the researcher to spend more time obtaining detailed information and gain a better understanding of the unique experience of each interviewed spouse taking part in the study. In terms of the background of each participant, there was no limitation in regards to age, gender, or ethnicity. The only criteria needed to be considered a participant for this study was to be 18 years of age or older, married to a current international student enrolled at a specific urban institution of higher education in the New England region of the United States, and had been at one point at the institution on either a F2 or J2 visa status.

For the purpose of this research study, a single urban institution of higher education in the region of New England was chosen. There were many reasons why this specific institution was chosen. It meets the criteria of being located in the New England region and in an urban setting. The institution is a private research institution and heavily supports international education both
in regards to domestic students studying abroad, and the amount of international students which are enrolled in their various educational programs at the undergraduate and graduate level. Many of the international students taking part in programs at this institution were graduate level meaning there was a much higher chance of them being married and therefore having spouses. In addition, being an academic administrator at the proposed institution during the time the research study was conducted led the researcher to be familiar with procedures, processes, and programs available as well as being a doctoral student at the same institution. Lastly, having one institution where research was conducted means only approval from one Internal Review Board (IRB) was needed, simplifying the process.

**Procedures**

When it came to conducting this research study, it was imperative the IRB was consulted and approved the proposed study. IRB approval was sought and approved for at a single urban institution of higher education located in the New England region. The research obtained from the study was also presented at the same institution which needed approval from the IRB. In addition, the international program office at the research site was contacted with a request for their approval to send out a recruitment email to help find participants for the study which was sent out to all international graduate students at the institution (Appendix A). Once approved, the international program office sent out a recruitment email on behalf of the researcher (Appendix B) and interested participants were contacted with information on the research project (Appendix C). Participants of the study signed a consent form (Appendix D) before interviews were scheduled. Due to the current sensitive political climate in the United States, it was important these spouses were informed their identity was to remain anonymous. This way they did not have to worry about their testimony interfering with their immigration status. Participants were able to
withdraw from taking part if they had wished and had the right to not answer any of the questions asked of them during the study.

Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) regarded the primary concern for researchers using the IPA methodology was to gather rich, detailed first-person accounts of the unique experiences under investigation. For this research study, data was collected through in-person interviews, which was one of the most popular methods under IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Questions for the study were compiled before interviews were conducted. The participants were found in a dual method approach. First, it was important to work with the International Program Office at an urban institution of higher education in the New England regional area to send out as email to all international graduate students enrolled at the institution to request those with spouses get in touch about the study. Once the spouses had shown interest, interview requests to spouses of international students was then sent via email. In addition, snowball methods was used as another way to connect with these spouses who might not have received information from their partner at the institution. Based upon the responses received, one on one interviews with five participants were then set up to gather data.

The questions asked during the interview were open-ended and semi-structured in format in order to allow more informative responses and followed the Interview Protocol (Appendix E). This allowed both the participants and the researcher to engage in meaning dialogue in what was considered real-time (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). While there was a set number of pre-established questions going into the interviews, the format allowed for follow up questions from the researcher in order to gather more information on the particular experiences of spouse being interviewed at that time. There was a total of ten main research questions which were asked. This did not include any follow up questions which the researcher might have asked during the
interview in order to gain clarification on any of the answers provided. Discussions occurring during these interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for presenting upon completion of the project. After the completion of the transcriptions of interviews, participants were provided with a copy in order for them to review for accuracy and clarification purposes. They then signed a Member Check Form (Appendix F) to verify the accuracy.

**Data Analysis**

According to Smith et al. (2009), there were four unique characteristics of IPA when it came to data analysis. The characteristics were movement from unique experiences from one participant to what is shared among all participants of the study, how the experience is described moving to how the same experience could be interpreted, commitment by the researcher to attempt to understand the point of view of each participant, and using a psychologically focused context when looking at how participants make meaning of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). After the completion of all interviews, the audio was then transcribed into a word document format for review. For the purpose of this research, the interview audio was transcribed using a program called Temi. Once in word format and approved by the participant for accuracy, the documents were then reviewed to begin the initial coding process. It was important for the researcher to conduct the transcription and initial coding as soon as possible upon the completion of each individual interview. On average the transcription was completed and emailed to the participant within a week of the interview.

Reading the completed transcripts was considered the next step of the process. This was the first step of the analysis process of the study and is done to make sure the participants were the focus (Smith et al., 2009). The initial readings allowed the researcher to pick up on unique experiences and their importance to the study. Once all of the transcripts had been read through
and noted, the second step of analysis began. The transcripts were reread, this time looking for more meaning behind the interview and themes were noted. This was known as coding. The method of coding was used while analyzing data collected from the proposed research study. Specific codes were created by the researcher after the interviews had been transcribed in order to identify various themes which occurred throughout the study. After each of the interview transcriptions initially had been coded, a second review of the transcripts occurred to allow for the possibility of sub codes to be created. These codes therefore began to show common themes throughout each individual interview conducted.

Criteria for Quality Qualitative Research

This section will cover the ethical considerations, credibility, transferability, internal audit, self-reflexivity and transparency, and limitations of the proposed research study.

Ethical Considerations

Since IPA studies are concerned with existential issues, it was extremely important for researchers of studies in such methodology to monitor how the interview was affecting participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Participants were notified by the researcher that their identity would remain anonymous and all answers they provided would be locked and held in a secure location away from campus as the researcher is an administrator at the institution where the research was being conducted. In addition, there were other considerations made over the course of the study. The participants were allowed to not answer any of the questions asked of them without any implications for the researcher. Each participant received a copy of their transcripts in order for them to review and provide any feedback to the researcher to make sure everything was understood clearly while collecting data. Once the participant was content with the transcription, they signed and returned a Member Check List (Appendix F) stating so.
Credibility

Trustworthiness was a big consideration when it came to research studies, particularly those following the IPA format. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were found by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to all have significant importance when it came to establishing trustworthiness of any research study.

Credibility has been argued to be one of the most important components when one was attempting to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, the researcher showed credibility by engaging with participants throughout the interviews. As previously mentioned, all of the participants of the study were notified their participation was completely voluntary and they could decide which questions to answer and leave at any time without judgement. This meant the data which was obtained could be considered genuine as only those who were interested in taking part in the study provided information. Copies of each transcript were made available as well to the participants for them to review, make clarifications, or comment on the accuracy of the conversation. This was one of most important ways researchers can boast the credibility of their study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This became helpful when the audio did not pick up certain words or if the participant struggled with articulating their thoughts due to English not being their first language.

Transferability

Scholar-practitioners conducting studies in the qualitative format must be aware of transferability of their study. This means a researcher conducting their study in a qualitative way will see explicit connections to the cultural and social contexts that surround their data collection. In regards to this specific research study, transferability aimed to offer insights into
how a given person (in this case spouses of international students) made sense of a given phenomenon (support services offered by institutions of higher education).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), information from the interviews, which must both be sufficient and put into specific context, should be provided by the researcher of the study to enable a reader to understand the outcome as best as possible. This was done through the process of thick description. By doing so, it allowed the reader to make comparisons between the problem faced by those taking part in the study and what they themselves experienced in their day to day lives. In short, how much the reader related to the findings of the study depended on how descriptive the researcher was in making connections between those in the study and how it could benefit others outside of it.

**Internal Audit**

Internal auditing was another aspect of the research project which was very important to take accountability. One way this can happen is through the method of personal journaling by the researcher. Journaling throughout the duration of the research study is a great way in order to view potential biases which might occur. The researcher maintained a reflective journal throughout the research project. The reflection occurred as soon as possible if not immediately after anything related to the project had occurred. This included communication during the recruitment process, interview process, transcription, and analysis. This allowed the researcher to visualize thoughts at that exact moment and bring to light any biases which they might have had otherwise been unaware of at the time.

As previously mentioned, after the interviews had been completed, a transcription of the conversation was done with a copy being provided to the interviewee. By doing so, it provided the interviewee a chance to make any clarifications which might have been missed. For instance,
a researcher might have believed the spouse being interviewed takes care of a certain responsibility or automatically might feel a certain way due to their gender, nationality, or religion. The interviewee could then provide any clarifications not in the transcript and provide additional insight to their experience leading to better analysis by the researcher.

**Self-reflexivity and Transparency**

I do realize there was potential for certain biases as I conducted my research. First of all, due to my background as a Caucasian educated female I was able to afford and take part in a life changing study abroad program to Paris, France as a junior at the University of Connecticut. There are many in our country who would not have the chance to attend an institution of higher education, let alone this program for an entire year like I was able to.

Another bias is my passion for international education in general. Throughout this program I have had to learn to deal with the fact there are others, even within the field of higher education administration, who do not have any interest in international education. As a scholar-practitioner, I have to put aside my bias on how important international education is and come up with new ways in order for my work to be as inspiring to others as my initial trip to Paris, France was to me when I was just seventeen years old.

Both my educational and work experience could lead to bias as well. I have been in a position to learn more about issues surrounding student visas, in terms of those coming to the United States, than the spouses who might not have been provided the information during the decision making process. This would lead to me potentially make assumptions in regards to what the spouses are already aware of instead of what they actually know.

Lastly, as a single Caucasian American female, I might have a hard time understanding what issues one faces in a marriage. Due to this, I might have a hard time emphasizing with the
spouses so it will be important for me to be open minded in regards to what they consider issues which might not line up with my personal opinion. Only by being open-minded and really listening to the concerns of these spouses would I able to make a difference as a scholar-practitioner.

Our own positionality shapes who we are on a daily basis. I would never have stumbled upon my passion for international education if it was not for my first class learning French back when I was fourteen years old. My passion carried over into what I want to conduct research on. These spouses have become known as an invisible population (Martens & Grant, 2008) and it is imperative they do not stay that way. However, it was vital for me to recognize my own biases during the process in order to make sure it did not affect my research.

**Limitations**

Research studies are not perfect and oftentimes have limitations to them. This study is no different. The limitations of using this theory was it focused strictly on the cultural adjustment of the subjects interviewed and did not take into effect directly any other potential overlapping themes. However, the researcher was able to make educated suggestions on what these institutions should look into doing based upon the information received from the interviews about adjustment issues of international student spouses.

