A CASE STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES IN A SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE AND THE IMPACT ON THEIR ACADEMIC TRANSITION

A thesis presented by:

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to understand how a service-learning course affects the academic transition of undergraduate-level international students attending a private university in the northeastern United States. To achieve this purpose, three research questions were developed as a foundation for this investigation: a) What do undergraduate international students learn from a service-learning experience that shapes their academic transition? b) How do undergraduate international students view their academic experience in their home country after participating in a service-learning program? c) How does a service-learning experience contribute to the English language proficiency of undergraduate international students? Data included eight semi-structured in-depth interviews, eight classroom presentation observations, field notes, and document review. Data was analyzed using descriptive and in vivo methods, axial coding, comparative analysis, and a series of coding strategies. Participants represented a variety of demographics of the site institution, including country of origin and gender.

Findings show that as a result of a service-learning experience undergraduate international students assimilate to academic expectations in the United States by valuing the application of knowledge learned in the classroom to real world contexts, engaging in collaborative learning environments, and adapting to critical thinking expectations by analyzing biases, withholding judgement, and practicing patience. Data shows that for undergraduate international students who did not speak English as their primary language, service-learning provided an opportunity for students to practice and improve their language skills, and develop linguistic confidence and self-esteem. Data illustrates that undergraduate international students reflected on their academic experiences in their home country and characterized it as teacher centered, more demanding, and less flexible when choosing an academic path. Additionally,
data shows that after participating in service-learning, students became aware of social inequities which led to a desire to participate in future volunteering/service-learning. From these findings, three salient conclusions were formed. First, a service-learning environment fosters cognitive, linguistic, and social skills. Second, a service-learning course presents an internal conflict between empowering and self-motivated U.S. education approach to rigor and demands in home countries. Third, service-learning expands worldview that leads to future civic action.

*Keywords*: international students, academic transition, service-learning, acculturation, assimilation, higher education, English language learners, transformative learning
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CHAPTER ONE: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

The United States serves as the top destination for higher education globally. From 2008 to 2018, on-campus international student enrollment in the U.S. increased from 671,000 to 1,094,792 students (Institute of International Education, 2019). As a result, the financial contribution of international students in the U.S. increased (Choudaha & Hu, 2016; Institute of International Education, 2015). While higher education institutions are receiving a substantial financial return by enrolling international students, some institutions are not investing in adjusting and improving their teaching practices to meet the academic and linguistic needs of the students (Kwenani & Yu, 2018; Miller, Berkey, & Griffin, 2015; Ward, 2015). As a result, international students are experiencing challenges with social adjustment and acceptance, cross-cultural interactions, and academic integration (Burkhardt, 2013; Hsieh, 2007; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011).

Rahul Choudaha and Di Hu, cofounders of DrEducation, LLC, a research and consulting firm specializing in global higher education, are encouraging institutions to extend priorities of international students beyond recruitment and immigration compliance to assisting with integration and acculturation challenges, as well as retention. Furthermore, Choudaha and Hu (2016) encourage evaluating the services being provided and finding ways to understand the transformational impact on international students’ personal, academic and professional development. The authors’ further state that such services should include examining the delivery of classroom practices and learning outcomes for international students that promote linguistic development, cross-cultural interactions, and engagement within local communities.
When moving to the United States and acclimating to a new environment, international students often face a life transition inside and outside of the classroom because of changes in cultural norms and practices (Banjong, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). This acculturation, for the purpose of this study, refers to change in a person caused by the interaction of two or more cultures (Banjong, 2015; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Research suggests that international students struggle to build meaningful relationships with domestic peers due to language and cultural differences which can lead to acculturative stress (Burkhardt, 2013; Hendrickson, Pritchard, & Skinner, 2002; Rosen & Aune, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2011). Additionally, a new learning environment presents obstacles to international students when navigating the academic standards and teaching pedagogies which differ from their home country (Li, Chen & Duanmu, 2009). The adjustment process for international students may bring forth feelings of deprivation, impotence, rejection, and confusion (Banjong, 2015; Leong & Sedlacek, 1986; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Pedersen, 1991; Shih & Brown, 2000; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2013).

While American higher education institutions continue to attract, recruit and matriculate international students, an emphasis on employing adequate strategies to reduce acculturative shock and stress such as social support and cross-cultural interactions should be considered (Burkhardt, 2013; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Extant research regarding international students attributes social support and developing a meaningful sense of community as contributors to a successful transition and overcoming stress related to cross-cultural differences (Burkhardt, 2013). Burkhardt (2013) and Moores and Popadiuk (2011) recommend the interaction of international students with peers from other cultures and host nationals to assist with the adjustment process and increasing self-esteem. International students...
view interactions with their domestic peers as fundamental to their development (Burkhardt, 2013). Literature on the international student experience suggests that students need to experience, persist and integrate into the host culture (Burkhardt 2013; Hsieh, 2007; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Furthermore, it is recommended to provide opportunities for American students to take active roles in fostering cultural appreciation and awareness. Thus, encouraging higher education institutions to support a campus culture in which diverse students are involved in campus programs and initiatives, instead of designing events specifically for international students (Burkhardt 2013; Hsieh, 2007; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011).

While recent research focuses on recommendations regarding social adjustment and student diversity initiatives to assist with developing awareness and appreciation of culture on college campuses, there is also a need to address the types of interactions that take place in the classroom that can assist with understanding the academic experiences and perceptions of international students. This study focused on the academic transition of international students. For this study, academic transition is defined as individual’s ability to assimilate to expectations and rigor of the academic program/course within the host country. According to a study by the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA), the major contributing factors influencing an international student’s choice for selecting a college destination is academic reputation, and opportunities that foster new ways of intellectually engaging in their field of study (Obst & Forster, 2007). As a result, institutions are seeking ways in which to assist international students with their academic transition by adjusting services and teaching practices to benefit from the global perspective they bring and to further meet their needs (Ward, 2015).
A rising trend of literature has suggested the implementation of service-learning as positively affecting the international student learning experience regarding language development, linguistic confidence, intercultural awareness and development, and engagement within local communities (Askildson, Cahill, & Mick 2013; Crossman & Kite, 2007; Elwell & Bean, 2001; Heuser, 1999; Kwenani & Yu, 2018; Miller et al., 2015; Steinke, 2009). Service-learning is defined as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teaching civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (NSLC website, n.d. as cited in Miller et al., 2015). Service-learning extends beyond the classroom, bridges theory and practice, and engages students in activities that address community needs (Askildson et al., 2013). Recent research surrounding service-learning and international students suggests the potential of service-learning creating a transformative learning experience (Millet et al., 2015).

Service-Learning and International Students

Service-learning has a long history in education in the United States. John Dewey, an American psychologist, philosopher, and educator is the founder of school-based service-learning (Dewey, 1938). Dewey encouraged educators to make learning relevant to the students’ personal and academic experiences, and the community to which they belong (Dewey, 1938). Service-learning opportunities allow students to learn and build upon course content while also engaging in the community through volunteerism and internship programs (Clayton, 2012, Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Felten & Claton, 2011; Furco, 1996; Montgomery & Ugoretz, 2014; Munter, 2008; Swords & Kiely, 2010). The benefits of participating in service-learning have been extensively documented and pertain to enhancing students’ identity development, empathy, multicultural competence and civic engagement (Bowman & Brandenberger, 2012, Einfeld &
Interestingly, despite the globalization of higher education, there are limited studies on the perspective of international students participating in service-learning within the United States (Askildson et al., 2013; Bippus & Eslami, 2013; Crossman & Kite, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2009; Miller et al., 2015; Warschauer & Cook, 1999). English Language Learners (ELLs) “are more likely to be recipients of service-learning projects rather than providers of service themselves” (Miller et al., 2015, p. 336). Furthermore, Grassi, Hanley, and Liston (2004) note that more than 70% of service-learning participants in the United States are with White and English-speaking students only. Extant research suggests the use of service-learning as a part of the educational experience of English Language Learners (ELLs) in higher education institutions (Askildson, Cahill, & Mick 2013; Crossman & Kite, 2007; Elwell & Bean, 2001; Heuser, 1999; Miller, Berkey, & Griffin, 2015; Steinke, 2009). Results have shown that service-learning can provide a platform to assist with the academic and personal development of international students (Miller et al, 2015). While ELLs express high levels of stress prior to participating in a service-learning project due to lack the of linguistic confidence, ELLs strongly attribute a positive service-learning experience with increased motivation, confidence and reflection, active class participation, language development, intercultural awareness and development, heightened awareness on social responsibilities, and engagement within local communities (Askildson, Cahill, & Mick 2013; Crossman & Kite, 2007; Elwell & Bean, 2001; Heuser, 1999; Miller et al., 2015; Steinke, 2009).

Service-learning could potentially be transformative in nature by sparking behavioral and attitudinal change (Miller, et al., 2015). Transformative learning is defined as the “process by
which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better validated” (Cranton & Roy, 2003, p. 87). Therefore, Mezirow’s (1978, 1991, 2000) theory of Transformative Learning and Kiely’s (2005) development of a Transformational Learning Model for Service-Learning provide the potential to understand how service-learning experiences can create opportunities for transformative learning experiences. The number of studies that have explored how service-learning can generate a transformative learning experience is limited (Heilman, 2012, Kiely, 2004). The frameworks can help guide higher education institutions with addressing the needs of international students and their integration in the host environment while reducing acculturative stress. Many researchers have studied the classroom experiences of students, instead of investigating the transformative experiences that can occur both inside and outside of the classroom. There is a significant opportunity to understand how a service-learning experience can serve as a catalyst for learning. This study seeks to understand how a service-learning course affects the academic transition of undergraduate-level international students.

**Context Statement**

The study site was a private institution in a major Metropolitan city in the northeastern United States, under the pseudonym of New College. New College is a non-profit, independent, private institution of higher education with over 9,000 students on campuses in North America, Abu Dhabi, Canada, China, and online. The institution offers 90 degree programs, in more than 50 fields of study at the undergraduate and graduate level. Since 1955, New College strives to provide career oriented education, offer access to opportunity for students, and support research experiences that benefit the field and larger world. The mission provides the context within
which the college addresses the traditional mission of higher education institutions: teaching, research, and service.

For fall 2018, at New College for the campuses in the Northeastern United States, the total undergraduate population includes approximately 3,600 students. Notably, of those students, 1,400 are international – with China, Saudi Arabia and India serving as the top feeder countries. Given the high numbers of international students attending New College, administrators and faculty members across all divisions and academic programs came together to better understand the needs of the students to rethink and adjust the types of services being provided. In 2014, an International On-Boarding Task Force was created to review the new student experience. The results of two pre-assessments (survey and focus groups) made it apparent that international student dissatisfaction varied across numerous areas within the college. Thus, subgroups were created to focus on targeted areas within the college (faculty and staff education; housing and meals; advisement; customer service; and employment). The collaborative approach by the institution and task force has allowed the staff and faculty to gain an understanding of the complexity regarding the needs of international students. Additionally, the strategic plan of the institution recently went through a comprehensive review and update. In 2030, the institution seeks to be the home to high quality teaching and learning that is consistently challenging, engaging, learner-centered, and profession focused. Therefore, in 2016, the instructors of undergraduate foundational courses were tasked with redesigning their course and integrating high impact practices such as service-learning within the curriculum.

**Conceptual Framework**

The purpose of this study was to explore how a service-learning course affects the academic transition of undergraduate-level international students attending a private university in
the northeastern United States. The conceptual framework that informed this study were a combination of elements from Mezirow’s (1978, 1991, 2000) theory of Transformative Learning and Kiely’s (2005) development of a Transformational Learning Model for Service-Learning. Mezirow’s (1978, 1991, 2000) Transformational Learning theory describes how individual learners undergo a process of effecting change in a frame of reference or a coherent body of experiences in their world, such as values, concepts, feelings, and conditioned responses. Mezirow claims that an individual’s personal development is often hindered by assumptions and distortions formulated by their experiences. Transformation Learning is the process through which learners develop personal perspectives based on life experience, which can then lead to guided action (Kiely, 2005). Building on the work of Mezirow, Kiely’s (2005) model provides a framework focused on the transformative impact of service-learning programs – which is directly aligned with this study. Given that understanding the academic development of international students is vital to their recruitment, satisfaction and retention, the framework provides a platform to explore how participants make meaning of a service-learning experience, cross-cultural differences, and changes to their individual perspective.

A discussion of the conceptual framework will begin with Jack Mezirow, the founder of Transformative Learning theory who believed that the adult learning process transforms when individuals reconstruct their frame of reference (Addleman et al., 2014; Franz, 2010; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Then, the section will introduce the work of Richard Kiely and the development of a Transformative Learning Model specific to service-learning. This section will conclude with the distinct learning dimensions of students developing a global consciousness, a chameleon complex, and experiencing transformational learning in a service-learning program.
Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory

Jack Mezirow, an American sociologist of Columbia University first articulated the Transformative Learning theory in the 1970’s (Addleman et al., 2014; Franz, 2010; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Mezirow conducted a qualitative study of women participating in reentry college programs within two and four-year colleges, across various states (Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b). The study sought to understand factors that may impede or facilitate the learning process. Results of the study depicted that many women questioned and reexamined their assumptions and perspectives about a woman’s role at home, which allowed the women to further develop their interpretation of their identity and role in society (Kiely, 2005). Mezirow labeled the learning process the women experienced as perspective transformation, a process that allows an individual to become aware of how their presuppositions can be restrictive, and to reformulate decision-making based on new understandings and experiences (Mezirow, 1991).

Mezirow (1991) describes Transformative Learning as a “process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective” (p. 167). His definition shows that frames of reference can restrict a person’s worldview and thus limit action and understanding. Mezirow (1991) postulates that learning in an individual’s early childhood comprises of socializing, normalizing, and acculturating. However, as adults, individuals become open-minded about knowing and understanding, while moving towards acting on these new understandings (Mezirow, 1991).

notes that transformation often follows some adaption of the following stages and phases of meaning. The steps engage an individual in activities that may have them shift their perspective by grappling with and being exposed to alternative viewpoints, and possibly engaging with others to integrate a new perspective (Mezirow, 1978).

**Stage 1: Experience.** Phase 1: A disorienting dilemma. Mezirow (1978a, 1978b) asserts that Transformative Learning focuses on the environment in which the experience is taking place, the individuals involved within the process, and how the two facets interact with one another (Heilman, 2012). The transformative experience begins by an individual engaging in an activity that causes a disorienting dilemma or triggering experience – an event causing disruption or disturbance (Addleman et al., 2014; Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Wilhelmson, Aberg, Backstrom & Olsson, 2015). A disorienting dilemma may include engaging in an extreme event such as a death, or a dilemma such as attending a university, starting a new career or participating in a program (Mezirow, 1991). The experience that an individual endures is simply not enough to cause transformation, instead critical self-examination of the beliefs and assumptions needs to occur (Merriam et al., 2007). The process by which an individual examines their beliefs, assumptions and/or beliefs is referred to as critical reflection (Mezirow, 1991).

**Stage 2: Critical Reflection.** Phase 2: A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame. Phase 3: A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions. Mezirow (1991) emphasizes the importance of the critical reflection process to the theory, whereas an individual develops new meanings by critically examining their beliefs. Critical reflection requires an individual to identify assumptions that are deeply embedded and ingrained (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). Mezirow (1991) states that critical reflection has a number of elements that needs to be present for change to occur. The first element relates to bringing forth an individual’s
belief structures – through an individual or group process. The next element relates to a detachment from beliefs to allow an individual to be objective, and separate from self-protected ideas (Mezirow, 1991). The third element is regarding perseverance throughout the reflective process, and how individuals moves past ambiguity. The final element is rational discourse which forces an individual to examine incongruences in their beliefs and assumptions, rather than avoiding them (Mezirow, 1991).

Stage 3: Reflective Rational Discourse. Phase 4: Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change. Phase 5: Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions. An individual’s ability to engage in rational discourse is vital to the transformative learning process. Rational discourse is the way in which individuals engage in discussion regarding their personal and social beliefs and assumptions (Mezirow, 1991). Rational discourse occurs in a sound and impartial manner, and brings to light biases through dialogue, debates, and discussions (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (1991) suggests that rational discourse is optimal when an individual is open to multiple and alternative view points, while being empathetic to the views of others.

Mezirow developed two foundational concepts known as bringing forth the transformation to further explain how individuals understand and revise their experiences framed within cultural assumptions and presuppositions (a) meaning schemas, and (b) meaning perspectives (Heilman, 2012; Taylor, 1998). Meaning schemas refers to attitudes, beliefs and emotional responses about understanding a group or oneself, as well as how to do and understand something (Heilman, 2012; Howie & Bagnall, 2013). The meaning schemas are tangible based on habits and expectations, and can change on a consistent basis (Taylor, 1998). For example,
meaning schemas can influence one may act or shape behavior around a person or group of people.

Meaning perspectives is a general frame of reference, a fundamental belief, world view or paradigm which involves the collection of meaning schemas (Mezirow, 1990; Taylor, 1998). Meaning perspectives are more difficult to attain and defined as “a structure of assumptions within which one’s past experience assimilates and transforms new experience” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 42). When individuals have a new experience, the meaning perspective causes an individual to conceptualize and assign meaning to that experience, which can change their view of themselves and the world, by also evaluating right from wrong, and good and bad (Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 1998). If the experience is not aligned or radically different, then those beliefs are rejected by meaning perspectives (Taylor, 1998). As a result, a transformation with meaning perspectives is harder to attain and not easily achieved through daily interactions or events since the impact for change is much greater (Mezirow, 1991).

Mezirow (1991) affirms that there are three types of meaning perspectives, which include epistemic perspectives, sociolinguistic perspectives, and psychological perspectives. Nagata (2006) suggests that these types of meaning perspectives can help individuals not only understand and change their views of themselves but those from different cultures as well. The combination of both meaning schemas and meaning perspectives is instrumental in how one understands their experiences, and the experiences of others that have different backgrounds than their own. This type of learning produces a significant impact or paradigm shift in future experiences because individuals critically reflect and question prejudices, stereotypes, and distortions (Heilman, 2012). Thus, leading an individual to plan a course of action and take action.
**Stage 4: Taking Action.** Phase 6: Planning a course of action. Phase 7: Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan. Phase 8: Provision trying of new roles. Phase 9: Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships. Phase 10: A reintegration into one’s life based on conditions dictated by one’s perspective. During the final stage of transformative learning, Mezirow (2000) begins by suggesting that an individual plan a course of action that is more aligned with the developing worldview which stands on flexibility and allows an individual to gain new skills. An example of acquiring new knowledge and skills is when an individual receives a new job or training in a new role (Mezirow, 2000). The stage of taking action continues when an individual provisionally tries the new role, while also modifying and adjusting as needed. In the new role or relationship with practice, competence and self-confidence is gained (Mezirow, 2000). Based on the new perspective, the final step includes the reintegration into one’s life where an individual integrates the new skills and abilities, and ultimately expands their worldview (Mezirow, 2000).

Given that Transformative Learning revolves around experience-based learning, the environment in which the experiences take place is vital for understanding any experience involving the theory (Heilman, 2012). Mezirow’s theory has been well regarded in the field as the learning experiences of an adult significantly shaped and impacted by their own experiences while reflecting on their own beliefs, perceptions and assumptions (Heilman, 2012). Cranton (2006) notes that the theory of Transformative Learning is fairly new in the realm of research and one that is still evolving and developing. Mezirow’s theory of Transformative Learning has been expanded since initially conceptualized, while also being highly regarded in the field of adult education to understand an individual’s paradigm shift (Heilman, 2012).
Service-learning educators recognize the theory of Transformative Learning as speaking directly to positive transformative effects of service-learning of undergraduate students (Kiely, 2004). Kiely (2004) and Hartman and Rola (2000) further suggest that service-learning can serve as a transformational learning experience, allowing students to make sense of their career focus and becoming caring and informed students. However, it is unclear whether these changes are long-term and all positive. As a result, Richard Kiely, a veteran international service-learning educator, sought to understand the perspective transformation of students participating in an international service-learning experience with a social justice focus (2005). The results of Kiely’s study and continued work in the field illuminated the long-term impact of perspective transformation and the participant’s actions that follow because of the transformative learning (Kiely, 2004). Kiely’s study depicted how service-learning can be transformative while providing an outlet for students developing critical consciousness, structural analysis, and further participation in social action (Kiely, 2005). Furthermore, Kiely’s empirical research led to the development of a Transformative Learning Model for Service-Learning, which has significant theoretical and practical implications for this study.

**Transformative Learning Model for Service-Learning**

In selecting a conceptual framework to guide this study, it was essential to identify a model that understands unique learning experiences as they relate to a service-learning program and a higher education setting. Mezirow’s seminal work of Transformative Learning is regarded as one of the most influential frameworks for service-learning practitioners (Kiely, 2005). However, the work of Mezirow and the studies that acknowledged the impact of Transformative Learning did not touch on the longitudinal impact and the frequency of perspective transformation. As a result, Kiely, sought to understand how undergraduate students experience
perspective transformation when participating in a long-term international service-learning program. Kiely focused on how individuals make meaning of their experiences, and how learning and behavioral change can be brought forth when engaging in an ambiguous life event (Hielman, 2012).

Kiely studied contextual factors and non-reflective forms of learning – the “what” of the experience rather than the “how” (Heilman, 2012; Kiely, 2005). The following three categories assist with integrating and giving meaning to the transformational learning pattern reflected in a study abroad experience and developing global consciousness: (1) envisioning, (2) transforming forms (see Table 1) and (3) chameleon complex. Envisioning is regarding the first shift in perspective when students express their intent to act on the perspective transformation upon returning to the United States from the study abroad experience. Transforming forms refers to six types of worldview shifts that individuals experience when participating in an international service-learning experience. These transforming forms are political, moral, intellectual, cultural, personal, and spiritual (Kiely, 2004). Lastly, the chameleon complex highlights the long-term challenges a student experiences when trying to change their lifestyle and take part in social action (Kiely, 2004). All three are explained below.

Envisioning. Kiely (2004) notes that after participating in a service-learning program, study participants report a sense of empowerment and an intention to act on their emerging global consciousness while promoting global social justice. Often times, this change in viewpoint can cause participants to reflect on their lifestyle and relationships (Kiely, 2004). The notion of envisioning is brought upon when students experience a strong connection and confidence in the community in which the service-learning is taking place, and the desire to impart change upon their return (Kiely, 2004). It is important to note that while participants of
Kiely’s study indicate the desire and envision change, it does not necessarily speak to the intention to act.

**The chameleon complex.** The most notable takeaway of Kiely’s study is how students struggled to “translate their perspective transformation into meaningful action” which is referred to as the chameleon complex (Kiely, 2004, p. 16). The chameleon complex depicts the ongoing disconnect that students have with what they want to do and the action taken after a service-learning trip due to shifts in one’s worldview. This finding touches on the ongoing struggle unique to each individual and his or her experience in a service-learning project. Kiely (2005) described this struggle as the following:

> Chameleon complex represents the internal struggle between conforming to, and resisting, dominant norms, rituals, and practices in the United States. Students report numerous challenges associated with reintegrating, applying, and coming to terms with aspects of their emerging global consciousness. They describe difficulties communication their international service-learning experience to others and maintaining relationships when challenging dominant U.S. cultural norms, beliefs, and practices. (p. 15)

The chameleon complex speaks to students feeling challenged when returning to their home country and attempting to explain the service-learning experience to others and going against the dominant cultural norms (Kiely, 2004). Students struggle and feel that they may lose friends by questioning the mainstream ideologies and isolate themselves with opposing viewpoints.

Similarly, the chameleon complex may apply to international students participating in a service-learning experience in the United States and upon their return to their home country.
International students may struggle and experience tensions when putting into practice their perspective transformation after participating in a service-learning program (Kiely, 2004).

The significance of transforming forms. Kiely (2005) utilized a longitudinal case study design to understand how undergraduate students from the United States experience and process transformative learning during and after a service-learning project oversees. The results of Kiely’s study emphasize the importance specific contexts play in shaping the form of transformation that occurs. Students within Kiely’s study envision ways in which to change their lifestyle, gain a sense of empowerment, and hope to serve as agents of change (Kiely, 2004, 2005). While students acknowledge differences in the way in which the transformational learning journey took place, all note perspective transformation as occurring within one or more of the following forms – political, moral, intellectual, cultural, personal and spiritual (Kiely, 2005).
Table 1

*Transforming Forms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transforming Forms</th>
<th>Meaning of Transformations</th>
<th>Characteristics and Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Expanding sense of social responsibility and citizenship, locally and globally.</td>
<td>Greater involvement to advocate for global poor, and raise consciousness on poverty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>Developing a relationship of mutual respect and care and sense of solidarity with those in the community where the service-learning experience is taking place.</td>
<td>Learning from the daily struggles of those in the community. Looking for ways to build allies with those living in poverty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>Questioning assumptions in regards to origin, nature and solutions to problems.</td>
<td>Valuing local knowledge and seeing how contextual factors shape social problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>Rethinking dominant cultural and social values, norms and rituals</td>
<td>Resisting dominant U.S. norm, seeing and acting on privilege and power relative to those in the community where the service-learning experience is taking place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Rethinking previous self-concept lifestyle, relationships and careers.</td>
<td>Actively develop more individually and socially conscious lifestyle, relationships, career, and educational choices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>A movement toward deeper (un)conscious understanding of self, purpose, society and greater good.</td>
<td>Searching for spiritual practices and organizations to connect with a community of likeminded individuals to sustain ability to challenge systemic injustice (Kiely, 2004).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants who experience political perspective transformation endure a shift in understanding their responsibility to advocate for those that are oppressed, and with lower socio-economic backgrounds. Individuals in this form of transformation challenged institutions that continued to enable inequality at the local and global level (Kiely, 2005). The moral form allows participants to learn from the experiences of others and develop relationships based on mutual respect by revisiting their sense of moral obligation. Participants did not see the service-learning project as a one-way experience but one based on reciprocity. The intellectual form questioned individuals’ assumptions and brought awareness to how local factors can have an impact on the
social problem at hand (Kiely, 2005). The cultural form referred to an individual’s ability to rethink dominant social values as they relate to their home countries norms. The personal form encouraged individuals to develop a more conscientious choice as it related to lifestyle, career, education and relationships. For some students that meant changing their career choices to allow for greater social impact. The final form of spiritual transformation moved the participant towards a deeper understanding of themselves, their purpose in society, and in search of spiritual practices and organizations that met their newly developed interests (Kiely, 2005).

Role of students’ nationality. As noted by Kiely (2004), students are often challenged to go against dominant cultural norms, and negotiate and question mainstream ideologies. To further expand on this finding, Dolby (2008) examined two groups of undergraduates from Australia and the United States to understand how students negotiate their national and global identities when studying abroad. Dolby (2008) argued that a student’s nationality can play a role in how one processes and comprehends a service-learning experience. Findings of the study illustrate that American students were often concerned with negotiating their national identity while studying abroad. For the most part, American students were highly engaged in critical self-awareness regarding the significance of the study abroad experience. Unfortunately, this reevaluation of their identity hindered their ability to develop as global citizens, while leading to the maintenance of the American identity (Dolby, 2008). Conversely, Australian students did not focus on their national identity, which lead to a smooth integration within contexts and a more developed identity as a global citizen (Dolby, 2008). The Australian students viewed the world as interconnected sites, which they navigated with ease. The students noted their experience in the United States as useful and the most beneficial aspects included learning about
academic resources, knowledge gained in classes and the professional networking needed to further develop career opportunities (Dolby, 2008).

Dolby (2008) went on to recognize that a student’s national background could determine the type of learning outcome before, during and after a service-learning experience. Interestingly, limited studies have explored the experiences of international students, and if service-learning can generate and/or facilitate a transformative learning experience, and the type of impact on a student’s academic transition. The need to address the context within the learning process is essential to linking meaning and experience, and to understanding the impact of experiencing a service-learning project as an international student in a host country.

**Service-learning and transformation:** Seminal research from Eyler and Giles (1999), Feinstein (2004), Kellogg (1999) and Rhoads (1997) depict how service-learning can have a transformative impact on domestic students. These studies increased awareness of various types of transformational outcomes caused by service-learning and impact on students’ perspectives regarding moral, political, intellectual, personal, cultural, and spiritual perspectives (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Feinstein, 2004; Rhoads, 1997). Furthermore, the studies showed that transformation is not caused by a single experience or interaction, and the degree of shift in perspective, timeframe and level of intensity varies from each participant (Feinstein, 2004).

To further explore how service-learning can yield transformative experiences, a recent phenomenological study examined reflective writing samples from a one-week immersive service-learning experience (Hullender, Hinck, Wood-Nartker, Burton & Bowlby, 2015). Hullender et al. (2015) found that evidence of transformation was complex given that students bring in a variety of contextual influences such as skills, beliefs and values to the course. While the researchers did not expect “burning bush” transformation in such a short time, students
shared feelings of disequilibria regarding the community structure and the role and capabilities of the elderly (p. 74). Elements of transformation were found in the students written reflections once they arrived home and had an opportunity to reflect. Some participants began to rethink their assumptions and think critically based on their experience in the service project and communication with community partners and peers. Other participants engaged in Kiely’s (2005) process of contextual border crossing by reexamining their position and power and how it related to the physical, social, political or cultural aspect. Notably, not all students experienced a transformative experience. The researchers’ note that the re-construction process within transformation often takes time to create the dissonance referred to by Mezirow, and that was not afforded in the given service-learning project (Hullender et al., 2015).

To examine the transformative experience of international students in a service-learning course, Miller et al. (2015) examined the experience of ELLs learners. Findings of the study suggest that service-learning can create transformative learning experiences by sparking both behavioral and attitudinal change. Student perspectives displayed a reflection of personal development and academic transition of classroom practices in in their home country versus the United States. For many, the service-learning opportunity allowed them to engage in community service for the first time with individuals of diverse backgrounds. Student perceptions shifted from viewing the service-learning as the student aiding the community to one of reciprocity. Students described their experiences as mutually beneficial between themselves and the community. The reflections of the students displayed an increased sense of confidence of the English language by working and engaging with community members. Furthermore, students felt a sense of agency, which included high levels of self-confidence, self-advocacy, and initiative (Miller et al., 2015).
Summary

Transformative Learning and a Transformative Learning Model for Service-Learning provide a platform to explain how powerful issues presented within a service-learning project can influence the learning process and academic transition of undergraduate-level international students. Mezirow’s theory of Transformative Learning and Kiely’s theory of a Transformative Learning Model of Service-learning describe the potential of a disorienting dilemma or triggering experience to spark attitudinal and behavioral change of students within a service-learning course (Kiely 2004; Mezirow, 1991). Both models recognize that transformative learning occurs in the presence of reflective practices and environments that challenge students’ notions of societal practices and norms (Hullender et al., 2015).

The frameworks by Mezirow and Kiely inform the problem of practice by understanding that the learning process of an individual is shaped by experiences that create a paradigm shift. A service-learning course may serve as an emancipatory experience for international students by allowing individuals to closely and critically examine the way in which they learn (past and present), becoming open-minded about knowing and understanding, while moving towards acting on these new understandings (Mezirow, 1991). Service-learning may create a platform for English Language Learners to develop the English language and cultural skills needed to be successful in their program of study and career, and their transition to the United States.