After the findings of the study, it would be important and imperative for scholar-practitioners to then research the effectiveness of the proposed changes to higher education institutions when it comes to better supporting the spouses of international students. This way, research can be done to show what worked and what did not work when it came to helping them adjust to life in the United States from an institutional perspective. Doing so will provide a whole other view on another important aspect of acculturation experiences.
International student spouses are oftentimes overlooked as important aspects of international student retention. Their happiness and ability to adjust to new surroundings when coming to the United States can have a huge impact on whether or not the international student partner completes their program of study. It is time for institutions to take a closer look at the spouses and this research study will provide important information on how higher education can better support them and in return the international student demographic on campus.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of spouses of international students for the purpose of understanding what support systems were provided to them during their time in the United States. All five of the participants were female, were in heterosexual relationships, and was their first time residing in the United States. The average length of their marriage ranged from 1.5 years to 4 years. At the time of the interview, the participants had been in the United States ranging from 3 months to 3 years. Two participants were from China, one from India, one from Turkey, and one from Egypt. From analyzing the transcripts of the five interviews conducted for this study, three superordinate themes emerged and ten subthemes were found. These included the following: 1) frustrations with daily life (1.1 boredom, 1.2 lack of work, 1.3 higher cost of living, and 1.4 language barrier), 2) lack of support (2.1 housing assistance, 2.2 depending on others, and 2.3 no access to institutional services), and lack of information (3.1 valuable information, 3.2 methods to improve communication, and 3.3 creation of a spousal identification card).

While existing literature explored the general experiences of international student spouses, minimal research has been devoted to understanding how the spouses of international students perceived the institution’s responsibility in terms of offering support services for their transition into American culture. In order to better understand their perceptions of institutional support systems, this study aimed to gain insight into how a small group of key stakeholders made sense of their experiences during their time in the United States. This chapter will discuss the results of in-depth interviews with the five key stakeholders who participated in the study. The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to gather open-ended responses that would allow for
better understanding of the participant experiences and perceptions of institutional support systems during their time in the United States.

**Table 4.1 - Superordinate and Sub-Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frustrations with Daily Life</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boredom</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Work</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Cost of Living</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Barrier</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of Support</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Assistance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depending on Others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Access to Resources</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of Information</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuable Information</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods to Improve Communication</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation of a Spousal Identification Card</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table provides a listing of the superordinate and sub-themes that were identified through the interview process with the participants in the study.

The following section will expand on the themes outlined in Table 4.1 along with the sub themes which were captured through the process of interviewing the five participants. Upon defining each theme, the researcher will provide a summation of the research.
Frustrations with Daily Life

One of the first major themes which emerged from the responses of the participants was a strong sense of frustration many of the participants had in regards to the restrictions placed on them during their time in the United States on a F2 visa. In addition, the participants expressed additional levels of frustration to include boredom, the inability to work, the financial constraints attributed to the higher cost of living, and the existing language barriers which will be covered in the next sections.

Boredom

Multiple participants emphasized being frustrated with the amount of boredom they experienced while on a F2 visa. For instance, one participant emphasized in the interview that they constantly were bored as they had nothing to do other than sit and be home by themselves. Due to the heavy restrictions placed upon those in F2 visa status, dependents had limited opportunities to engage with those outside their immediate family, whether just the student spouse or children if they have any who traveled with them. They cannot take part in courses and are not allowed to work during their time which leaves them with a lot of free time in a city and culture they are not as familiar with. This led to boredom while they waited for their spouse to return home from their courses and other academic duties they might have depending on their program. Participant D perfectly explained this:

Yes, because when I learned going to public libraries all of our people in my group are like me, want to socialize because we have nothing here. No family, no friends. Just hard for us. So we try to find something and it would be nicer to find something easier.

It appeared participants had to find these opportunities themselves as they were not given any information from the institution or others, unless it was word of mouth from friends.
The student spouse had much more opportunities to form friendships than the F2 dependent did. All of the spouses who were interviewed mentioned their partners were enrolled in graduate programs. While the student spouse would have had social interactions and obligations as part of their program, even more so on a graduate program level, it appeared F2 dependents did not have similar opportunities and oftentimes were left home alone. Even with the invention of technology such as Skype, WhatsApp, and other social media platforms, there was also a time zone barrier when communicating with those back in their home country. As one participant noted “the struggle I faced a lot is the time my husband started going out and when I was home alone and I had no one to talk to because of the time difference like according to eastern standard time, I could talk to people in India only until 12 or 1:00 PM, after that everyone goes to sleep in India and then I have no one to talk to.” Not being able to talk to friends and family as readily as they would be able to back home appeared to only add to the boredom the spouses felt. Even if they were able to become friends with their partner’s friends, it did not mean they considered them close:

I had a couple of friends who are my husband’s friends but still it’s like, you know, I was new, I was not that close to them that I can share with them what I see and what I wanted to do throughout the day. And no one is that free for me of course [laughter].

Some of the spouses came to the United States with the idea they might be able to have some sort of options such as taking professional development courses or potentially getting a job. For instance, Participant E lamented

And I’m an engineer and I already had my master’s from back home and I already have work experience. So I came here with the dream, getting a good job or doing my PhD, and with an F2 you can do nothing.
All of the spouses reported they had not received any information from the institution in terms of the restrictions of their visa status until they arrived. There was a real sense of “nothingness” which was echoed by each of the international student spouse during the interview conversations. These frustrations would lead to fights, as Participant A discussed, in terms of “I feel really frustrating, frustrated when we have fights”. Boredom, as it appeared through the interviews, made many of the participants depend more on the student spouse to provide companionship. Due to the academic obligations placed on the student spouse, they were not around enough to alleviate the boredom of the dependent spouse or perhaps even lend a hand in helping finding outlets to lessen the sensation of boredom. The concept of the international student spouses being frustrated leading to fights with their partners also comes up later in this chapter when the issue of domestic violence and divorce are discussed.

**Lack of Work Opportunities**

The lack of work opportunities was another major sub theme which came up when discussing struggles the international student spouse faced while adjusting to life in the United States. In fact, all but one of the participants talked about their careers they held back in their home countries. Participants in the study had careers in the field of accounting, finance, consulting, and government. Two participants already had graduate degrees in business and engineering. The participant who worked in government quit their job but had the guarantee they could return to that position if they wished upon their return back to their home country. They were the only participant who had a job lined up for when they returned. Having that guarantee of a job appeared to have made their decision easier to make in regards to joining their partner in their studies.
All participants were found to be highly educated and were not used to having as much free time as they had being here on the dependent F2 visa. Participant C noted in their interview that since they had been working back in their home country, they were not used to sitting around all day without anything to do and considered it a “big pain”. This caused tension between her and her husband. Participant A added onto that sentiment by saying “because for most of us, we don’t want to just stay at home watching videos, music, and cooking”. For others, such as Participant B, the fact it was not possible to work on the F2 visa made them feel sad. As they said, “because my student dependent [F2 visa] I can’t work. But in my country I am working many years. But sometimes I feel sorry I can’t work.” All three of the participants who changed their visa status from F2 to F1 mentioned they did so in order to reduce the amount of stress which was occurring due to the F2 dependent status.

The lack of work opportunities on an F2 dependent visa also prevented some of the spouses from coming immediately to be with their partners. One participant described their husband as “he came alone and he stayed here for like close to a year, eight or nine months, and we were just married so that was difficult… because it was difficult financially for both of us to come at one time”. For Participant E, the financial decision to come later than their partner was due to the fact the student spouse had lost their job back in their home country which had already created a financial hardship on them. They had originally declined the offer to enroll in the academic program in order to save money.

It’s just that the offer he got wasn’t a full ride, a full scholarship. He had to pay the last semester and he was like ‘if I have a job and we’re stable and we just got married, we can postpone the decision of continuing education for a year or two until we have that
financial amount and before we travel’. So it made more sense back then. Of course after he lost his job that was the best option.

But after time trying to find a job, they looked back at the opportunity to study in the United States as a way to improve career prospects.

So he lost his job just after we got married and he had already gotten the offer from [the institution] and he declined it before he was let go… he tried to find another job quickly and everything was not happening so he contacted [the institution] and told them whether there was a chance he could change his mind and come and start the program.

Participant B also brought up that they came about six months after their spouse had arrived to start their program. Based off of the information obtained through the interviews, the strain of being newlyweds and losing a sense of financial security was enough to have caused major frustrations for the participants and their family.

Higher Cost of Living

The general cost of living in the city where the institution was located, and therefore where the participants lived, was considered one of the most expensive locations in the United States to live. Participants were generally accustomed to a more affordable cost of living in their home countries. Adding to the general cost of living was the stress of obtaining affordable housing was well as health care.

Obtaining Affordable Housing. The cost of housing came as a big struggle for all of the five spouses which were interviewed. Participant A noted rent was so expensive in this location that they had to live with roommates, another couple, when they would prefer to live alone by themselves: “So we need to, we need to, renting an apartment with other, other students so
[housing] is not affordable to us” Participant D noted apartments were very expensive to rent and not only a struggle for them, but the student spouse as well:

It was a struggle for my husband. But he finds [an apartment] when I came here, but he has trouble with that. He finds it hard like many other students. Like it’s really expensive.

Participant E noted apartments were expensive from the beginning. They also stated that they had pre-existing expectations before they arrived of having couple housing available to them. This was due to such housing being offered to not only their parents when they had coming to the United States 30 years before for graduate work but also friends at other institutions located throughout the United States, although not in the New England area.

Of course things are more expensive… a lot more expensive. I didn’t feel like things were all set for us. I mean, like I recall my father always talking about when he got his offer to the PhD, I know that was like 25 years ago or 30 years ago… I do understand that… but he always told us that they already had the housing for married people at [the institution their father attended].

F2 visa status preventing work added to this struggle. At the current institution, even if they were able to get graduate housing they would not qualify as it is only available for students, not couples. It appeared only institutions providing couple specific housing would help in terms of providing affordable housing to married couples.

**Health care.** Health care and health insurance were both considered very expensive by the participants. It is well known already throughout available literature that health care and health insurance was a major issue for American citizens in terms of cost and affordability, so it was easy to see how it would come up as a major frustration and struggle for the participants.

Participant B complained about the long wait time to see a doctor, for instance to discuss a
lingering headache, while Participant D received health care through the state sponsored program after not being able to afford any other plan and had a hard time finding doctors. They mentioned the institution provided them information on a health insurance plan but “but we couldn’t afford it so we couldn’t find any other options there. They’re more expensive, really hard to… and could not find doctors… but we solved this.” They had solved it by being able to enroll in the state-sponsored health insurance program which they were told they qualified for.

Not only was health care and health insurance important for when one gets sick, it was also something the participants took into consideration when and where they would start a family. Participant A wanted to start a family but “health care is very expensive because we plan to have a baby but… and the money is too [laughter]”. The cost of a hospital stay and all other medical care which might be needed to start a family appeared to be another financial strain on international student spouses and their partners while studying at the institution.

**Language Barriers**

Not surprisingly based off of the previous literature as discussed in Chapter Two, language barriers was a common frustration for the participants. Many participants stressed while they understood English well, they had a hard time expressing their feelings. Two of the participants articulated at length their frustrations with the language barriers they faced. Participant A noted “language barrier [is a struggle] because my speaking is not, it’s not good. I know I can, I can understand people’s, um, I can understand others talk out of words, but I could not express my ideas”. Another participant emphasized:

You know my English is not good. I can read really good but listening and speaking, uh, is bad. When someone talk to me, uh, I, I can’t respond at once. I should translate it to my
native language so it spends too much time. Um, I, I can’t clearly express what I want to say. So complicated. It’s difficult.

This language barrier frustration also occurred when it came to communicating with others. Some brought up not only the language barrier but the cultural component of speaking with a native English speaker as “I don’t know how to, how to start a topic of how or how to communicate with others [native English speakers]… because we have different culture but… I don’t know how to talk to them.” If spouses were trying to improve their English language skills, they would do their own research and oftentimes end up at the local library where language groups would advertise their meetings:

I find just libraries, public libraries. And there are lots of people there. You could have chance to improve your English. And they are really very important because they do it voluntarily thanks to them, but again, lots of people coming from different countries. For example, you’re going to have to have a chance to speak. This one is a circle because when I came to America I wanted to improve my English. While these groups at the libraries were not with native speakers, it did appear to allow the participants to work on their language skills and have been a less stressful way to communicate with English speakers.

**Conclusion**

Frustration was a major overlapping theme throughout the discussions with the participants. Boredom, housing, health insurance, and language barriers were the most common sub themes when it dealt with frustration and each affected the majority of the participants. Since their visa status prevented them from working, many of the participants were left to stay home while their partner attended class and other institutional social events. Many of the participants
were highly educated and held jobs back at their home countries and were not used to the lack of independence both financially and socially which they were accustomed to back home. Some of the participants had to move in and rent apartments with other couples while another pointed out while it might not have been a direct struggle for them, it would have been for their partner when it came to finding housing, especially if the student spouse was there before they arrived. Health care was another frustration to them, primarily due to the financial cost of obtaining insurance. For one participant, it even made them contemplate holding off on having a family. Language barriers prevented the participants from being confident with interacting with others. Through these conversations with the participants, they not only came with their student spouse with a hope of potentially furthering their career, but also wanted to improve their language skills. Even though they were not provided any information from the institution, some of them were able to find local groups in the library to help. As one participant summarized:

> It was very difficult for us to find a house, especially the F2 person is non-existent so they cannot work. They cannot do anything in the world, and they’re still expected to pay health insurance and live.

**Lack of Support Services**

The second theme which occurred during the analysis was the lack of support services being offered to spouses of international students. All five of the spouses who were interviewed were not aware of any services which would be offered by the institution upon arrival. Participant B thought it was not good at all that no information had been provided to them. However, both Participant C and D mentioned it was possible it could have been provided to their spouses and just not forwarded on to them. It is important to note that all of the participants stated they did not receive any documents from the institution except their I20 which allowed
them to enter the country. Participant C received a document which outlined what they could and could not do with their I20 but none of the participants mentioned receiving documentation outlining the restrictions they would face. Participant E added they did not receive any information from the institution until they switched visa status from F2 to F1 when they became a graduate student at the institution.

There were three sub-themes which were found in the analysis of the data. The sub-themes included housing assistance, depending on others, and no access to general institutional services.

**Housing Assistance**

Receiving assistance when it came to securing housing was another concern for the spouses. Since all five of the participants had never been to the United States before they came either with or to join their partner for their studies, they were not familiar to the area and the renting culture of the city the institution was located in. Participant E stated “but yeah it was just a difficult process for you to be new to the place and you don’t know the area as much so spending a lot of time checking houses… realtors… It was just difficult when you’ve come from somewhere else.”

Even if they received some information about housing from the institution, the information was not always in the best interest of the spouse and their families. Participant D was the only one in the study who mentioned receiving some sort of information about housing from the institution. However, they stated while information was received, it was for housing which was extremely expensive and included other issues upon viewing which made her and her husband decide to look elsewhere for housing which they eventually found.
Participant E was particularly vocal about the lack of support they felt from the institution in terms of housing. As previously mentioned in the prior theme, they had been under the impression there would be housing available for couples such as themselves provided by the institution. Unfortunately this was not the case and her and her husband struggled to find housing without any support of how the renting system worked.

**Depending on Others**

Participants oftentimes felt they were depending on others due to the lack of independence their visa status afforded them as well as the lack of support provided to them by the institution. When it came to learning about the city and other important information, they turned to friends for their opinions because “they come here like us as students and had opinions just between us, the city, which is convenient for us. But not from [the institution].” Learning about the local community was not the only area participants felt they depended on others to learn more about, but they were also financially dependent on their partner as well. For instance, Participant C stressed how they were now financially dependent on their student spouse and had to rely on them for basic needs when they mentioned “and then you’re financially dependent on your husband, you have to ask for the credit card.”

Not only were the participants not able to work and therefore not able to gain some sort of financial independence, three out of the five participants ended up enrolling in graduate programs in order to switch from an F2 visa to an F1 visa which appeared to lessen the restrictions they would face while in the United States. For many of them, such as Participant E, they felt like they had no other choice than to do so.

So I’m used to working every single day. I’m used to being independent and on my own income, doing everything going on around me and then suddenly you’re just not allowed
to do anything, you know what I mean? So of course that wasn’t acceptable to me. I was hoping to get a job. Unfortunately that’s not an option… so the only option I had was to go back to study.

Enrolling in a degree program seemed to be the only way these spouses could gain some sort of freedom and independence back which they enjoyed in their home country. Participant A, C, and E all transferred from F2 to F1 due to the struggles they faced being on a dependent visa.

**No Access to General University Services**

The last subtheme which was brought up by the participants in terms of the lack of support they experienced was how they were not allowed access to general university services which could benefit them. While each participant understood and believed they should not have access to the classrooms, they did believe they should be able to attend certain events on campus and have access to at least some of the institutional recreational facilities.

**Events on campus.** As mentioned in previous sections, all of the participants felt they did not receive any information from the institution which included information about events which might be occurring throughout campus. One participant even talked about how “if it’s something going on at [the institution] or other universities, we will probably join them.” All of the five participants which took part in the study were highly educated and stated they would have been interested in attending various free seminars which were constantly held throughout the academic year.

Part of this issue seemed to stem from information not being passed on from the student spouse. One spouse explained by stating “he has lots of things to do around and can’t always tell me there’s something.” In addition to not being provided information either from the institution or by the participant’s spouse, some events might be strictly reserved for students and no one
else. For instance, “yeah, sometimes it’s hard to find what’s going on and you always in something. Also, some events are just for students and maybe suppose this can be open.” Another participant questioned “why are you not invite the spouses? Could be educated people who are interested in seminars!”

**Institutional recreational facilities.** Both Participants A and C talked about their love of swimming and how they wished they could have access to the institution's swimming pool. Participant D stated her husband, as a student, had the advantage of using the campus gym but she had to find a gym closer to her home when it would be better to use the campus gym instead. However, these facilities were only available to students and paying staff and faculty members. Since the participants were already under financial strain due to the fact they could not work under the restrictions placed on their visa status, to be able to use the facilities their spouse already had access to as a student, even at a minor additional cost, could help. This would allow, as the participants noted, a chance to alleviate their boredom.

Participants were divided on whether or not they should be able to access the university library on campus. Most felt they should have access to the library to be able to further their own independent studies or at least be able to read for pleasure. Sure they already were going to other public libraries for language meetup groups, but they felt they should still be able to have access to the library on campus due their student partner being enrolled there. However, Participant E felt dependent spouses did not need to have access to the library because “well the library is a tricky issue because it is difficult for anyone that’s not a student to get access to it”. They suggested instead they be able to accompany their spouse on other leisure events such as being able to take advantage of the free museum entrance which students, but not their partners, had
access to use and enjoy. As they joked “I mean, my husband’s not going to go to the museum by himself, you know what I mean?”

Conclusion

Participants dealt with what they classified as lack of support services throughout their time on the dependent F2 visa. This included lack of housing assistance, having to depend on others for basic needs, and no access to institution recreation facilities. In terms of housing assistance, many felt they were on their own in trying to navigate the renting structure of a new city and culture they had not been used to before. While one participant mentioned receiving some type of information from the institution, they found it was only for expensive apartments and did not offer information about housing as a whole. Another participant came to the United States with the assumption there would be university housing available strictly for married couples due to what was available at other institutions their friends attended as well as the experience her parents had at another institution years earlier when her father was obtaining his graduate degree.

The need to depend on others was experienced by participants and was found be both financial and social dependence. Since those who are on a F2 dependent visa could not work, the participants were financially dependent on whatever money they had saved before arriving in the United States or what the student spouse was able to receive in aid. This was particularly stressful for the participants because the majority mentioned they were working professionally before they left to join their partner. In addition, the participants felt they depended on their spouse as a way of social support as they did not have many chances to interact with others and oftentimes depended on their friends from back home who had been abroad before for information on what to do at their new home.
Lastly, not having access to general university services was considered a lack of support by the institution in interacting with the participants. The participants understood while they could not have unlimited access to everything which an enrolled student would, they did feel the institution should have allowed them to access facilities such as the library and the gym. In terms of other access, they believed they should have being able to attend events going on throughout campus such as seminars which were free, especially since they might be interested in the topics. Other perks which students might receive, such as having free access to specific museums, were deemed important by the spouses to take part in and the student oftentimes would not want to attend such events alone.

These all would lead for the participants to display frustration towards the institution in now providing them support as well. Participant A summarized her frustration with the institution in regards to the lack of support in the following words: “I think [the institution] doesn’t care about F2 dependents… they only care about money.”

**Lack of Information**

The third and final theme which was uncovered from this research study was lack of information being provided to the participants from the academic institution. This theme was divided up into the sub themes of valuable information, methods to improve communication of information, and need for the creation of a spousal identification card.

**Valuable Information**

The immediate subtheme which came up in this area was the concept of valuable information. Throughout the interviews, all the participants stressed what areas they wished they had been provided information on which they deemed valuable to them. This included health
care, academic programs, legal support, programming on campus, career counseling, language programs, obtaining housing, and point of contact once they arrived on campus.

Health care. Not surprisingly, the majority of the participants stressed how valuable information on the health care system in the United States would be to them. When it came to finding out what information those on a F2 visa would have liked to have, health care was a major one. Participants A, C, and D all stressed they wished there was a way for institutions to offer health coverage at a more affordable cost since dependents were not able to work and therefore financially restricted. Participant A particularly wanted info on how to prepare to see a doctor. Information on specific health care plans, such as the state sponsored one which Participant D ended up enrolling in, would be great as well to be provided to spouses.

Mental health information was another area in health care which the study participants wanted more information on. Some participants picked up on the fact many of their friends or themselves dealt with such issues while in F2 visa status and would benefit from having some sort of knowledge on where to go and who to speak to about obtaining those services. Participant C was particularly vocal in this area:

Exactly! But still taboo [mental health] coming from India and if somebody said ‘hey let’s do mental health counseling’ I would be like ‘hey, no, no!’ But yeah, now I’m very open to more for that, so if I need one. So like you have no one to talk to and then suddenly your confidence is going down because you know, you’re dependent on your husband to go out around the city or something. Then you really need someone to talk to.