Mezirow (1991) suggests that learning occurs in four ways which include expanding on existing frames of reference, learning new frames of reference, transforming points of view and transforming habits of mind. The key of Mezirow’s theory suggests that individuals understand and revise their experiences framed within cultural assumptions and presuppositions through critical reflection, detachment from beliefs, and a separation from self-protected ideas. Extending
and to provide further meaning to the transformational learning pattern described by Mezirow, Kiely (2004) acknowledged that there is a need to consider the long-term impact of perspective transformation while participating in an integrated program with a social justice focus such as service-learning. While Mezirow (1991) assumed that the transformative experience of participants was solely positive, Kiely (2005) focused on the unique nature and impact of students within service-learning, and the possibility of enhancing or hindering transformation.

Kiely (2005) confirmed that participants experience shifts in their worldview by experiencing a minimum of one or more dimensions within their frame of reference which include: intellectual, moral, political, cultural, personal and spiritual. Kiely’s (2005) findings expanded on Mezirow’s work by recognizing perspective transformation as complex, dynamic and multifaceted. Aligned with this study, the cultural transforming form may apply to international students in a service-learning course and their potential to rethink dominant cultural, social values and norms they have experienced in their home country, by being aware and acting on their position relative to their experience in the United States (Kiely, 2004). Furthermore, Kiely’s (2004) introduction of the chameleon complex, speaks to the struggle an individual can experience when presented with learning in the six transforming forms, and the ability to act on transformation once returning to one’s home country (Kiely, 2004).

**Problem Statement**

The numbers of international students continue to expand in higher education but little is known about the potential transformative impact of a service-learning experience with international students on American campuses (Askildson et al., 2013, Bippus & Eslami, 2013; Crossman & Kite, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2009; Miller et al., 2015; Warschauer & Cook, 1999). Service-learning has the ability to influence the learning process of international students by
allowing students to rethink dominant cultural, social values and norms from their home countries, engaging in mutually beneficial experiences with the community members to increase their self-confidence in the use of the English language, and developing a sense of agency, self-confidence, self-advocacy, and initiative (Hullender et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2015).

To understand what a university can do to enhance the academic experiences of undergraduate international students, a private university in a major Metropolitan city in the northeastern United States was identified for this study – New College. At New College, a newly vested interest and institutional priority from faculty and administrators to embed service-learning within undergraduate courses is underway, and an opportunity to explore how a service-learning course affected the academic transition of international students was present. The framework by Mezirow and Kiely inform the problem of practice by understanding that the learning process of an individual is shaped by experiences that create a paradigm shift. A service-learning course can serve as an emancipatory experience for international students by creating a platform for critical reflection of past assumptions and learning, while also practicing and improving the English language.

New College’s commitment to developing global citizens who support hands on research that benefits the larger world goes hand in hand with the mission of service-learning. The institution recognizes that a transformative experiential education program can assist students with improving their academics, increase involvement within the internal and external communities, and build civic skills. At New College, service-learning takes place through existing courses and is accomplished with the help of service-learning staff, faculty, students, and community partners. Coursework and curriculum are connected and developed to the history and current context of the community in which the service will take place. Community problems
become the coursework and the curriculum is brought to life in service to the community. The students are not simply taking a course for a grade and/or degree requirement, but the student’s work has a significant role within the community.

In 2016, New College embedded a service-learning component in sections of the undergraduate course entitled Foundations of Inquiry. The typical composition of the core classes includes freshmen and sophomores, since these introductory courses serve as prerequisites for advanced level degree progression. Each class has approximately 20 students, and one-third are international. The service-learning component program is embedded for at least an hour of service for each student, each week, for approximately 10-weeks throughout the semester. One of the primary goals of the service-learning courses is to work with teachers and faculty to schedule college students to participate in experiential hands-on STEM learning activities with children and to provide technology support services during school hours.

Administrators may find some or all the study results useful as they continue to understand how student-learning experiences are impacted by classroom interactions. Information learned from this study has the potential to assist with the academic transition of international students by understanding how adjusting services and teaching practices can serve as transformative and meet the unique academic experiences of international students and their ability to learn the English language and cultural skills needed to be successful in their program of study and career. New College and higher education institutions in general can use the findings from this case study to examine their teaching practices and gain an understanding of how diversifying curriculum practices benefits student learning. More generally, the research conducted in this study will further inform ongoing scholarly work surrounding international students, academic transition and service-learning. Thus, an opportunity to explore this topic
existed to understand how a service-learning course affects the academic transition of international students. A qualitative approach was implemented to achieve the outlined goals of the study.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this case study was to understand how a service-learning course shapes the academic transition of undergraduate-level international students attending a private university in the northeastern United States. Based on the researcher’s academic and professional goals, and theoretical framework of this study, the following research questions were formulated to guide this study:

1. What do undergraduate international students learn from a service-learning experience that shapes their academic transition?
   a. How does a service-learning experience contribute to the English language proficiency of undergraduate international students?
2. How do undergraduate international students view their academic experience in their home country after participating in a service-learning program?
3. How does participation in a service-learning experience change academic goals for undergraduate international students?

**Significance of the Research Problem**

As the number of international students studying in the United States continues to grow, studies that address the impact of service-learning can assist educators further understand the academic transition of international students which may result in improved English language proficiency and degree completion. Given global trends, gaining an understanding of the experiences of international students is critical to the field of higher education in the United States.
States to encourage personal, academic and social development and adjustment, while also assisting recruitment and retention initiatives (Burkhardt, 2012; Gurin et al., 2002; Smith et al., 2007). Aligned with the literature, at my alma mater and previous employer of New College, there has been a significant increase in international student enrollment. As a result, administrators and faculty members came together to create an International On-Boarding Task Force to understand the needs of the students, and to rethink the types of services being offered. The results of assessments made it apparent that international student dissatisfaction varied across numerous areas, including academic transition. While significant strides have been taken, the area of academic integration and assimilation of international students to the teaching environment at New College has not been considered.

The presence of service-learning experiences for international students has notable benefits on student success, including developing increased motivation, confidence and reflection, active class participation, language development, intercultural awareness and development, heightened awareness on social responsibilities, and engagement within local communities (Askildson, et al., 2013; Crossman & Kite, 2007; Elwell & Bean, 2001; Heuser, 1999; Kwenani & Yu, 2018; Miller, et al., 2015; Steinke, 2009). The shift in learning in lectures to adapting to a more collaborative and team oriented way of learning often found in service-learning experiences, may serve as an opportunity to facilitate the adjustment process of international students and their transition to the United States (Burkhardt, 2013; Crossman & Kite, 2007; Elwell & Bean, 2001; Heuser, 1999; Millet at al., 2015).

The types of in-class interactions of international students with peers from other countries and exposure to experiences and viewpoints different from what is known as predominant in their home country, can enhance their cross-cultural competencies and knowledge of diversity
(Miller et al., 2015). For example, students in Miller et al.’s. (2015) study reported an improvement in language development, intercultural awareness, engagement in local communities, and linguistic confidence (Miller et al., 2015). Miller et al. (2015) notes that while service-learning courses assist students with developing relationships with their peers and community partners, it does not come without conflict and resistance due to a shift in teaching style. Thus, both faculty and administrators have a responsibility to create teaching and learning opportunities that allow international students to engage with students outside of their culture and community, and develop relationships that can assist with creating a positive and fostering environment (Miller et al, 2015).

Research that assists with improving the academic achievement, increasing student engagement, and building civic skills of international students as they work through the acculturative stress of moving to the United States may allow higher education administrators and faculty to be more supportive to students are facing acculturative stress. The findings of this study may be a significant asset to both my university and the broader academic community. The findings of this study provide the information necessary to break down barriers and resistance with integrating service-learning and culturally relevant practices. Mezirow’s (1997) theory of Transformative Learning identifies the need to understand how students make meaning of their experiences by acknowledging that learning is cultural and personal. Kiely’s (2005) model establishes that an international service-learning course can bring forth significant changes in a student’s world-view as it relates to the political, moral, intellectual, personal, spiritual, and cultural dimensions, while bringing forth conflict and struggle to translate their new found critical awareness to action. Therefore, a need emerged to create service-learning and civic engagement opportunities to further support international students within higher by
affording students with opportunities to engage intellectually in aspects of the American culture through a social change lens, while applying academic learning to their respective career related fields.

**Positionality Statement**

Banks (2007) asserts that a researcher’s experience, culture, and positionality can influence their research. As a qualitative researcher, I had the opportunity to interact with students at a site that served as both my alma mater and place of employment. Throughout the process I was mindful that I come from a different background and a place of privilege than those I engaged with in research. As Briscoe (2010) notes this can limit the participant’s ability to speak openly and influence the validity of the results. “Participants may decide that researchers are not to be trusted” (Briscoe, 2010, p. 25). I strived to create an environment on trust and communication. I am strongly invested in further understating how educators at the collegiate level can use service-learning – community based learning, to help support the personal and academic transition of international students. Over time, I have become more aware of my opinions, feelings and biases on the topic, which has brought a level of individual awareness. Although it is difficult to eliminate these thoughts, as it is distinctively human nature, I was aware of them. I recognized that while the experiences I have undergone are valid, they are also extremely limiting (Machi & McEvoy, 2012).

To address research bias and influencing participants, I selected students at random and avoided those that I have direct contact with in my day-to-day work. When interacting with participants, I led with my role as a researcher and reinforced that my intent is that of a researcher and not a university official. I was aware of my tone and facial expressions when conducting interviews. I used an inductive approach to analyze data, allowing the data to do the talking while allowing themes to emerge (Creswell, 2013). I did not have pre-identified themes to guide the
analysis and interpretation process. As a researcher, I was committed to being mindful that I did not generalize my experiences personally and professionally as I moved along in the research process, recognizing the literature available in the field, and staying abreast of current practices. Additionally, when analyzing data, I looked to understand the field of student learning from various perspectives and worked to create and implement changes in areas that needed improvement and development.

**Definition of Terms**

**Academic transition:** an individual’s ability to assimilate to expectations and rigor of the academic program/course within the host country

**Acculturation:** “…a dynamic process of relating to a dominant group by which a minority group selectively adopts its value system and cultural practices when involved in the process of integrating with, and differentiating from, the dominant group…” (Shih & Brown, 2000 as cited in Banjong, 2015, p. 133)

**Assimilation:** an individual exchanges their home cultures values and attitudes with those of the host country

**Biculturalism:** an individual embraces an aspect of both the home and host culture

**Critical reflection:** an individual develops new meanings by critically examining their beliefs, assumptions, and values

**Disorienting Dilemma:** an event causing disruption or disturbance

**English Language Learners (ELLs):** an individual who is learning English, in addition to their native language

**Meaning schemas:** refers to attitudes, beliefs and emotional responses about understanding a group or oneself
**Meaning perspectives:** an individual’s frame of reference which reflects cultural biases, and can further validate one’s experiences and skew reality

**Personal development:** an individual’s development of self-efficacy, self-confidence and resilience towards social aspects of their life and cultural differences between their home country and the culture in the United States

**Perspective transformation:** a process that allows an individual to become aware of how their presuppositions can be restrictive, and to reformulate decision making based on new understandings and experiences (Mezirow, 1991).

**Service-learning:** teaching approach that builds on course content and integrates aspects of community engagement through structured and intentional opportunities based on reciprocity and reflection

**Sojourner:** “an immigrant who clings to the cultural heritage of his [or her] own ethnic group and is psychologically unwilling to organize himself as a permanent resident in the country of his sojourn” (Sato & Hodge, 2015, p. 79).

**Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL):** English-language test most commonly used in the world and recognized by colleges, universities and agencies throughout the country

**Transformative Learning:** a “process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better validated” (Cranton & Roy, 2003, p. 87).

**Pathway and bridge programs:** provides international students’ academic preparation in areas of English language training and academic skills that leads to undergraduate or graduate degrees.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to understand how a service-learning course shapes the academic transition of undergraduate-level international students attending a private university in the northeastern United States. Based on the researcher’s academic and professional goals, and theoretical framework of this study, the following research questions were formulated to guide this study:

1. What do undergraduate international students learn from a service-learning experience that shapes their academic transition?
   a. How does a service-learning experience contribute to the English language proficiency of undergraduate international students?

2. How do undergraduate international students view their academic experience in their home country after participating in a service-learning program?

3. How does participation in a service-learning experience change academic goals for undergraduate international students?

Introduction

Identifying and facilitating ways in which international students can manage and adapt to changes in cultural norms to a host country is viewed as essential to embracing a positive social and academic experience (Lobo, 2012; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Olivas & Li, 2006; Shigaki & Smith, 1997; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Tseng & Newton, 2002; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Yeh & Inose, 2003). A rising trend of literature has suggested the implementation of service-learning as positively impacting and affecting student learning experiences for English Language Learners (ELLs) (Askildson, Cahill, & Mick, 2013; Crossman & Kite, 2007; Elwell &
Service-learning – an influential teaching strategy that links theory and practice, is a form of experiential education which engages students in supporting the needs of a community, while gaining insight into their own learning (Einfled & Collins, 2008; Hughes, Steinhorn, Davis, Beckrest, Boyd, & Cashen, 2012; Mayhew & Engberg, 2011). Research suggests that international students who engage in an integrated curriculum with service-learning may develop deeper peer-relationships to combat issues of isolation and loneliness, gain self-confidence with the English language, and develop cultural awareness of their host country (Askildson et al., 2013; Crossman & Kite, 2007; Elwell & Bean, 2001; Heuser, 1999; Kwenani & Yu, 2018; Miller et al., 2015; Steinke, 2009).

Independently, existing literature on international student education and service-learning intersects with aspects of student development and transformative learning experiences. Adult learners can gain knowledge and understanding in different forms through experience-based learning. This type of learning may generate and/or facilitate changes in beliefs, assumptions and perceptions previously held by an individual (Addleman, Nava, Cavallos, Brazo, & Dixon, 2014; Franz, 2010; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Transformative learning provides a lens to understand the personal and academic experiences of international students in a service-learning course. Although service-learning is recognized as a teaching approach throughout higher education, it is used far less with English Language Learners, and international students in general (Askildson et al., 2013; Bippus & Eslami, 2013; Crossman & Kite, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2009; Miller et al., 2015; Warschauer & Cook, 1999). While institutions continue to encourage and support faculty members to infuse diversity into curriculum and teaching practices, there is a need to understand the experiences of international students in service-learning courses and the impact on their academic experiences.
Scope and Organization of the Review

Many approaches were used to find relevant literature for this review. The primary approach included the search engine of Scholar OneSearch within the Northeastern University library database. The keywords throughout the search – used independently and harmoniously – included but are not limited to the following terms: ‘international student’, ‘foreign student’, ‘acculturation challenges’, ‘service-learning’, ‘transformative-learning’, ‘transitions’, and ‘transformative learning model for service-learning’. The overall search yielded over one hundred studies from scholarly journals which included the Higher Education Research Institute, International Journal of Intercultural Relations, Journal of College Student Development, Journal of Experiential Education, Journal of Higher Education, Journal of International Students, New Directions for Teaching and Learning, TESOL Journal and The Review of Higher Education.

This literature review will provide an extensive examination of three interconnected strands of literature: the international student experience, service-learning and transformative learning. Topics for review include experiences of international students entering the American educational system surrounding acculturation, social adjustment, cross-cultural interactions, acceptance, academic integration, linguistic barriers, classroom interactions, faculty cultural tolerance, and recommendations to assist with the social and academic experience (Banjong, 2015; Burkhardt 2013; Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002; Lee & Rice, 2007; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998; Steinke, 2009; Yan & Berliner, 2011). This review will consider the significance of service-learning as a teaching method, and the known impact on English Language Learners (ELLs). Then, using Jack Mezirow’s theory of Transformative Learning and Richard Kiely’s development of a Transformational Learning Model for Service-Learning, this literature review will consider how an educational program such as service-learning can impact or catalyze a
transformational outcome for international students regarding personal and academic learning. Finally, limitations within the literature will be identified to provide context for the design of the study.

**International Student Experience**

International students place significant pressure on themselves to succeed academically, learn cultural practices, and gain acceptance by their peers (Banjong, 2015; Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002; Sato & Hodge, 2015). International students often place the highest priority on academic adjustment, while interpersonal happiness is viewed merely as a “social accessory” (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002, p. 315; Wan, Chapman, & Biggs, 1992). Educational achievement is a status symbol and if unattained students can be shamed by their family and the community (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002; Sato & Hodge, 2015). For Asian students in particular, academic excellence, education and hard work are strong expectations of the culture (Sato & Hodge, 2015). However, these levels of expectations can be hard to achieve given cross-cultural transitions. While acculturation challenges can negatively affect students, a growing body of research has also examined how students can succeed academically despite these barriers by educators understanding cross-cultural interactions, academic integration, linguistic barriers, and classroom interactions (Banjong, 2015; Burkhardt, 2013; Tseng & Newton, 2002).

**Acculturation to The United States**

International students may face difficulty when being exposed to Western cultures and norms, and adjusting to a new environment (Banjong, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). International students typically face more challenges and stress during the adjustment process than domestic students, which can bring forth feelings of deprivation, impotence, rejection, and confusion (Banjong, 2015; Leong & Sedlacek, 1986; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Pedersen,
The process of change that international students experience when entering a new culture is known as acculturation (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Acculturation is defined “as a dynamic process of relating to a dominant group by which a minority group selectively adopts its value system and cultural practices when involved in the process of integrating with, and differentiating from, the dominant group…” (Shih & Brown, 2000 as cited in Banjong, 2015, p. 133). Suinn, Khoo and Ahuna (1995) and Banjong (2015) further noted that the acculturation process leads to three potential outcomes which included (1) assimilation – an individual exchanges their home cultures values and attitudes with those of the host country; (2) resistance to assimilation – an individual resists the culture of the host country by holding tightly onto their culture; and (3) biculturalism – an individual embraces aspects of both the home and host culture. The type of experience a student embraces can determine the level of stress and challenges endured. Some of the acculturation transitions for international students are expected while others are unseen, and in some instances, have created challenges inside and outside of the classroom (Banjong, 2015; Shih & Brown, 2000; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

International students often face difficulty prior to entering the United States and endure the highest level of stress during the first six-months (Lee, 2010). Immigration regulations, increased fees, and securing financial support to enter the country has even discouraged students from applying (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998; Yan & Berliner, 2011). Once students enter campuses, issues of financial difficulties persist due to restrictions of employment because of the United States immigration law and the complicated process of securing on-campus work (Geo, 2008; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). International students are prohibited to work more than twenty-hours per week on-campus and
can be restricted from working off-campus (Lee & Rice, 2007; Yan & Berliner, 2011). This creates an issue for students that are working to support themselves. Visa issues can also restrict students from planning short trips to return home during winter and summer breaks. Students’ fear that they will not be able to return to the United States because of declined visas which can further attribute to issues surrounding homesickness and the acculturation process (Yan & Berliner, 2011).

In addition to difficulty with navigating processes prior to entering the country, international students must learn how to negotiate basic procedures and seek out assistance with support service offices around campus including admissions, registrar, bursar and residential life (Banjong, 2015; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Llyod, 2003). Students feel like “uninvited guests”, do not trust professional support, and have difficulty communicating effectively (Lee, 2012; Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 386). On-campus interactions with peers, faculty and staff can create an environment led by discriminatory beliefs (Banjong, 2015; Lee & Rice, 2007).

While research has focused on international student challenges in general, Yan and Berliner (2011) focused on the Chinese student population. A qualitative approach containing semi-structured interviews revealed factors prior and during acculturation. Chinese students endured greater levels of personal and academic challenges when adapting to the American culture and educational system due to barriers with language proficiency, social structure, and political ideology (Yan & Berliner, 2011). The United States and China are polar opposites because of two distinct cultural backgrounds. Chinese students had difficulty coping with a new environment due to their inability to navigate a different culture. Older students within the study experienced higher levels of culture shock, immigration pressure, and visa challenges than their younger peers. Younger students felt that while their social and academic adjustment was
challenging, they did not feel as restrained due to exposure to the American culture prior to coming to the United States by watching American movies and listening to music (Yan & Berliner, 2011).

Extant research regarding international student adjustment strongly attributes social support and developing a meaningful sense of community as contributors to a successful transition and overcoming stress related to cross-cultural differences (Burkhardt 2013; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013; Yan & Berliner, 2011). To further help facilitate the transition of international students, the host institution needs to understand their responsibility in supporting social adjustment and cross-cultural interactions and acceptance.

**Social Adjustment, Cross-Cultural Interactions, and Acceptance**

International students have expressed challenges with social adjustment, cross-cultural interactions, and acceptance (Burkhardt 2013; Hsieh, 2007; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Research suggests that international students easily develop friendships and relationships with co-nationals (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Hendrickson et al., 2002; Rosen & Aune, 2011). However, developing friendships with host nationals is more difficult due to cultural differences beyond clothing which include food preference, gender roles, and sexual openness (Burkhardt, 2013; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2011). A Chinese female student within Hsieh’s (2007) narrative study described her exchange with peers as difficult and isolating. She perceived her American peers as exclusive. “…you become ignored; you cannot get into their groups or their conversations” (Hsieh, 2007, p. 384). The student felt that her peers were exuding an attitude toward her background which created a strain for developing meaningful peer relationships (Hsieh, 2007).
Similarly, findings of Lee’s (2012) quantitative study, indicated that international students reported difficulty with social adjustment and lower levels of satisfaction with the host country because of experiencing unfair treatment by peers and perceived discrimination in comparison to domestic students.

Aligned with the findings by Hsieh (2007) and Lee (2012), Lee and Rice (2007) conducted a case study to assess the goals, satisfaction and experiences of international students within a large public university in the southwest United States. The students hailed from a range of academic majors and countries – including India, East Asia, Latin America, Africa, Caribbean, Canada and New Zealand. Findings of the study suggested that international students face discrimination and exclusion in their social interactions with peers, faculty, and staff. Comparatively, White domestic students felt respected within the institutional environment and found their interactions welcoming. Another prominent finding of the study revealed that international students struggled from moving from “being part of a majority culture and then entering the U.S. as a ‘minority’” (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 394). Students implied that discrimination went beyond the physical race, but rather focused on language and cultural traits. While the level of discrimination was evident at the university level, it was more prominent in the external community (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Despite challenges with developing friendships with host nationals, international students desire more contact with domestic students (Church, 1982; Hendrickson et al., 2011). Failure to develop these relationships has led to feelings of disappointment and discouragement. Interestingly, students that had higher levels of interaction with host nationals, noted greater rates of satisfaction and adjustment, improved levels of communication, and overall positive thoughts regarding the culture of the host country (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Pruitt, 1978; Sam 2001).
Cross-cultural interactions have allowed international students “to begin to understand why people behave, communicate, and interact the way they do, thus previously unexplained behavior is put into context and can be interpreted more readily” (Hendrickson et al., 2011, p. 283).

Burkhardt (2013) and Moores and Popadiuk (2011) stress that interactions with peers from other cultures and host nationals can assist with the adjustment process and increase self-esteem. Students found social interactions with their peers as fundamental to their development and proficiency of the English language (Burkhardt 2013; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). The casual conversations outside of the classroom space created an opportunity for students to express themselves more freely without the structure and pressure presented in their courses (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Participants of Burkhardt’s (2013) study strongly attributed willingness to engage in an intercultural environment to being open-minded, taking initiative, responding with resilience and interacting with confidence. Participants referred to their orientation of a new intercultural environment as an ongoing and dynamic process – consistently changing based on experiences encountered. Those who were flexible to embracing the process and open to new ideas and experiences, reported a meaningful and positive academic, and personal experience.

A lack of open-mindedness presented some participants of Burkhardt’s (2013) study with barriers to successful adjustment. One participant in particular struggled when conversations included sexual experiences – a topic seen as culturally tabooed. The participant quickly recognized that by placing judgment on others that are freely expressing themselves can create an environment which impacts the types of positive interactions that can occur with host nationals. Students often sought out shared interests such as playing sports and video games to serve as a catalyst to develop relationships and bridge cultural divides. Intercultural interactions
that deemed to be beneficial were based on the foundation of taking risks and managing cultural tension. Instead of responding negatively to situations that brought forth discomfort, participants responded with resilience and confidence, and in some cases learned how to disengage and challenge assumptions to avoid cultural conflict. Participants identified what they held to be important and made compromises when interacting with others. The participants contributed the successful social adjustment to managing cultural tension and assumptions, finding commonalities, and the ability to make a campus community feel like home (Burkhardt, 2013).

Similar to Burkhardt (2013), Yan and Berliner (2011) found that Chinese student integration within the campus community, and support from family members and co-national peers assisted with their assimilation. Social support impacted the psychological adjustment of Chinese students and support was not limited to family and friends but also included individuals from their church. Although past research does not recognize Chinese students utilizing religious support groups, Yan and Berliner (2011) noted that Chinese students found the church as a place to build meaningful relationships. These networks of individuals provided emotional support for students and a level of commonality since there was shared similar societal pressures to excel academically and professionally. Students referred to this notion of a collective lifestyle and the support from others as providing a sense of belonging. “In China, in school and at the workplace we get used to a collective lifestyle; however, few places or institutions like the church in the US can provide [such a community that] can satisfy our need to belong…” (Yan & Berliner, 2011, p. 537). In additional to providing emotional care, students also shared the benefit of church support in their daily lives, whether that was a ride from the airport, trips to the store, and in some cases a place to stay.
While in theory, Chinese students in Yan and Berliner’s (2011) study recognized interactions with host national peers as beneficial, they took less advantage to connect with American peers. Those students that interacted with host nationals found their interactions as particularly useful when navigating the new cultural environment and norms. However, Chinese students found American students to be superficial and individualistic which prevented intimate friendships from formulating. Interactions less prominent than host national peers was the use of professional counseling support by Chinese students. Students shared that culturally they were taught to keep their issues at a personal level. Sharing concerns with outsiders is viewed as bringing shame to their family (Yan & Berliner, 2011).

The studies by Burkhardt (2013), Moores and Popadiuk (2011) and Yan and Berliner (2011) further revealed that students successfully transitioned when they had the foundation of family and friends from their home country. Despite the distance, maintaining a foundation that was familiar was comforting, while bringing forth levels of intimacy and belongingness (Burkhardt, 2013). The studies highlighted the need of social support for international students and creating a sense of community on campus when facilitating cross-cultural transitions. Developing support services and social activities such as dinners, outdoor activities, and shopping trips can help international students gain exposure and understanding of the American social life. Additionally, these studies further reinforce the need for higher education professionals to create a teaching and learning space for students to share their cultural experiences, knowledge and perspectives. This type of support not only assists with students’ transition but can further prepare professionals to create interactions and interventions inside and outside of the classroom (Burkhardt, 2013; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2011).
Existing literature on the international student experience, has implied that students need integrate into the host culture (Lee, 2012). These recommendations imply that international students have the lion share of responsibility, while the role of host campuses as inconsequential (Lee, 2012). To extend beyond the work of Burkhardt (2013), Moores and Popadiuk (2011) and Yan and Berliner (2011), Lee (2012) and Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) further suggested that college administrators should not merely assimilate international students in the campus culture but rather learn how to base interactions on mutual engagement of international students, co-nationals and host nationals. Thus, allowing for “global social mixing” which can foster meaningful cross-cultural dialogue and understanding (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). To achieve this, more research is warranted on the perspectives of international students regarding their academic experience and effective contexts and practices that can encourage social adjustment, cross-cultural interactions, academic integration and acceptance.

**Academic Integration and Linguistic Barriers**

The culture shock of a new academic environment creates barriers for international students (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Steinke, 2009). Prior to their collegiate experience, international students learn through a pedagogical approach based on lecture (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). Internationally, the student-teacher relationship is based on formality and the teacher is seen in the highest regard. The information provided by the teacher is viewed as the ultimate truth (Ladd & Ruby, 1999). The classroom culture in the United States is at a stark comparison (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2009). Students often refer to their professor by first name, engage in dialogue regarding classroom material, speak without being called upon, come to class late or leave early, and hold side conversations with their peers (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). These types
of behaviors and classroom norms around freedom of expression are often misconstrued by international students as signs of disrespect (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998).

Approximately 45% of all international students within American higher education come from Asian countries such as India, China and Japan (Sato & Hodge, 2015). During the 2009-2010 academic year, 230,904 international students hailing from Asian countries indicated that English was not their first language (Sato & Hodge, 2015). Given language barriers, students can endure negative dispositions towards American students, and feelings of isolation. Sato and Hodge (2015) analyzed the views of Japanese exchange students and their sojourn experience. The sojourner is referred to as “an immigrant who clings to the cultural heritage of his [or her] own ethnic group and is psychologically unwilling to organize himself as a permanent resident in the country of his sojourn” (Sato & Hodge, 2015, p. 79). The results of the descriptive-qualitative study suggested that Japanese students, both male and female, felt frustration in ESL courses, as well as academically inferior to their American peers. The participants noted that Americans perceived them as low achieving students. The Japanese students also felt significant pressure to perform well in the ESL courses coupled with emotions of impatience and urgency given the need to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam to be eligible to register for academic major courses. Not only did the students put pressure on themselves to perform well academically but they embraced an individualistic approach. Japanese students felt academic and social jealousy and envy when their Japanese counterparts progressed further along academically (Sato & Hodge, 2015).

**Classroom Interactions with Domestic and International Peers**

In the United States, students are often expected to take part in group work and this poses a challenge for students from Asian countries that are taught to be individualistic in their studies
(Kim, 2011; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). International students often request to work with other international students, most preferable those from their own home country. When this is not possible, international students can feel ignored or excluded in classroom lessons (Sato & Hodge, 2015). This type of interaction can lead to further isolation and insecurities from international students and brings upon feelings of being an outsider (Lee & Rice, 2007; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998).

In addition to group work, American higher education classrooms embrace group discussions, which bring forth levels of distress and angst among international students (Kim, 2011). International students notice that their domestic peers are more assertive and expressive in classroom conversations (Hsieh, 2007). As previously noted, Hsieh (2007) conducted a narrative study to explore the academic experience of a Chinese female international student and why she remained silent in her classes. Findings of the study further revealed that the Chinese student felt as though her classmates perceived her silence as a sign of incompetence. She felt misunderstood. She isolated herself and did not have the desire to go to class, and ultimately became a “voiceless participant” (Hsieh, 2007, p. 388). In many regards, the student became invisible to her peers and she did not care to prove to them that she was intelligent. The most notable finding in this study is that when interacting with other international students, many with cultural backgrounds different that her own, the student felt comfortable, competent, and confident. This study implies that while ethnic culture influences may attribute to students not embracing group discussions, that a higher education setting can also disempower international students (Hsieh, 2007).
Faculty Cultural Tolerance and Recommendations

Compounding on the academic concerns, research further finds that staff at higher education institutions often criticize international students for failure to take responsibility for their academic advancement, development of critical thinking skills, and language proficiency (Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Lee & Rice, 2007; Terrazas-Carrillo et al., 2014). Staff do not always consider cultural barriers students endure which can further isolate and exclude them from the campus environment (Lee & Rice, 2007). International students feel embarrassed given their limited proficiency with the English language and view some of their professors as unaccommodating and impatient (Lee & Rice, 2007; Terrazas-Carrillo et al., 2014). In some cases, although unintentional, students have endured verbal discrimination due to cultural intolerance imparted by a faculty member (Lee & Rice, 2007). While international students endure academic hardship, Lee and Rice (2007) further revealed that students from English-speaking and Western countries did not face the same level of discrimination than their non-native speaking counterparts.

Ladd and Ruby (1999) posit that the goal of an instructor is to assist international students with adapting to the educational culture in the United States, as opposed to assimilating them to their new surroundings. Instructors have a responsibility to create and provide a safe and welcoming environment (Lee & Rice, 2007). Given that many foreign educational systems rely on a lecture style of teaching with limited class participation, instructors should assist students with developing self-confidence when participating in classroom discussions and voicing their opinions. Instructors can begin the semester by asking students to recall facts and information, then slowly move to short answers, and end with open ended questions, which require opinion and reflection (Ladd & Ruby, 1999). This type of approach assists students with developing self-
confidence in speaking the English language in front of their peers. In concert with Ladd and Ruby (1999), Steinke (2009) suggested that for English Language Learners (ELLs) to become fluent speakers, students need to move past memorization of pronunciation and punctuation. Classroom material should immerse students in the English language by creating context-rich situations (Steinke, 2009). When students understand the meaning of the language and the context, they will be motivated to learn and develop fluency of the English language (Steinke, 2009).

**Section Summary**

As noted in this section, the acculturation process may present stressors for international students due to immigration and visa regulations, linguistic barriers, intolerance, isolation and perceived discrimination from their domestic peers, as well as stark differences in academic expectations surrounding the role of an instructor as a facilitator and the expectation to engage in group work and classroom discussions. (Banjong, 2015; Burkhardt, 2013; Hsieh, 2007; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998; Sato & Hodge, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2013). Yet, research posits that while these barriers exist, interactions with peers from other cultures and host nationals, as well as cognizant efforts by instructors to develop context-rich situations can assist with the adjustment process (Kim, 2011; Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Lee & Rice, 2007, Sato & Hodge, 2015; Terrazas-Carillo et al., 2014). As a result, international students developed increased self-esteem, a meaningful sense of community, motivation to learn the course content, and improved English language skills. While there is limited research on the types of academic experiences that can be created to address acculturation challenge, the pedagogical approach of service-learning has gained traction and positive regard with domestic students. Further research is needed to
determine the potential impact of service-learning on the academic transition of international students. This next section will discuss the history and impact of service-learning, and advantages as a pedagogical approach with English Language Learners.

**History and Impact of Service-Learning**

Institutions of higher education aim to provide students opportunities to become well-informed citizens through active community engagement (Antonio, Astin, & Cress, 2000; Chesbrough, 2011; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Thomson, Smith-Tolken, Naidoo, & Bringle, 2011; Montgomery, Ugoretz, Zanden, Jorgensen, & Rudic, 2014). John Dewey, an American psychologist, philosopher, and educator recognized service-learning as an “intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experiences and education” (Dewey, 1938, p. 20). Dewey (1938) challenged educators to make learning relevant to the students’ experiences and the community to which they belong. The role of the educator cannot simply be depositing knowledge to students. The service-learning experience involves a “reciprocal collaboration among students, faculty/staff, community members, community organizations, and educational institutions to fulfill shared objectives and build capacity among all partners” (Felten & Clayton, 2011, p. 76). Both parties argue and negotiate the subject matter. The course objectives are achieved through problem-solving outside of the classroom from volunteering and community service projects to field studies and internship programs (Clayton, 2012; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Felten & Clayton, 2011; Furco, 1996; Montgomery & Ugoretz, 2014; Munter, 2008; Swords & Kiely, 2010). Service-learning allows students to build on course content and take part in community engagement through structured and intentional opportunities based on reciprocity and reflection (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Felten & Clayton, 2011; Mayhew & Engberg, 2011; Thomson et al., 2011; Warschauer & Cook, 1999).
Service-learning experiences are most valuable when students engage in meaningful ways (Wilson, 2011). Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda and Yee (2000) referenced the importance of specific strategies to connect service-learning experiences to academic material such as journal writing and group discussion. Students need to feel that they are a part of a team, and this can be achieved by working alongside community agencies (Wilson, 2011). As a result, students can receive feedback for improvement directly from the staff (Rockenbach, Hudson, & Tuchmayer, 2014; Wilson, 2011). High-quality placements incorporate the course material and the service being performed by requiring reflections and analysis to encourage personal growth (Wilson, 2011). The experiential learning process is a pedagogical transformative strategy through collaborative experiences (Montgomery & Ugoretz, 2014; Naude, 2015). Throughout the service-learning process, students can expand subject matter knowledge, gain appreciation for the discipline of study, and enhance identity development, empathy, multicultural competence and civic engagement (Bowman & Brandenberger, 2012, Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Jones, Rowman-Kenyon, Ireland, & Munter, 2008; Niehaus & Skendall, 2010; Naude, 2015; Wilson, 2011).

Identity Development

For many students participating in one service-learning opportunity has led to subsequent experiences such as involvement in study abroad or volunteering in the local community (Felten & Clayton, 2011; Jones et al., 2010). One of the greatest advantages of service-learning is the ability for students to develop self-confidence and question their value systems (Jones et al., 2010). The transformative process of service-learning can often present students with moral dilemmas that go against their beliefs (Astin et al., 2000; Naude, 2015).
A recent study exposed students to short-term immersion programs in New York City, Peru, Chicago and the Czech Republic (Jones et al., 2010). Throughout the service-learning experience, students often negotiated and confronted difficult social issues with topics such as HIV/AIDS and homelessness – life-circumstances that are not a part of their own experiences. Jones et al. (2010) referred to these occurrences as crossing boundaries – the ability to encounter experiences between the familiar and unfamiliar. This type of service allowed students to gain both an understanding of their own privilege, and the confidence to share their experiences with peers. “A lot of people have it worse than us and that really needs to be taken into perspective” (Jones et al., 2010, p. 211). Participants shared a sense of purpose and openness to try new experiences. Additionally, service-learning experiences can bring forth value awareness and change at an individual level (Astin et al., 2000, Jones et al., 2010).

**Empathy – Emotional Connections and Self-Awareness**

Wilson (2011) identified the importance of students’ engaging in complex issues and various viewpoints as the cornerstone to developing empathy. Service-learning experiences can give students the opportunity to understand the perspective of another individual and a sense of the challenges they are facing (Astin et al., 2000; Wilson, 2011). “The active consideration of imagining how a target is affected by his or her situation produces an empathic arousal that leads the perspective-taker to offer greater assistance to the target” (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000, p. 708). Students can reshape their attitude when their belief system is challenged by classroom material and they are presented with an unexpected experience (Bowman & Brandenberger, 2012).

The results of a study by Wilson (2011), evaluated the effect of service-learning experiences in relation to personal development and empathy. By evaluating reflective student
papers of two courses – one which involved a service-learning component, analysis showed that those involved in the service-learning course expressed greater empathy and self-reflection than those who did not participate in service-learning (Wilson, 2011). For instance, students who worked with children from a foster care agency gained insight to the academic hardships the children endured at the agency. Exposures to these types of experiences helped students build a connection to the children, as well as strengthen their own commitment to helping others (Wilson, 2011).

**Multicultural Competence**

Jones et al., (2010) characterized student experiences with service-learning projects as crossing boundaries of race and culture. Service-learning moves beyond serving those less fortunate and allows students to experience multicultural education by examining local needs and issues from various perspectives (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Jones et al., 2010). Participants often reported an increase in awareness of their own privilege regarding familial upbringing and financial status after completing a service-learning project (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). Einfeld and Collins (2008) and Nelson, Laird, Engberg and Hurtado (2005) recognized that students who have consistent interactions with individuals from different ethnic backgrounds are more likely to encounter personal growth, social self-confidence and multicultural knowledge. While participants of color are more accustomed to such experiences, White students describe their service-learning experience as intense and challenging (Jones et al., 2010). Students often find themselves in heated conversations, which led to tolerance and a broader view of the world. Participants reflected on their experience as uncomfortable because it required them to get out of their comfort zone and navigate their understanding of race, class, culture and religion (Jones et al., 2010). Similarly, Jayakumar (2008) examined the experiences of White students raised in
homogeneous and diverse neighborhoods. Findings of the study suggested that students from neighborhoods comprised of homogeneous make-up have fewer interactions across race. Thus, collegiate experiences such as service-learning with a diversity focus can bring forth meaningful reflection for students and allow for the development of greater empathy, patience, and trust (Bowman & Brandenberger, 2012; Einfield & Collins, 2008; Jayakumar, 2008).

Service-learning often helps students deconstruct the “us vs. them” dichotomy and breaks down barriers and stereotypes (Montgomery & Ugoretz, 2014). Through reflective discourse in a service-learning course, students can discern their own racial tendencies as well as those in their community – leading to a shift in their views on stereotypes and openness to educate others to negate ignorance (Einfield & Collins, 2008; Montgomery & Ugoretz, 2014). Deconstructing views of privilege can lead students to reflect on their lack of cultural competence and ignorance. Service-learning experiences can assist with presenting experiences that are uncommon and uncomfortable for students. These interactions can assist with developing a sense of self through increased cultural competence and the development of skills such as empathy, patience, trust, and reciprocity (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Montgomery & Ugoretz, 2014). Additionally, students may gain “a civic-minded sense of agency to educate others and combat ignorance” when the service-learning experience is aligned with course objectives (Montgomery & Ugoretz, 2014, p. 14).

**Civic Engagement and Social Justice**

Civic responsibility is defined broadly as “the sense of personal responsibility individuals should feel to uphold their obligation as part of any community” (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998, p. 5). An individual who is civically engaged considers social problems as inherently a part of their responsibility (Mayhew & Engberg, 2011). Service-learning fosters a renewed and
increased sense of civic engagement and responsibility by assisting with the development of democratic values. Students who participate in volunteer opportunities throughout their collegiate experience are more likely to participate in service after graduation (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). Einfeld and Collins (2008) noted that participation with service activities may lead to specific civic responsibility outcomes, which included the following: dedication to assist others, working as a volunteer, and seeking out opportunities with non-profit organizations.

Service-learning experiences can lead to an increased awareness and promotion towards social justice, civic engagement, equality and empowerment (Astin et al., 2000; Einfeld & Collins, 2008). While this awareness does not equate to promotion or action of social justice and equality, participants feel a sense of personal empowerment. Findings from an AmeriCorp service-learning project revealed that students gain an understanding of systemic inequalities through participation in such projects (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). Furthermore, results suggested that students may adopt either a social justice paradigm or charity paradigm through active service. The difference in paradigms is attributable to the background and experiences of the participants (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). Through structured reflection and analysis around social, cultural and institutional systems, students may report higher degrees of learning. Comparably, a study on short-duration community-based experiences of first-year students led participants to realize the importance of social issues while grappling with background of policy creation and societal disparities (Schamber & Mahoney, 2008). If students share the desire to become community advocates, the community-based curriculum gives students the knowledge base to deeply evaluate social policies (Schamber & Mahoney, 2008).

Hughes, Steinhorn, Davis, Beckrest, Boyd and Cashen (2012) suggested mentoring of high-poverty youth as the ideal service-learning vehicle to engage student awareness of social
issues. Findings of their study proposed that students/mentors learn firsthand of societal inequities when engaging in projects in neighborhoods and school districts different from their own. Students reflect on their service experiences and the coursework to understand the challenges students face at school, which are often related to issues at home. Challenges observed by students throughout the study included stress, violence, discrimination, crime and mental health concerns. The preconceived notions of the mentors were often challenged by observing the realities of students from under-resourced schools daily. Students became exposed to the challenges other students faced such as serving as caretakers for siblings, cooking for the household, and working full-time jobs to help support the familial income. Therefore, participation in service-learning and mentoring increased learning about issues of social equities.

**Service-Learning and Impact on English Language Learners**

The record number of international students studying in the United States is in large part attributed to conditional acceptance programs (Miller et al., 2015). These programs are known as pathway programs, and provide ELLs the tools needed to prepare academically while gaining much needed linguistic skills. The curriculum of pathway programs provides students in-depth English language training to prepare for undergraduate and graduate programs (Miller et al., 2015). ELLs primarily interact with students in their own classes and less with the mainstream student body (Russell, 2007). Although service-learning is a common pedagogical tool, it is utilized less with international students (Askildson et al., 2013; Bippus & Eslami, 2013; Warschauer & Cook, 1999). In 1997, more than 70% of service-learning participants were with White, English-speaking students only (Grassi, Hanley, & Liston, 2004). The use of service-learning as a pedagogical tool has potential for the academic development of international students. A growing body of research of ELLs attributes a positive outcome of service-learning
experiences to language development, linguistic confidence, intercultural awareness and
development, and engagement within local communities (Askildson, Cahill, & Mick 2013;
Crossman & Kite, 2007; Elwell & Bean, 2001; Heuser, 1999; McNally, 2017; Miller et al., 2015;
Steinke, 2009).

Discussion in ELL classrooms tend to follow a pattern where the teacher leads the
conversation by initiating dialogue, a student responds, and then the teacher wraps up
(Warschauer & Cook, 1999). While the use of student journals can encourage reflection, it does
not encourage collaborative interaction among students but rather the teacher and the student.
Heuser (1999) and Warschauer and Cook (1999) recognized that in order for ELLs to improve
the English language, both oral and written, the reflection of the service-learning project needs to
create a platform where students reflect critically on past assumptions and the learning process.
Assignments to increase this type of reflection include peer-shared journal entries, and
discussions that include additional readings and student experiences (Heuser, 1999). ELLs need
lessons to be meaningful and teachers should create opportunities for learners to use the rules of
the English language but not limited to syntax, pronunciation and punctuation (Steinke, 2009).
ELLs can overcome embarrassment in their ability to speak English when instructors create an
environment for students to practice discourse and role play, and reflect on their experiences
(Askildson et al., 2013; Stenike, 2009).

Stenike (2009) stresses that ELLs express high levels of concern prior to participating in
a service-learning project. The resistance is caused by a lack of confidence in linguistic skills
and not being able to adequately prepare for every speaking situation that arises. A qualitative
study by Elwell and Bean (2001) utilized ethnographic methods to understand the influence of a
short-term service-learning project within a reading course. The course material was based on the
novel, *Of Mice and Men* and students visited a farm after a devastating freeze. Afterwards, students worked with community members to collect items for adults and children of the town. The results of the study confirmed that ELLs benefited academically by the experience. The instructor of the course noted that the students surpassed expectations by improving “their ability to speak, listen, read, and write in English” (Elwell & Bean, 2001, p. 57). Despite hesitations to give group presentations, the experience of the community service-learning project sparked an excitement within the students to share ideas with their peers.

Aligned with Stenike (2009), Bippus and Eslami (2013) conducted a multiple case study of college students identified as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) within a service-learning course. The students represented a host of countries including Colombia, Mexico, South Korea, Venezuela and Vietnam. The students voluntarily participated in the courses and completed a minimum of a service-learning course prior to the study. The service aspect included two options – visiting a retirement community or a children’s library (Bippus & Eslami, 2013). The participants articulated that the service-learning project helped them gain confidence when speaking English. Not only did the students notice the change themselves but others commented on their progress too (Bippus & Eslami, 2013).

Extant research suggested that the increased motivation and reflection of ELLs is largely attributed to immersion with service-learning (Heuser, 1999; Russel, 2007; Steinke, 2009). Russel (2007) noted that oftentimes students do not connect classroom material to the real world and intended fields of study. However, when there is meaning behind the context, student motivation is enhanced by linking content knowledge within the community to the concepts learned in class (Heuser, 1999; Stenike, 2009). Participants of Heuser’s (1999) study took part in an extensive reflection process that connected the students’ experiences with the service-learning
project and course content. The structured reflection took place after each session and had students relate their experiences with the project to what was covered in class. Students expressed gaining deeper levels of course material through oral and written exercises. Similarly, students in the study by Bippus and Eslami (2013) expressed the service-learning experience as active and dynamic. Students did not feel that the learning process was passive. Students had a commitment to completing their homework since they wanted to prepare themselves for their next community visit.

Interestingly, ELL students are unsure how they can commit additional time outside of the classroom to dedicate to the community site. However, once students begin volunteering, they are no longer concerned with the number of hours required (Stenike, 2009). Through reflections of the service-learning experience, international students challenged preconceptions and wanted to stay involved in the community well past the class project (Russell, 2007). After participating in service-learning, students were more likely to develop a sense of empathy to help those less fortunate, join local organizations and/or student groups dedicated to community service, and institutional wide community based projects to enhance the campus climate (Elwell & Bean, 2001; McNally, 2017; Russell, 2007). Students view themselves as active contributors to the community and want to stay involved even after the project concluded (Elwell & Bean, 2001).

In a study by Crossman and Kite (2007), international students learned social responsibility by participating in a service-learning course. Students noted that their experience in their home countries were at stark contrast, as the government handled issues of hunger and poverty. Through open and honest dialogue with their peers and community members, students gained cultural sensitivity to backgrounds and traditions different that their own. Students began
to interact with peers from various cultures in their class and developed an appreciation for teamwork. Within the group projects, students reported individual contributions that emerged based on their strengths. Some students were natural team leaders, while others carried editorial responsibilities. Conflicts did arise among students from time to time around scheduling meetings and workshops. This was attributed to varied work habits, miscommunication and language skills.

Most recently, in 2012, Northeastern University recognized that aligned with national trends, international student enrollment was at a significant upward trajectory. Within a seven-year span, international enrollment at the institution increased by 447% (Miller et al., 2015). Administrators learned anecdotally that international students were only engaging with their peers in English for an hour a week. To make the academic experience more inclusive, administrators acknowledged that a service-learning component could supplement extensive English instruction, as well as provide students exposure and immersion to the American culture (Miller et al., 2015). Milner et al. (2015) conducted a phenomenological study to explore the impact of a service-learning course and how transformative learning experiences impact the development of international students within pathway programs.

Unlike previous studies, the results of the Miller et al. (2015) study suggested that students reflected on their own development largely influenced by the service-learning aspect of the course. Service-learning created transformative learning experiences by sparking both behavioral and attitudinal change. Student perspectives displayed a reflection of personal development and academic transition of classroom practices in their home country versus the United States. For many, the service-learning opportunity allowed them to engage in community service for the first time with individuals of diverse backgrounds. Student perceptions shifted
from viewing the service-learning as the student aiding the community to one of reciprocity. Students described their experiences as mutually beneficial between themselves and the community. The reflections of the students displayed an increased sense of confidence of the English language by working and engaging with community members. Furthermore, students felt a sense of agency, which included high levels of self-confidence, self-advocacy, and initiative (Miller et al., 2015). One student described his experience by writing, “I became braver than before. I learn how to communicate with my classmates as well. In the past, I was afraid to talk with people” (Miller et al., 2015, p. 343).

**Section Summary**

The literature demonstrates the advantages of service-learning as a pedagogical approach – students may expand subject matter knowledge, and enhance identity development, empathy, multicultural competence and civic engagement (Bowman & Brandenberger, 2012, Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Jones et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2005; Naude, 2015; Niehaus & Skendall, 2010; Wilson, 2011). The transformative process of service-learning has allowed students to develop personally by questioning their value system and by understanding varying perspectives and experiences (Astin et al., 2000; Jones et al., 2010; Wilson, 2011). International students despite hesitations to participate in service-learning at first due to a lack of linguistic confidence, shared that the experience was mutually beneficial between themselves and the community. Available research has attributed a positive academic outcome for English Language Learners regarding self-confidence, language development, linguistic confidence and initiative (Askildson, Cahill, & Mick 2013; Crossman & Kite, 2007; Elwell & Bean, 2001; Heuser, 1999; Miller et al, 2015; Steinke, 2009). Interestingly, limited studies have explored the experiences of international
students, and if a service-learning can generate and/or facilitate a transformative learning experience, and impact their academic transition.

**Transformative Learning**

Transformative Learning is a theory of learning focused on adult learning. Jack Mezirow, the founder of Transformative Learning theory believed that the adult learning process transforms when individuals reconstruct their frame of reference by revising their interpretation and meaning of their lived experiences (Addleman et al., 2014; Franz, 2010; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Mezirow conducted a qualitative study of women nationally participating in reentry college programs – those either resuming their education or considering employment opportunities (Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b). Mezirow identified a diverse sample of 83 women within 12 reentry college programs at two and four-year colleges, across various states including New York, New Jersey, Washington and California (Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b). The study sought to identify factors that impeded or facilitated the learning process. A follow-up study took place the same year, where phone and mail surveys were sent to additional participants (Mezirow, 1978b). The findings of the studies concluded that women experienced a personal transformation and fell within ten unique phases (see Table 1). In particular, many women questioned their assumptions about a woman’s place being at home, which allowed for further identity development and changes in societal roles. Returning to school required many of the women to challenge assumptions and perspectives, engage in critical reflection, cross boundaries, and ultimately change what they knew (Addleman et al., 2014; Kiely, 2004; Merriam et al., 2007, Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b, 1991 & 2000).

Mezirow defined the learning process of the women as perspective transformation and “the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to
constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable and integrative perspective; and making decisions or otherwise acting on these new understandings” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 14 as cited in Kiely, 2004). Transformative learning theory describes the ability of an individual to question their experiences and their interpretation of the world (Jones et al., 2012; Merriam et al., 2007; Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b, 1991 & 2000). For transformation to occur an individual has to experience integrative and deep thinking, resulting in an overall improvement and development for personal success. Mezirow suggested that often individuals hinder their growth and development by staying restricted to their own experiences and by simply trying to relive them (Mezirow, 1978). Transformative learning focuses on the environment in which the experience is taking place, the individuals involved within the process, and how these two facets interact with one another. The experience that an individual endures is simply not enough to cause transformation, instead critical self-examination of the beliefs and assumptions needs to occur (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2012; Merriam et al., 2007). Transformative Learning consists of ten phases which are grouped into four stages, described below (Heilman, 2012; Mezirow1978a, 1978b).

Stage 1: Experience
- Phase 1: A disorienting dilemma

Stage 2: Critical Reflection
- Phase 2: A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame.
- Phase 3: A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions.

Stage 3: Reflective Rational Discourse
• Phase 4: Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change.

• Phase 5: Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions.

Stage 4: Taking Action

• Phase 6: Planning a course of action.

• Phase 7: Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan.

• Phase 8: Provision trying of new roles.

• Phase 9: Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.

• Phase 10: A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s perspective.

The theory begins by an individual engaging in an activity that causes a disorienting dilemma or triggering experience – an event causing disruption or disturbance (Addleman et al., 2014; Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Wilhelmson, Aberg, Backstrom, & Olsson, 2015). The frame of reference of the individual is inadequate to handle the situation. Therefore, a modification or shift in a frame of reference through dialog and critical reflection takes place to move the recently developed information into meaning (Cohen, Brown, & Morales, 2014).

The two foundational concepts known as bringing forth the transformation are meaning schemas and meaning perspectives (Heilman, 2012; Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b, 1991 & 2000). Meaning schemas refers to attitudes, beliefs, and emotional responses about understanding a group or oneself, as well as how to do and understand something (Heilman, 2012; Howie & Bagnall, 2013). On the other hand, meaning perspectives are more difficult to attain and defined as “a structure of assumptions within which one’s past experience assimilates and transforms new experience” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 42). An individual changes their views of themselves and
the world. Mezirow (2000) notes that meaning perspectives can often represent cultural paradigms – learning which occurs unintentionally as a result of cultural assimilation. This type of learning is reflected by an individual’s cultural biases, which can provide validation to experiences, while also slanting reality (Taylor, 1998). The combination of both concepts plays an important role in how one understands their experiences, and the experiences of others that have different backgrounds than their own. Heilman (2012) and Kiely (2004) assert that this type of learning produces a significant impact or paradigm shift in future experiences because individuals critically reflect and question prejudices, stereotypes, and distortions. Transformational learning is achieved once learners can develop meaning perspectives that are valid and can assist with interpreting experiences and guiding action (Kiely, 2004).

Kegan (1994) further expands on the concept of resolving conflict when old meaning schemas need to change through critical reflection. Interestingly, about 65% of the general population become high functioning adults since they are unable to transition to higher stages of development. For an individual to gain the skills and traits to critical thinking, there is a need to be self-aware and in control of social factors (Kegan, 1994). Kegan (1994) emphasizes the importance of transformation as more than gaining new skills and knowledge. Instead, individuals have to change the way they know and understand the world around them, and can then transition to higher stages of development.

During the frame of reference examination individuals closely scrutinize their feelings of fear, shame and guilt, and assess their assumptions (Addleman et al., 2014). Mezirow (1997) as cited in Cohen at al. (2014) proposes two dimensions – habits of mind and points of view. Habits of mind is formulated by multiple experiential influences of an individual, based on values and interpretations (Addleman et al., 2014). Examples of such assumptions stem from moral/ethical,
philosophical and psychological predispositions. On the other hand, point of view encompasses meaning schemes and are constantly changing or modified based on the situation at hand. Point of view refers to “sets of immediate, specific beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and value judgments” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 133). As a result, point of view can be changed more easily than habits of mind because feedback can be given regarding specific beliefs. Mezirow recognized that difficult frames of reference and situations that do not align with an individual’s point of view calls for critical reflection to take place in an attempt to acquire new information. Often interacting with individuals who have a different perspective/viewpoint that their own, can result in a holistic learning experience (Addleman et al., 2014).

The learning process within Transformative Learning does not occur independently, instead an individual needs to face a radical situation than misaligns with their meaning perspective. Mezirow believes that this type of change can occur within an educational setting when emancipatory knowledge is gained by critical self-reflection of assumptions (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow continued to build on the concepts of meaning schemes and meaning perspectives by developing the concept of domains of learning which considers transformation within an instrumental domain or communicative domain (Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b, 1991 & 2000). Instrumental domain references experiential engagement with the environment and an understanding of how things function. Communicative domain involves the way in which individuals communicate, understand and present themselves to others (Howie & Bagnall, 2013). For an individual to arrive at new meaning, Mezirow asserts the need for engagement in discourse (Merriam et al., 2007). “Discourse is not a war or debate; it is a conscientious effort to find agreement, to build a new understanding” (Merriam et al., 2007, p.
Discourse takes place in various formal and informal settings and occurs one-on-one and in groups.

The shift in the learning process can be epochal or incremental, but ultimately leads to individuals viewing themselves in an improved manner by challenging assumptions and expectations, which are a better fit in the current context (Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Merriam et al., 2007; Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b, 1991 & 2000). The final stage of action can occur immediately or delayed. For example, action can lead to change in a decision of social activism or action (Merriam et al., 2007). An epochal transformation occurs quickly and the meaning perspective shifts. Incremental transformation is caused by small shifts in meaning schemas stretched over a long period of time (Howie & Bagnall, 2013). While there is no defined period, a learner slowly recognizes a change and shift in their meaning perspectives and the process can often appear to be cyclical in nature (Addleman et al., 2014).

Mezirow first investigated Transformative Learning in the 1970’s. Since then, his work has expanded and evolved by contemporary scholars and can be viewed as a work in progress (Heilman, 2012). Additionally, Mezirow expanded on the initial work by arguing that specific conditions are needed for deep change. A large emphasis has been placed on the learning environment through facilitation, critical reflection, and critical events (Franz, 2010). Daloz (2000) as cited in Franz (2005) suggested that an individual’s assumptions, beliefs and perceptions are the result of meeting the interest of others, rather than independent thought. The elaboration of transformative learning is based on facets of adult learning which include feelings and imagination (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2012). Furthermore, Daloz (2000) postulates that a mentoring community can significantly influence developing “sense of self” in young adults (Heilman, 2012, p. 37). A supportive context can create a platform for an individual to self-
reflect and deal with cognitive disagreement. Feelings of security within interpersonal relationships can assist individuals with the transformative learning process of disorienting dilemma, cognitive conflict, motivation and supportive context (Wilhelmson et al., 2015). In alignment with these ideas, Burgeois (2002) as cited in Wilhelmson et al. (2015) recognized the need for motivation to engage in the learning process. When an individual views the learning experience as liberating then the motivation will be high and the fear of change will not be present (Wilhelmson et al., 2015).

Interestingly, the number of studies that have explored how service-learning can generate a transformative learning experience is limited (Heilman, 2012, Kiely, 2004). Many researchers have studied the classroom experiences of students, instead of investigating the transformative experiences that can occur outside of the classroom. There is a significant opportunity to understand how a service-learning experience can act as a stimulus for learning and behavioral change. Seminal research from Eyler and Giles (1999), Feinstein (2004), Kellogg (1999) and Rhoads (1997) depicted how service-learning can have a transformative impact on students. These studies increased awareness of various types of transformational outcomes caused by service-learning and impact on students’ perspectives regarding moral, political, intellectual, personal, cultural, and spiritual perspectives (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Feinstein, 2004; Rhoads, 1997). Most recently, Fritze (2017) conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis of teaching assistants within a service-learning experience, and the meaning making process of the unfamiliar in a service-learning experience. The findings of the study conclude that all participants of the study experienced a level of transformation when engaging in service-learning or what was described as the “unfamiliar” (p. 252). The service-learning experience impacted the participant’s academic and personal growth, and enlightened their personal and professional
revelations. These studies showed that transformation is not caused by a single experience or interaction, and the degree of shift in perspective varies from each student (Feinstein, 2004). However, these studies did not show the longitudinal impact and the frequency of perspective transformation occurring. As a result, Richard Kiely sought to understand how undergraduate students experienced perspective transformation when engaging in a service-learning program. The program constituted a social justice focus and created the Transformative Learning Model for Service-learning (Kiely, 2004).

**Transformative Learning Model for Service-Learning**

Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning provides a useful framework for service-learning practitioners. “It focuses on how people make meaning of their experiences and, in particular, how significant learning and behavioral change often result from the way people make sense of ill-structured problems, critical incidents and/or ambiguous life events” (Kiely, 2005, p. 6). Richard Kiely, Director of Engaged Learning and Research at Cornell University and international service-learning educator, postulates that transformative learning is aligned with service-learning experiences (Kiely, 2004). Kiley acknowledged that substantial research has documented positive aspects of domestic service-learning regarding students’ academic learning, and personal and professional development (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Feinstein, 2004; Kiely, 2004; Rhoads, 1997). However, the majority of studies have focused on the impact of the experience and not the context or process of elements that generate or facilitate transformation (Heilman, 2012; Kiely, 2004, 2005). “…there is a deficit in studies that generate theory and/or investigate the contextual factors and learning processes in service-learning that lead to reported outcomes. The focus on the “what” of student learning rather than the “how” leaves us with a theoretical “black box” regarding the contextual and process mechanisms in service-learning that enhance
certain cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes – particularly those that are transformative” (Kiely, 2005, p. 5). Past service-learning studies have relied on the reflective learning process as hallmarks of student academic and personal outcomes. Thus, Kiely studied contextual factors and non-reflective forms of learning (Kiely, 2005).

Kiely examined the long-term impact of undergraduate students’ perspective transformation and if the actions taken are a result of participation in a transformative learning experience (Kiely, 2004, 2005). Kiely (2005) indicated that the case study approach was deliberate and would “increase the trustworthiness and validity of the study results.” (p. 8). The study closely examined the students’ emotional, physical and intellectual responses to a service-learning setting with a social justice focus. The purpose of the service-learning project was to shape and execute health clinics alongside community partners. Students interacted with the community by engaging in participatory research – attending presentations to learn about health and government, volunteering at the local hospital, and conducting health assessments. A total of forty-three students within five cohorts participated in the service-learning program over a seven-years. The sample of the study included twenty-two students from across all cohorts. All except one participant were U.S citizens and White (Kiely, 2004; 2005).