What was also important to note was the participant brought up the notion of cultural stigma about mental health. They went on to state it would be important to have someone who
understood the culture of the F2 dependent wishing to obtain these services to better support them.

The second area within health care that was brought up was knowing how to visit and communicate with American doctors. Some participants had health issues come up and were confused on where to go so information detailing how to do so would be important. For instance, Participant D noted “two or three times I have not feel good and some problems with my health. I couldn’t find where to go or what to do here. This was so important for me”. Participant A stressed, “the health process, I think, and how to visit the doctor, the doctor here as F2 dependents because if we don’t know if I don’t have health insurance”. Not only was it hard to find out where to see a doctor, but trying to make sure their health insurance would be accepted or if they were covered at all was also a concern.

Lastly, providing information on specific English language terms which F2 dependents could use when going to the doctors to help express their concerns appeared to be valuable. This was very important to Participant A, who was concerned because, as she stated, “I don’t know how to express my, my feelings about my body”. Having a cheat sheet of terms was noted by participants as extremely important to them and appeared as something institutions should provide to them.

**Academic programs.** Classes were another form of valuable information the participants felt should have been provided to them by the institution. Some of the participants had expressed they might had been interested in taking a course to help with their professional development interests or even decided to enroll in a specific program they might not had been made aware of. Participant C emphasized this concept during the interview:
Because knowing my background, you know, a university could helped me with, you know, selecting a course that, you know ‘do you want to go for any courses? Like we have these mini courses…’ something related to my field. So, um, once I visited my husband’s office and I met his colleagues and every, everyone and his colleague, he’s also from [the institution] and he introduced me to project management which I’m doing now. So that was a year later after I came to America. So if I would have introduced that course earlier, you know, I would have started.

The cost of these programs was another point of consideration by participants. Similar to a friends and family discount, Participant A mentioned dependents should be allowed to enroll in courses at a lower rate than what normally would be charged. As discussed in the previous sections, all but one participant mentioned they had held jobs in their home country and all of them brought up they would have liked to take courses to help their professional development but were not sure where to start and information provided from the institution would help with that.

**Legal support.** As part of the information about classes the participants would like as a dependent, they also mentioned being provided information on how legally to switch from dependent status to a student visa. In this case, from an F2 to an F1 visa. Participants A, C, and E all ended up switching visa status and enrolling in programs at the institution. This new visa status provided them more freedom than being a dependent, but as Participant E relayed, being a student was not in their original plan and was only done because they felt no other alternative:

Honesty I would have done it whatever it was, but I have nowhere to go. So the only route that was open for me was go to work, convince the [faculty to work with me] and get accepted to do the PhD which is what I did.
Participants all agreed having information already available to dependents in regards to switching statuses would be greatly beneficial, especially upon arrival.

The concept of having legal information available to dependents when it came to domestic violence and how to proceed with divorce was important in particular for Participant A. She remarked how important that information was “because I think domestic violence, um, between international spouses is very common. It’s really common.” Having this important information readily available to those dependents who are victims of domestic violence or who are looking to go through the process of divorce would make a huge difference according to some of the participants.

**Programing on campus.** Boredom was mentioned in a previous section as one of the struggles the participants faced as being on the F2 dependent visa. It would come to no surprise every participant in the study mentioned having information on various social clubs such as those going on throughout the institution would be extremely valuable. Some had struggled to find information on social groups and had to find them on their own which is what Participant C did:

I think um… so about this club I got to know later that is an [institutional] club, I think if that would’ve been introduced to me initially, I got to know later and I joined that later, but initially itself, if I read more to know about that, it would have helped me to go out and talk to people and that is a very informal group and you know, when I went later I felt so good talking to them, you know, even though people are very good, they’re excellent in English, and still they came there for networking and I’m a kind of person who likes networking, I like to go out, like to talk to people.

Participants stated having this information in advance would make the transition into living in a new country a lot easier than it had been without it.
Social programs were not the only information in regards to events on campus. As Participant A stressed “social programs are ok... and some academic ones too. Because most of us, we don't want to just stay at home watching videos, music, and cooking”. There were many educational events such as guest speakers, seminars, and conferences which were regularly held on campus. Information on such events were desired by the participants. Participant E asked “Why are you not inviting the spouse? Could be educated people who are interested in seminars!” Making sure the dependents were notified of these events was key. Participant D voiced “yeah, sometimes it’s hard to find what’s going on and you always in something. Also, some events are just for students and maybe suppose this can be open [to dependents].” Participant E added to this sentiment reinforcing these events should be open and free to spouses like they were to students:

The student is very busy, so what’s the spouse going to do if they can’t work and they can’t access anything and of course they’re going to be on a very tight budget because they’re moving to one of the most expensive places. So just give us ideas of things to do or invite us to things that are happening in the university or like seminars.

Volunteering at such events on campus would be information participants stated they were interested in and would be happy to help out at. Participant D voiced this idea directly when she remarked “You know I’m free. I don’t have job or something. I have time. Maybe volunteer jobs. Yeah. I know our [partners] need us to do something to earn money just to do something to be in outside social life.” They even elaborated more on the concept by bringing up the fact there were many interest groups such as for animal rights, human rights, and unions which have relationships on campus but it was not easy to find or join those types of clubs as a dependent.
Joining an interest group on campus was not the only way dependents thought they could volunteer. They also wanted information on how to volunteer to help out on the various events which occurred on campus. Participant E explained

Or even volunteer work here at the university. Even if the F2 people are not supposed to get paid, but there are a lot of events that happen here at the university that usually need people to help, like volunteering events, these options for them. If someone would have told me about something I can volunteer to when I was on an F2, I would have loved it. I was going crazy.

Volunteering would allow, as the quote showed, a chance for the participants to get out of their lodgings and be able to interact more with people, lessening their boredom.

Career counseling. Career counseling came up with two of the participants of the study, both of whom had careers back home. Participant B had worked as an accountant and Participant C had her MBA and had worked in finance. It was not surprising they both considered information on career counseling as important for those on the F2 dependent visa. Part of career counselling could also be tied into what courses the dependents could take to help them learn new skills. These participants had quit lucrative careers back home and were essentially taking years off from the workforce and wanted to make sure they could re-enter it without issue.

In addition, Participant B thought having information on the employability of specific academic program graduates was important as well. She stated she would have liked to know what the chances the degree her husband was obtaining would lead to a job at the end of the program. This would be important information to help determine whether or not it would be worth spending the money to earn the degree.
**English language programs.** Interest in information on English language programs also came up with the majority of participants. Participant B exclaimed that she thought information on language was the most important. Participant A mentioned “we don’t have any information about how to take part in language, a language groups as an F2 dependent. I don’t have any information” and would have wanted more information on available classes to improve their skills as “when I was F2 [visa] dependent, no chance for me to talk”. Participant D echoed the same sentiment saying her main problem was English language so she started looking for language courses and unfortunately there were no such courses offered at the institution. Participant B wanted both more information on language courses, whether available at the institution or outside of it, and make such classes free for dependents.

**Obtaining housing.** Participants all stated information on how to rent an apartment was valuable information they wished they had known before arriving. While Participant D mentioned the institution had provided some information on apartments in the area, they were considerably very expensive and had other problems which they did not elaborate on what those exactly were. The apartments provided in the information most likely had a working relationship with the institution and could had been located near the campus based off of the interview with participant. Either way, Participant D stressed they were outside their affordability range. Making sure information on those apartments listed were in a wide affordability range would be important.

Other information in regards to obtaining housing would be for institutions to provide documentation to guarantee students, especially international students and their families, in order for them to rent apartments. Participant D explained how she had issues finding housing because the institution was not willing to be a financial guarantor: “Yeah there were a few houses, and we
like the houses and they were convenient for our budget but would not rent them because no guarantor”. While it is understandable the institution cannot afford to be a financial guarantor to every single one of their students, perhaps they could provide information to the participants on how to apply for them to be one in order to secure housing but only limit it to married international couples.

Offering affordable housing on campus specifically for married couples, as Participant E brought up in their interview, was another option for institutions to get around having to be a financial guarantors for those wanting to rent apartments during their stay. Most couples wanted to be close to campus where oftentimes the rent was the highest and this was an opportunity for institutions to provide another needed services to their international students and their dependents. Participant E noted most other institutions, including where her father was working on his doctorate degree, had such housing available and was not sure why this specific institution did not offer it and would have appreciated information on housing specifically designated for married couples.

Point of contact. Having a specific point of contact at the institution for any questions or concerns for those on the F2 dependent visa was considered valuable information by the participants. Based off the various conversations with the participants, two types of contacts seemed to come up which would be beneficial to have information on. These included a university administrator specifically assigned to deal with F2 dependents and someone else, almost similar to a peer mentor, which could be a fellow dependent who has been there for a while and would have a better understanding of the struggles experienced.

Ideally, as brought up the participants, they would like information on someone at the university they could contact if they had specific questions on anything. They also believed this
administrator could help and be able to come up with many more ideas on how to improve the experience of dependents. A single person whose only focus is on the needs of the dependents is ideal, but just having someone take that on as part of their job description is enough as well.

Participant E elaborated stating:

There are so many administrative positions all around the university admissions, if one of them, you don’t even have to allocate the human, but if one of the existing ones had in their job description that they need to take care of spouses… so yeah, I would just make this one of this responsibility is assigned to someone. If it's just out there in the air and then some people might assume than others are doing it, uh, and we might keep going in circles. And in reality, no one is actually doing it, need to get someone specifically to do it.”

Just having information in terms of contact information for someone the dependents could contact on a university level was reported by the participants as having the potential to lower the frustrations and isolation they felt.

In addition, some of the participants mentioned it would be great to have contact information for someone such as a peer mentor. Participant C suggested preferably someone from the same background as the F2 dependent to better understand which could help with the cultural understanding and language barriers many dependents face. Participant D added to this by saying these peer mentors could “maybe when we first come here we find a person like you, first maybe a little conversation here. Somethings are if you have a problem you can call me and maybe something else… I can’t not say… it would be nice” as they would be a person in a similar position as the participants were. This person ideally, according to Participant D, can
arrange some conversation, some meetings between older and newer spouses who are just arriving on campus and do not know anyone.

The importance of emotional support was not lost on Participant E. This was considered extremely valuable to the dependents. Participant E summarized why this such support is important to this demographic:

But the emotional support is very important as well. In the end, international students are leaving their life back home, you know, like literally their whole life. So maybe it was even more emotional for me because I was newly married, you know.

Both the institutional administrator and the peer mentors would be able to offer emotional support to those dependents who oftentimes were in dire need of help such due to being away from the normal support systems of friends and families who are back in their home country.

Methods to Improve Communication

Once the institutions are able to assemble and create all the valuable information for the dependents, it is important for the institution to know the best way to communicate with the spouses. As Participant E exclaimed “just making the spouse feel like they exist” appeared to make a world of difference. The participants noted they yearned for some type of communication from the institution. However, currently there was no communication between the institution and the dependent spouses, as one participant noted “I really do mean it when I say I was not in existence. So a person who was not in existence does not receive emails [laughter].” The three ways the participants stated the institution could do to improve this communication including a gesture of acknowledgement, email, and website.

Gesture of acknowledgement from the institution. Participants were hungry for any type of acknowledgement from the institution that knew the spouse had come with their student
partner. Participant B lamented just wanting “a sign, just a university know that the spouse is coming”. This could be, as Participant C suggested, something as simple as a welcome letter perhaps from either the department of international programs on campus or any administrative department at the institution. These letters did not have to be specialized uniquely to each student, a general welcome letter would be good enough. The participants just wanted something from the institution that let them know the dependent came with the student spouse so they did not feel forgotten or “non-existent”. As one participant stressed, “as a student you get everything [emails], but as a spouse of the student - nothing.”

**Email.** The most popular way of improving communication from the institution in providing information to the participants was via email. Participants wanted the institution to directly email the dependents since student spouses might not have the time to look or forward on information so direct communication appeared to be better. Participant E explained:

Exactly, you get tons of emails [as a student]. If some of those emails that have general information could be sent to the spouse, I mean that would free time off the actual student. You know what I mean? I mean my husband didn’t have time to read all of this to be very honest with you. You know what I mean? But some of that stuff could have been helpful to the spouse.

Obtaining the dependent’s email would rely on the student spouse. However, the department handing international programs could easily collect email addresses from the dependents. This could then create a direct communication link. The first email could even be used as a welcome letter as Participant E noted:

I would have loved to even get an email. [My husband] can provide my email and get an email from the university just like he does that says this is for spouses of international
students, we have the following services. If they do have any like something like, oh well we offer if you want English language classes, social groups, stuff like that. Anything.

In that same welcome email, per the suggestion of Participant A, there could even be a link to a website which included the desired resources for the dependent spouses to access.

**Website.** In addition to emails, the creation of a website which would provide the valuable information the dependent spouse would want was also suggested by the majority of participants. Participant A and B both voiced an opinion stating they believed a website would be the most effective way to provide information. Participant A elaborated on the need for such a support service:

More information on the website. I went on our website and I cannot get any information about… health insurance price for F2 dependents and I don't’ know where to ask what help with some legal advice. Otherwise, some information for the website would be great. Having a website would provide a one-stop shop for the institution who can just refer to that specific link whenever someone had a question. They would just need to update the website instead of sending out individual emails to every dependent.

**Creation of a Spousal Identification Card**

Lastly, the idea of the creation of a spousal identification card was brought up in several of the interviews. These identification cards would be used for the dependents to access recreational services such as the gym, library, or swimming pool on campus. Both Participant B, D, and E went further and compared them the type of identification cards the institution provided their alumni. Participant E wished for something “like the alumni cards, they’re not, for example, allowed to enter the library, but they’re allowed to do other stuff or they’re recognized as just an, some sort of, you know what I mean. You exist.” Participant B elaborated further by stating
“that's the only difference is, uh, difference is the specific ID can’t just go to classes but they can use the ID to go to the library, go to the gym, go to classrooms, and other places they would want to go.” Just having some sort of institutional identification card, even though it made it clear they were not a student, would provide some sort of sense of connection to the institution for the participants and other dependent spouses.

**Conclusion**

Every participant taking part in the study felt there was a huge lack of information provided to them by the institution. The first step the participants felt institutions needed to do was to take a look at what was considered valuable information to be sent on to them. The interviews showed healthcare, academic programs, legal support, programming on campus, career counseling, language programs, obtaining housing, and point of contact once they arrived on campus were all important information F2 dependents wanted to know. Improving methods of communication between the dependents and the institution also needed to be reviewed. The participants all stressed wanting some sort of welcome letter or gesture from the institution showing they were aware of the dependent spouse. In terms of distributing the important information, participants found emailing them directly or posting the information on a website would be just as effective. Lastly, the majority of the participants brought up the idea of having an identification card, similar to those issued to alumni, would benefit them greatly by allowing them access to institutional resources and events.

Simply providing the dependents a way to access important information that would already have been made available to their student spouse would make all the difference. As Participant C exclaimed, “if I had been provided with all of these resources, then I would not be eating my husband’s head! [laughter]”
**Summation**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the individual experiences of international student spouses in order to understand their perceptions of what support institutions of higher education should provide them during their time in the United States. The following research question had been developed for this study: What role do international student spouses perceive institutions of higher education have in terms of offering support services? An analysis of the interview data conducted for this study provided many insights into the perceptions of international student spouses who are in the United States on an F2 dependent status. Generally speaking, the consensus of the participants was their perceptions of the support they received drastically was different from the support they needed.

Frustrations in daily life was identified in this study as a major indicator of which support systems international student spouses would need to have access to during their time associated with the institution. Majority of the participants described a sense of boredom with the limitations they experienced. Due to the lack of independence socially and financially brought about by the severe restrictions of their dependent visa status, participants expressed frustrations in regards to not being able to continue working which put financial strains on their relationships. Part of the financial strain was not being to find affordable housing in the area because of lack of income and the general high cost of living in this particular city. Socially, participants felt isolated because the student spouse had more interactions with others to create friendships while dependents had nothing to do but stay home. Language barriers also provided stress as it prevented the participants from pursuing friendships with native speakers as they had lack of confidence in their capabilities to communicate with others whether on a social or professional (such as seeking medical attention) level.
Lack of support came up in various forms throughout the interviews. This came up when talking about housing assistance, having to depend on others, and not being able to access general institutional resources such as the gym and library. Housing was considered a major stressor for the participants which was only exasperated by the lack of financial support due to the lack of ability to work. In particular, the lack of support was felt more in terms of not helping the participants obtain affordable housing. In addition, there was no on-campus housing available to couples while the expectation there would be was based on it being available at other institutions. Participants had to depend on others for many things. They were financially and socially dependent on their student spouse for everything in addition to hoping they would pass on important information to them as well. Since the institution did not provide much information, the participants and their student spouses depended a lot on the advice of those had been in the location before to gain knowledge. Lastly, there was no support from the institution to integrate the participants into the local community as they were not invited to seminars or other social events on campus. They were also not allowed access to the some of the general facilities such as the gym and library which would be of major benefit to them since the student spouse already had access to them.

Finally, lack of information was the biggest theme throughout the interviews conducted for this study. The participants discussed what information was valuable to them, methods on how to improve communication, and the need for the creation of a spousal identification card. There were several areas and ideas of what information was considered valuable to the participants. All but the request for information on how to transfer from an F2 visa status to F1 status were information which would be beneficial not only to international students spouses, but international students who were not married as well and perhaps was already being sent to the
international student demographic but not being forwarded on to spouses. Information on health care, housing, career counseling, language programs, and social opportunities were the most popular requests for information by the participants. In terms of communication, a welcome letter just showing the dependent spouse the institution knew they were coming was suggested. For providing the desired information to the participants, emailing the dependent spouses directly with a designated link to information appeared to be the most useful choice. Lastly, the participants stressed a need for the institution to provide a designated administrator whose role would be to anticipate the needs of the dependent spouses, improve available services to them, in addition to them being a welcoming resources for any issues the dependent spouses might have during their time on campus.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of spouses of international students with the aim of understanding what support systems were provided to them by institutions of higher education during their time in the United States. This study was developed using acculturation theory, credited to John Berry (1992; 1997; 2003; 2005; 2006), which provided the researcher a unique theoretical perspective in order to explore how the perceptions international students spouses on F2 dependent visas had in regards to which support services were expected to be offered and which ones were offered in reality. A qualitative research approach was used for this particular study in order to capture unique experiences of international student spouses on dependent visas who were considered the key stakeholders.

Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provided the investigation of how the key stakeholders perceived institutional support systems as international student spouses on dependent visa statuses. In order to accomplish such a goal, there was need by the researcher to use an approach which would capture each of the unique experiences obtained from five participants who were interviewed for the study, including being able to look at both the similarities and differences of what they individually experienced. By using IPA as the strategy of inquiry for this research project, the researcher was able to focus on the experiences of the individuals and ask specific questions that would capture their lived experiences. In addition, the IPA methodology allowed the researcher to look at their own learning and personal experiences as an academic administrator in regards to the lack of support systems being offered by the institution to spouses of international students.

Data for this study was collected through in-depth, one-on-one interviews which yielded detailed descriptions of the participants’ unique experiences when it came to their perceptions of
institutional support systems. The five international student spouses on an F2 dependent visa who took part in this study provided the researcher with detailed accounts of their own unique experiences with their lack of support systems available to them by institutions of higher education. Smith et al (2009) provided a detailed procedure when it came to analyzing data from IPA methodology studies.

The researcher discovered three superordinate themes and ten subthemes through this analysis leading to defining elements in regards to the participants’ experiences with or lack of support systems at a specific institution in higher education. The superordinate and subthemes were: 1) frustrations with daily life (1.1 boredom, 1.2 lack of work, 1.3 higher cost of living, and 1.4 language barrier), 2) lack of support (2.1 housing assistance, 2.2 depending on others, and 2.3 no access to institutional services), and 3) lack of information (3.1 valuable information, 3.2 methods to improve communication, and 3.3 creation of a spousal identification card). When viewed as a whole, each of the themes provided an answer to the research question by suggesting international student spouses who were in the United States on a F2 dependent visa received little to no support from institutions of higher education and there was much which could be done in order to help with the spouses’ acculturation into American way of life.

This chapter will present and discuss the findings of this particular research study. The following sections will discuss how the findings relate to this study’s literature review provided in Chapter Two. The researcher developed these findings by using the analyzed data and were influenced by the themes that emerged as part of this study. Findings included the need for better communication between institution and dependent spouses, more opportunities for integration into campus community, and the creation of on-ground support. In addition, there were new
discoveries made in this research study which had not been discussed in prior literature. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of this study for practice and research.

**Need for Better Communication between Institution and Dependent Spouses**

Throughout the study, the participants noted consistently the lack of information they received from the institution, especially when it came to support services being offered. While the participants remarked they did not receive any communication from the institution, they stressed how important their desire was for that to change. During these discussions, the mentioning of a welcome letter, email, and website communication all came up as potential ways institutions could provide communication with the spouses. This appeared to be in agreement with Varma (2001) whose study found communication to be key when providing support to international student spouses.