After participating in the service-learning project, students of the study all developed an emerging global consciousness and fell into one of three categories – (1) envisioning, (2) transforming forms and (3) chameleon complex. Students envisioned ways in which to change their lifestyle, gained a sense of empowerment, and hoped to serve as agents of change (Kiely, 2004, 2005). While students acknowledged differences in the way in which the transformational learning journey took place, all noted perspective transformation as taking place in one or more of the following forms – political, moral, intellectual, cultural, personal and spiritual. The most
notable takeaway, is how students struggle to “translate their perspective transformation into meaningful action” (Kiely, 2004, p. 16). The chameleon complex described the ongoing disconnect that students had with what they want to do and the action taken after a service-learning trip. Drawing on Mezirow’s work, Kiely’s analysis summarized the findings of the study into six categories that explained how students experienced transformative learning through a service-learning opportunity and was named the Transformational Learning Process Model for Service-Learning (Kiely, 2005). The categories included (a) contextual border crossing, (b) dissonance, (c) personalizing, (d) processing, (e) connecting, and (f) emerging (Kiely, 2005).

**Contextual Border Crossing**

Contextual border crossing relates to how the “personal, structural, historical and programmatic elements” of a service-learning experience can increase or decrease the process of transformative learning (Kiely, 2005, p. 9). The personal aspects aligned with the individual participating in the service-learning project include elements such as personality traits, social roles, professional experiences, beliefs, values, interests and motivation (Kiely, 2005). These are seen as an individual’s life experiences and provide content to the way in which an individual understands and processes service-learning. The structural element relates to an individual’s race, class, gender, religion and nationality (Kiely, 2005). The structural aspects allow participants to focus on the power they have compared to those in the service-learning project by having awareness of their socioeconomic and political capital. The historical dimension of contextual border crossing relates to factors that influence the history and culture of a specific site in relation to an individual’s experiences. “Historical elements of context have implications for learning that leads students to examine the significance of nationality, unequal relations of
power, and relative value of certain citizenship rights and obligations” (Kiely, 2005, p. 9).

Programmatic factors, the last category that describes how a student experiences transformative learning in service-learning, relates to how context affects the process. For example, the service-learning site can impact the students’ experiences (i.e. living arrangements, interactions with community members. Crossing contextual borders moves beyond factors that relate to an individual’s nationality and physical boundaries, instead it takes into consideration the borders related to the social, cultural, political, economic and historical of an individual and the service-learning experience.

**Dissonance**

Participants of a service-learning experience encounter dissonance when there is a mismatch with their prior frame of reference and the features of the contextual factors (Heilman, 2012; Kiely, 2004; Kiely, 2005). While participants may examine their positionality prior to beginning a service-learning experience, it is not until they are immersed in the project that they experience dissonance related to the physical, environmental, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions. Kiely’s study found a correlation between low and high intensity dissonance. Low intensity dissonance relates to an individual’s experience and difficulty communicating in another language, adjusting to a new location, and changes to physical surroundings/housing, climate and food. Participants typically adapt to low-intensity dissonance quickly. On the other hand, high-intensity dissonance relates to participants observing extreme conditions as they relate to poverty, hunger, and diseases. These experiences are overwhelming and mere reflection is often not enough to overcome the dissonance. High-intensity dissonance sparks ongoing learning and stays with a participant far beyond the service-learning experience. Kiely refers to
the high-intensity dissonance as a repositioning process that takes places over time, and one that begins the transformational learning process.

**Personalizing**

Personalizing refers to how individuals respond to and learn from the various types of dissonance (Heilman, 2012; Kiely, 2004; Kiely, 2005). This process is personalized and emotional. For some students the service work can trigger a personal responsibility to be emphatic to another’s experiences based on firsthand experiences and interactions with others. Students in Kiely’s study expressed outrage, shame, guilt, anger, helplessness, joy, sarcasm, embarrassment confusion and sadness when directly facing poverty in Nicaragua. Interestingly, each student’s response differed based on his or her individual contextual aspects. Each individual works thorough dissonance by reflecting and accessing on their personal experiences, strength and weaknesses, and then taking action to address the issues they are encountering in the service-learning project.

**Processing and Connecting**

The categories of processing and connecting are seen as having an interconnected relationship between the cognitive and affective dimensions of the transformation learning model of service-learning (Heilman, 2012; Kiely, 2004, 2005). Processing is an individual and social learning process in which participants explore and reevaluate their assumptions to understand the causes and solutions as they relate to the social problem they are being confronted with in the service-learning project. Processing is accomplished through journaling, observations, and reflective dialogue. In addition to understanding more about the problem, participants need to make sense of their experience by connecting with the community and their peers. On the other
hand, connecting is learning through non-reflective modes such as sensing and feeling. These
types of informal interactions allow participants to develop deeper relationships and empathy.

**Section Summary**

The findings of Kiely’s longitudinal study and model adds to previous studies regarding
the transformative nature of service-learning by providing specific contextual factors that shape
the learning process (Heilman, 2012; Kiely, 2004, 2005). Studies have noted the importance of
structural dimensions; however, the conceptual connections have been overlooked. The learning
processes described by Kiely further contributed to “a conceptual framework for educators to
understand and more effectively foster learning processes that lead to transformative outcomes in
service-learning” (Kiely, 2005, p. 9). Kiely’s model substantiated the positive impact of service-
learning in K-12 and higher education settings (Billig & Eyler, 2003; Furco, 2000, Furco &
Billig, 2002; Heilman, 2012; Honnet, & Migliore, 1991; Howard, Gelmon, & Giles, 2000; Kiely,
2005; Welch & Billig, 2004). Interestingly, while Kiely’s research has advanced prior studies
regarding perspective transformation and service-learning, the sample size of the case study was
limited to domestic students. The learning experience of students should not be viewed in
isolation from their backgrounds. This study can further inform the field by examining the
service-learning experience of international students while using Transformative Learning and
the Transformative Learning Model for Service-Learning as the frame of reference.

**Chapter Summary**

While recent research focuses on student diversity initiatives to help develop awareness
and appreciation to culture on college campuses, there is a significant opportunity to address the
types of interactions that take place in a service-learning course that can assist with
understanding academic experiences and perceptions of international students. Most of the
previous research has focused on assimilation and integration issues of international students leading to challenges surrounding social adjustment, discrimination, culture shock, cross-cultural differences and academic integration (Lee & Rice, 2007; Steinke, 2009). Unfortunately, institutions have largely overlooked academic experiences as providing or accommodating diverse needs of international students. Service-learning moves beyond just altering curriculum and encompass the significance of the what, how and why of teaching to help incorporate student experiences and cultures within pedagogical practices, and can serve as a transformative leaning experience.

**Limitations and Conclusions**

There are several limitations that emerged upon reviewing the literature on the international student experience, service-learning and transformative learning. First, it is important to understand that a diverse student body has varying needs and cannot be considered in a vacuum. Higher education institutions need to recognize that the race and cultural background of a student plays a significant factor in their retention and learning of a subject matter. Much of the existing literature focuses on international students as a whole without acknowledging the differences among cultural groups and even those that belong to the same cultural group. Students come from distinct communities and bring unique experiences, needs, norms and expectations. Therefore, one cannot generalize service-learning experiences of international students across all sectors and communities.

Another concern is that neither the theory nor model of Transformative Learning by Mezirow and Kiely directly addressed the importance of a student’s cultural background to the process. This can be problematic as this study looks to understand the experiences and perceptions of international undergraduate learners. By ignoring an individual’s background, it
may restrict the amount and types of learning opportunities that can take place. Christie, Carey, Robertson and Grainger (2015) assert that for critical reflection to occur, issues surrounding diversity of individuals, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation need to be considered. The need to address the context within the learning process is essential to linking meaning and experience.

When considering limitations of the current research surrounding Transformative Learning and a Transformative Learning Model for Service-learning, it has been noted by the majority of scholars as leading to positive outcomes and growth. “Transformation enables people to move towards habits of mind and habits of being that are more inclusive, open, whole, and wise” (Stevens-Long, Schapiro, & McClintock, 2012, p. 184). It is important to note that changes in assumptions and beliefs can result in a negative transformation through formal or informal interactions. These types of experiences can hinder personal growth and impact the experiences of others in similar educational or social groups (Kiely, 2004; Stevens-Long et al., 2012). Critical reflection of assumptions and beliefs do not always lead to catalyzing a transformative experience. Transformative learning should not be seen in a vacuum or a one size fits all framework (Stevens-Long et al., 2012).

Given an influx of international students in higher education, limited research explores the impact between service-learning and international students, as well as the possibility to address acculturation challenges through a transformative learning experience. The theory of Transformative Learning refers to three related concepts: a transformational outcome, a process of learning that is experienced by a learner, and an educational program that fosters a learning experience which can result in or catalyze a transformational outcome (Stevens-Long et al., 2012). “Transformative learning shapes people. They are different afterward, in both they and others can recognize” (Stevens-Long et al., 2012, p. 184). Transformative Learning and a
Transformative Learning Model for Service-learning provide a lens to understand the experiences of a marginalized population and can bring upon needed understanding of the non-traditional academic experiences of international students. Thus, providing a platform to explain how powerful issues presented within a service-learning project can affect the personal and academic development of undergraduate-level international student.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The purpose of this case study was to understand how a service-learning course affects the academic transition of undergraduate-level international students attending a private university in the northeastern United States. Based on the researcher’s academic and professional goals, and theoretical framework of this study, the following research questions were formulated to guide this study:

1. What do undergraduate international students learn from a service-learning experience that shapes their academic transition?
   a. How does a service-learning experience contribute to the English language proficiency of undergraduate international students?
2. How do undergraduate international students view their academic experience in their home country after participating in a service-learning program?
3. How does participation in a service-learning experience change academic goals for undergraduate international students?

This chapter provides the guide utilized to carry out the research for this study. First, a discussion of the paradigm and philosophical perspectives that underpinned this study will take place. Second, a review of the case study methodology will be provided, as well as how the methodology related to the study. Third, a discussion of the population studied, the sampling and sample criteria will be explained, followed by the recruitment and access of the participants and the research site. Finally, the chapter will conclude by speaking to the ethical considerations and confidentiality used to conduct the study.
Research Paradigm

The constructivist paradigm influenced this qualitative case study, and was used to gain an understanding of how undergraduate international students described their academic transition in a service-learning course in the United States. A research paradigm defines the philosophical foundations and conceptual organization of a study (Merriam, 2009; Ponterotto, 2005). The main tenant of the constructivist paradigm is that reality is socially constructed by those engaged in research or those who live it, as opposed to a single entity (Ponterotto, 2005). “Constructivism adheres to a relativist position that assumes multiple, apprehendable, and equally valid realities” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). The constructivist paradigm as it relates to this study, understands the background and role of the researcher as an interactive link between the participants of the study. I gained an understanding of the lived experiences by interacting directly with the participants. I, along with the participants brought our own thoughts and interpretations to construct meaning based on social and learned experiences (Mertens, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005). Thus, multiple, socially constructed realities were brought forth.

The approach to constructivist research is achieved by gaining an understanding of the lived human experience, and interpreting meaning from a standpoint or situation (Mertens, 2005). I began by generating a pattern of meaning based on the background and experiences of the participants, as opposed to a theory approach found in the postpositivist paradigm (Creswell, 2003; Mertens, 2005). The construction of knowledge within the constructivist approach is not a static process. Instead, there is continuous development of knowledge and understanding based on previous experiences and new interactions, allowing for knowledge to be socially constructed (Crotty, 1998; Ponterotto, 2005; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2011). Within the constructivist paradigm, there is a need for flexibility as participants formulate new knowledge and challenge their
experiences to better understand their experiences throughout the research process. Within each experience a person further maintains or develops their sense of reality (Crotty, 1998).

To further examine the constructivist approach, Guba and Lincoln (2005) identified a belief system to define paradigms. The four philosophical assumptions include axiology, ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Mertens, 2005). Axiology focuses on the nature of ethics and judgement, which in the constructivist approach is a balanced representation of views, raising participant awareness and building community rapport. Second is ontology which is the nature or belief of the reality (Mertens, 2005). “Your way of being, what you believe is real in the world; that’s your ontology” (Wilson, 2001, p. 175). Critical to the constructivist approach and the ontological belief system is that there are multiple perspectives brought forth by multiple perspectives and the context informing an interpretation (Mertens, 2010). Next is epistemology, which refers to how individuals think about a reality by focusing on the relationship with the researcher and participant (Mertens, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005; Wilson, 2001). This study acknowledged the interactive role between the researcher and participants, and the subjective nature of the research process. I sought to understand the experience of multiple individuals in a natural setting, and saw the process as collaborative. Creswell (2013) suggests that conducting research where the participants “live and work” provides firsthand information to what is being shared. Finally, the methodology was based my epistemology or way of thinking to make meaning of new experiences and knowledge (Mertens, 2005; Wilson, 2001). Axiology, ontology, epistemology, and methodology worked in tandem to comprise the constructivist research paradigm.

This study used a case study methodology which was informed by the constructivist approach (Stake, 1995). The constructivist position aligned with this study because it is
underpinned by the belief that meaning is revealed through deep reflection and interaction between the researcher and participant. Thus, both the participants and I co-constructed findings while understanding the array of factors that influenced interpretations and perceptions (Crotty, 1998). I aimed to understand multiple socially constructed realities (Mertens, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005). Additionally, given the interactive researcher-researched relationship, my relationship with the participants was based on trustworthiness, authenticity, reflexivity, rapport, and reciprocity (Mertens, 2010). Qualitative methods are prominent in the constructivist paradigm and are further explored in the next section as the guiding approach of this study.

**Nature of Qualitative Research**

A qualitative research approach was used for this study to explore personal perspectives of international students participating in a service-learning course, rather than testing or confirming a specific hypothesis or relationship. The qualitative nature of research, also referred to as interpretive or naturalistic, looks to shed light on a central phenomenon by studying places and people in their natural settings (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) describes qualitative research as “understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). Qualitative studies move away from cause and effect and prediction, and instead seek to uncover the meaning behind a population or phenomenon, and how individuals make meaning of their constructed experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1985; Ponterotto, 2005; Stake 1995).

Merriam (2009) describes the main characteristics of qualitative research as focusing on process, how individuals interpret their experiences, the researcher as essential for data collection and analysis, the process as inductive, and the output as highly descriptive. An inductive process
allows a researcher to gather data in the field from observing, interviewing and documenting, while further building on ideas and concepts. Thus, allowing a framework to be informed by what is inductively learned as opposed to deductively testing a hypothesis common to positivist research (Merriam, 2009).

A qualitative approach uses data collection tools such as interviews and observations which can produce unexpected findings and does not limit respondents to multiple choice selections, which are often found in a quantitative tool such as a survey. The coding and analysis of qualitative research keeps the perspective of the participant predominant to the research which is being studied (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2011). A qualitative research design was ideal for studying international student experiences to help gain a richer understanding of students’ unique perspectives and how those perspectives may be altered/developed as a result of a service-learning course.

There are an array of qualitative research strategies. The research design most aligned with my problem of study and conceptual framework was a case study model. Case studies employed by researchers seek to understand how and why something takes places within a specific environment (Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1988; Merriam, 2009). According to Merriam (2009), “a case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40). The bounded system referred by Merriam (2009) refers to specific time, space and location that is used to make meaning of a program or person. The goals of this study were achieved with a qualitative case study method by understanding the academic experiences of undergraduate international students in a service-learning course and the impact on their academic transition.
Methodological Approach: Case Study

The case study method was identified as the methodological approach for this study. This section will begin by describing a case study research. Then, the different types of case studies within the methodological approach will be considered. Lastly, the section will provide a detailed overview of a single instrument case study as it pertains to this study.

Creswell (2013) and Merriam (2009) describe a qualitative case study as focusing on a bounded system or a unit of analysis such as an event, program or person. According to Yin (2009) a case study must involve a real-life setting. In essence, a case study allows a researcher to search for meaning and perspective by exploring a real-life bounded system (a case) (Merriam, 2009). The case study method approaches research holistically by satisfying three tenets of qualitative research which include describing, understanding and explaining (Tellis, 1997). Fundamental to the case study approach is gaining an understanding of a complex problem or social phenomenon by answering “how” and “why” something has occurred at an individual, group or organizational level (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2011). Tellis (1997) notes that a single case study can add to understanding a theory, or a specific case. This particular case study attempted to describe the experiences of specific undergraduate international students in a specific service-learning course, while also seeking to provide further understanding to the possible transformative learning resulting from a service-learning experience and the general impact on academic transition.

One of the defining features of case study research is to identify a specific case, bounded or described by certain parameters and specific boundaries (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2005). A researcher must make a choice of what is being studied and what is not (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 2005). As Stake (1995) and Yin (2009) note, a case study approach
should be used when a researcher has identifiable cases with boundaries. Merriam (2009) further asserts that the most essential feature of a case study is identifying the case of a study, including the “what”, which is the bounded system/context, and the “who”, which refers to a person, a group, or an institution. By identifying the “what” and “who”, a researcher is fencing in what they plan to study (Merriam, 2009, p. 40).

Miles and Huberman (1994) compare identifying the bounded context of a study to a circle with a heart in the center. The focus of the study was the heart and the circle represented the areas that could not be considered within the scope of the research. For this study, the bounded case or circle looked at a single organization, a private university in the northeastern United States. The second layer of analysis was examining within the organization or the heart, service-learning courses at the undergraduate level, to help understand possible commonalities and uniqueness in the academic transition of international students (Stake, 1995). Tellis (1997) recognizes that a single case is appropriate since it can add to further understanding a case, and in this research study further understanding the impact of a service-learning experience with undergraduate international students. This particular case study described the experiences of the students in a particular service-learning course, but also contributes to current literature in the field on the academic transition of undergraduate international students in the United States, and whether specific elements of the learning context can generate, stimulate, create or facilitate transformative learning.

The types of case studies considered for this study included intrinsic, instrumental and collective (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2011). The type of approach used within a case study approach is dependent on the size of the bounded case, and the number involved such as one individual, several individuals, a group, a program or an activity (Creswell,
Baxter and Jack (2000) and Stake (1995) describe an intrinsic case as moving beyond understanding an abstract or generic phenomenon, but rather a researcher’s genuine interest to understand a specific case. An instrumental case study is used when looking to provide understanding to an issue or redrawing generalizations (Merriam, 2009). A single instrumental case study looks at one bounded case to highlight an issue by providing insight, and moves beyond merely describing a case (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995, Yin, 2011). In a collective case study, also referred to as a multiple case study, a single issue is selected such as a phenomenon or population, and the researcher utilizes multiple case studies (i.e. several research sites, multiple programs) to highlight the issue (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2011). Thus, varying perspectives are depicted on the issue. In a collective case study design, the inquiry method is replicated. However, generalizability from one case to the next is reserved since contexts can vary (Creswell, 2013). In contrast, a collective case study lends researchers to find similarities, differences, and/or patterns of behavior (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995).

Creswell (2014) suggests studying cases that are in progress to ensure that information is gained in real time. Furthermore, it is recommended that to gain an in-depth understanding of a case, a researcher should utilize an array of data sources such as interviews, observations, reports and focus groups (Creswell, 2013; Eisenhardt, 1989; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Yin 2011). Creswell (2013) refers to the use of multiple sources as the “hallmark of a good qualitative case study” (p. 98).

This single instrument case study drew from multiple sources of information within the service-learning course, including interviews, participant observations, and document review. Thus, I was able to understand if the service-learning experience was truly transformative in nature, and learned about the potential impact of the experience on a student’s academic
transition, academic experience, and language proficiency. In order for this approach to be successful, I gained access to participants. The next section will discuss the research site, participants, recruitment and access.

**Research Site**

My research setting was a private institution in a major Metropolitan city in the North East. This site is referred to as “New College”. At New College, service-learning takes place through existing courses and is accomplished with the help of service-learning staff, faculty, students, and community partners. To ensure service-learning goals are met, each member has responsibilities. Coursework and curriculum are connected and developed to the history and current context of the community in which the service will take place. Community problems become the coursework and the curriculum is brought to life in service to the community. The students are not simply taking a course for a grade and/or degree requirement, but the student’s work has a significant role with the community.

Community partner relationships emerge in the context of undergraduate students enrolled in core courses entitled Foundations of Inquiry and Foundations of Scientific Process. The typical composition of the core classes includes freshmen and sophomores, since these introductory courses serve as prerequisites for advanced level degree progression. However, these courses are open to all undergraduate students. Each class has approximately 20 students, and one-third are primarily international, the majority from the countries of China, India and Saudi Arabia. The grant program specifies at least an hour of service for each student, each week, for approximately 10-weeks during a semester.
One of the primary goals of the service-learning courses at New College is to work with teachers and faculty to schedule college students to participate in experiential hands-on STEM learning activities with children and to provide technology support services during school hours. At New College, service-learning is a type of experiential learning that is a high impact educational practice with the following qualities as defined by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) (Kuh, 2008). These qualities include:

- spending time and effort in purposeful tasks;
- substantive interactions with faculty and peers;
- high frequencies of feedback and guidance on making continuous improvements to student work;
- making connections between disciplinary content with real-world experience;
- writing and reflecting on connections between curriculum, learning, and personal experience; and
- opportunities to apply learning to real-world problems.

The faculty members at New College do not rely on a predictable response to course experiences; the adjustments to lectures, readings, student feedback, and community partner issues are continuous. As an effect, the course work effort becomes a dynamic public effort that engages all participants and prepares students for active citizenship, work and life.

**Participants**

To secure participants for this study, I used purposeful selection, also known as purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009). A purposeful sampling approach allows a researcher to “discover, understand, and gain insight”, by selecting a deliberate sample of participants that allows for such information to be learned (Merriam, 2009,
Purposeful sampling does not seek to understand the experiences of the average opinion or experience, but rather an in-depth look about certain instances within a bounded setting (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1995). According to Yin (1984), a case study approach typically involves a small number of individuals. The sample size for this study included eight students. Creswell (2013) acknowledges sample size in case study research as a smaller number which allows for an opportunity to identify themes within the cases. The sample size for this study was considerably smaller because I focused on the deep contextual stories described by the participants in their service-learning experiences. The purpose of qualitative research is to illuminate the specifics rather than focusing on generalizability (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

The participants in this study were given the opportunity to describe their experiences in their own terms, similar to storytelling, which allowed me to gain a holistic and in-depth understanding of the students’ academic and service-learning experiences (Tellis, 1997; Zainal, 2007). It was important to note that in this case study I did not seek to generalize the findings but rather understand the unique experiences of the participants selected (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). As a result, the ability for generalization was limited. Therefore, the descriptions captured by the participants represented cannot be applied to all people and contexts (Butin, 2010).

As noted by Merriam (1998), purposeful sampling seeks to select participants than can provide the greatest insight into a studies research questions. A selection criteria ensured that an optimum group of study participants were selected. The participants of this study met the inclusion criteria set forth below:

- The participants were undergraduate students
- The participants were international students
The participants were enrolled in the Foundations of Inquiry (FCIQ-101) course.

The participants participated in the service-learning experience aspect of the FCIQ-101 course.

The participants were comfortable communicating in the English language.

At the time of this study, the demographics of New College was 38% female and 62% male. Interestingly, the pool of participants that met the inclusion criteria included 50% female and 50% male. I sought representation from the top feeder regions of international enrollment which included East Asia and Southeast Asia. To allow for variation in sampling, a category of ‘other’ was created to allow for participants from other countries outside of the top feeder regions. A third of the participant pool represented East Asia, another third represented West, Central and Southeast Asia, and a third represented the “other” category (Europe, Africa, and Latin America). Interviewing in this case study continued until at least one student from each region was interviewed.

The final sample included 5 females and 3 males, which included two males from East Asia (one from South Korea and one from China), one female from East Asia (Myanmar), one female from Southeast Asia (Vietnam), one male from Africa (Ghana), two females from Africa (Rwanda and Nigeria), and one female from France. The following Table 2 presents a visual illustration of the final sampling.
Table 2

**Final Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region (Country)</th>
<th>Freshman</th>
<th>Sophomore</th>
<th>Junior</th>
<th>Senior</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East Asia (South Korea)</td>
<td>1M</td>
<td>1M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8 (5F, 3M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asia (China)</td>
<td>1M</td>
<td>1M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asia (Myanmar)</td>
<td>1F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Asia (Vietnam)</td>
<td>1F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Ghana)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1M</td>
<td>1M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Rwanda)</td>
<td>1F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Nigeria)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1F</td>
<td>1F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (France)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1F</td>
<td>1F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8 (5F, 3M)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

M=male; F=female

The participants of the study were comprised of undergraduate international students from various home countries. Dolby (2008) recognizes that a student’s national background can determine the type of learning outcome before, during and after a service-learning experience. Interestingly, limited studies have explored the experiences of international students, and if a service-learning can generate and/or facilitate a transformative learning experience, and the type of impact on a student’s academic transition. Therefore, I wanted to understand the unique experiences, needs, norms and expectations of undergraduate international students from multiple backgrounds.
Recruitment

The central phenomenon of this study was to understand the service-learning experience of undergraduate international students attending a private university in the northeastern United States. Initially, to assist with recruiting undergraduate international students, I contacted all FCIQ-101 course faculty members who embedded a service-learning component in their curriculum and asked them to provide nominations of student participants. Also, I secured two contacts within the university which included the senior director of international and experiential education and the department chair of the undergraduate core curriculum. The two individuals were informed that the research study would take place in both the classroom and service-learning experiences within the broader community. While these two individuals were integral to support the study, they did not determine who would be selected to participate. Instead, students were secured by responding to the recruitment email.

The formal recruitment process of students included two steps, a recruitment letter (Appendix A) and confidential questionnaire (Appendix B), which were emailed to all undergraduate international students at the university enrolled in the Foundations of Inquiry (FCIQ-101) course at the metropolitan campus. As per New College’s IRB process, the director of international and experiential education served as the Principle Investigator of the study, and was copied on all emailed correspondences, including recruitment materials (letter and confidential questionnaire), scheduling, and member checking to undergraduate international students. The recruitment letter was sent to 18 students from 6 course sections and included the purpose of the study, expectations of the selected participants, and assurance of confidentiality. The questionnaire was designed to gather attributes of participants which included gender, nationality, race and/or ethnicity, class year, major, first language, level of comfortability with
the English language, and preferred method of communication. The questionnaire was sent to potential participants a total of two times over a one month span to encourage participation. Once the students sent back the completed questionnaire via Google surveys and agreed to participate in the study, I reviewed each questionnaire to ensure those selected were purposefully sampled and met the inclusion criteria.

A total of 10 out of 18 participants responded to the questionnaire and were also given the opportunity to speak to or email me with any questions. I emailed the selected participants and arranged for a mutually agreed upon interview time and location. During these contacts I emphasized that participation was fully voluntary. Through communication, I learned that two participants did not meet the inclusion criteria set forth as they did not participate in a service-learning project in the FCIQ-101 course. Therefore, the final sampling included a group of 8 undergraduate international students.

**IRB Approval and Protection of Human Subjects**

Gaining access to a site and individuals requires a process to ensure there is no harmful impact or risks to those that agree to participate (Creswell, 2013). To protect the rights of research participants, the federal government mandates the need for colleges and universities to create institutional Review Boards (IRB) to approve research by students, faculty and staff (Creswell, 2014). I submitted two IRB applications – one to Northeastern University to seek permission to conduct the study, and the other to New College to gain access to the site of the study. The IRB applications to both Northeastern University and New College included the abstract of the study, a brief description of the purpose of the study, source of participants and the selection criteria, description of the procedures to be followed, assessment of risks and benefits, protection of data/privacy, consent procedures, and information on my background.
Templates for the data collection methods accompanied the IRB proposals. Prior to conducting any data collection and analysis, IRB approval from both Northeastern University and New College took place.

Prior to the interviews, each participant in the study was given an informed consent agreement (Appendix C), which included the purpose of the study, that participation or non-participation in the study would not impact the students standing within the class or institution, and all information and communication shared would remain confidential. At the start of each interview, participants were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any recourse and their decisions and responses would not be influenced by the researcher (National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research, 2011). The same information in the informed consent agreement was also shared with each participant verbally prior to starting the interview and reiterated as needed throughout the process. As noted by Creswell (2014), by providing a consent agreement, participants better understood their expectations and set realistic expectations needed on their behalf to participate in the study.

The relationship between the participants and I were ongoing and built on trust and reciprocity (Maxwell, 2005). I am an alumni and former employee of New College for over eighteen years, and was highly interested in understanding the stories of the participants. Participation in the study allowed students to reflect on their educational experiences in their home country and the United States, and may further help with their academic and personal adjustment. Additionally, their insights may help university administrators and faculty understand how a service-learning experience has the potential to assist with the academic experiences of international students and their ability to learn the English language and cultural skills needed to be successful in their program of study and career. More generally, the research
conducted in this study will further inform ongoing scholarly work surrounding international students, academic transition, and service-learning.

**Data Collection**

Creswell (2013) asserts that data collection is far more than focusing on the types of data and the process of gathering information. Instead, researchers should not only seek to collect data but also observe and notice information that can further inform the study (Merriam, 2009). Data collection involves gaining permissions, putting in place and executing a sampling strategy, recording information (digitally and on paper), storing data, and thinking through ethical considerations (Creswell, 2013). A case study methodology uses various sources of data collection to assist with considering multiple perspectives, and to help inform a holistic understanding of the phenomenon at hand (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin 2014). I collected information from multiple data sources to gain rich data and to help substantiate findings of the study which included student interviews, observing final classroom presentations, and reviewing documents such as journals (when applicable) and class assignments. (Boblin et al., 2013).

This section will provide an overview of the data collection methods. I will describe each of the data collection methods and how they applied to the goals of this case study. Data collection took place through student interviews, observing classroom presentations, and reviewing documents such as journals and class assignments.

**Data Collection Research Timeline**

The research site required students to participate in a service-learning program for approximately 4 weeks. The full semester took place over a 16-week period. Table 3 outlines the actual data collection period and participation by the participants. The fall 2018 semester began in September and finished in mid-December. The goal was to conduct data collection
during the second half of the fall 2018 semester. However, given delays with the start of the service-learning project, interviews took place towards the end of the semester in a compressed timeline.