Roberts and Dunworth’s (2012) study showed the drastic differences in opinions between higher education administrators and international students when it came to whether or not support services were available. Their study showed administrators believed too much information about services were being sent to international students while half of the international student focus group stated they had no idea about any of the support services which were being offered to them. While this study did not seek input from the international program administrators as the research site, some of the participants noted in their interviews that there was a potential their partner had received information but not forwarded that information on to them. In fact, one of the participants who had ended up changing their visa status from an F2 dependent to F1 student visa stated that she only received communication while a student. Even then she said the rate of communication was overwhelming. Based off of that information, the
findings from this study appears to be in line with part of what was found in Roberts and Dunworth (2012).

This study was in agreement with Fritz, Chin and DeMarinis (2008) with both showing constant communication with the international student spouse demographic for assessing needs would be pertinent to providing important information. The information provided through the interviews with the participants revealed that institutions lacked the ability to provide them with support services that demonstrated the level of frustration of this population. Since the institution did not provide any information to the participants in terms of what support services were available to them, it is hard to answer whether the institution had attempted or considered doing some sort of assessment planning to see what services might be beneficial to provide to the spouses. As a result, the researcher was limited because of the inability to assess how these support services were beneficial to the participants of the study as they were not informed of these essential services. Consequently, this concept exemplified Fritz, Chin, and DeMarinis (2008) because without providing continued communication to international student spouses in regards to support services, the spouse would remain less knowledgeable about these supports.

While the institution did not provide any information on potential support services, one participant mentioned receiving some sort of document which listed housing options close to campus and no other areas. This lack of information sharing on the part of the institution led to the participant having to pay higher rent costs. As Galloway and Jenkins (2005) explained, institutions assumed that they assimilated the information to the spouses, their assumptions can widely contribute to this type of disconnect. Roberts and Dunworth (2012) in their case study found as well that there was a difference in what institutions felt was useful information and how efficiently their participants utilized such information. This illustration clearly demonstrated
how there is a strong need for institutions to change the way they communicate to international student spouses in a way that will increase their ability to access services. Doing so would also be able to set up a sense of certain expectations of what the experience would be like during their time in the United States so dependents could be able to understand what the spouses needed to do on their own and what the institution would handle.

The responses of the participants were in alignment with previous studies noting the participants felt, just like those in Campbell and Prin’s study, that there was a lack of institutional support during their time on campus. The majority of the participants in this study felt there were no services besides those providing information on obtaining the student and dependent visas for entry into the United States. They struggled with adapting to their new normal and had to figure out information on their own in terms of finding housing, health insurance, and other social opportunities. Such experiences reported by the participants were in agreement with Akanawa’s (2015) study which found spouses of international students were oftentimes left to figure out what services were available themselves without any help from institutions of higher education where their student spouse was attending their academic program.

While it appeared none of the participants attempted to communicate with the international program office located at the research site, one participant noted they received a lot of helpful advice, especially when it came to academic programs, from the department where their husband was enrolled as a graduate student. That participant used the information they were provided from those faculty members and ended up enrolling in a program shortly thereafter. This finding clearly aligned with Roberts and Dunworth’s (2012) study which showed many administrators believed staff / student culture could create barriers. Since this study did not investigate directly whether or not international student spouses attempted to communicate
directly with the international program offices, the fact that one of the participant noted a favorable interaction with other professional members of the campus community seems to not align with Roberts and Dunworth’s (2012) findings.

**More Opportunities for Integration into Campus Community**

Interviews with the participants clearly emphasized the need for institutions to integrate spouses of international students into the campus community. Similar to those interviewed in Campbell and Prin’s (2016) study, the spouses had difficulty integrating into the local community in spite of attempting to find and use community resources. In particular, for those spouses who took part in this research study, they had a hard time feeling they could strike up conversations with native English speakers due to lack of confidence in their own language skills but also not knowing proper cultural etiquette in starting conversations. This was in alignment with De Verhelyi’s (1995) study whose participants also showed lack of language skills prevented social interactions.

Just as in De Verhelyi’s (1995) study, the importance of socialization also led to the suggestion by this researcher for institutions in provide more support groups for international student spouses. In particular, programs with a focus on career building and professional growth was a trend throughout the interviews in terms of support services the participants wished the institution would have provided them if they wanted such guidance. This finding was in line with that of Martens and Grant (2008) in terms of spouses having a strong preference for programs for professional growth. While both Bordoloi (2015) and Campbell and Prins’ (2016) studies expressed concerns about career goals due to restrictions put in place by their visa status, that did not seem to be a particular concern among the participants in this study and therefore not in alignment with previous literature. The participants did bring up how they were not allowed to
work but focused more on the financial struggle such situation caused rather than any career setbacks they might experience upon returning home. In fact, one participant in particular had her position she left to come to the United States ready for her to resume upon returning to her home country. This was not in line with what was found in Bordoloï’s (2015) study which argued many of the spouses felt they would experience professional problems if did not return home to work.

The more opportunities which institutions could provide to help international student spouses practice their English language skills would allow another opportunity to integrate more into the campus community. While Chavajay and Skoronek (2008) found language skills were strongly associated with successful acculturation, this study did not have strong findings to validate or invalidate those claims. However, the participants who demonstrated strong English language skills were more likely to not bring up the desire for language programs than those whose language skills were not as strong and developed. In fact, the two participants who demonstrated weak English language skills were the ones who voiced their wish to gain more confidence in such skill to help with their daily life. Many of the participants brought up how valuable language skills were, especially when asking for medical help, which was similar to Kim’s (2006) study which showed many considered English was an indispensable skill because there was a need for it to be used on a daily basis. Finally, the findings from this study are in agreement with Lei et al. (2015) who stated language skills related to spouses connectedness during their time in United States. The participants with higher levels of English language skills were able to feel more comfortable seeking out language partnership programs at such locations as the local libraries to improve their skills.
Creation of On-Ground Support

An additional finding of this research study strongly suggested the creation of some sort of on-ground support system for international student spouses. This was in agreement with prior research which showed the importance of creating a central administrative office for the unique international student demographic needs (Buultjens & Robinson, 2011). Participants in this study noted how they oftentimes did not know where to turn to for answers to any questions they might have. In particular, the majority of the spouses articulated how isolated they felt from everything going on around them and had to look for answers to complicated situations, such as transferring from a dependent to a student visa, themselves.

Administrators who understood the unique situations facing international student spouses was something the participants strongly desired. One of the participants mentioned how they did not receive any support from the international programs office but was greatly impressed with all the help they received from their spouse’s academic department when they were considering changing to a student visa. Similar to Blount’s (2008) findings, it appeared institutional administrators made a huge difference when it came to helping the spouses during their adjustment into American culture. While having a designated administrator to help spouses with any concerns and questions they might have is ideal, simply having someone, such like a peer mentor, could do just as much in terms of emotionally supporting international student spouses during their struggles of adjusting to their new normal. Simply put, information provided by the participants agreed with prior literature that they experienced lack of institutional support (Campbell & Prins, 2016).

Not only having someone to contact about issues spouses were facing, but making sure such person had the correct information to provide is imperative. Many participants agreed with
Alkandari (2014) with the view spouses believed they had not been provided useful information and had no idea who to contact if they had questions. While participants did not directly state they did not feel comfortable asking certain questions to a potential institutional administrator, there was mentioning of being able to talk to someone, potentially a peer mentor, with a similar background as the international student spouses. Such a mentor would have the possibility to be able to understand unique situations experienced by international student spouses from a specific area of the world which a regular institutional advisor might not be able to understand.

New Findings

This particular research study was able to bring new findings to light in terms of the experiences on international student spouses here in the United States which had not been discussed in previous literature. These findings included that international student dependents are actually highly educated, needed affordable housing options, and oftentimes ended up switching from their F2 dependent visa status to the F1 student visa status during their time in the United States.

Dependents are Highly Educated

The participants in this study were highly educated and included those with an MBA, Masters degree in Engineering, with others working in high demand fields such as accounting, finance, and government affairs. They were not the traditional subservient female wife which many might assume. Because of being highly educated, they were prone to boredom and yearned for intellectual stimuli which their visa status prevented them from obtaining. While previous literature tended to focus solely on the need for social interactions, this study showed dependents craved intellectual ones as well. Guest speakers and other seminars were high on the list of events the participants wanted to attend on campus if they were allowed to and were aware of
when they were going on. In fact, this study found intellectual events were just as highly regarded, if not more so, than other social events which might had occurred on campus.

**Need for Affordable Housing**

Another major finding this research study discovered was the particular need of affordable housing which international student spouses noted as very important to them. Housing had not been previously discussed in any of the prior available literature when it came to services desired by international student spouses. Ideal apartment housing was found to be very difficult for the participants to obtain due to the financial restrictions placed upon them by their visa status limitations. Many participants had to live by themselves or ended up having to pay much more than they wanted to in order to live by themselves. This included having to look at housing on the outskirts of the city instead of close by to campus to fit their budget.

On-campus couple housing also was a strong desire by the participants and also had not come up in prior studies. It was clear from the interviews that it would be ideal for international student spouses to have the option of staying on campus in couples-designated housing, similar to a dormitory setting. While dormitory housing for international students perhaps had been discussed in previous studies focusing only on the needs of international students, it had not come up in any of the literature which discussed the needs of the spouses of international students.

**Switching from F2 to F1 Visa Status**

Lastly, there was a new discovery in this study which had not been noted in any of the available prior literature. Three out of the five participants in this research study ended up switching from F2 dependent visa status to F1 international student visa status during their time in the United States. All three of the participants ended up applying and being accepted into
graduate programs at the research site which was also where their partners were attending programs of study as well. It is important to note that these participants all voiced they had made the change in their visa status, not because they originally wanted to further their education, but out of the need to alleviate some of the stress the dependent visa restrictions had put them under. All three participants also noted they received no information from the institution on how to switch their visa status and just did so based off of their own research.

Participants in this study addressed how they would have liked to know what the procedure would have been if one had decided to enroll as a student while in the United States as a dependent. Many did not know switching their visa status could be an option and provide them more freedom than what they were experiencing under the dependent visa status. This study now can let international program offices know they should be providing such information to these international student spouses upon arrival.

**Conclusion**

For this research study, the following research question was developed: What role do international student spouses perceive institutions of higher education have in terms of offering support services? The detailed and rich answers to the research question were collected from interviewing the five international student spouses who took part in the study.

Communication appeared to be one of the most important issues to spouses of international students based off of this study. International student spouses hungered for any sort of information from the institution. Based off of the conversations with participants, there was no communication between them and the institution. This was one of the reasons spouses struggled so much during their time on campus. The spouses were not made aware of important topics such as health care, housing, and campus events which might be of interest to them. Such
information should be easily and readily available to them. As one of the participants noted, they felt like they were nonexistent to the institution even though prior research has shown how they were connected to the wellbeing of the student spouse.

Need for inclusion into the campus community was another important finding from the study. Since the spouses oftentimes felt isolated, simply knowing about campus events such as seminars and other social programs would have made them feel much more included and welcomed by the institution. The participants in the study were highly educated with many obtaining advanced degrees before arrival and were interested in many of the academic seminars and speakers which had come to campus. However, due to the lack of communication from the institution, they were not made aware of such events until it was much too late to attend.

Lack of communication and the lack of inclusion for the spouses of international students all came down to the issue there was no on-ground support for them. If the institution had an administrator in the international program office who would focus on the needs of international student spouses, they would be able to develop a communication procedure between the institution and the international student spouses in addition to creating programing to help include the spouses into the campus community. The participants noted how they struggled with not knowing who to contact at the institution if they had any questions, especially in regards to health care and campus related issues. All of those issues could easily had been resolved if the spouses knew who to contact to get answers.

In addition, this research study was able to add to the available literature on the subject of international student spouses in many ways. The findings showed the spouses were highly educated and wanted to take part in educational opportunities such as seminars on campus and did not only want social opportunities. Housing options was another big concern of international
student spouses which had not been talked about before, including the desire to have more on
campus housing designated purely for married couples. Lastly, no previous literature had brought
up the finding that many international student spouses had ended up switching their visa status
from the F2 dependent visa to the F1 student visa in order to gain some more freedom than what
they were allowed upon arrival on campus.

After reviewing the findings from the study, it is imperative to review what can be done
to improve the situations discussed throughout the study as well as take a look at what other
areas of research still need to be covered in the future. The following sections will focus on the
recommendations for practice as well as recommendations for future research.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The study provided a wealth of knowledge on how international student spouses
perceived support services at institutions of higher education. They even provided ways to
improve services for them which would not be a large financial cost to the institution. Out of all
the suggestions provided, three of them became highly recommended. Creation of a designated
institutional administrator, couple designated campus housing, and a spousal identification card
would greatly benefit spouses of international students and could easily be implemented by
institutions of higher education without any major issues.

**Designated institutional administrator.** Based off of the information obtained from this
research project, one idea which could be implemented by institutions of higher education is
designating an administrator to be a point of contact for spouses of international students. For the
most part, the position should be housed in the same department which processes and supports
the international student population on campus. For bigger institutions, the department of
international programs would be a good start while for smaller institutions, the administrator
could be housed with the advisors who work with international students. Ideally the administrator would have the primary function of working solely with the spouses of international students. However, there is an understanding that institutions, especially those on the smaller scale, might not have the financial resources or a need depending on the size of the international student population for a full-time administrator focusing on spousal needs. In this case, assigning the duty of being the contact person for spouses of international students could be assigned to an existing international student advisor. Perhaps, the international student advisor’s case load could be decreased to accommodate this additional work if possible.

The designated international student spouse support administrator would be in charge of many administrative tasks to help promote more communication between the spouses and the institution. First of all, there would be a need for the institution to create and implement some sort of notification procedure for international students to document whether or not dependents would be traveling with them. Obtaining names and email addresses of the spouse would be important to capture at that point. The administrator would then be in charge of reaching out directly to these spouses upon such notification to not only introduce themselves as a point of contact for questions but also provide important information about events and support services spouses could access during their time on campus.

Assessing the needs of international student spouses would be imperative to this administrator’s role. The administrator would be in charge of creating an assessment plan to help update what information spouses of international student would need communicated to them such as on information on health care, housing, visa restrictions, and basic information on joining the campus community. This administrator would also be in charge of creating programs and support services which would benefit the spouses such as volunteering, mentorship, and
social offerings. While housing is limited in urban areas, this administrator could also lobby institutions to create a certain amount of dormitory space to be designated as couples-only housing. This position should be looked at as voice for these spouses and fight for their inclusion when it comes to dealing with issues on an institutional level. It will be imperative for this position to work with international student advisors to make sure important information is also being forwarded on to the spouses and just not the student partner.

Lastly, this position would be the direct line of communication between the institution and the spouses. In addition to assessing important information and services for the spouses, they will also be in charge of making sure communication is done through the most direct and efficient channels. The data from this study suggests communicating within three specific forms. These include a welcome letter, email lists, and a website set up specifically for the spouses of international students. The administrator would make sure welcome letters were sent out to each of the spouses upon notification from the student spouse of their attention to come to campus with dependents. Such notification can be done either by mail or electronically via email to make sure the information is provided directly to the spouse. Making such an email list of all the current spouses of international students on campus will need to be maintained by the administrator which can be updated ideally every semester, but at least every start of the Fall semester. This email list would be an easy way for the administrator to provide information on events, volunteering opportunities, and any other important information which the spouses should know. There will also be a website set up specifically for information spouses of international students deem important as well as contact information as a way to communicate with the advisor if the spouses have any questions. The administrator would be in charge of
making sure the website is maintained and up to date whether the updates be made directly by them or with a help of a student worker upon approval or publishing the changes.

**Couple designated campus housing.** Housing was a consistent theme among the participants when discussing the struggles they endured. As discussed in Chapter Four, housing was a particular struggle for two reasons. These included the financial costs of obtaining housing and secondly, the unavailability of on-campus housing which married couples could take advantage of during their stay.

Financially, housing in the city where the institution was located was considered very expensive. For international couples, the issue of finances was a major struggle due to the loss of income. Dependents are not allowed to work due to their visa restrictions which means the couples must depend on any savings and any stipend the student spouse receives as part of their program. Housing in the city where the research was conducted was considered one of the top most expensive cities in the United States which already made securing housing difficult for those who were working. While many of the participants wanted to live closer to campus, they had to find housing on the outskirts of the city. Even then the couples were forced to live with either other couples or with roommates, instead of having their own apartment.

One of the participants noted the lack of housing available for couples and was shocked to find out such a service was not provided to them. They mentioned other institutions of higher education, one in the Northwest region and one in the Midwest region, provided such services to their family members and friends. While the institution did provide housing for students, those who were married were not allowed to take advantage of this service. For that particular participant, lack of couple specific housing was the focal point of the majority of the interview.
Institutions could easily rectify the housing issue for couples by designating a small amount of dormitory space for those who are married. The institution discussed in this study is a large private urban university with global ambitions. They constantly are building new dormitories which could easily be used to house international student couples. First and second year undergraduate students are required by the institution to live on campus in one of their many dormitory suites. While it is understandable to want first year students to live on campus, releasing second year students from the burden of requiring them to live on campus could open dormitory space for the spouses and allow traditional undergraduate students more flexibility in their housing options.

The institution in question does not have to provide housing for all married couples which request it. A housing lottery could be held which is something institutions of higher education already do for their undergraduate students who wish to remain on campus. Priority could go to international student couples who request to become part of the lottery. This way, the couples could make their own informed choices of whether or not they wish to stay on campus or try for an apartment somewhere else in the city. Institutions should limit the couple housing lottery to those without children. By doing so, this will allow for a smoother transition into dormitory housing. In addition, none of the participants who took part in this research study mentioned having any children which could lead to the conclusion that the majority of international students and their spouses who choose to come study in the United States do so before they decide to start a family. This makes relocating much easier than doing so with any young children one might have.

Not only having couple specific housing would alleviate a lot of stress for international students and their spouses, but could also be a major influx of revenue for the institution as well.
The institution could research actual rental costs in the area for the purpose of figuring out what would be fair to charge couples or to provide a lottery that would furnish them with either dormitory housing in either a studio or one bedroom style format. Institutions of higher education primarily charge for a full semester for their undergraduate students to live on campus. This particular institution could institute the appropriate cost for couple housing based on the current market rate. International students and their spouses should be able to afford the cost of this discounted apartment provided by the institution. By providing this option, the student would be able to pay month to month instead of having to pay for housing all upfront. Because space is a premium in the city where the institution is located, international students and their spouses would be willing to pay a little bit more to live on campus by themselves than taking the gamble of having to live with others. The institution would then get extra revenue from those who pay monthly rent to live there.

**Creation of spousal identification card.** One of the most important ways institutions can create a sense of community with international student spouses is by creating a spousal identification card. Most institutions provide identification cards for their alumni to use after graduation. Something similar could easily be made available to spouses. This card would allow spouses to feel like they are part of the campus community and allow them to easily integrate into the area.

The spousal identification card would allow international student spouses access to the institution’s library with ease. In addition, this identification card would make it easier for them to attend other events, such as concerts, plays, and seminars, on campus without issue. The spouses could use the card in order to get student discounts as well whether on campus or off campus to events such as museums and concerts. Spouses could even use the card to gain access
to the campus gym if they agree to pay a monthly or semester based membership fee. This way the institution could make some additional money by the increased revenue from the gym, while allowing the spouses to stay together when using facilities.

Such identification card would also come in handy to those spouses who opt to take advantage of on campus couple housing once such is enacted. These cards would allow international student spouses access to the dormitory buildings where their housing is located. Security is an important issue in large cities such as where this institution is located. Spousal identification cards would provide an extra layer of security by only allowing those who should be in the building instead of having to wait to be let in.

Lastly, the spousal identification card could allow spouses to take advantage of some of the services already being offered at the institution, but at a limited capacity. For instance, they could be able to join social groups on campus whether they are to practice their English language skills, social networking, or just personal passions. By having the identification card, the support services at the institution knows they are providing information to a spouse of a current student and not someone who found their way to campus trying to take advantage of services.

As previously discussed, implementing an institutional administrator, creation of couple specific housing, and spousal identification card would benefit the spouses of international students. More importantly, they would come at a low financial cost to the institution. While it would be more beneficial to have one administrator solely focusing on the needs of the international student spouse demographic, financially that might not be possible. Institutions could cut costs by designating one of the administrators in the international program offices, such as an international student advisor, as one who would take on those responsibilities. The creation of couple specific housing would allow the spouses and their student partner a chance to
live on campus and not have to potentially live with roommates in order to financially secure. In regards to the spousal identification cards, alumni and student cards are already created so it would just mean the issuing of a minor amount of new cards just for the spouses. A simple change of the text of the cards is all that is needed which will not take up much resources.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Based off of the research obtained from this study, the researcher is able to make certain recommendations in regards to future research on the subject. There is a lack of research available on specific areas. These includes looking at the differences in regards to experiences at urban and rural institutions of higher education when it comes to the availability of support services, and looking in to the unique experiences of either same sex marriages or those in which the student is female and the non-student spouse is male.

It is important for researchers in the future to look into the experiences of international student spouses when it comes to differences between urban and rural institutions in terms of available support services. This study only focused on the experiences of those related to an institution which is located in an urban setting in the New England region of the United States. It would be interesting to delve deeper into the experiences of international student spouses and attempt to make a comparison between those who were interacting with institutions in rural areas and those who had interactions in urban areas. Based off of the research obtained for this study, other institutions, particularly in the Midwest and Northwest regions of the United States, were noted by a participant of having support services, such as housing available for couples, which the institution being looked at for this particular study did not provide.