Table 3

*Data Collection Research Timeline*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Interview(s)</th>
<th>Observation Date</th>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>Documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>12/3/18</td>
<td>12/11/18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aida</td>
<td>12/3/18</td>
<td>12/11/18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinh</td>
<td>12/3/18</td>
<td>12/11/18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favour</td>
<td>12/4/18</td>
<td>12/11/18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yusif</td>
<td>11/16/18; 12/4/18</td>
<td>12/11/18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>11/15/18; 12/5/18</td>
<td>12/11/18</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abe</td>
<td>12/7/18</td>
<td>12/11/18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laeticia</td>
<td>12/11/18</td>
<td>12/11/18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows how each participants was involved in the data collection process throughout the month of December. Participants Yusif and Julia were interviewed twice as I needed additional information since the first interview did not include the needed follow-up questions. The participants were contacted again so additional probing questions could be asked to uncover meaning and details/stories. I not only had to explore the service-learning experience but the implications of those experiences and lessons learned.
Interviews

I conducted individual interviews with eight students in the FCIQ-101 service-learning project. A primary way to gain detailed information about participants is the use of in-depth interviews including open ended and response evoking questions (Boblin et al., 2013; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Englander (2012) suggests asking questions that will provide descriptions to the phenomenon and staying away from questions that may elicit a “yes” or “no” response. Often asking participants to focus on recalling an “early emotional memory” or situation can help with the discovery of the meaning and the context in which they take place (Englander, 2012, p. 22). The remaining interview questions were dependent on the response of the interviewee and focused on the phenomenon. I sought to understand individual experiences around service-learning and academic adjustment in the United States. The interview questions encouraged deep reflection and storytelling as students reflected on their academic experiences in their home country and the United States. I kept in mind that special attention would be given to understanding descriptions that were related to emotion which is often related to a Transformative Learning experience (Kiely, 2005).

The student interview guide is found in Appendix D. The interviews used a semi-formal method, also known as the interview guide method, which used a prepared and approved protocol (Creswell, 2013). The interviews took place in a private office setting to ensure the participants were comfortable, and scheduled at a time that was most convenient to them. Each interview took place for approximately 70 minutes, with the first 10 minutes focusing on reviewing the informed consent form (Appendix C). At the beginning of each interview, each participant confirmed the attributes they noted in the recruitment letter (Appendix A) and questionnaire (Appendix B) which include their gender, nationality, race and/or ethnicity, class
year, major, first language, level of comfortability with the English language, and preferred pseudonym. I reviewed the informed consent document, and asked the participants to sign it. The interview then began and were digitally recorded with two devices (a cellphone and tablet) to ensure there were no technological glitches.

In addition to the digital recordings, I took notes during the interviews and made note of observable behaviors such as emotions and facial expressions. The use of field notes (Appendix E) played a critical role in the data collection of this study. The field notes supplemented the audio recordings and allowed me to capture both verbal and non-verbal statements and actions, as well as my impressions of the interviewee and the context of the interview (Creswell, 2013; Montgomery & Bailey, 2007). During the interviews the field notes were hand written on the interview guide. The field notes were then typed and stored using the field notes record, coded and utilized in the data analysis.

Immediately after each interview I sent the interview recordings to a transcription service, and reviewed each recording against the transcripts to ensure accuracy. The data was stored on my computer, which was secured with a password and not accessible by others. The raw transcripts of the interviews were stored in a lockable file cabinet. I used a member-checking process after the interviews to further assist with credibility (Boblin et al., 2013). This process entailed taking the data and insights/interpretations back to each participant to ask them to confirm the credibility of the information, which in this study included sharing findings and representative quotes (Creswell, 2013). The transcripts and findings were stripped of any personal information and the institutions name. Each student was assigned the pseudonym selected from the completed demographic questionnaire.
Observations

Creswell (2013) recognizes observations as an essential data collection method for qualitative research. Observations allows a researcher to take note of the phenomenon taking place in the actual field by focusing on the purpose and questions of the research (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam (2009) asserts that an observer is uniquely positioned because they can notice behaviors that may be routine. For this study, I observed participants by attending New College’s Service-learning Conference where the outcomes of the service-learning project were shared by each participant. The Service-learning Conference, organized by New College’s School of Interdisciplinary Studies and the Office of International and Experiential Education, gave students, faculty and staff members a platform to share their service-learning experiences and research with the broader community. By observing the final class presentation, I was able to gain insights to the participants’ experiences in the field – the service-learning experience, as well as how they presented to their peers on their culminating experience.

I had a nonparticipant/observer participant role, which allowed me to observe and take field notes at a distance without any direct involvement. I focused on the activities that took place during the presentation such as the participants’ interactions and involvement in their service-learning project, use of English language skills, and the ways they were engaged academically.

I utilized an observational protocol to record information and took notes during the final presentations (Appendix F – adapted from Creswell, 2013). Field notes can serve as the foundation of a study’s finding by including direct quotations from participants and descriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The protocol included a section for descriptive notes which allowed
me to make reflections of the projects and jot down possible summaries of conclusions. The field notes record were used when observing the final class presentations at the Service Learning Conference at New College. This platform required students from each of the Foundations of Inquiry courses to present their service-learning projects to a broader audience. With the field notes document, I kept record of the participants’ contributions to the overall presentation, their English language fluency, connection of their projects to academic disciplines/academic transition, takeaways of their experiences, and any emotions exhibited. These field notes assisted with the coding process. For example, field notes from Laeticia included her excitement around political engagement and service-learning. In her presentation she shared the following which were noted in the field notes, “It was exciting to learn about others experiences and different points of views. It helped me grow and representative of what I may do in the future.” Another example of how the fields notes document were used with coding included observing Abe and Trinh present at the Service-Learning Conference. Both Abe and Trinh were active contributors of their presentation. Trinh spoke with confidence on the overview of the voter registration project and gave suggestions on how to increase voter turnout. Abe’s group shared an overview of their STEM education project, and Abe led the discussion on how the discipline of psychology relates to the service project. Seeing Trinh and Abe in this context illustrated their ability to not only effectively communicate in the English language but also overcome any fears about speaking to their peers. When I was getting ready to leave the conference, Trinh came to me and said “I can’t believe I spoke about this project to all of these people.” This quote was noted in the field notes document and later used in the coding process. Similar to the interviews, the documents did not include confidential information about the participants. All field notes and memos were kept in a lockable file cabinet.
Survey

I sent electronic surveys via Google Forms to all participants of the study (Appendix G). These surveys were distributed at the end of the service-learning opportunity and sought to gain an understanding of how participation in a service-learning experience may change academic goals for undergraduate international students. The surveys included open ended questions with response options (Creswell, 2013). The students had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in the course and the service-learning experience, as well as future academic plans. As a result, I gained further insight to the impact of a service-learning opportunity and possible impact on future academic plans and goals. The results of these surveys spoke to the possible transformative learning experience by comparing the responses to those from the interviews.

Document Review

The final method of data collection was document analysis. The value in reviewing documents allows a researcher to gain insight into sources of information that they may not have been able to directly observe (Stake, 1995). Boblin et al. (2013) suggest that documents provide the researcher to confirm or question data found in other sources. The criteria that was used to select relevant documents was connected to the purpose of the study and included: (1) alignment with the research questions and conceptual framework; (2) information that relates to the serving-learning experience; (3) reflections on the academic experience and transition. According to Marshall and Rossman (1995) and Morse and Field (1995), document review provides insights on participants intimate details, including their values and beliefs without being intrusive.

The documents for this study included students’ journals and class presentations. Interestingly, only one class section of the FCIQ-101 course required students to complete
journal reflections of their service-learning experience. Therefore, only 1 out of the 8 participants submitted journal entries. In these journals, the student discussed and shared their specific experiences with the service-learning project, course content and their personal reactions. By reviewing the documents, I gained an understanding of the student’s reflections in their service-learning experience. As a result, I gained a richer understanding of the context of a student’s service-learning experience and the potential impact on their academic transition. However, since only 1 participant provided journals, I did not have the same level of reflection from each participant. The documents acquired for this study were organized by a unique file name (e.g. DB_ServiceLearningReflection).

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis process in qualitative research is comprised of organizing the data or minimizing the data into segments, placing and narrowing down the data into broader themes through coding, and then presenting the findings into a discussion, figures or tables (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998, Stake, 1995). The purpose of data analysis is to develop findings from the lens of the study participants and the interpretations of the researcher (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). While the elements of general data analysis can be captured by researchers, it is important to understand that the process is not a one size fits all model (Creswell, 2013; Huberman & Miles, 1994). “The processes of data collection, data analysis, and report writing are not distinct steps in the process – they are interrelated and often go on simultaneously in a research project” (Creswell, 2013, p. 182). Aligning with the constructivist nature of this study, the data analysis methods included initial coding, categorical aggregation, and comparative analysis.
Coding

The heart of data analysis is often referred to as the process of forming codes or categories, which requires describing, classifying, and understanding the data (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2013). Codes are defined as “labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). The process of coding includes taking text and aggregating them into categories based on the different methods of data collection, and then using a code to assign to each one (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) recommends that researchers use codes that represent the following:

- information the researcher expected to unfold prior to conducting the study;
- information that the researcher was surprised to find; and
- information that is conceptually interesting or unique to researchers

Saldaña (2013) further explains that coding moves beyond a technical process, but one that requires analysis and higher level interpretations. Coding involves breaking down larger elements of data into smaller subsets, which then leads to telling a story. Charmaz (2006) posits that coding is a fundamental link between data collection and understanding the meaning of the data. For this case study, initial coding was used to highlight and capture the experiences of the researcher and participants using interviews, field observations, and document review notes. Coding was broken down by two stages which were initial/first cycle and second cycle coding.

Initial Coding

For this study, the initial coding approach used descriptive and in vivo methods. Descriptive codes summarize the topic in the data by using a short phrase or word (Miles et al., 2014). In vivo coding is similar to descriptive coding but uses actual words or phrases directly shared by participants. In vivo coding is common in qualitative research, in particular when
researchers are looking to highlight the experiences and voices of the participants’ experiences. By using descriptive and in vivo coding, I sought to capture the personal experiences of the participants from interviews, field observations, and document review. Both coding approaches leave room for flexibility regarding interpretations and aggregation, while assisting with building a foundation for data analysis (Stake, 1995).

I manually conducted the initial coding process and then use a qualitative data analysis software program, NVivo. The process of manual coding provided me the opportunity to develop a strong connection to the study and the participants’ experiences. As an example, when the first set of participant interviews were analyzed there were more than 50 initial codes highlighted throughout the transcripts. Initially, a large focus included the emotions surrounding service-learning which included codes such as excitement, uncertainty, identity development, empathy, and curiosity. However, as I continued to work through the data sets, it became clear that the data did not speak heavily on emotions. Instead, I needed to focus on what action was occurring as a result of the service-learning, and move away from what the participants learned but how it shaped their academic transition. I recoded the data and themes began to emerge which included but were not limited to collaboration, communication, critical thinking (moving beyond rote), social engagement, and teacher-directed.

The use of both a manual and data analysis software allowed me to stay connected to the participants and their experiences within the study (Saldaña, 2013). I then transferred the manually developed codes to NVivo to further analyze and compare the results. To ensure the research questions were being answered in their entirety, I changed the questions into statements to see if the themes and subthemes were answering the questions posed. This helped me work through the findings of all research questions but more specifically research question 2, as the
focus was on international students’ academic experience in the United States instead of their academic experiences in their home countries. It was necessary to resolve this conceptual misunderstanding because it caused coding overlap between research question one and two. To assist with the organization of the coding process, I used a code book. A code book is a way for a researcher to compile codes, descriptions of the codes, and information on how the code is being used (Saldaña, 2013). I used NVivo to store the codes which included their meaning and direct quotations from the participants. To organize the code book, I captured the following information: code number, code label, code definition, quotes, and the file name.

An analysis of transcripts took place in multiple steps by utilizing grouping, reduction, elimination, and clustering (Pringle, Hendry & McLafferty, 2011). Benner (1985) and Creswell (2013) suggest developing a list of statements that stand out as significant, and then grouping them into larger meaning units or themes to uncover both the context and meanings of the case. I created and wrote a textural description of what the participants experienced by using examples from the transcripts, followed by using a structural description focusing on the context in which the phenomena occurred (Creswell, 2013). I came to understand there was a large amount of conceptual overlap and reused data from the initial coding. As a result, I had to resolve the overlap as data could not be used in two differed codes/categories (Merriam, 2009). I combined both the textural and structural meanings, the “what” and the “how” of the participants experiences, by providing an overall description of the meaning that was constructed (Benner, 1985; Creswell, 2013).

The analysis of the data was not pre-categorized by Mezirow’s stages and phases of Transformative Learning. Instead, I allowed elements of the experiential learning environment to emerge. This exercise allowed for themes and differences regarding everyone’s experience in
a service-learning project to develop, depict how learning unfolded, highlight triggers of the learning process, and understand how it impacted the students’ academic transition. To truly embrace and understand the elements that generate and facilitate Transformative Learning it was important to uncover the experiences of all participants given the individualistic nature of the change process noted by the theory.

The interview transcripts were read with special attention to the descriptive value shared by the participants. I became well acquainted with the content. Each interview was given a primary code based on the descriptive value as it related to the students’ academic transition in a service-learning project. Some categories were general and others more specific. For example, direct quotes from the interview transcripts were assigned multiple codes as they described or related to more than one element. This process assisted with organizing data and allowing themes to emerge (Heilman, 2012). The categories were heavily descriptive in nature and captured the participants’ beliefs and experiences. These types of categories were known as substantive. Substantive categories use *in vivo* coding and are descriptive (Maxwell, 2005).

**Second Cycle Coding**

I then conducted second cycle coding, also known as axial coding to group summaries of themes into smaller categories (Saldaña, 2013, Stake, 1995). Essentially, I was seeking to understand the contexts and conditions that were shaping the study. Then, I looked to interrelate the categories by grouping and regrouping the conceptual categories (Saldaña, 2013). Through this level of analysis, I worked through conflicts, and saw how the parts fit into the relation of the entire phenomena (Benner, 1985).

The process of second cycle coding occurred manually after data collection was complete. I reviewed both the code book and the analysis within NVivo. The four main
applications within second cycle coding include reducing or condensing larger amounts of data into smaller analytic units (Saldaña, 2013). This process assisted me early in the process by understanding interactions and how data connected to one another, and how it spoke to this specific case study. The synthesis and grouping of the codes continued to occur until many of the codes are captured. For those codes that appeared to be an anomaly, those were addressed later within the process. The goal of the coding was to allow for a smaller set of themes to emerge that were then used as conceptual categories.

I also used comparative analysis, common to grounded theory to compare the coded data from the interviews and observations to understand if anything further needed to be explored (Bennett, 2016; Merriam, 2009). This step within grounded theory allowed me to analyze codes within categories to see if there were similarities and differences. The purpose of constant comparison is to achieve the following: (1) comparing incidents to categories (2) integration of properties and categories (3) finding theoretical boundaries (4) writing up theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). The process of comparative analysis allowed me to recognize patterns, and to gain meaning from the participants of the study, as well as my own perspective. Effective constant comparison occurs when categories are “parallel in likeness and format” (Bennett, 2016). The process of comparative analysis takes place throughout the analysis process.

To assist with the process of eliminating misinterpretations of the meanings and viewpoints of the participants, it was essential for me to conduct a member-checking process (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Once I developed the categories and their definitions supported by direct quotes within the transcripts, the participants were sent a copy of the summaries to provide feedback. The purpose of this exercise was to ensure that my interpretations were aligned with the participants’ experiences. For this particular study, while
three of the eight participants signed off on the accuracy of the interpretations, no additional feedback was provided to further strengthen the accuracy of the content.

It is important to note that while the research questions were developed to give shape and direction to the study, during the coding process, one of the research questions were slightly adjusted. Flick (2006) compares research questions to navigational tools and recognizes that while researchers may map out their directions, they must also be ready to understand the unexpected. For this study the proposed research question was the following: How do undergraduate international students describe the impact of a service-learning experience to their academic transition? After the coding process the question was revised to the following: What do undergraduate international students learn from a service-learning experience that shapes their academic transition? This adjustment to the research question allowed me to capture not only what the participants learned in the service-learning experience but how it shaped their academic transition.

**Data Storage and Destruction**

Given the large number of data that was collected for this study, it was essential that I had a defined and organized way to store it. According to Creswell (2013), there are a set of principles about data storage which include: (1) creating backup copies of computer files; (2) using high-quality audio recordings; (3) maintaining a list of all information received; (4) protecting the identity of participants by using pseudonyms. These principles were used to ensure confidentiality for the data storage of this study.

The recordings, transcripts and all documents collected were placed in a locked safe, only accessible by the researcher. The electronic items were password protected and stored on my password protected computer. For backup copies of the digital files, I placed them on Google
Drive. Both the computer and Google Drive passwords were not shared with anyone else. Hard copy files collected through the document review process were stripped of participants’ identities, as well as the service-learning site and partnering institution. The paper files were stored in a locked drawer/file cabinet. As a backup for the hard copy files, they were scanned and stored on my password protected computer. Within a year of the study being completed; all identifiable information will be destroyed by shredding hard copy documents and deleting computer and Google Drive files. Informed consent forms will be kept for three years and deidentified files will be stored indefinitely. After the completion of three years, the informed consent forms will be shredded.

**Trustworthiness, Validation and Credibility**

The process of ensuring trust in the research process is a fundamental concern to those conducting research in the field (Merriam, 2009). Trustworthiness is dependent on how well the findings speak to and describe the phenomenon of study, due to the potential influence the results can have on the field (Lauckener, Paterson & Krupa, 2013). In qualitative research, trust is gained through a well-defined data collection and data analysis methods. The data within this study has the possibility of influencing those that make decisions on classroom and teaching practices for undergraduate students and specifically international students. Various data collection methods and sources were considered to help increase triangulation. Triangulation assists with increasing validity because information from multiple data sets are being compared to further inform the research questions and focus of the study (Creswell, 2013, Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Merriam, 1988, Miles & Huberman, 1994). “This process involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). In addition to data collection methods, conceptual categories were triangulated against multiple data
collection methods, member checking, and the use of the research questions and conceptual framework.

Merriam (2009) and Lincoln and Guba (1981) note that there is a need to not only trust the results of research but to ensure reliability and validity. Validation is viewed as a need to access the “accuracy of findings” as explained by the participants and the researcher (Creswell, 2013, p. 249). The validation techniques that were utilized in this study included the following: (1) the researcher spending time with participants; (2) member checking during data analysis to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations; (3) awareness of the researcher’s bias and positionality; (4) use of the developed research protocols. Validation, value and accuracy of a study is achieved by ensuring the researcher spends time in the field and with participants. In this research study, I engaged with those at the site by conducting interviews and observing class presentations. This allowed me to build trust with the participants, understand the experiences and then use that information to help clarify distortions that may be brought forth through data analysis (Creswell, 2013; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988).

The process of member checking was utilized to ensure the researcher’s interpretations and validate the participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005). Each participant was given a copy of the themes, representative quotes and asked to confirm the accuracy of the account, and to provide insights to any information that may have been overlooked. A total of three participants confirmed accuracy of the themes. Additionally to address trustworthiness of the data, the researcher used triangulation, which collects data from multiple sources, including interview transcripts, the code book, document analysis, field notes, and constant comparison (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005).
Limitations

A limitation of this study is the types of service-learning projects each participant will engage in within the external community. Although students were selected from the same course (Foundations of Inquiry – FCIQ 101), the project varied from student to student. For example, in fall 2018, six sections of the course partnered with three nearby elementary schools and a senior citizen center. The students explored a variety of social issues connected to various topics. Each of the schools worked independently to develop curricular goals and then share knowledge, processes, and skills to reach a shared goal. While applicability of how students apply learning across different sites occurred, it made the process of analysis and collection more complicated.

Another limitation of this study is regarding the selection of the participants, which is common of qualitative research. Since the study used purposeful sampling, specific and intentional criteria were set forth to identify participants who can represent a diverse subset of the institution’s population and multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, purposeful sampling was an appropriate limitation for this study since specific selection criteria were identified to address the research questions of this study (Creswell, 2013). As a result, the participants of the study represented undergraduate international students from various home countries, and one course and institution of higher education. The results will not be statistically generalizable to international students of all levels (undergraduate only) or all cultural backgrounds, but rather used to further understand the role of service-learning and international students studying in the United States in general.

Conclusion

The research design for this study was a qualitative analysis using a case study approach. The utilization of a case study allowed for the search of meaning and understanding within a
bounded system, while also acknowledging the role of the researcher during data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). This methodology sought to understand the service-learning experiences of undergraduate international students in a private university in the northeastern United States. The participants were selected using specific criteria and recruited by completing an initial survey. To understand how a service-learning course affects the academic transition of undergraduate-level international students, multiple forms of data collection were utilized, which included interviews, presentation observation, and document review. Data analysis was achieved through multiple methods beginning with initial coding, reflective writing and then conceptual category development. The findings of the study were triangulated across the data collection and data analysis methods. Appropriate steps were considered to ensure the identity of each participant and the accuracy of the information shared. As internationalization continues, the goal of the research was to use the findings to add to the scholarly conversations and best practices in the field of higher education around international students, academic transition, and service-learning.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this case study was to understand how a service-learning course affects the academic transition of undergraduate-level international students attending a private university in the northeastern United States. Based on the researcher’s academic and professional goals, and theoretical framework of this study, the following research questions were formulated to guide this study:

1. What do undergraduate international students learn from a service-learning experience that shapes their academic transition?
   a. How does a service-learning experience contribute to the English language proficiency of undergraduate international students?

2. How do undergraduate international students view their academic experience in their home country after participating in a service-learning program?

3. How does participation in a service-learning experience change academic goals for undergraduate international students?

This chapter begins with an overview of the eight study participants, and then a presentation of the research findings. Throughout this chapter, the research site is referred to as “New College,” and participants are referred to as students and/or international students. The three research questions are answered under their own sections as categorical themes that developed from data analysis through an inductive process.

Study Participants

Primary data for this study was collected via 8 semi-structured interviews from undergraduate international students in the Foundations of Inquiry course at New College, as well as secondary data from document review (journals), a follow-up survey, observations of
final class presentations, and field notes. Demographic information was collected prior to the interviews through the confidential questionnaire (Appendix B), and confirmed prior to the start of each interview. The questionnaire collected information on gender, region of origin, citizenship, year of study, major and first language. All participants were between the ages of eighteen to twenty-four years old, and assigned a pseudonym of their preference to protect confidentiality. Table 4 presents a visual representation of important demographic information of the participants, which was utilized during participation selection to ensure variation. The participants’ information is arranged in the table below in the order in which they were interviewed.

Table 4

(*Participants’ Key Demographics*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Region of Origin</th>
<th>Citizenship</th>
<th>Year of Study</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>First Language</th>
<th>Service-Learning Setting/Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>East Asia</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Elementary school, teaching STEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aida</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>East Africa</td>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Communication Arts</td>
<td>French/English</td>
<td>Elementary school, teaching STEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinh</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>Freshmen</td>
<td>Engineering Management</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Elementary school, teaching STEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favour</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>West Africa</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Life Sciences</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Senior center, interviewing senior citizen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yusif</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>West Africa</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Electrical and Computer Engineering</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Elementary school, teaching math/technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>Freshmen</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Burmese</td>
<td>Hospital, supporting elderly patients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abe</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>East Asia</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>Elementary school, teaching STEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laeticia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Western Europe</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>French/English</td>
<td>New College, encouraging political engagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview One: June

June is a male from South Korea and a sophomore at New College. He is majoring in Computer Science. June’s first language is Korean, and he emphasizes that his primary reason for attending college in the United States was to learn the English language.

I came here [United Stated] to learn the language of English. So that I can have more opportunity and to have a better job, to have a better life, because English is the most common language ... like most worldwide language, so that I can communicate with more people.

June’s commitment to learning the English language is confirmed by him voluntarily enrolling in a one year language immersion program in Arkansas prior to attending New College. June shares that this experience assisted him with speaking and writing English.

June shares that the common teaching approach in Korea was lecture based, and teachers are the primary source of knowledge. June does not recall class projects or service-learning courses in South Korea, and his only memory of community based learning was in middle school when he volunteered to clean his school’s auditorium.

Interview Two: Aida

Aida is a female from Rwanda and a sophomore at New College. Aida is studying Communication Arts. Her primary language is French, and she is very comfortable communicating in English as all of her schooling was taught in the English language. Aida came to the United States to follow her passion in media and entertainment.

I've always been interested in media and entertainment since I was a kid, but I never really took it seriously. I never took it seriously because I was in a traditional school where we learned traditional stuff like math, science, and it didn't really click and it was
something I liked to do as a hobby. It started with doing small blogs and Instagram and small clubs. Then I started falling in love with the subject.

Aida spent time in the United States prior to attending New College by visiting family and friends, and taking vacations. Additionally, after high school, Aida spent a summer in the United States taking college classes at another university focused on design and art. This experience reaffirmed Aida’s career choice and her decision to come to the United States to study.

It proved to me that I actually have the talent to do what I wanted and I had the passion for it. When I was doing photography, I was doing film photography. When I was doing it, I realized that I have the eye for photography and I have the passion to do this. I wanted to do it all the time. It wasn't hard for me to wake up during summer while all my friends are having fun in other places. I was going to school and I loved it, and my teacher was amazing. The faculty was amazing, the school. Everything was perfect.

Aida describes the teaching style in Rwanda as traditional with a large emphasis on the subject areas of Math and Science. Aida shares that she found this educational experience to be stressful because there was a lot of homework and exams, with limited project based learning. Independently, in Rwanda, Aida participated in community service activities where she helped construct libraries and decorate classrooms in less privileged areas. Aida did not take part in a service-learning experience prior to New College.

**Interview Three: Trinh**

Trinh is a female from Vietnam and a freshman at New College. She is studying Engineering Management and became interested in the major because her father is a mechanical engineer and serves as her role model. Trinh became interested in coming to the United States to
study because her older brother did, and she wanted to learn about other cultures and develop as a person. Trinh knew attending a college in the United States would be a financial strain on her family. To help alleviate the financial pressures, Trinh applied to a cultural exchange program, was accepted on scholarship, and spent her junior and senior year in a high school based in the United States.

Trinh’s first language is Vietnamese and she describes her comfort speaking English as a two or three out of a scale of ten. Trinh shares that she is more comfortable speaking conversational English with peers but tends to overthink talking in class because she has to understand what she wants to say in Vietnamese and then translate it to English.

To be honest, in high school, I'm not very open. I'm kind of shy a little bit because my English kind of like a broken English, so a lot of time I don't really understand what other kids talking about.

Trinh describes her educational experience in Vietnam as challenging with the main focus on science and math. Trinh states that teachers created a competitive learning environment with a ranking system. Trinh did not participate in project based or service-learning prior to attending New College. Once arriving to New College, Trinh found herself actively involved in the collegiate community by founding a media club and being a member of the robotic and Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) club.

**Interview Four: Favour**

Favour is a Nigerian female and a senior at New College on a highly selective scholarship. Favour’s first language is English. She is studying Life Sciences and plans to attend medical school. Favour became interested in the medical field at a very young age as she was in and out of the hospital due to health issues. Favour viewed the Pediatrician as a role
model and she wanted to help others in the same way. Favour came to study in the United States for educational opportunity and to achieve the American dream.

When you come to the United States, there's more opportunity for social mobility. So there's this perspective internationally and very much in Nigeria that if you come to US and you work hard, then you can achieve the American dream in a sense of ... if you're good enough you just get recognition for being good enough and you can progress in that way.

Favour describes teaching in Nigeria as lecture based with the teacher providing the knowledge to the students. Students are expected to take notes and refrain from speaking. Students are asked to be quiet unless they are asked a question by the teacher. Favour does not recall any project-based or service-learning in Nigeria. However, she volunteered at a local orphanage on a monthly basis. Upon arriving to the United States, Favour sought out community based work and volunteers at a hospital.

**Interview Five: Yusif**

Yusif is a male from Ghana who is in his senior year at New College. He is majoring in Electrical and Computer Engineering, and his first language is English. He describes his comfort speaking the English language as a 10 out of 10. Yusif did not come to the United States prior to attending New College. He came primarily to gain practical experience in the field of Engineering and was intrigued by what he saw in the movies.

I used to watch a lot of American movies. So I see how especially action movies where they're having hackers trying to get into systems and build in like AI and drones and stuff. I think that was what got me interested.
Yusif shares the primary focus in Ghana’s educational system was around learning and getting good grades with an emphasis was on tests, essays and homework. Yusif did not take part in group projects, service-learning or volunteer work prior to the Foundations of Inquiry Course. Yusif is involved in the campus community at New College and is a member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) club.

**Interview Six: Julia**

Julia is a female from Myanmar studying psychology at New College. She is in her freshmen year. Julia attended an American school from kindergarten to ninth grade and then went to Singapore for high school. Julia speaks six languages with Burmese as the primary. She is very comfortable speaking English. Throughout high school Julia played badminton and rugby for the national team.

Julia was afforded the opportunity to study outside of her home country throughout her educational experience. She recalls academic expectations being very different in Burma, and her family wanting more for her.

If I were to have stayed in my own country, then you would have just sat there and learned whatever the teacher said and that kind of thing. It’s a very traditional country, so there’s still things like…people still think that women can't do some things, and there's something that a woman does and some things that men do.

Julia recognizes that in Singapore women are encouraged to learn and have an opinion, which allows her to pursue a career of her choice. Julia participated in service-learning prior to New College, and giving back to others became a big part of her culture.

If it's your birthday, you just go to the monastery and donate, or you go to the pagoda and donate, or you go to an orphanage and you donate. And then if you have time off, then
people think, "Oh, I should probably travel there and do some service," or, "I should go here and find out what they need," and stuff like that. So it becomes a habit. If you're not donating, you're like, "Oh, I feel like I'm missing something. I should probably be doing something this day."

Julia states that participating in the service-learning experience at New College is exciting and allows her to continue giving to others.

**Interview Seven: Abe**

Abe is a male from China whose first languages are Chinese and Mandarin. He is a transfer student studying Biology. Abe came to the Unites States to pursue the American dream and major in Business but quickly realized that he was pursuing someone else’s dream.

So my dream is to ... Actually, my dream was to have my family, to have their business. But actually that was not my personal dream, 'cause one of my family wanted me to do because they're a person who wanted me to. But deep inside of me, the reason I choose bio, biology, is I want to be a doctor somehow, like in the future. The reason I want to be a doctor is that I do want to help people. It's like I have to help somebody. It's my responsibility. Because I can feel that I'm needed by people, just not by myself.

Abe went to a small competitive high school in China which helps prepare students to go to college in the United States. Abe recalls teaching being straightforward with the teachers giving students knowledge at a fast pace. He goes on to describe the competitive nature of a Chinese education and compares it to people going to war.

I'm study until night, and go to afterschool classes. I'm not a person that is still good. My mom want me to be the best of the class, the best of the best, so I went to four... I
remember I went to three English classes at the same time, in different area. I have two musical instrument classes. And then I have to practice how to speak Chinese, Mandarin.

Abe did not take part in any project based or service-learning projects prior to coming to the United States. Abe shares that he looks forward to service-learning because he can learn academic knowledge from other people.

**Interview Eight: Laeticia**

Laeticia is a female senior from France who is majoring in Architecture. She identifies her first language as both French and English. Laeticia came to the United States as a transfer student because her fiancé is also studying here. Laeticia shares that her desire to study is to have a degree but has no intention to work.

I'm just studying to have a degree. And in the future after all that I can work if I need to. I don't actually intend to work. I intend to get married and have kids. I've always been like that since I was a kid. I just don't have interest in being independent and having my own work. It's just not something that appeals to me. I was also grown up a lot in India, and I really liked the cultural background and I feel very much Indian and I like that.

Laeticia moved to India when she was thirteen years old and studied there throughout high school. She describes the teaching style as teacher led with lecture style classrooms and a strong emphasis on science and Math. Volunteering became an important part of who Laeticia is and she does not consider it work.