Researchers should also take a look at same sex marriages or male spouses in particular. The majority of the available literature, in addition to this study as well, has obtained information
from female spouses in heterosexual relationships. With the growing acceptance of same-sex marriages throughout the world, it will be important to focus on support services which could be offered to international student spouses specifically those in the LGBTQ community. The information obtained from those research projects could provide a valuable look into their experiences and help provide better support services to them. In addition, traditionally the available research has not strictly looked at male spouses and the international education field could benefit from looking into their own unique experiences as well.
Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

Dear Office of Global Services,

My name is Kirsten Bilas, and I am a doctoral student here at Northeastern University. I am writing to ask for your help in my current research by sending out the attached recruitment email to your current international graduate students.

International higher education has been a strong interest of mine for many years, especially international students who attend institutions here in the United States. Currently I am working on my dissertation on the spouses of international students and their view of support systems available them at universities. I am hoping to speak to spouses about their experiences.

The research process will include one step: interviewing international student spouses. During the interview I will collect background information such as where they are originally, had they been to the United States before, and how the decision was made to accompany their partner during their studies. After that I will ask questions about support services offered to them ending with asking them what changes they would like to see. The interview will be around 60 minutes and will happen at times and locations comfortable for their spouse. The interview will be transcribed into a document which the spouse will be able to review for accuracy. Responses will be confidential and the spouse will never be identified. I must follow strict guidelines during this research project which allows participants to not answer questions if they wish and also having the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

If you agree to send out the attached recruitment letter on my behalf, I would need a permission letter, stating you will send out the email to all international graduate students at your institution.
and allowing me to interview their spouses. I will be happy to schedule a phone or video call with you to go over this request in more detail.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kirsten Bilas, M.Ed.

Ed.D. Candidate

Northeastern University at Boston, MA

Phone: 781-974-3494 Email: bilas.k@husky.neu.edu
Appendix B: Letter to International Graduate Students

Dear Student,

My name is Kirsten Bilas, and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts. I am writing to ask for your help in my current research. The Office of Global Services has agreed to send this email on my behalf.

International higher education has been a strong interest of mine for many years, especially international students who attend institutions here in the United States. Currently I am working on my dissertation on the spouses of international students and their view of support systems available at universities. I am hoping to speak to spouses about their experiences.

The research process will include one step: interviewing international student spouses. During the interview I will collect background information such as where they are originally, had they been to the United States before, and how the decision was made to accompany you during your studies. After that I will ask questions about support services offered to them ending with asking them what changes they would like to see. The interview will be around 60 minutes and will happen at times and locations comfortable for your spouse. The interview will be transcribed into a document which your spouse will be able to review for accuracy. Responses will be confidential and your spouse will never be identified. I must follow strict guidelines during this research project which allows participants to not answer questions if they wish and also having the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

If your spouse volunteers to participate in my research study I will need them to get in contact with me via email (bilas.k@husky.neu.edu) stating their interest in taking part and requesting to schedule an interview. Once the interview has been scheduled, I will go over the research project in detail with them and have them sign a consent form before recording the interview. I will be happy to schedule a phone or video call with you to go over this request in more detail.

Please have your spouse contact me at bilas.k@husky.neu.edu if they would like to take part in this study or has any questions about it. Know that your spouse’s participation is entirely voluntary.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.
Sincerely,

Kirsten Bilas, M.Ed.

Ed.D. Candidate

Northeastern University at Boston, MA

Phone: 781-974-3494       Email: bilas.k@husky.neu.edu
Appendix C: Email Response to Interested Participants

Dear (Participant’s Name),

Thank you so much for your interest in taking part in my research study. My name is Kirsten Bilas, and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. I am writing to ask for your help in my current research.

International higher education has been a strong interest of mine for many years, especially international students who attend institutions here in the United States. Currently I am working on my dissertation on the spouses of international students and their view of support systems available them at universities. I am hoping to speak to spouses such as yourself about their experiences.

The research process will include one step: interviewing international student spouses. During the interview I will collect background information such as where you are originally, had they been to the United States before, and how the decision was made to accompany your spouse during their studies. After that I will ask questions about support services offered to them finishing ending with asking them what changes you would like to see. The interview will be around 60 minutes and will happen at times and locations comfortable for you.

If you are still interested in participating in this study, please email me at bilas.k@husky.neu.edu and I will email you a consent form which will be in English. If you prefer to have it translated into another language, please let me know. Once I have the signed consent form returned to me, we will then schedule the interview time and location. Any interviews conducted during this
study will be under strict university protocols which allows your participation in the study to be confidential and allows you to withdraw from participating at any time.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kirsten Bilas, M.Ed.

Ed.D. Candidate

Northeastern University at Boston, MA

Phone: 781-974-3494 Email: bilas.k@husky.neu.edu
Appendix D: Consent Form

Northeastern University, Boston, MA

Northeastern Department: College of Professional Studies (CPS) - Higher Education Administration (HEA) concentration

Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Ricardo Valdez (Principal Investigator), Kirsten Bilas, M.Ed. (Student Researcher)

Title of Project: Making the Invisible Visible: International Student Spouses and Their Perceptions of University Support Services

Request to Participate in Research Study

You are cordially invited to participate in a research study on the spouses of international students and their view of support systems available them at universities. You have been invited to take part in this study because you are a spouse of a current international student. This form will tell you about the study, but the student researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask the researcher 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 not to participate, there will be no impact on you or your student spouse. If you decide to participate in this study, you will be one of several participants in this research. Before agreeing to participate, we ask that you read this form carefully, sign this statement, and we will give you a copy to keep.
This study is being conducted by Kirsten Bilas, Doctoral Candidate in Higher Education Administration at Northeastern University, Boston. This study is conducted under the supervision of Dr. Ricardo Valdez.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the unique experiences of spouses of international students to examine their perceptions of support systems available to them by institutions of higher education in the United States. I invite you to participate in this research and seek your consent to interview you and have it audiotaped which I will describe below.

As part of the informed consent process, I would like to explain that there is no compensation offered to participants, so you will not be paid for your participation in this study. There is also no risk to participating in this research; I will keep responses confidential and all recorded audio from the interviews will be destroyed following transcription and analysis. Any reports or publications based on this research will only use pseudonyms, and will not identify you or any other participant as being part of this project.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study; however, this research study is designed to obtain new knowledge in the field of international higher education, and your answers may help to promote improved support systems for spouses of international students in the future.

I will offer you the opportunity to review the transcript of the study interview and to request that any of your contributions be withheld from analysis. This will also provide you a chance to make any clarifications to the transcript which might have been missed.
Participating in this interview and research is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to answer any question and may withdraw from the study at any time.

Specifically, I am seeking your consent for the following:

**Documentation:** I would like your permission to analyze any documents you have received in regards to support services offered at your spouse's institution.

**Interview:** I would like you to participate in a semi-structured interview that I will record and transcribe. The interview will generally take around 60 minutes and will take place at a location and time at your choosing. I anticipate this interview will take place over the summer of 2018. The interview will consist of 10 main questions.

Please note that your responses will be kept confidential to the best of our ability, and will only be used for the purpose of this research. Any reports or publications based on this research will not identify you or any individual as taking part in this study. Participants’ names will be changed.

My focus in this research is on the spouses of international students and their perspectives, so I will not actively seek input from international students or support service administrators, but rather will depend on your reflections on your own experiences with support services.

Finally, your review of my interpretations of research data, particularly as it represents your perspective is critical to the credibility of my research. At the end of the interviews, I will ask you to review the findings and conclusions and ask for your thoughts about interpretations of the data. I will do my best to limit the time required of you, but your input about my findings will be valuable.
Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns about participating this research. You may contact me at bilas.k@husky.neu.edu or at 781-974-3494. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Ricardo Valdez at r.valdez@northeastern.edu.

**If you have any questions about your rights in this research,** you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

I truly appreciate your participation. Thank you very much!

Kirsten Bilas, M.Ed.

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**Participant’s Agreement:**

I have read the information provided above. I understand the information presented on this form. I have asked all the questions I have at this time, and my questions so far have been answered. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study and my understanding that I can withdraw at any time.

Please indicate your consent by signing below

_________________________________  __________
Signature of person agreeing to take part  Date
Printed name of person above

Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date
Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Kirsten Bilas, M.Ed. Date: Location:

Introductory Statement: This interview is part of a study on the experiences of international student spouses with support services at institutions of higher education. Because your responses are important and I want to make sure I capture everything you say, this interview will be recorded. I will also be taking some written notes during the interview. Is this process acceptable to you?

To meet our human subjects’ requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me (provide consent form). Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you uncomfortable, (3) this interview will be audiotaped and (4) we do not intend to inflict any harm (allow time to review form). Do you have any questions about the interview process or this form?

I can assure you that all responses will be confidential - I will only use your pseudonym when quoting from the transcribed text. This will be the only interview. We have gone over the process of the study and you have read the consent form. Do you have any other questions about the process at this time? Do you agree to sign the Consent Form? Thank you.
Interview questions:

1. How long have you been in the United States?
2. Had you been to the United States before?
   1. If so, in what way such as holiday, work, family?
3. How did you make the decision to come with your spouse here for their studies?
4. What has surprised you about moving to the United States?
5. What type of struggles have you experienced while adjusting to life in the United States?
6. Were you or your spouse aware of any support services a specific institution would offer upon enrollment while you were going through the decision process?
7. What information did your spouse’s institution provide you prior and after arriving in the U.S. in regards to visa information and restrictions as well as adjusting to life here in Boston?
8. What do you think universities could do more in order to make your transition into American life easier?
9. What information do you wish had been provided to you prior to making the decision to relocate with your husband?
10. If you were in charge, how would you make sure spouse such as yourself receive the support they need from universities?

Closing the Interview: I am finished with my questions at this point. Is there anything that we did not discuss that you think would be important to add at this time?

I thank you again for spending this time with me. Your participation in this study has been very helpful. I will be back in touch with you when I have your transcripts and you review them via email at that time.
Appendix F: Member Check Form

Date of interview:

Interviewer:

Participant:

Interview Time/Date/Location:

The researcher has reviewed the findings from interview with the participant, and I attest to the following statements (check boxes that apply and initial):

_____ I have verified the accuracy of the report

_____ I agree that the description is complete and realistic

_____ I agree that the themes are accuracy

_____ I agree that the interpretations are fair and representative

_____ I do not agree with the description, themes, and/or interpretations and I make the following suggestions (see comments below)

______________________________________________________________________________

Participant Date:

Comments:

______________________________________________________________________________
References


Reiners, G. M. (2012). Understanding the differences between Husserl’s (descriptive) and Heidegger’s (interpretive) phenomenological research. *Nursing & Care, 1*(5), 1 – 3. [http://dx.doi.org/10.4172/2167-1168.1000119](http://dx.doi.org/10.4172/2167-1168.1000119).