In India I did go to an orphanage and met children and brought things for them. I was school president and I did many things, so I guess I did some volunteering there too. But once again, I didn't feel like I was volunteering when I did it. We had a lot of things that made us really think what's going on in the world and help our local community. There
was things on waste, and we did many initiatives across the school campus. We were quite involved actually.

Laeticia shares that she does not look forward to the service-learning project as she is focused on graduating, and may have had a greater appreciation if it took place earlier in her academic program.

**Findings**

This case study is centered on understanding how a service-learning course affects the academic transition of undergraduate-level international students. A visual depiction of the findings listed by research question are shown in Table 5. There are a total of four sections which include: a/ How service-learning shapes the academic transition of undergraduate international students’, b/ The contributions of service-learning to the English language proficiency of undergraduate international students’, c/ Undergraduate international students view of their academic experience in their home country after participating in a service-learning program, and d/ The change in academic goals of undergraduate international students’ after participating in a service-learning experience. To answer these questions a total of nine themes were noted. To explain each theme, select excerpts from the interviews are included under each theme.
Table 5

Summary of Findings

1. What do undergraduate international students learn from a service-learning experience that shapes their academic transition?

- Valuing Applied Knowledge
- Engaging in Collaborative Learning Environment
  - Participating in dialogue
  - Working in groups
  - Building relationships
- Adapting to Critical Thinking Expectations
  - Withholding judgement
  - Practicing patience
  - Analyzing biases

1a. How does a service-learning experience contribute to the English language proficiency of undergraduate international students?

- Providing Opportunities to Practice and Improve
- Developing Linguistic Confidence and Self-Esteem

2. How do undergraduate international students view their academic experience in their home country after participating in a service-learning program?

- Teacher Centered
  - More Demanding than U.S. Educational System
  - Less Flexibility in Choosing an Academic Path

3. How does participation in a service-learning experience change academic goals for undergraduate international students?

- Creating Awareness of Social Inequities Leads to Future Volunteering
How Service-Learning Shapes Academic Transition

Three themes were identified that capture how service-learning shapes the academic transition of undergraduate international students: a/ Valuing Applied Knowledge, b/Engaging in Collaborative Learning Environment, and c/Adapting to Critical Thinking Expectations. The following sections will describe the undergraduate international students’ academic experience at New College. This study describes academic transition as an individual’s ability to assimilate to expectations and rigor of the academic program/course within the host country. Within each section, select excerpts from interview transcripts are included to highlight each theme.

Valuing Applied Knowledge

The first way service learning shaped the academic transition of undergraduate international students is Valuing Applied Knowledge. This is defined as students’ sharing an appreciation for applying course material to a real-world setting. Students sought value in this application as it helped them move beyond knowledge gained in a textbook or a lecture. There was an overwhelmingly positive response to embracing application of classroom material to real-world contexts, as it was different than what the majority of participants experienced academically in their home countries. All of the students’ shared how it is difficult to bridge the subject matter to their field without the application. For example, Favour, a senior at New College shares how the service-learning project was one of the most effective courses she took because it provided the application component:

I feel like the service learning course was one of the more effective courses for me just because we weren't stuck in a class all day like talking about hypothetical things that don't even involve with this class business. It's just like great when you can go outside and put what you're learning into action. So I think it was definitely one of the better
courses and easier to follow because it required your full participation when you were there. So you couldn't do just like sit there. You were learning.

Favour was the only participant that actively sought out the service-learning course as an elective because she wanted to gain experience in the field and connect her learning through service. Favour considers herself an active learner and one who learns by doing. She wants to get at the “why” something is taking place and does not want to learn a handful of facts. Favour is not fond of staying quiet and writing down notes when learning, instead she prefers discussion and application based learning. Aida, like Favour, feels that she needs to go out and get experience and see how facts and theory are related to application. She needs to “click them together”. Aida states that at New College she spends most of her time learning and analyzing material with limited connection to the application. She prefers to get to the point and participate in the application. The service-learning project provided Favour and Aida what they were looking for in their academic experiences at New College.

The need to move from theory to practice was an expectation shared by the participants but not always seen as fundamental prior to a service-learning course. For Yusif, he took the Foundations of Inquiry course twice to improve his grade. The second time he took the course it included a service-learning component. Similar to Favour, Yusif reflects on how he found the service-learning course disconnected from the rest of his academic experiences at New College because the course, unlike others, connected to real world applications:

I think the FCIQ class that I took, the last one, I think it's disconnected from the rest of my classes and the rest of my learning experiences and all. I would say that they're disconnected. It was probably the most fun class I had taken, almost interesting. It was really open. It was like a philosophy class, how I imagine a philosophy class should be.
This was more practical. It was more useful to me because I'm really interested in politics and finance and real world "things," whereas the rest of my classes are focused more on engineering.

Although the service-learning project was not directly related to Yusif’s major, it is evident that he valued the way in which he was learning by moving beyond theory. Yusif shared that he found his overall educational experience at New College disappointing because it was different than what he assumed, and at times he lost interest in learning. Yusif expected the American educational system to be more practical and rigorous than Ghana. Unfortunately, this expectation was only fulfilled in the service-learning project because it exposed him to the practical side which he described as applicable and relevant.

The application of knowledge proved to be extremely beneficial for the participants and a central theme to shaping their academic transition as it allowed them to move from book knowledge and understand expectations of U.S. education. Similar to Favour and Yusif, Julia recognized the value in learning when you are able to make connections outside of the classroom and moves beyond facts or theory. “Everything you learn [in class] is basically almost a fact or a theory. So you have to learn it. But if I'm not gonna be able to apply that in whatever, in the outside area, outside of school, then I don't really see the point of learning it.” Julia is the only participant that took part in a service-learning project prior to coming to New College. She does not see service-learning as mandatory, instead it is a choice that has rewards. For Julia, the service project allowed her to spend time with patients in a psychiatric ward of a hospital which brings her closer to her academic work and career aspirations. She worked directly with patients which at times was emotional and draining but truly provided her with the application of what she learns in the classroom to a real-life setting. This application of knowledge speaks to the
academic transition of the participants. The participants learned new academic expectations as a direct result of the service-learning experience. This experience was at the polar opposite from their educational experiences in their home country where the classroom was seen as teacher centered. Service-learning served as a catalyst to assist participants with assimilating to academic expectations in the U.S by moving beyond textbook knowledge and understanding the value of applying knowledge.

**Engaging in Collaborative Learning Environment**

Undergraduate international students learn about Engaging in Collaborative Learning Environment as a result of service-learning. This is defined as students connecting and interacting with peers/community partners at an individual and group level in the classroom and the service-learning site. These engagements are regarded as assisting participants with their academic transition by being socially rewarding and developing a sense of community. Findings show that the majority of undergraduate international students in the Foundations of Inquiry course at New College went through an emotional journey when engaging in collaboration because they were encountering an academic environment unlike than their home country which placed a large emphasis on a teacher centered approach with little to no room for interacting with their peers. While participants described their experiences as different, they saw value in the relationships they built in the course and service-learning site as it played an integral role to understanding and being integrated into the academic expectations in the United States. The category of Engaging in Collaborative Learning Environment includes three subcategories: Participating in dialogue, Working in groups, and Building relationships.

**Participating in dialogue.** The first sub-theme of engaging in a collaborative learning environment is Participating in dialogue. Participating in dialogue is defined as the ability to
communicate with peers and express opinions in a classroom environment. Findings showed that participating in dialogue allowed students to express their ideas, share their opinions, as well as understand the viewpoints of other students. As a result students learned to enhance their own understanding of class topics being discussed. While the process of participating in dialogue did not come easily for all students, there was an overall agreement and appreciation for learning in this way. Additionally, students saw value for how this approach can assist them in furthering their career aspirations. In many cases, students had to begin by recognizing that they were learning differently than their home country. For example, Favour notes that in Nigeria she was taught to keep quiet and write notes when the teacher taught. She was not fond of learning in this way and appreciated that she could embrace a discussion based approach.

I think just adjusting to this new style of learning and also like self-directed pace of American learning was very new to me. You know? This new thing was huge, and I feel like also class participation that was definitely a huge transition I had to make from coming from a place where it's supposed to be quiet and write your notes, and not your notes, and you can speak when you're asked to like when there's a question. For that you were supposed to speak, but otherwise there's not supposed to be talking in class. So going from that to a system where like actually talking is part of why you get points. I'm an active learner. I work ... I feel like I work best when I don't have this sit in rows of chairs and pay attention to that like one person or look at the screen at something.

Favour goes on to share that even though the process was a transition, she prefers to learn in an environment where there is discussion and sharing of opinions. She aspires to be a doctor and from the Foundations of Inquiry course and service-learning project she came to appreciate and
value being an active learner, and one who learns by interacting with others. Participating in
dialogue allows her learn from other people which excites her and gives her energy.

Engaging and learning from peers is helpful for students as they adjust to the academic
expectations in the United States. Similar to Favour, June also came to appreciate an
environment where he was engaging in dialogue alongside his peers and learning from their
experiences, while also seeing a direct correlation to his career goals. When reflecting on his
academic experiences in Korea, June recalls studying for tests and doing homework.
Engagement in dialogue with his peers was a new approach but one he was open to embracing.
Through service-learning June shared that he was able to further develop his communication and
English language skills which has prepared him for his career. June states, “I've learned from
this service learning that if I get a job communicating with other people is really important. The
service learning is like we are doing project with other people and so from what I felt from
serving learning is like it helped me to think about what it's going to be work. What it's going to
be like if I get a job.”

A collaborative learning environment is not common in the home countries of the
participants. Through service-learning participants came to prefer learning in an environment
where there was an exchange of ideas and opinions and the creative space to embrace it. Julia
and Yusif shared that if they studied in her home country they would have been told what to
learn from their teachers, and expected to write down class lectures word for word. Being a part
of a service-learning environment allowed Julia to understand that she learns best when she is
sharing her ideas and in a sense arguing for what she believes in. “I prefer it when there's a
discussion going on, and I get to have my opinions. And I like open-ended discussions where
you could be wrong, or you could be right, or all of us could be right. That kind of learning
approach.” Yusif and Julia found a participatory approach allowed them to generate their own ideas and opinions, rather than accepting the beliefs of the teacher.

It is evident that participating in dialogue within a service-learning course is an important part of a student’s academic transition, and for some it shaped the way in which they viewed their outlook on learning, while others were impacted personally by affording them the confidence they need to succeed in their fields. For example, Abe opened up about his personal experiences when he first came to the United States. With tears in his eyes, Abe shared that as a quiet person he became isolated and extremely depressed. Abe did not talk to his peers or have a social network. Initially he felt uncomfortable taking part in service learning because it was unlike any other course he had experienced. He assumed his peers may not like him or agree with what he had to say. However, over time, Abe came to embrace this pedagogical approach, and gained the strength to share his opinions and thoughts with his peers. He heard the opinion of others, and learned to respect them even when they were different than his own. The service-learning course gave Abe the confidence to talk to people again. Service-learning did more than just open Abe up to a new way of learning but also gave him purpose and confidence again. He describes the experience as life changing, “Taking this class, and this opportunity, really do help me to find my dream, somehow again. Not to find my dream again, to light it up again. To find my purpose.” Participating in dialogue is one sub-theme of engaging in a collaborative learning environment, another is working in groups, which will be described next.

**Working in groups.** The second subtheme of Engaging in Collaborative Learning Environment is Working in groups. This is defined as students working towards a common academic goal with their peers and with those at a service-learning site. Participants recognized that they need to work with their peers in their service-learning class to accomplish larger course
goals. For example, Favour’s class participated in a service-learning project in partnership with a senior center. The class was tasked with capturing life experiences of seniors, understanding the influence drugs and alcohol had on the seniors and the community, and engaging in dialogue about how youth can learn from seniors’ wisdom. The class formed groups and visited the senior center. Favour commented that since the class size was small, she got to know her peers. There was a general level of respect among all of the students, and collectively they were tolerable, polite and respectful of one another’s opinions, and the overall goals of the project. As a culmination to the service-learning project, the class created a pamphlet of all of the seniors’ stories to help illuminate their experiences. Through this, Favour came to learn not only about the senior she interviewed but how the stories collectively had a larger impact on the rich history of the communities in which they lived. Overall the group work helped Favour learn from her peers. Additionally, the Foundation of Inquiry class had a larger community impact by sharing the collective voices of the seniors in a shared project.

Given the nature of the service-learning projects, it was difficult for participants to approach the experience individually. Interestingly, participants came to embrace working in groups so much so that they emulated the same approach in service-learning when teaching elementary school students a STEM based curriculum. The participants saw great value in learning in this way, and decided to teach the students in a group environment. The participants assigned each of the students a role in the group to provide a sense of responsibility, and acknowledged that it allowed students to appreciate the value of teamwork, as they did in the Foundations of Inquiry course. For Abe and June they were nervous about teaching students due to language barriers but they overcame this hurdle by working together. The participants
extended the notion of group work beyond their course goals, and embraced it when approaching
service-learning.

Additionally, I observed the notion of group work when observing the final class
presentations at the Service Learning Conference at New College. This platform required
students from each of the Foundations of Inquiry courses to present their service-learning
projects as a class to a broader audience. In my observations, I saw cohesive presentations which
included participation by all group members. Students collectively articulated an overview of
their projects, the connection of their projects to academic disciplines, and takeaways of their
experiences. The participants showed a commitment to their presentations and to one another by
putting together well thought out presentations and embracing it as a team effort. In observing
Trinh and Laetitia, who presented on the same service-learning project of improving voter
registration and encouraging political engagement through a STEM after school program, it
became clear that they worked towards a common goal. In their presentation they included a
slide contributing to increasing the number of individuals that registered to vote, and included a
picture of their collective efforts at a registration table. Trinh shared that there was value in
working together to increase awareness and registration, and their class would not have had the
same impact if they worked alone. This example depicts how the students in service-learning met
a common goal as a collective group.

Building relationships. The final sub-theme of engaging in a collaborative learning
environment is Building relationships. This is defined as the ability to connect and develop a
sense of community. Findings show that as a result of service-learning, participants were
effective in developing relationships with both community partners as well as their peers in the
Foundations of Inquiry course. While participants developed relationships, it is important to note
that it took time and trust on both parties. For Favor, she wanted to gain trust from the senior citizen she was working with to uncover his life experiences. She recognized that there was a generational gap between them and that could create a barrier. She went on to discuss that if he didn’t trust her then she would not be able to learn about his experiences. Favor shared some of the questions she asked herself at the beginning of the service project, “Are they're going to be trustful of me? Are they going to be open because if they don’t it doesn't really work. We can't really get a lot out of someone if they don't feel like they can trust you?” Favor began to build trust by being respectful of the information the senior citizen shared and by remaining open minded. She did not record the session until the senior citizen was comfortable with her doing so and she made sure she shared the written narrative with him before it was published. Favor recognized that their relationship developed over time and was formed with time, trust and patience.

The process of building relationships took time and took an emotional toll on some of the participants as those at the service-learning site came from backgrounds different than their own. For example, Julia took part in service-learning within a hospital setting, specifically a children’s ward. Julia, similar to Favor was able to build relationships with those at the service-learning site overtime. While Julia was overcome with emotions around the difficulty of working with this population, she embraced the opportunity and visited the children’s ward over a two month period. She described the beginning of the experience as awkward because she was unsure how her presence would be received by the children or if she could understand the circumstances around their illnesses. However, as she continued along with service, she became more comfortable. She began to embrace the experience and started interacting with patients by playing games with them. For Julia these small gestures humanized her to the children, and they
began to open up to her about their experiences. The children started looking forward to her visits. While Julia felt that she was able to build relationships with children over time, she also felt extremely challenged by their circumstances. She felt as though she had a weight of responsibility in her position, which unlocked mixed emotions such as gratitude, happiness and fear. While the interactions were difficult for Julia, the service-learning opportunity reaffirmed her career aspirations to be a doctor and desire to help others.

The ability to build relationships through a service-learning experience is an important part of the participants’ experience. This is shown to be an integral part of undergraduate international students’ academic transition to the United States. Abe found the service-learning experience to be extremely beneficial because it allowed him to develop relationships with those at the service-learning site. Abe had the opportunity to work with students in an elementary school setting. He describes himself as shy because he views his English language skills as “broken”. Abe began the service-learning experience reserved in his interactions with the students. However, as he began to teach the students about STEM education, he realized that the students wanted to know more about him. Students were intrigued by his background. Through his interactions with the students, Abe began to feel more comfortable with them, and came to share that as a direct result of service-learning he learned that he likes to talk to people, felt warmth in his interactions, and came to develop relationships with the students which allowed him to understand more about their backgrounds.

Adapting to Critical Thinking Expectations

Another impact of service-learning to undergraduate international students’ academic transition is Adapting to Critical Thinking Expectations. This is defined as students reflecting on what they were previously taught/learned and their ability to draw a new set of conclusions or
see alternative view points as a result of service-learning. A pattern emerged among undergraduate international students in the Foundations of Inquiry course that allowed them to connect classroom learning to real-world applications at the service-learning site. While findings showed that participants critically reflected, the level of reflection varied for each of the participants which may be attributed to circumstances such as varying educational backgrounds, exposure to social issues, and/or level of commitment to service-learning and the course. Overall the findings support that students improved their critical thinking skills as the service-learning project progressed. The category of adapting to critical thinking expectations incorporates three properties that represent distinct features which include: Withholding judgement, Practicing patience, and Analyzing biases.

**Withholding judgement.** The first sub-theme of an undergraduate international students’ academic transition in this category is Withholding judgement. Withholding judgement is defined as the practice of not jumping to conclusions with individuals based on previous experiences and beliefs. While it may be difficult to refrain from prematurely judging others, it is an essential aspect of an individual being able to think critically. An important characteristic of this process is being able to understand and listen to another individual’s experiences or perspectives by putting yourself in their shoes. Many of the participants within the service-learning project had the opportunity to interact with individuals from backgrounds different than their own. Through interactions, participants were able to listen to how their experiences were distinct, withhold judgement and in some cases appreciate a varying viewpoint or experience.

Appreciating a background unfamiliar to participants allowed them to also explore their own belief systems in the process. For Favour it was important not to judge individuals until she had the opportunity to get to know them. While Favor may have entered the service-learning
experience with preconceived notions about the senior citizen she was working with she came to understand that has to be able to hear that individual’s story to truly appreciate their experiences. Embracing the practice of withholding judgement was only possible for Favour when she allowed herself to be open-minded to hearing and listening to the senior’s experiences and asking questions which helped her clarify any misunderstandings she had. She describes her philosophy of withholding judgement as the following:

I mean, I think that [the service-learning] experience helped me ... It helped me see that it makes no sense to judge people until you actually, really know them ... because whatever ... When you feel like one, when you see a story and then the news or you hear from someone it's just like one perspective and it's just like one snap shot of a person in one moment, you know. It doesn't really tell like the deeper story, and I think like it just made me more open to that conversation and specifically when I feel like negatives, I actually want to know more. I want to dig in besides what I'm seeing on the headlines, or besides what someone is telling me that I should believe. So, that definitely is something that is a part of it. This was like a lot of things that you've been told not to do, that you're able to do that here, and just explore yourself and see that the things that you ... Explore your lifestyle. Explore your belief system and come with an open mind I think.

Being open to conversations and wanting to learn and know more is an important part of Favour’s construction of withholding judgement. Trinh also recognized the importance of listening to help reframe her beliefs and understanding. For her this practice occurred throughout the service-learning project and took time to embrace. Trinh notes that in her home country of Vietnam she was extremely judgmental in her way of thinking as it related to gender roles and career choices. Prior to service-learning, Trinh shared that not many women studied engineering
because they cannot fit into a male dominated field. However, as a direct result of service-learning she learned to reframe her judgements by engaging with others, listening, rethinking assumptions, and continuing to engage in dialogue. The process of withholding judgement allowed Trinh to be open to understanding varying viewpoints. For Trinh this process did not occur in one visit to the service-learning site, instead it involved constant dialogue, and was a process. Trinh notes the following about the importance of listening to overcome judgement:

I would say that I have less temper or judgmental way of thinking. Yeah. So because now I have that patient to actually listen to people and maybe talk to them and giving them some fact and let them rethink and let them, get themselves a little and then we have a conversation again. It's not a one-time conversation. It's a process throughout.

The process of communicating and listening to overcome judgements continued to weave throughout the service-learning experiences of the participants. For Aida, a Communication Arts major at New College, she shares that within service-learning and her major more broadly she has to learn how to communicate with different audiences and understand their experiences to be effective. Coming to the United States was at times challenging for Aida. At times, she felt that she was not always understood and did not understand others. Through service-learning and interacting with students with different backgrounds, Aida began to understand the importance of not jumping to conclusions because she does not always know what is going on in the lives of others. For her, she had to learn to listen to their experiences before making judgements, and this process took time. “I've never been tested to deal with people as much as I have been tested these past few years, and also going to service learning, the people who necessarily don't understand you, not in a bad way, but they don't understand or you don't understand them.” Communicating and listening are important constructs for withholding judgement, and critically thinking more
broadly. Another important factor is practicing patience throughout the service-learning experience, which is discussed in the next category.

**Practicing Patience.** The second sub-theme of undergraduate international students’ academic transition in this category is Practicing patience. Practicing patience is defined as an individual’s ability to be tolerant to accept change or varying viewpoints experienced and the need to reflect on what is being shared and learned. A pattern is evident among participants’ descriptions of how patience is embraced when entering a new learning environment. The process is described as requiring continual reminders that patience is needed, and reframing experiences by relating and connecting it to academic and personal goals.

Several participants noted that they had to continually remind themselves to be patient throughout the service-learning experience, instead of allowing the experience to become a barrier. For Trinh and Laeticia part of their service-learning involved encouraging students at New College to be active members of the political process by registering to vote. Their goal as a class was to register a minimum of 300 individuals. Throughout the experience of encouraging voter registration, the participants felt that they were ignored. Trinh and Laeticia felt as though they were disturbing students on campus, and even found some students as rude and dismissive of their efforts. Trinh describes her interactions as the following:

We're all in the same university, we were inside the university so they know for a fact that we're not disturbing them. I really had to pull them [other students] to make them understand why [they should register to vote] and then they would, many of them would register. They just had such a negative attitude towards being asked something.

As a result, Trinh and Laeticia learned to be patient in their interactions with their peers by focusing on the purpose of the project and the importance of registering to vote, and less on the
students’ reactions. Interestingly, the second part of their service project was teaching students about political engagement in a STEM afterschool program. Trinh and Laeticia described having to practice patience when working with their peers and not with students at the STEM afterschool program. They acknowledged that the younger students were excited to learning about politics and creating pseudo campaigns, whereas their peers were not open-minded and felt more disrupted by the experience.

When interacting with those at the service-learning site, participants learned to exhibit patience which allowed them to learn about others and themselves. For Aida, June and Abe they visited an afterschool program within an elementary school where they taught students about the election process, candidate selection and roles within campaigns by comparing it to the process of making ice cream. The students were intrigued by the participants’ backgrounds and continued to ask questions that were unrelated to the project. For example, Abe notes that at the start of the service project he was annoyed by all of the questions. However, as he began to reflect he understood that the students wanted to learn about his background just as much as he wanted to learn about theirs. Abe shared that he learned to be patient as he continued to visit the site because it gave the students an opportunity to be curious and to learn. Similar to Abe, Aida also touched on the importance of embracing patience and shared the following:

Going to service learning, the people who necessarily don't understand you, not in a bad way, but they don't understand or you don't understand them. You have to be patient and to listen carefully just to understand where they're coming from before jumping into certain conclusions because we really don't know what's going on in people's minds.
Aida went on to note that she never saw herself as a patient person but service learning and interacting with the students at the site helped her learn that she has patience which allows her to learn more and understand the why behind something.

Patience with those at the service site required a genuine commitment and interest in the project, as well as an understanding that building relationships with others takes time. For Favour she was paired with a senior citizen and was interested in illuminating his life experiences. To gain the seniors trust, Favour knew she had to be patient and understand that trust would develop as a result.

The one thing that I have, was like a question mark after me was like, "Are they're going to be trustful of me? Are they going to be open because it doesn't really work. We can't really get a lot out of someone if they don't feel like they can trust you, and they're definitely like parts of my interview with Ed, who I was paired with, that I didn't record because he asked me not to record them. So just I was glad that he shared all those things with me. You know? And going into the service learning process, I wasn't sure if I was going to ... like what the reception would be.

Favour was mindful that patience was needed to gain the trust of the senior citizen. She notes that embracing patience allowed her relationship with the senior to flourish and created an environment where the senior shared more intimate details of his upbringing. Clearly, practicing patience is a salient part of the participants’ academic transition and thinking critically; however; another important element is analyzing biases. For participants to analyze their biases, they must begin the process by withholding judgement and practicing patience.

**Analyzing biases.** The third and final sub-theme of what undergraduate international students’ learned about from the service-learning experience that shaped their academic is
critical thinking is Analyzing biases. Analyzing biases is defined as the practice of reflecting on personal and previously assumed judgement/preference. Findings show that participants who took part in service-learning were given the space to analyze and reflect on their biases. One factor that contributed to participants analyzing biases is largely in part because of the format of the Foundations of Inquiry course. Participants saw great value in the instructors’ using a discussion based approach which allowed them to reflect on conscious and unconscious biases, speak through their experiences, ask questions, and hear the opinions of their classmates. For example, Yusif compared the Foundations of Inquiry course to a philosophy class because the instructor valued open dialogue that incorporated different viewpoints which allowed him to reflect on his own experiences and those he was encountering in the service-learning project. He shared that the discussions not only covered class content but incorporated the students’ experiences as well. This allowed Yusif to reflect on his assumptions and biases as they related to the course content and service-learning project, and allowed him to address any misunderstandings.

In some cases, students oriented themselves with individuals at a service-learning site that had different experiences than their own. Throughout the service-learning experience, the participants reflected on their assumptions and judgements prior to starting, during and at the conclusion of the project. For example, during Favour’s service-learning project she visited a senior center. Within the senior center, she interviewed a senior who shared his life story which focused on the influence drugs and alcohol had on him and the community in which he lived. Favour recognized that deep down she had judgement of the senior and his circumstances but largely because she had a lack of understanding of the factors that led him to take drugs and
eventually become addicted. Favour shared the following about her experience interacting with the senior and learning about his experiences:

I just came with very surface level understanding of the drug epidemic. I just came in thinking like people gotta life they've complicated just simply because they had nothing better to do... like their lives and why would you not do better? I never had seen that expected if all I had seen ... I've never really understood the factors that went into the original like drugs, drug use. But I feel like deep down there was some sort of judgment or like lack of understanding of the factors that drive someone to taking drugs and then eventually perhaps become addicted. I think talking with someone who had gone through that who had been really at the very like ... in his own world ... that had really bottom of his life and really seeing him pull himself up and tries to do better.

Hearing the senior’s story helped Favour understand his upbringing, develop an understanding of the drug epidemic, and reflect on her preconceived notions. The service-learning experience allowed her to learn the importance of analyzing biases by being open-minded. This will further assist Favour in her academic program at New College as it allows her to understand experiences of those that come varying backgrounds than her own which can ultimately help her be successful in the field of medicine.

In describing their ability to adapt to critical thinking expectations, participants recognized that through service-learning they were able to challenge their assumptions by interacting with those at the site. Similar to Favour, Abe and Aida also had biases about the students at the service-learning site prior to arriving. Abe had to travel to a part of the city he had never gone to. In fact, he acknowledged that he was scared because he was going to a neighborhood with only African Americans, who he assumed were uneducated and rowdy.
However, based on his first visit, Abe came to understand that the students in the afterschool program were interested in learning and were respectful. Abe recalls the following:

Some of the children they are noisy, annoying like I said, but actually they were really not. They want help, they want attention, they want people to notice them. So the children they were super lovely after that, because if you listen to them, you know that why they are being so annoying somehow. They didn't mean it on purpose.

For Aida, she assumed that students at the service-learning site were not disciplined because of their upbringing and simply had to take part in an after school program because they had nowhere else to go. However, upon visiting the site, Aida learned that the students wanted an interactive space to learn from their peers and were genuinely interested in learning. Abe and Aida overcame their biases once they interacted with those at the site. Their interactions allowed them to reflect on preconceived notions and assumptions, and break down their assumed barriers. Overcoming and analyzing ones bias is a salient part of participants’ ability to think critically.

**Section Summary**

This section described three themes that capture what undergraduate international students’ learn from a service learning experience that shapes their academic transition: a/ Valuing Applied Knowledge, b/Engaging in Collaborative Learning Environment, and c/Adapting to Critically Thinking Expectations. The category of Engaging in Collaborative Learning Environment included three properties that represented: Participating in dialogue, Working in groups and learning academic knowledge from others, and Building relationships. Additionally, the category of Adapting to Critical Thinking Expectations included three properties that included: Withholding judgement, Practicing patience, and Analyzing biases. While each of the themes and categories within them are noted distinctively, it is important to
recognize that they are not disconnected from one another. For example, the findings suggested that students learned the value of critical thinking through an ongoing process that includes withholding judgement of preconceived perceptions of those in service-learning, practicing patience when engaging with those at a service-learning site, and analyzing their own biases and misconceptions based on experiences. Therefore, the categories and properties noted exhibit an interdependence and further speaks to the complexities surrounding the academic transition of undergraduate international students’ participating in service-learning experience at New College.

**Contributions of Service-Learning to English Language Proficiency**

Two primary themes were identified that speak to the contributions of service-learning to English language proficiency: a/ Providing opportunities to practice and improve, and b/Developing linguistic self-confidence and self-esteem. The following thematic sections will describe how a service-learning experience influenced the English language skills of undergraduate international students attending New College. Related excerpts from the interview transcripts will be included in each section to highlight each theme.

**Providing Opportunities to Practice and Improve**

Service-learning contributes to the English language proficiency of undergraduate international students by providing opportunities to practice and improve English. This means creating contexts in which students’ gain versatility with their English language skills. Of the eight participants, three did not identify English as their first language. Of those three all were exposed to English in their home countries educational system. While the three participants shared feelings of uncertainty and discomfort when speaking the English language, taking part in
classroom discussions and teaching others in the service-learning project were found to be effective ways in which these participants practiced and improved their English language skills.

Communicating proved to be a barrier for some participants and the most difficult aspect of the service-learning experience. June compared his use of the English language in South Korea as vastly different from the United States and emphasized that in his home country English was only used when reading or taking an exam. He went on to say that he was overcome with anxiety when he first learned of the service-learning project. June didn’t feel that he knew how to effectively communicate and talk with younger students at the site since he was speaking to them in his second language. He became concerned with how he would teach and discipline the students with the language barrier in place. However, after a visit to the service-learning site, June knew he had to adapt his approach and develop his language skills.

I felt that I need to more develop my level of my language. English language. And ... I felt that I need to participate in this kind of service, so that I can motivate myself. That I can, I need to just let me know myself, that I need to practice more, because ... what I do from the school is just studying, right? Studying for tests and doing homework, and prepare for the exams. So, I don't really experience this kind of thing.

June went on to share that the service-learning project motivated him to practice his English language skills when teaching students at the site which helped him realize that he needs to continue practicing and that he cannot get held up in the thought of making mistakes in front of his peers.

While communicating was a source of anxiety for some participants, service-learning allowed them to improve their English language skills. Unlike June, both Trinh and Abe share a common outlook of their English language skills declining from when they were in their home
country to their time at New College. When describing their comfort speaking the English language both began by rating their abilities out of ten, with one being least comfortable and ten being the most comfortable. Trinh cites her comfort with speaking the English language in high school as a five and her English skills at New College as a three or even a two because her grammar and vocabulary needs developing. Similarly, Abe rates his English language skills as a six prior to coming to the United States and a four at New College. Trinh and Abe’s language barrier causes them to be shy in group settings and reserved in classes. As a result they are not able to further develop their English skills but rather saw a decline in their abilities because they were not afforded adequate opportunities to practice English consistently. Yet, the findings show that the service-learning experience provided them with opportunities to practice and improve their skills.

Trinh describes talking in class and at the service site as allowing her to develop ideas and improve her vocabulary. While this process has not come without challenges of having to code switch between Vietnamese and English, she is “quite comfortable” and “confident” speaking in English as a direct result of the service-learning. At times Trinh felt that speaking to the kids at the service-learning site was more difficult than talking to her peers in class because kids had less patience. She goes on to share that service-learning took her outside of her comfort zone and created an environment that challenged her approach to class participation more so than other courses. For Abe, he considers himself an introvert but not by choice. He does not speak to his peers because he feels that he is not given the opportunity to do so. He feels that his classmates in courses outside of the Foundations of Inquiry don’t interact with him because of his accent. However, the service-learning project changed his outlook by allowing him to further develop his English skills by interacting with students at the service site. “Children, they keep
asking you questions. Sometimes if my accent is really strong, they can't hear me. I repeat and repeat and craft it again, and that will help me to pronounce it well.” June, Trinh and Abe learned through service-learning that their contributions to classroom conversations and at the service-learning site help them improve their English language skills. Unlike other courses at New College, the Foundations of Inquiry environment allowed for each student’s opinion to be respected, valued and heard, while also creating an environment to practice and improve their English.

**Developing Linguistic Confidence and Self-Esteem**

Service-learning contributes to the English language proficiency of undergraduate international students by Developing Linguistic Confidence and Self-Esteem. In other words, service-learning allows undergraduate international students to gain assurance when using the English language which may carry with them beyond the actual service-learning experience. While participants questioned their comfort speaking English when arriving to New College, findings show that participants gained confidence once they were given opportunities to practice and improve. These experiences allowed them to rethink their outlook regarding their English language abilities. For example, both Trinh and Abe were more comfortable and interacted with confidence as a direct result of working with students at the service-learning site. Trinh referred to herself as shy and reserved prior to the Foundations of Inquiry course and the service-learning project. Interactions with the students at the service-learning site allowed her to build assurance and overcome her nervousness when speaking in English. She compared her experience with the students to life outside of college and how the confidence she gained from speaking English applies to her career and the need to work with other people:
And I think to have that confidence, you can know what they want, know what you want, and develop you as you go because when you grow older, you never know what type of person you're gonna have to work with and stuff like that.

Comparably, Abe found working with students at the site as beneficial. He was intrigued by their ability to constantly ask questions. The constant questioning allowed Abe to repeat what he was saying in English which made him feel more comfortable and confident when speaking. Trinh and Abe interacted with students more comfortably by practicing and improving their language skills. This led them to a motivation to continue speaking and interacting. This is highlighted by Abe sharing that he has “more motivation to talk, I have more motivation to express my idea[s].”

Not only did service-learning provide participants assurance when interacting with students at the service-learning site but it also helped them gain confidence when speaking and working with their classmates in the Foundations of Inquiry course and New College. Abe attributes the service-learning course to motivating him to go to class as well as being able to talk to different types of people which he would have not spoken with prior to service-learning:

But I do think, because of this class this semester, I do think, I do want to my whole life to go to class every day because I can talk to people, I know a lot of new people here [New College], so we can at least greet on the campus. It's not about our citizenship, it's not about the nationality, it's about this person that you shared with.

Trinh attributes her overcoming anxiety of speaking English to making friends, both international and domestic. “I think it’s great because now I have more friends that they actually listening to what I say and they willing to repeat what they say because they understand the struggle of making friends and stuff like that.”
The confidence students gained by effectively communicating in the service-learning course and site, allowed them to feel comfortable interacting with their peers in New College, which is a salient part of their academic adjustment. I had the opportunity to observe Abe and Trinh present at the Service-Learning Conference. This conference brings together all students who participate in a service-learning project at New College. The students shared an overview of their project and what was learned. Both Abe and Trinh were active contributors of their presentation. Trinh spoke with confidence on the overview of the voter registration project and gave suggestions on how to increase voter turnout. Abe’s group shared an overview of their STEM education project, and Abe led the discussion on how the discipline of psychology relates to the service project. Seeing Trinh and Abe in this context illustrates their ability to not only effectively communicate in the English language but also overcome any fears about speaking to their peers. When I was getting ready to leave the conference, Trinh came to me and said “I can’t believe I spoke about this project to all of these people.” This quote highlights how linguistic confidence and self-esteem were achieved through the service-learning experience for the non-native English participants. While this was a process that began with emotions of anxiety, the participants contributed their English language proficiency to opportunities in service-learning to practice and improve, as well as develop linguistic confidence and self-esteem.

**Section Summary**

This section described two central themes which spoke to the contributions of service-learning to English language proficiency: a/ Providing opportunities to practice and improve, and b/Developing linguistic self-confidence and self-esteem. Evidence demonstrated how a service-learning experience improved the English language skills of undergraduate international students in the Foundations of Inquiry course as well as at New College more broadly. Service-learning
plays a central role in creating opportunities for students to practice their English skills within the service site and through active reflections in classroom participation. The participants did not have the same experience in other courses. Findings showed that once students were given the opportunities to practice and improve, confidence followed. The culminating Service Learning Conference was shown to positively impact non-native English speakers’ ability to present their experiences in service-learning to their peers and bolstered their confidence and ability to build relationships with classmates.

**View of Academic Experience in Home Country after Service-Learning**

Three central themes were identified to illustrate the view of students’ academic experience in their home country after participating in service-learning: a/Teacher Centered, b/More Demanding than U.S. Educational System, and c/Less Flexibility in Choosing an Academic Path. The following thematic sections will describe undergraduate international students’ perspectives on their academic experiences after participating in a service-learning experience at New College. To help describe each theme, excerpts from interview transcripts will be included.

**Teacher Centered**

Participants now see their view of academic experiences in their home country as Teacher-Centered after participation in a service-learning experience. In other words, the teacher is the main source of knowledge and the students passively receive the information. I found that students from East Asian and African countries shared a similar sentiment around the role of the teacher in a classroom. For example, June and Abe who are from South Korea and China respectively, describe the teaching style in their home countries as straightforward and the teacher as the one who imparts knowledge. When asked to describe a typical classroom, June
says the teachers “just give us lectures” and Abe says “They [teachers] just want to give you knowledge…in China, teachers they take the equation and formula, they prove everything.” Similar to June and Abe, Aida, Favour and Yusif who are from Africa refer to the teaching as only including lectures and dictations. None of the participants recall taking part in classroom discussions or group projects.

Another characteristic described in a teacher centered approach is the set-up of the classrooms. The students from East Asia and Africa recall the classrooms having a chalkboard or smartboard, and rows of desks facing the front of the room. Yusif remarks “[In] Ghana everyone is just facing forward at the teacher. The teacher just teaches on the board and everyone else just writes it down.” The set-up of the room compliments the teacher centered approach allowing the teacher to provide information, and the students being recipients of knowledge. In fact, the majority of the participants state that they were not encouraged to speak or ask questions in classes, either with their peers or teachers, and were simply expected to take notes. Favour’s perspective on her academic experience is typical of the participants and encompasses the teacher centered approach:

I think the way that I must say the teacher serving as the knowledge expert in teaching, the ignorant students, not even in a bad way. It's just like you're ignorant on what ... about what he's teaching you. So a teacher would tell us the most important things, then he would write notes on the board, and you would write down the notes along, like you have a notebook, and you write down what he would write on the board. And so you were supposed to be quiet and you were supposed to focus on writing the notes and finishing it in time and then you would go study the notes in your own sweet time.
The participants then went on to share that in a teacher centered approach, student learning is typically measured through assessments and tests. Students are expected to use the information provided by the teacher to prepare independently for exams through rote memorization and repetition. Abe shares that new knowledge is given to students for several weeks and the rest of the time the expectation is that students “practice, practice, practice” for exams. For Abe, he went to a competitive high school in China, and the primary focus was preparing for the SAT and getting into a college in the United States. The classroom material focused on test preparation only. June recalls a similar classroom environment where students were expected to study independently and for an exam. This suggests that at times this approach simply required students to memorize material as an approach to learn material and simply prepare for a test/assessment.

**More Demanding than U.S. Educational System**

Participants view their home country schooling as More Demanding than U.S. Educational System after taking part in service-learning. That is, the belief is the academic expectations and workload are more rigorous and competitive when compared to the U.S. educational system. For example, participants describe having a lot of homework and studying for exams in their home country. Aida says schooling in Rwanda is traditional, with the main focus on homework and exam preparation. “Back home, I had to read notes. I had to write those. I had to do homework. I had to do so many things and so many books, so many papers. It was a lot.” Similar to Aida, Yusif shares that in Ghana the schooling environment was strict. He recalls assignments as more challenging with a large emphasis on homework. When Yusif was asked if he found homework challenging in Ghana, he says, “Everything is much more challenging in Ghana.”
Often times when participants reflected on schooling in their home country it also touched on the pressure they faced due to cultural norms and family expectations to be at the top of their class. Participants note that it was essential for them to score well on every exam because of their parents’ and teachers’ expectations of them and schooling overall. For Aida this pressure was so overwhelming that it made her want to move on from high school. Aida states:

It was kind of stressful, to be honest, at some point. I love my school, don't get me wrong, but some of the subjects I was doing just was killing me, really. They were just like maths and English, it was just too much. I just felt like it was too much to feed me. I couldn't take it all in. I couldn't wait, everyone couldn't wait to just graduate and get out of school. And I don't get as much work as I used to get in high school, to be honest.

Yusif and Abe describe similar sentiments related to academic pressure. Yusif felt that the Math and Science in Ghana was at a very high level compared to courses at New College. Yusif mentions that failing an exam was not an option. Instead teachers would instead continue to reinforce the material until a higher grade was achieved. For Abe, he faced pressure to be academically successful from his teachers and mother. Abe describes his mom wanting him to be the best in the entire class. This meant that he had to attend three English classes at the same time to improve his oral skills, and then continue to practice at home.

Finally, I found that the demands and high expectations experienced by the participants in their home countries led to a competitive academic environment. Participants speak on comparing themselves to their peers and family friends. Culturally, this seemed to be the norm. There is an emphasis on rankings and acceptance to a prestigious college. Abe went as far as to describe the level of competition as “going to the war”. He shares that since China has such a large population, it drives students to be competitive.
Because it's [school is] really hard. And don't make me wrong, for Chinese, we have a huge population, so we have to be competitive during that period. Some people say like it was going to the war. I would say that's true. Because you only have one time to fight that time, and then you have to take a Chinese SAT and then go to a famous university, at least the first top, tier 1 university you have to go.

Abe attended a small private school in China with forty-six students in his grade. He recalls all of his classmates being accepted to prestigious U.S. based colleges. He describes the level of competition as high and consistent throughout the entire four years. Students constantly strove to be better, and would take pride and feel a sense of accomplishment when they advanced in the class ranking. Aida also experienced a competitive schooling environment and constantly compared herself to her peers not because she wanted to but she wanted to know how she was doing in relation to her peers. Based on the participants feedback there seems to be an underlying need for international students to perform better academically than others, rank higher, and go the best and brightest school.

**Less Flexibility in Choosing an Academic Path**

Participants also describe their academic experiences in their home country as having Less Flexibility in Choosing an Academic Path after taking part in a service-learning experience. This is, students are directed towards a career path that is predetermined and expected by family and/or societal pressures. For example, participants touch on their majors being decided by what their parents wanted for them, not necessarily what they wanted for themselves. They go on to share that the thought of disappointing their parents weighed heavy on them, and in many cases they did not contest their academic paths, at least not initially because they did not want to create conflict.
or dissatisfaction. While these pressures were substantial, the participants did not always stay on the same academic journey over time.

The notion of familial pressure to pursue certain career interests weighed heavy on the participants. Aida shares that her teachers and parents had a “preset destination” for her. All of Aida’s classmates studied in the STEM field because that was expected of them. Growing up Aida was told she needed to study either law or psychology because these are respected fields that would lend themselves to financial stability. This was frustrating for Aida to hear because she was not interested in them. Aida had a natural talent for photography. However, she knew she could not pursue photography professionally because that would go against cultural and familial norms. Instead Aida focused on math and science, and allowed photography to be a hobby. When it came time to go to college, Aida applied to a prestigious university in the United States to study psychology. She was accepted to the program but admission from the college was rescinded upon receipt of her final high school grades. Aida was not disappointed in this outcome because she knew her grades declined due to her lack of interest in school, and she did not want to follow an academic path that was set by others. Aida ended up taking a gap year to explore her interests further. She told herself, “Let me take a step back and just understand what I want to do really.” She went on to pursue communication arts at New College because of her childhood interest in film, TV, production, fashion and media. Despite Aida’s parents’ initially putting pressure on her to study law or psychology, she came to understand that she needs to pursue what she loves, and they came to accept it.

Participants reflected on the contributing factors which led to less flexibility in choosing their academic path. Both Julia and Abe were told they need to study business, but the reason why was very different. For Julia she was always interested in the medical field since her parents are
also doctors. However, Julia’s parents did not want her to pursue the same career as them because it was an emotionally trying profession. She recall her parents saying, “Being a doctor is not as cool as you think it is. We see a lot more stuff than what you want to see.” Julia’s Dad continued to encourage her towards business. Julia would not back down from her interests and took it upon herself to volunteer in a hospital environment. Julia gained experience in her field which reaffirmed her interests and made her parents see that she was determined to pursue a career choice she wanted for herself. Julia’s parents finally came around to the idea of her pursuing medicine but it took some time.

For Abe, his parents told him he needs to study business. His family owns their own business and it was expected that he would take over the business after he graduated. Prior to attending New College, Abe attended another U.S. university as a business major. He recalls the following:

They [my parents] force me to study business, all business class I get a Fail, I get an F or a C. But for all the math, bio, chem, I get A+ or A something. So that's the reason. I deeply in my heart don't like business. I don't like playing with numbers for the rest of my whole life. Actually, my dream was to have my family, to have their business. But actually that was not my personal dream, 'cause one of my family wanted me to do…but what I really want to do is to I really want to be a scholar. To study whatever I want, and then to be a real master somehow in a certain. Maybe in the future I can be a professor or something, I want to teach students.

Abe unlike the other participants started an academic path set forth by his parents. However, after falling into deep depression, he knew he needed to follow his dreams. Abe transferred to New College and told his parents that he was changing directions. Unfortunately, Abe majoring in
Biology was not well received by his parents. His parents stopped speaking to him and no longer supported his college costs. With tears in his eyes, Abe describes changing majors as one of the most difficult decisions he made because he did not want to let his parents down. Like the other participants, with time Abe’s parents began to support his choices and are still working on rebuilding their relationship.

While each of the participants had different academic paths, the pressure each of them faced towards a specific career choice was undeniable. The participants had to balance feelings of possibly disappointing their parents and choosing a path they defined for themselves. While some participants were able to explore their own interests initially, and for others the process took time, family support was eventually gained for each of them. Although this experience was challenging and emotional, all of the participants expressed a passion towards their majors and career paths, and felt that they were in control of their choices.

**Section Summary**

This section described three central themes to illustrate the view of students’ academic experience in their home country after participating in service-learning: a/Teacher Centered, b/ More Demanding than U.S. Educational System, and c/Less Flexibility in Choosing an Academic Path. Although there is no conceptual overlap with the categories and properties within each theme, it is important to note that there is a connection. I found that students often faced demanding academic pressures from their teachers and parents within highly structured classrooms and a teacher centered approach, which then led to more stringent and direct views on academic paths and careers. The complex nature of a student entering a service-learning environment is at the polar opposite of what was experienced academically in their home country, and speaks to the codependent relationship of these themes.
Change in Academic Goals after Participation in Service-Learning

One main theme emerged that captures how participation in service-learning changes academic goals for undergraduate international students: a/ Creating Awareness of Social Inequities Leads to Future Volunteering. The following thematic section will describe the process of how undergraduate international students attending New College gained awareness of social inequities as a direct result of service-learning which then led to the desire to take part in future service-learning/volunteering experiences. Relevant excerpts from interview transcripts are included to illustrate the theme.

Creating Awareness of Social Inequities Leads to Future Volunteering

Participation in service-learning changes academic goals of undergraduate international students by Creating Awareness of Social Inequities Leads to Future Volunteering. This means that individuals became aware of social disparities and overcome biases and misconceptions by interacting with others, and as a result seek value and reward in helping others and want to participate in future service and/or volunteering opportunities. For many of the participants they traveled to parts of a metropolitan city they had only heard about by others or seen in movies. As a result, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that some of the participants had preconceived notions of the neighborhoods and the people prior to participating in service-learning. For example, one of the participants noted that he was scared to go the service-learning site because he had never been to that “part of town” with so many African-Americans. Another participant said that students from “that neighborhood” perform poorly in Math. This section will highlight how students became aware of social inequities within the service site and their own misconceptions, and how that led to future volunteer and/or service-learning opportunities.
Findings of this study show that service-learning allowed participants to become aware of social inequities. In most cases students became aware of social disproportions prior to starting the service-learning project based on classroom discussions and the instructor applying the concepts and theory in the Foundations of Inquiry course to the service-learning project. For example, June understood his purpose for taking part in service-learning to help lower socio-economic students gain interest in the STEM field because they did not have the same educational opportunities as others. He shares the following when asked to reflect on his initial thoughts about service-learning:

This service learning for our class is ... it is ... it's for lower income students. And how can we make them better ... how can we make them ... how can we make them, like motivate them to get a STEM education. Where what ... how a STEM education change their life, or make them to think about their future, because what I've learned from my class is lower income students they don't have really an opportunity, or they don't really have many resources that they can get the STEM education.

June reflected further on his experience, and came to understand that the students at the service-learning site were more educated and kinder than he expected, and that the students wanted to not only learn the subject matter but from his experiences as well. June was surprised how the students showed him respect and even followed simple classroom rules by asking to go to the bathroom and respecting the opinion of others. June concluded his reflection by saying that the students were more educated, motivated and disciplined than he assumed. “No matter where you’re from, and no matter what you are, you can do whatever you want if you want to.” This reflection speaks to June’s ability to overcome initial assumptions about the students at the
Participants learned to ground their own assumptions and gain an appreciation for students and families that have a different upbringing that their own. For Abe, he assumed that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds did not have confidence or the academic capabilities to succeed in the STEM field. “I felt a lot of people, especially in the low income neighborhood, they are defined ... no STEM education [is] possible. Especially you can seldom see people from maybe this neighborhood, they are really good at math.” Abe also assumed that students at the service-learning site came from families who were not committed to their child’s education. Through service-learning, Abe came to understand that many of the parents wanted to be involved in their child’s education but because of circumstances beyond their control they were unable to do so. Abe had the opportunity to speak to a mother at the service-learning site and came to realize that she is a single parent, who has three jobs, and works multiple shifts every day. She went on to share that she wants a better life for her children, and while she may not always be around, she wants to empower them to be the best they can be. This conversation helped Abe understand his own assumptions and gain an appreciation for students and families with different backgrounds. As a result, Abe came to understand that he could play a part in the students’ success by teaching them, building their confidence, and encouraging them in their academic aspirations. Service-learning helped participants such as June and Abe become aware of the social inequities that exist and assisted them overcome their own biases and assumptions by interacting with those at the site.

Participants also gained an awareness of social inequities by reflecting on their own privileges and upbringing. For Julia, she conducted service-learning at a hospital and worked
directly with children who were ill and in long term treatment. In her journal reflections, Julia
shared that while this project was extremely difficult to take part in, she found it to be rewarding
because it got her out of her comfort zone which allowed her to become aware of her own
privileges, while reaffirming her desire to help others by becoming a doctor. Julia shared the
following in her final journal reflection where she touches on the mixed emotions she
encountered in service-learning:

   But the most important thing I have gotten out of this experience is my gratitude towards
my own health. I felt humbled and thankful that I was able to help people who
are physically not as strong as me. Through this service I have learned the importance of
the job and also the weight of the responsibility as a person in this position. This
has unlocked different feelings in me such as gratitude, happiness and fear. This
experience have been very important to me to ensure that this is absolutely what I want to
do in the future.

   Similar to Julia, service-learning allowed Aida and Laeticia to also recognize their own
privileges and be appreciative for what they have. Initially Aida and Laeticia saw the service-
learning project as an opportunity to meet new people and travel. However, over time and based
on interactions with students at the site, Aida and Laeticia mention that service-learning has
allowed them to realize that countries you assume are well off such as the United States, actually
are not. The service project allowed Aida and Laeticia to become aware of social inequities such
as poverty and disproportions in economic standing. For Aida this experience as well as her
upbringing, have allowed her to reflect on the importance of helping people and giving back to
those that are less fortunate. Aida is committed to helping others, particularly young children
and describes the importance of civic engagement as the following:
It's better to give than to expect. For me, the act of giving made me feel not better about myself but actually made me feel like I was contributing to changing something about this world. I mean, I don't want to just be a statistic in the world. I want to contribute and do something for my community. I feel like if I contribute a little bit, other people want to contribute.

For Laeticia, she considers herself “lucky” because she did not have to go through the same hardships as the students she interacted with at the site. Service-learning created an environment for Laeticia where she came to understand her own privilege in the process. “I don't have the problems that they have, but it made me realize that they all have their own background, their own things to go through and it was very different from mine and I probably did not understand that before.” Laeticia went on to reflect that service-learning doesn’t seem like work or even volunteering. Instead she finds it beneficial because she is able to contribute to the well-being of others while growing as a person.

In addition to participants acknowledging social disproportions and overcoming biases and misconceptions, all participants shared a desire to help others/volunteer after taking part in service-learning. Participants noted that their desire to help others went beyond just the service-learning course, and extended to being involved in volunteer opportunities in their home countries. For example, June shared how he was moved by his experience working with students at the service-learning site. He felt that he made a difference in their lives by helping them learn Science and Math. He went on to recognize that although projects like service-learning are not a part of the educational system in Korea, he wants to go back and participate in a program where he can teach lower income children. June shared that the Foundations of Inquiry course and in particular the service-learning project made him realize his life goals. June found himself
isolated when arriving to the United States, however, the service-learning course allowed him to find purpose in his life by helping others. “I haven't had a lot of human contact in the past year, so taking this class, and this opportunity, really do help me to find my dream. Helping people is my number one goal in my whole life.” The other participants also recognized that taking part in service-learning was more than a class requirement, instead it was a course that allowed them to contribute to changing and making a difference in the lives of others than may not be as fortunate as them. The participants described their desire to help others in future service-learning/volunteer opportunities as “necessary” and their “duty”.

Section Summary

This section described the theme of how participation in a service-learning experience changed academic goals for undergraduate international students: a/ Creating Awareness of Social Inequities Leads to Future Volunteering. Findings showed that participants gained an awareness of social inequities as a direct result of service-learning. As participants overcame their own biases and assumptions of the populations within the service-learning site, they were able to recognize their own misconceptions as well. Findings further suggested that once participants became aware of these social inequities, it led to their desire to take part in future service-learning/volunteering experiences. Participants noted that the service-learning course was different than past and current educational experiences and allowed them to understand their civic responsibility to local communities, as well as to those in their home countries.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented findings for the three research questions that served as a guide to this qualitative case study. The data presented shows that participation in service-learning impacts academic transition of undergraduate international students by assimilating to academic
expectations in the United States, gaining an appreciation for applying knowledge learned in the classroom to real world contexts, engaging in collaborative learning, and thinking critically by analyzing biases, withholding judgement and practicing patience. Data shows that for undergraduate international students who did not speak English as their primary language, service-learning provided an opportunity for students to practice and improve their language skills, and develop linguistic confidence and self-esteem. Data illustrates that undergraduate international reflected on their academic experience in their home country and characterized it as teacher centered, more demanding than U.S. educational system, and less flexible when choosing an academic path. Additionally, data shows that after participating in service-learning, students became aware of social inequities which led to a desire to participate in future volunteering/service-learning. The next chapter will speak on the conclusions, a discussion of the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The purpose of this case study was to understand how a service-learning course shapes the academic transition of undergraduate-level international students attending a private university in the northeastern United States. Based on the researcher’s academic and professional goals, and the theoretical framework of this study, the following research questions were formulated to guide this study:

1. What do undergraduate international students learn from a service-learning experience that shapes their academic transition?
   a. How does a service-learning experience contribute to the English language proficiency of undergraduate international students?

2. How do undergraduate international students view their academic experience in their home country after participating in a service-learning program?

3. How does participation in a service-learning experience change academic goals for undergraduate international students?

This qualitative case study explored the experiences of undergraduate international students at New College. New College is located in the northeastern United States and was selected for this study because of its commitment to supporting international students and convenience to sample. By studying a campus in which international students’ academic, social, and personal adjustment is a priority, I was able to understand more about the role of service-learning as an avenue to shape students’ academic transition. The conceptual framework guiding this study are a combination of elements from Mezirow’s (1978, 1991, 2000) theory of Transformative Learning and Kiely’s (2005) development of a Transformational Learning Model.
for Service-Learning. Both of these frameworks shaped the research questions and data analysis. Nine research themes emerged to support a richer understanding of the research questions.

Chapter five will focus on what has been learned as a direct result of this research, how these findings align with current research and the conceptual frameworks that guide this study, and how the findings can further inform research surrounding the role of service-learning to facilitate international students’ academic transition. Building on the findings, the chapter will conclude with recommendations for future research. This chapter includes three sections which include: a/ Study Conclusions and Discussion, b/Implications for Practice, and c/Recommendations for Future Research.

**Study Conclusions and Discussion**

This section provides conclusions and discussions for this qualitative case study. This study allowed for an in-depth dive into understanding how a service-learning course shapes the academic transition of undergraduate international students. Three conclusions emerged as a result of this case study which include the following: a/ Service-learning environment fosters cognitive, linguistic and social skills; b/ A service-learning course presents an internal conflict between empowering and self-motivated U.S. education approach to rigor and demands in home countries; and c/ Service-learning expands worldview that leads to future civic action. The following sections will discuss these conclusions and how they relate to the literature and conceptual frameworks of the study.

**Conclusion One: Service-Learning Environment Fosters Cognitive, Linguistic and Social Skills**

The first conclusion of this study is that a service-learning environment fosters cognitive, linguistic and social skills. Service-learning shapes the academic transition of undergraduate
international students by exposing them to academic expectations in the United States which also plays a role in their academic transition. Service-learning taught undergraduate internationals students’ cognitive skills by creating a space which allowed for reflection of what they were previously taught/learned in their home countries and their ability to draw a new set of conclusions or see alternative viewpoints. Overall the findings support that students improved their critical thinking skills as the service-learning project progressed. Through interactions in the service-learning course, participants were able to listen to how their experiences were distinct, withhold judgement and in some cases appreciate a varying viewpoint or experience. Appreciating a background unfamiliar to participants allowed them to also explore their own belief systems in the process. From a linguistic aspect, service-learning contributed to the English language proficiency of undergraduate international students by providing opportunities to practice and improve English, which led to linguistic confidence and self-esteem. Communicating proved to be a barrier for some participants and the most difficult aspect of the service-learning experience. However, service-learning allowed them to improve their English language skills by participating in dialogue, working in groups and building relationships. Finally, from a social aspect, the majority of undergraduate international students went through an emotional journey when engaging in collaboration because they were encountering an academic environment unlike their home country, which placed a large emphasis on a teacher centered approach with little to no room for interacting with their peers. Participants described value in the relationships they built in the course and service-learning site as it played an integral role to understanding and being integrated into the academic expectations in the United States.
Existing research highlights the development of critical thinking skills through service-learning experiences (Bohlander, 2010; Fritze, 2017; Sedlak, Doheny, Panthofer & Anaya, 2003). Critical thinking is defined as “the ability to broaden and deepen one's thinking through systematic intellectual self-assessment, internal reflection and collaborative validation” (Goldberg & Coufal, 2009, p. 40). Goldberg and Coufal (2009) recognize that development of cognitive skills such as critical thinking are ongoing and complex and can take time to develop through experience and confidence to ask questions, analyze biases, correct assumptions and revise assumptions when additional situations arise. Bohlander’s (2010) study highlights that a service-learning experience creates an environment to allow students to question their assumptions, and recognize, respect and analyze various viewpoints. Service-learning leads to respect for varying viewpoints which has an effect on students’ critical thinking abilities.

While international and domestic students are transitioning to a new learning environment when entering a higher education setting, research shows that international students are most challenged by their inability to effectively communicate in the English language which creates barriers to academic transition (Lee & Rice, 2007). A growing body of research of English Language Learners (ELLs) attributes a positive outcome of service-learning experiences to language development and linguistic confidence (Askildson, Cahill, & Mick 2013; Kwenani & Yu, 2018; McNally, 2017; Miller et al., 2015). Milner et al. (2015) support this notion, contending that while service-learning may initially bring forth feelings of hesitation and anxiety it leads to an increased sense of confidence of the English language by working and engaging with community members. Through service-learning, ELLs are pushed to develop their English language skills by interacting with Native English speakers at the site. These interactions can further develop their fluency and confidence in English. As a result, international students who
are able to communicate effectively experience less stress and discomfort in their host environments (Heggins III & Jackson, 2003). As described in this current study, service-learning contributes to the English language proficiency of international students by providing opportunities to practice and improve English, which led to linguistic confidence and self-esteem.

International students have expressed challenges with social adjustment, cross-cultural interactions and acceptance (Burkhardt 2013; Hsieh, 2007; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Research suggests that international students easily develop friendships and relationships with co-nationals (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Hendrickson et al., 2002; Rosen & Aune, 2011). However, developing friendships with host nationals is more difficult due to cultural differences which include food preference, gender roles, and sexual openness (Burkhardt, 2013; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2011). Despite challenges with developing friendships with host nationals, international students desire more contact with domestic students (Church, 1982; Hendrickson et al., 2011). Students that had higher levels of interaction with host nationals, noted greater rates of satisfaction and adjustment, improved levels of communication, and overall positive thoughts regarding the culture of the host country (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Pruitt, 1978; Sam 2001). Burkhardt (2013) and Moores and Popadiuk (2011) stress that interactions with peers from other cultures and host nationals can assist with the adjustment process and increase self-esteem. Students found social interactions with their peers as fundamental to their development and proficiency of the English language (Burkhardt 2013; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). As evidenced by this study, service-learning creates opportunities for students to connect and interact with peers/community partners at an individual and group level in the classroom and service-learning site by engaging in a
collaborative learning environment by participating in dialogue, working in groups and building relationships.

Findings from the current study depict how a service-learning environment fosters cognitive, linguistic and social skills for undergraduate international students. The development of these skills assist students with their academic transition to the U.S. educational system. The participants went through an emotional journey when engaging in these skill sets because they were encountering an academic environment unlike than their home country which places a large emphasis on book knowledge, and a teacher centered approach with little to no room for interacting with their peers or participation in classroom dialogue. The skills gained in the service-learning experience not only help participants with their adjustment to New College, but the tools needed as they enter their careers. Again, this conclusion represents the importance of skill development to assist international students with the assimilation to academic expectations and rigor within the United States.

Conclusion Two: A Service-Learning Course Creates Internal Conflict between Empowering and Self-Motivated U.S. Education Approach to Rigor and Demands in Home Countries

The second conclusion of this study is that a service-learning course creates internal conflict between an empowering and self-motivated U.S. education approach to rigor and demands in home countries. All of the participants struggled internally when navigating a new academic approach because it was at the polar opposite of their educational experience in their home country. While participants of this study related to the flexibility and empowerment that comes with a U.S. based educational approach, they also viewed their home country education as far more superior because they viewed it as academically challenging. When asked to describe a
U.S. education, participants used words such as “free”, “education is optional, “laid-back”, “self-driven”, and “do what makes you happy”. Participants acknowledged that domestic students were often given flexibility in choosing a career path that is of their own interest. Comparably, in their home countries participants selected academic paths based on expectations of society and their family and the educational system is highly competitive. While the participants liked the flexibility and empowerment of a personalized approach of U.S. education, there appeared to be an unresolved conflict that was rooted in cultural values around intensity of textbook learning, teacher-driven approach, and predetermined career choices in their home countries. These perceptions led to discomfort which is often challenging but a part of the individual’s maturation process which has the potential to create barriers and conflict with their academic transition.

Existing literature shows that international students may face difficulty when being exposed to Western cultures and norms, and adjusting a new environment. (Banjong, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). International students typically face more challenges and stress during the adjustment process than domestic students, which can bring forth feelings of confusion, impotence, and rejection (Banjong, 2015; Leong & Sedlacek, 1986; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Pedersen, 1991; Shih & Brown, 2000; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2013). The process of change that international students experience when entering a new culture is known as acculturation (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Acculturation is defined “as a dynamic process of relating to a dominant group by which a minority group selectively adopts its value system and cultural practices when involved in the process of integrating with, and differentiating from, the dominant group…” (Shih & Brown, 2000 as cited in Banjong, 2015, p. 133). The acculturation process can lead to three potential outcomes which include (1) assimilation – an individual exchanges their home cultures values and attitudes with those of the host country; (2) resistance
to assimilation – an individual resists the culture of the host country by holding tightly onto their culture; and (3) biculturalism – an individual embraces aspects of both the home and host culture. In this study, participants related to aspects of the home and host culture education.

The conceptual framework of Transformative Learning Model for Service-Learning that guided this study explored the significance of dissonance. Dissonance speaks to an incongruence between an individuals’ prior frame of reference and aspects of the factors surrounding the service-learning experience (Heilman, 2012; Kiely, 2004, 2005). While participants may examine their positionality prior to beginning a service-learning experience, it is not until they are immersed in the project that they experience dissonance related to the physical, environmental, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions. “The type and level of intensity of their dissonance has to do with the gap or incongruence that students experience between their contextual baggage and elements of the new cultural context (Kiely, 2005, p. 10). The duration of the learning process, intensity, and the type of learning play a role in the type of dissonance that takes place. Low to high-intensity dissonance trigger learning (Kiely, 2005). Dissonance types include cultural, social, economic, communicative, and environmental. These experiences are overwhelming and mere reflection is often not enough to overcome the dissonance. High-intensity dissonance sparks ongoing learning and stays with a participant far beyond the service-learning experience. Kiely refers to the high-intensity dissonance as a repositioning process that takes places over time, and one that begins the transformational learning process (Kiely, 2004, 2005).

Additionally, Kegan (1994) speaks to the importance of critical thinking and emphasizes that individuals have to change the way they know and understand the world around them to transition to higher stages of development. The work of Kegan expands on the concept of
resolving conflict when old meaning schemas need to change through critical reflection. For an individual to gain the skills and traits to critical thinking, there is a need to be self-aware and in control of social factors (Kegan, 1994). Kegan (1994) emphasizes the importance of transformation as more than gaining new skills and knowledge. Instead individuals question expectations and values, explore other thoughts and feelings, and generate their own understanding of the world. In regards to this study, it is possible that international students have not yet had the opportunity to engage in critical reflection to come to resolution of the conflict between their home country and Western education.

Findings from the current study extend this contention by showing that international students view their home country education and Western education as incongruent. Given the duration of this study, it is difficult to know if the critical and transformative process was sparked. However, the high intensity dissonance that is described can certainly initiate the process. Overtime this dissonance can continue to play a role with students’ career choices, worldview and lifestyle (Kiely, 2005).

**Conclusion Three: Service-Learning Expands Worldview that Leads to Future Civic Action**

The third and final conclusion of this study is that service-learning expands worldview that leads to future civic action. Findings of this study depict that after participating in service-learning, undergraduate international students expand their worldview on social inequities and overcame biases and misconceptions by interacting with others. Participants learned to ground their own assumptions and gained an appreciation for students and families that had different upbringings than their own. In addition to participants acknowledging social disproportions and overcoming biases and misconceptions, all participants shared a desire to help others/volunteer
after taking part in service-learning. The participants described their desire to help others in future service-learning/volunteer opportunities as “necessary” and their “duty”. Service-learning proved to be a different learning environment than past and current educational experiences because it allowed students to understand their civic responsibility to local communities, as well as to those in their home countries. Additionally, service-learning was viewed as more than a class requirement, instead it was a course that allowed international students to contribute to changing and making a difference in the lives of others than may not be as fortunate as them.

Civic responsibility is defined broadly as “the sense of personal responsibility individuals should feel to uphold their obligation as part of any community” (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998, p. 5). An individual who is civically engaged considers social problems as inherently a part of their responsibility (Mayhew & Engberg, 2011). Service-learning fosters an increased sense of civic engagement and responsibility. Students who participate in volunteer opportunities throughout their collegiate experience are more likely to participate in service after graduation (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). Einfeld and Collins (2008) note that participation with service activities may lead to specific civic responsibility outcomes, which included the following: dedication to assist others, working as a volunteer, and seeking out opportunities with non-profit organizations.

Existing literature shows that domestic and international students can view service-learning as a burden because it requires a commitment of additional time outside of the classroom to dedicate to the community site (Elwell & Bean, 2001; McNally, 2017; Stenike, 2009). However, once students begin volunteering, they are no longer concerned with the number of hours required (Stenike, 2009). Through reflections of the service-learning experience, international students challenge preconceptions and want to stay involved in the
community well past the class project (Russell, 2007). After participating in service-learning, students are more likely to develop a sense of empathy to help those less fortunate, join local organizations and/or student groups dedicated to community service, and institutional wide community based projects to enhance the campus climate (Elwell & Bean, 2001; McNally, 2017; Russell, 2007). Students view themselves as active contributors to the community and want to stay involved even after the project concludes (Elwell & Bean, 2001). Students who participate in volunteer opportunities throughout their collegiate experience are more likely to participate in service after graduation (Einfeld & Collins, 2008).

Two conceptual frameworks guided this study – Transformative Learning and Transformative International Service-Learning model. Transformative Learning as a “process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167). His definition shows that frames of reference can restrict a person’s worldview and thus limit action and understanding. Mezirow (1991) postulates that learning in an individual’s early childhood comprises of socializing, normalizing and acculturating. However, as adults, individuals become open-minded about knowing and understanding, while moving towards acting on these new understandings (Mezirow, 1991).

Mezirow (2000) begins by suggesting that within Transformative Learning an individual plans a course of action that is more aligned with the developing worldview which stands on flexibility and allows an individual to gain new skills. The stage of taking action continues when an individual provisionally tries the new role, while also modifying and adjusting as needed. In the new role or relationship with practice, competence and self-confidence is gained (Mezirow,
Based on the new perspective, the final step includes the reintegration into one’s life where an individual integrates the new skills and abilities, and ultimately expands their worldview (Mezirow, 2000). The participants of this study reported an increase in social awareness after participating in service-learning. As a result of the service-learning experience, participants shared that their experience changed their worldviews, and their cultural misconceptions were challenged by interacting with those at the service site. They went on to further share that their thinking expanded beyond what they were taught in their home countries by seeing and experiencing varying perspectives, both in the classroom and service-learning site. In addition to participants acknowledging social disproportions and overcoming biases and misconceptions, all participants shared a desire to help others/volunteer after taking part in service-learning. Participants noted that their desire to help others went beyond just the service-learning course, and extended to being involved in volunteer opportunities in their home countries.

The conceptual framework of Transformative International Service-Learning model speaks to an emerging global consciousness represented by a transformational learning outcome and process that is a result of participating in service-learning (Heilman, 2012; Kiely, 2004, 2005). Emerging global consciousness represents a shift towards the role of being a global citizen (Kiely, 2004; Kiely, 2005). According to Kiely (2005) after participants take part in an international service-learning trip they return and express a desire to act on an emerging global consciousness by adjusting and changing their lifestyle. This adjustment is triggered by exposure to social inequalities and disparities within the service-learning site. The participants of this current study expressed gaining an awareness of social disparities and overcoming biases and misconceptions by interacting with those at the service-learning site and evaluating their own
privileges and upbringing. As a result participants want to participate in future service and/or volunteering opportunities, and may have gained an emerging global consciousness as described by the Transformative International Service-Learning model.

**Section Summary**

Three conclusions were identified from analyzing the data. First, a service-learning environment fosters cognitive, linguistic and social skills. Second, a service-learning course presents an internal conflict between empowering and self-motivated U.S. education approach to rigor and demands in home countries. Third, service-learning expands worldview that leads to future civic action. These conclusions demonstrate how a service-learning experience shapes the academic transition of undergraduate international students by fostering skills needed not only to navigate service-learning but their academic program and career. While exposure to the U.S. educational system can create internal conflicts for participants between academic values taught in their home country, it has the potential to be resolved as the academic transition progresses. This chapter will conclude with implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

**Implications for Practice**

Findings of this study can inform higher education practice to support undergraduate international students with their adjustment and academic assimilation to the U.S. educational system. Implications for practice are relevant to areas within higher education which include but are not limited to enrollment management, student affairs, counseling and academic affairs. The first set of implications include recommendations for my own practice as a scholar-practitioner. Then, the section will discuss implications for practice as they relate to higher education.
institutions more broadly, and how they can be applied to international students more specifically.

Personal Implications as a Scholar-Practitioner

For the past fourteen years, I have been working in higher education institutions in a variety of Enrollment Management capacities. My work is driven by improving the quality of services and strategies to improve the overall student experience. I focus on cultivating an organization dedicated to student success and learning. Additionally, a large focus of my work has been around serving underserved populations and their access to, persistence in and completion of postsecondary education. Two years ago, I began working at a large, state university in the Northeast. A major focus of admissions recruitment efforts is recruiting a larger international study body. In the past year, new international student enrollment increased from 8% to 20%, with the goal to grow to 30% by next year.

The first example of what this means in regards to my work is the need to expand the focus from solely recruiting a diverse applicant pool. Instead it is important to identity and implement strategies than can assist with the academic transition, language development, and socialization of international students once they arrive on campus. This research has identified the importance of considering service-learning as a pedagogical practice. This study shows that service-learning exposes international students to Western ways of learning which assist with their academic transition by connecting classroom material to real-world contexts, and providing a space for collaborative learning and critical thinking. While my work is surrounded by the need to continue to attract, recruit and matriculate international students, it is important to consider the spaces in which learning takes place to assist with the academic transition of all students. The work of recruiting students whether international or domestic includes more than
just the efforts of the Admissions office but rather encompasses the efforts of staff and faculty throughout the campus community.

The second personal implication of this study is the need to connect service-learning more intentionally across multiple course offerings within a core curriculum. Within higher education institutions, core curriculums are typically within the first two years and around the arts and sciences. Core curriculums are a critical aspect of the undergraduate student experience and provides students exposure to a broad range of subjects across various disciplines. At New College, service-learning is incorporated within a few sections of the Foundations of Inquiry course but not all. Due to delays in processing of paperwork and ensuring compliance within community organizations, participants typically completed 5 to 10 hours of service. By creating an opportunity where students engage in service-learning across multiple courses that build off of one another, and over a longer period of time, it will assist students with skill development, academic transition, collaborative learning, peer relationships, and continued exposure to addressing the needs of the local community. This recommendation would require significant coordination on behalf of administrators and faculty members across multiple departments. However, the rewards for the students would outweigh the output needed.

The third personal implication is rethinking the types of services that are provided to international and domestic students. For example, in higher education institutions it is common to conduct two separate new student orientations for domestic and international students. These types of events can create a divide among the students with little to no room for interaction with peers of backgrounds different than their own. The findings of this study speak to the reward in international students interacting with their domestic peers inside and outside of the classroom to
help with socialization, and English language development. By creating events that are inclusive would move away from a common divide seen in higher education settings.

**Implications for Higher Education Professionals**

**Encouraging participation.** This section focuses on implications for higher education professionals. The first implication of this research is understand the importance of exposing international students to contexts outside of the classroom environment. I recommend that higher education institutions embed service-learning into the curriculum and administrators’ particularly academic advisors encourage international students to take part in service-learning and/or civic engagement courses/opportunities to further develop their interpersonal skills, connect learning to real-world contexts, and promote community engagement. In this study only one participant took the course because of their interest in service-learning. There is an opportunity for academic advisors to actively encourage students towards participating in courses that embed service-learning and civic engagement, and be transparent in syllabi and course overviews to describe teaching philosophies and instructional practices that involve collaboration, applied knowledge, and peer interaction.

**Training tool for faculty members.** The second implication of this research focuses on the importance of service-learning contributing to the English language proficiency and linguistic self-confidence of undergraduate international students. By participating in service-learning, international students are pushed beyond their comfort zone, and required to interact with those at the service-learning site and their peers. For some participants, communicating in English, which is not their first language, begins by creating emotions of discomfort but then leads to reward by assisting with the development of linguistic confidence and improvements to their English language skills. Findings of this study can be used as a training tool to encourage
faculty members to create spaces in the classroom environment which include dialogue and reflection. Often times, participants in the study cited teaching methods as only including lectures. Teaching as described within a service-learning course requires the teacher to create a back and forth dialogue between the students and teacher to further understand the course content and the service-learning project. There is a need to recognize the types of interactions that take place in the classroom that can create quality and positive learning environments for both students and teachers. Shifts in pedagogical practices can assist with creating spaces where students, both domestic and international are interacting and learning from one another. Adjustments in teaching methods can help undergraduate international students’ academic adjustment to the collegiate environment in the United States, and further assist them with developing their communication and critical thinking skills.

Additionally, faculty and staff need to recognize that international students are going through a transition and often times an internal conflict not only when arriving to the United States but when assimilating to academic expectations in the United States. This level of conflict can weigh heavily on students and can impact them inside and outside of the classroom. To assist faculty with addressing this conflict, higher education institutions can create toolkits to help ease internal conflict which include adapting teaching practices to incorporate journaling, mental processing, and critical reflection. This toolkit is intended to guide faculty members and to create awareness to challenges students may be facing that can impact academic performance and mental health.

**Creating less formal spaces for community engagement.** The final implication of this study is for higher education institutions to create less formal opportunities for students to take part in community engagement. Findings from this study show that participating in service work
can create awareness of social inequities that leads to the desire to take part in future volunteering opportunities and giving back to those that are less fortunate. Higher education institutions can create community service centers to help students get involved civically, electorally, and politically within the communities in which they live. This can provide students the opportunity to learn about issues in these communities and work to address them, while bringing civic engagement opportunities to campuses for all students to take part in. For example, to promote campus conversations among students, faculty and staff members, centers can coordinate discussions around topics such as diversity, public concerns and social justice. Additionally, these centers can create programs such as fundraising, advocacy efforts and political engagement to help develop short and long term programs for students to get engaged. Initiatives like these would further demonstrate a value of international and domestic student success, and empower students to stay civically engaged, gain practical experience, and learn critical thinking at the community level.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The literature review of this study recognized that while recent research focuses on student diversity initiatives to help develop awareness and appreciation to culture on college campuses, there was a significant opportunity to address the types of interactions that take place in a service-learning course that can assist with understanding academic experiences and perceptions of international students. Most of the previous research has focused on assimilation and integration issues of international students leading to challenges surrounding social adjustment, discrimination, culture shock, cross-cultural differences and academic integration (Lee & Rice, 2007; Steinke, 2009). Unfortunately, institutions have overlooked academic experiences as providing or accommodating diverse needs of international students. Findings of
this research study, illustrates how service-learning moves beyond just altering curriculum and encompasses the significance of the what, how and why of learning, while playing a crucial role with the academic transition of international students. Although the findings of this study contribute to facilitating the academic transition of international students, there are several recommendations for future research that can extend beyond the findings of this study, and further address the academic needs of international students.

1. This study was conducted at a small, private university in the northeastern United States. Therefore, it is unclear if the findings of this research study can be seen as representative of all institutions. It would be beneficial to conduct a similar study at another small, private university to see how the experiences of international students align to those at New College, and assist with further validating the findings in diverse settings.

2. The sample size represented in this study included eight undergraduate international students in one service-learning course. A qualitative study with additional participants across additional service-learning courses can assist with further generalizing the findings to a larger population and a greater course offerings.

3. The participants of the study included undergraduate international students from various home countries. The study sought to understand the unique experiences, needs, norms and expectations of undergraduate international students from multiple backgrounds. However, students come from distinct communities and bring unique experiences, needs, norms and expectations. One cannot generalize service-learning experiences of international students across all sectors and communities. There is a need for another study to explore and recognize differences among cultural groups and of those that
belong to the same cultural group, and the potential impact of service-learning to academic transition.

4. This study took place over two months and included one interview and observation of the participants. Ideally, a longitudinal study that collects the academic experiences of undergraduate international students prior to their arrival and throughout their collegiate experience can further facilitate a better understanding of how their experiences have developed, and whether participation in service-learning/community engagement persisted over time.

5. Neither the theory nor model of Transformative Learning by Mezirow (1978, 1991, 2000) and Kiely (2005) directly addresses the importance of a student’s cultural background to the process. By ignoring an individual’s background, it may restrict the amount and types of learning opportunities that can take place. A study that explores issues surrounding diversity of individuals, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation need to be considered. The need to address the context within the learning process is essential to linking meaning and experience.

6. This study examined the experience of undergraduate international students in a 16 week service-learning course. For many of the participants, a total of eight to ten hours of service were completed at an off-campus site. Further research could explore an immersive, multi-day international and/or domestic service-learning trip as influencing academic transition of international students.

7. The participants of this study included undergraduate international students from varying class levels (i.e. freshman to senior). It is difficult to generalize findings of academic transition to all students without considering where they are in the academic pipeline.
Further research that explores how different levels of students were affected by service-learning will expand the results of this study.

8. This study examined the experiences of undergraduate international students in core curriculum course. Further research that explores the social-emotional and academic transition value of service-learning for disciplines that are not currently using service-learning such as math and engineering would contribute to future research.

9. Since this research examined the experiences of undergraduate international students, it would be beneficial to also explore and compare them to domestic students in a service-learning course. This would highlight the perspectives of both international and domestic students, and provide a greater understanding of the international student experience.

10. This research focused on the overall experience of service-learning. Additional research considering which aspects of the service-learning activity, if any, had the most influence on academic transition would further contribute to the research.

11. This study concluded that service-learning can create an internal conflict for international students as they navigate an empowering and self-motivated educational approach in the United States versus the rigor and demands commonly found in their home countries. Further research that looks further into this conflict can enhance the findings of the study and identify ways to address the conflict for international students.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This study attempted to understand how a service-learning experience shapes the academic transition of undergraduate international students. While recent research focuses on recommendations regarding social adjustment and student diversity initiatives to assist with developing awareness and appreciation of culture on college campuses, there was also a need to
address the types of interactions that take place in the classroom that can assist with understanding the academic experiences and perceptions of international students. By understanding the authentic international students’ experiences in a service-learning course, this study unpacked several extensions to existing research and opportunities for future research. These findings can assist higher education institutions better understand and serve the needs of international students by recognizing the importance of high impact teaching practices such as service-learning to meet the needs of internationally diverse campuses in the United States.

As I reflect on my doctoral journey, I can say with confidence that I am walking away as a scholar-practitioner. I have come to learn the importance of research and data to support my professional work, as well as the need to think of new strategies to address and meet the needs of an evolving student population. Throughout the dissertation process I was challenged by conceptual overlap and misalignment with data sets. I remained committed to resolving the overlap and misalignment by deepening my thinking and moving beyond what was supported in the literature. The findings and implications of this study can further support students at New College, as well as students at other higher education institutions. My research will shape future conversations around the need to recruit, retain and graduate international students, and ways in which administrators can support their academic transition. Partnerships with scholars and practitioners in the field have complimented my professional experiences gained at a campus level, and have prepared me to be a thoughtful leader, while maintaining knowledge and sensitivity to students’ academic, social, cultural, wellness, and financial needs. I leave this journey appreciating the challenges and embracing the need for constant reflection and deepened thinking. I walk away as a life-long learner committed to understanding student learning and
working to continuously create and implement change in areas that need improvement and development to further enhance the student experience.
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Appendix A: Recruitment Letter (Sent by Email)

September 17, 2018

Dear students,

My name is Deepa Bhalla and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University in the Organizational Leadership Program. I am conducting research for my dissertation and recruiting first year undergraduate international students who might be interested in participating. The purpose of the study is to understand how a service-learning course affects the academic transition of undergraduate-level international students.

The selected participants of the study will engage in one audio-recorded interview, approximately an hour long. The identities of all participants will remain confidential. Participation in this study is voluntary and participation or non-participation will not affect your status at the university. If you decide to participate in the study, you can withdraw at any time without penalty. Once all interviews are completed, I will share the interview transcripts with you. You will have the opportunity to review the content and confirm whether they are accurate, and provide further clarification to anything that may be misrepresented. Findings will be included and published in my dissertation and possibly subsequent publications. No personal identifiable information will be included. All participants in this study must feel comfortable communicating and participating in the English language.

If you are comfortable with the nature and purpose of this study, and would like to participate in research that will assist and improve the academic transition of international students, please complete the demographic questionnaire via Google Forms by September 26, 2018.

Thank you in advance for your time and interest!

Best,
Deepa Bhalla
xxx-xxx-xxxx
email address removed to protect confidentiality

This study has also been approved by the Institutional Review Board at New College, though the study is for Deepa Bhalla’s student research study at Northeastern University.
Appendix B: Confidential Questionnaire

*This questionnaire will be created using Google Forms*

If you are interested in participating in this study, please return this questionnaire by September XX, 2018.

Today’s date: ________________________________

Name: ________________________________

Email address: ________________________________

Phone number: ________________________________

Preferred pseudonym (fictitious name for this study): ________________________________

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Gender: ________________________________
☐ Male  ☐ Female

Nationality (home country): ________________________________

Race and/or ethnicity: ________________________________

Year of study: ________________________________
☐ Freshman  ☐ Sophomore  ☐ Junior  ☐ Senior

Major: ________________________________

First language: ________________________________

Are you comfortable communicating in the English language? ________________________________
☐ Yes  ☐ No

Have you had any prior contact with me in any context? ________________________________
☐ Yes  ☐ No
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Education Department
Deepa Bhalla
“A Case Study of Undergraduate International Students’ Experiences in a Service-Learning Course and the Impact on their Academic Transition”

Dear Participant,

You are invited to take part in a research study that I am conducting under the direction of my doctoral dissertation advisor, Dr. Elisabeth Bennett. This form will tell you about the study, but I will explain it to you first. You may ask me any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell me if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy for your records as well.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an undergraduate international student. There will be approximately 8-12 students involved in this study. The purpose of this research is to understand how a service-learning course affects the academic transition of undergraduate-level international students. If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in one interview that should last approximately sixty minutes. Ten of those minutes will be spent going over this informed consent form. You will be interviewed at school or at a time and place that is convenient for you. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. At the end of the service-learning opportunity, you will be sent an electronic survey which will ask 6 questions and should take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Once all participant interviews are finished and I have written my findings, I will email you a copy of my findings to review. You will be asked to provide feedback via email or telephone.

There are no foreseeable risks and/or discomforts associated with this study. I will be certain to keep interviews at sixty minutes or under in order to avoid any inconvenience to you. There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, I am a highly interested higher education professional and listener who cares deeply about your stories. Participation will provide you with an opportunity to reflect on your experiences. Information learned from this study may help improve conditions for fellow international students.

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only I will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that will identify you in any way. I will review interview transcripts and remove all identifying information, including the names of people and places. I will replace these identifiers with code names. All data will be kept in a locked file cabinet. This form will be maintained in a locked drawer for three years after completion of the study. All other data will be destroyed within one year of completion of this study. In rare cases, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this
study. This is done to make sure the research is done properly. I will only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board or New College (pseudonym for site name added to protect confidentiality) Institutional Review Board to see this information. No employee of New College will ever know whether or not you participated in this research.

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment of treatment solely because of your participation in this research. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you start the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student at Eastern University.

If you have questions or problems, please contact me at 732-xxx-xxxx (cell) or via email at (address removed to protect confidentiality). You may also contact Dr. Elisabeth Bennett at (email address removed for confidentiality).

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-xxx-xxxx, Email: (email address removed to protect confidentiality). You may call anonymously if you wish.

There are no known costs associated with participation in this study. You must feel comfortable communicating in English. All written and verbal communications will be in English. You cannot have had any prior contact with me before the initiation of this study.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________  _________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part                  Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________  _________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent                  Date
Appendix D: Student Interview Protocol

Interviewee: Name
Interviewer: Deepa Bhalla
Date:
Location of Interview:

Part One: Introduction
Hello. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of the study is to understand how a service-learning course affects the academic transition of undergraduate-level international students. This interview will provide me the opportunity to get to know you and hear about your experiences in the Foundations of Inquiry (FCIQ-101) course, and more specifically your insights regarding your participation in a service-learning project.

Your thoughts and insights is important to this research. I want to make sure I capture them accurately so I will be recording your interview today. Are you comfortable with this interview being recorded?

I would like to record your consent to be audio taped so I will request your confirmation a second time. [Press record] Do you agree to be recorded today? [Pause for consent] Thank you. I will begin recording now and will also be taking notes throughout.

I would like to take this time to reassure you that all responses you share will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting your comments from transcriptions and notes. I will be the only person with access to this recording. Any information that has identifiable information will be destroyed within a year of the study’s completion. Files and information including the pseudonym will be stored indefinitely. Consent forms will be stored and secured in a locked file cabinet and destroyed after three years.

To meet the human subject requirements of this study I emailed you an informed consent document prior to today. I also have one with me that you must sign (provide form). Essentially this form states that: (1) your participation is voluntary and can end at any time for any reason; (2) your information will be kept confidential; (3) I do not plan to inflict any harm on you; and (4) you can skip or not answer any question that is asked of you.

Do you have any questions for me? [PAUSE. Wait for response.] If you agree and are willing to participate please sign the informed consent form I have given to you. [PAUSE. Wait for them to sign.] And again, so we have your consent audio recorded, may I confirm that you give your consent to participate in this study? [PAUSE. Wait for response.] Thank you.

I have planned this interview to last about 60-90 minutes. During this time I have a variety of questions to ask you. If time runs short I may interrupt you to move ahead to ask additional questions. Do you have any other questions before we begin?
Part Two: Participant Demographic Information
Please confirm the following information (information taken from confidential questionnaire):

Pseudonym: 
Gender: 
Nationality: 
Race and/or ethnicity: 
Year of Study: 
Major: 
First language: 

Part Three: Interview Questions

Introduction/Warm-up
The purpose of the study is to understand how a service-learning course affects the academic transition of undergraduate-level international students.

1. Why did you decide to come to the United States to study?

2. Did you spend significant amount of time in the United States (or anywhere outside your home country) prior to coming to the United States for college? If so, do you feel those experiences have helped you adapt to learning in the United States? How?

3. What types of service or volunteering have you done before the FCIQ-101 course?

4. Describe the service-learning project in the FCIQ-101 course.

5. What was your reaction when you first learned about the project and that you would be participating?

6. What did you know about the issue being addressed in the community or population being served before you began the project?

7. How are projects like service-learning incorporated into academics back home?

RQ1: How do undergraduate international students describe the impact of a service-learning experience to their academic transition? a. How does a service-learning experience contribute to the English language proficiency of undergraduate international students?

1. Describe your reaction when you arrived at the site of your service-learning project.

2. What types of relationships did you develop with others during the service-learning experience? How were you communicating with them?

3. How would you describe your level of comfort speaking the English language when arriving to the United States?
4. How has your experience in the service-learning project allowed you to practice the English language?

5. How would you describe your level of comfort speaking the English language after participating in a service-learning project?

6. What are some of the required assignments in the FCIQ-101 course you found beneficial to you as you adjust to your college experience?

7. How does participation in a service-learing course help you adjust academically? Please provide an example.

8. What are you learning about yourself while taking part in the service-learning project?

9. What has been the most academically challenging aspect of the service-learning project?

10. What are your expectations of this college to help you with your academic transition? Are these being met?

11. Would you participate in another service-learning project? Why or why not?

**RQ 2: How do undergraduate international students view their academic experience in their home country after participating in a service-learning program?**

1. What do you value most as a learner?

2. Describe your academic experience in your home country?

3. How would compare this service-learning project to school projects you took part in your home country?

4. What academic challenges have you faced related to studying abroad? How have you overcome these challenges?

5. What are the biggest differences you see between your academic experience in the United States and in your home country?

6. What do you feel was of the greatest importance emphasized (from teachers and parents) when it came to your academics growing up? How does that differ from your experiences in the United States?

7. What did you find most challenging in this service-learning experience?

8. What surprised you the most?

9. What would you change about your service-learning project?
10. Who or what was the most meaningful part of this service-learning experience?

11. How has this experience affected your view of how you might be involved in your home community?

12. What advice would you give to other students from your home country regarding studying in the United States?

Closing
We are now at the end of the interview. Before we finish, is there anything else you would like to share?

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak candidly with me about your thoughts and experiences. Once I have finished my interviews, I will contact you so you may review a draft of my findings and give any recommendations for improvement.
Appendix E: Field Notes Record

Researcher: Deepa Bhalla
Date:                        Time:
Location:                    Setting:
Data Collection Experience:

Observations

Interpretations

General Notes
# Appendix F: Observation Protocol

Researcher: Deepa Bhalla  
Date:  
Location:  
Participants:  
Time:  
Setting:  
Length of Time:  

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Appendix G: Web-based Survey

*This survey will be created using Google Forms and sent to the participants via email.*

1. What was your outlook about service-learning before you started the FCIQ-101 course and now?

2. What was the most rewarding aspect of participating in a service-learning experience?

3. What were the challenges you faced in this service-learning course? Did you overcome them?

4. Are you inclined to participate in future service-learning opportunities in the future?

5. What impact, if any, do you believe your service-learning experience had on your future academic plans?

6. Do you have any additional comments you would like to add regarding your service-learning experience in the FCIQ 101 course?