UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL, ACADEMIC, AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

OF IRAQI EXCHANGE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

by

Heather Lyn Theisen-Gándara, MEd

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The University of Houston-Clear Lake

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in Educational Leadership

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-CLEAR LAKE

DECEMBER, 2018

UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL, ACADEMIC, AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

OF IRAQI EXCHANGE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

by

Heather Lyn Theisen-Gándara

APPROVED BY

_____
Amy Orange, PhD, Chair

_____
Lilian McEnery, EdD, Committee Member

_____
Bryan Morgan, EdD, Committee Member

_____
Janel Dumbre, EdD, Committee Member

RECEIVED BY THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION:

_____
Joan Y. Pedro, PhD, Associate Dean

_____
Mark D. Shermis, PhD, Dean

Dedication

Dedicated to the Iraqi Exchange Community, whose voices need to be heard, and to my husband and children whose multiculturalism inspires me every day.

Acknowledgments

I am greatly indebted to the support of my family in the pursuit of my doctoral degree. Without their understanding and encouragement, I would not have made it through this amazing educational experience. I am especially grateful to my children, Max and Isabella, for their faith in me, and constant understanding while Mom was traveling for work, away at the campus, and busy researching at home. To my husband, Jesus, I am grateful for your support and belief in me even when I didn't believe in myself. To my mother, whose passion for learning is contagious. The support of my dissertation Chair, Dr. Amy Orange, and the guidance and expertise of the committee members has been extraordinary and much appreciated. Finally, to Cohort 9 members who have become friends, family, and colleagues. Kelly Thomas and Louis Gracia, you have inspired me each day to become a better person. I eagerly await our post-doctoral friendship and adventures.

ABSTRACT

UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL, ACADEMIC, AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

OF IRAQI EXCHANGE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Heather Lyn Theisen-Gándara
University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2017

Dissertation Chair: Amy Orange, PhD

The purpose of this qualitative study was to analyze the cultural, academic, and social adjustment of seven international, undergraduate students from Iraq. Utilizing a multiple case study design, the dissertation included semi-structured interviews with the student participants of the study as well as the host university staff and academic advisors from the non-profit organization that administered the Iraq student exchange program. The interviews yielded comprehensive data regarding the individual and collective experiences of the Iraqi undergraduate participants. Through careful coding of the interview data, the author analyzed the emergent themes from the diverse group of study participants. The data revealed a strong balance between in-country familial support and new social capital built in the host country. The participants demonstrated resiliency factors upon arrival to the United States, after living through a high level of violence in their home country. The themes indicated a significant customized, individualized

support from the host university in conjunction with the administering non-profit coupled with hope and determination from the students. Many of the students cited appreciation for the safety and freedom of their new environment as contributing directly to their success. Comprehensive and coordinated support across campus, and with the non-profit organization that administered the scholarship, was indicated as a fundamental factor in successful adaptation to academic, social, and cultural life in the United States. Findings from the study concluded that the student participant adaptation was strongly related to support networks, strength of character and determination, as well as an overarching natural aptitude and prior academic preparation from their high school in Baghdad. Broader conclusions indicated that comprehensive support on campus and pre-departure preparation led to successful academic achievements, strong acculturation, and success on a social level. Implications include suggestions for building social capital for students with traumatic past experiences, individualizing cultural adjustment support, and supporting international students that diversify campuses in the United States to increase retention rates.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION

The struggle for Iraqi exchange students from Baghdad, and other cities with a high rate of terrorism, has been unique and complex, given their violent histories. Though it has been precarious to leave the country, many students are encouraged by their families to seek an international education in the United States. In 2013-2014, there were 1,491 Iraqi exchange students in the United States, which increased 15.8% to 1,727 in the 2014-2015 academic year (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2015). In 2015-2016, the number increased further to a total of 1,901 for Iraqi students on U.S. campuses, with a slight decrease to 1,698 in 2016-2017 (Farrugia, Bhandari, Baer, Robles, & Andrejko, 2017). The United Kingdom nearly parallels the US numbers, with a total of 1,400 Iraqi students studying within the UK borders in 2016-2017 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2018). Due to the increasing number of students entering the United States, educators and support networks on campus have an increased opportunity to welcome and support these students. Largely absent from the literature, with a cursory representation in some recent dissertations (Al-Mandwee 2015; Hollands, 2012; Patnaik, 2014), Iraqi exchange students need to have their experiences revealed so that the world can understand how to support those Iraqi students who struggle, and how to further encourage those Iraqi students who excel.

This dissertation utilizes multiple exploratory case studies, focused on Iraqi undergraduate exchange students' perceptions of their cultural, academic, and social adjustment in the United States. This study has augmented and added to the body of literature on international student adjustment to include the Iraqi student experience.

Purpose of the Study

The country of Iraq has a deep, rich history of distinction in the arts, education, and culture. "About one thousand years ago, Baghdad was arguably the greatest city in the world" (Al-Janabi & Anderson, 2011, p. 1). In the 1980s, Iraq boasted some of the most advanced technologies and international standards in higher education globally (Al-Janabi & Anderson, 2011). The decline had begun with UN-imposed sanctions in the 1990s and, subsequently, the invasion by the United States in 2003 (Al-Janabi & Anderson, 2011).

After 2003, the insurgence violence escalated in Iraq, and the educational community was an unfortunate target (Marr, 2012). Classes were cancelled at primary and secondary schools, buildings destroyed, and teachers assassinated (Marr, 2012). Fear of kidnapping had also discouraged many parents from sending their children to school (Marr, 2012). While academics have studied the concepts of culture shock and cultural adaptation extensively (Gebhard, 2012; Kim, 2012; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Selby & Woods, 1966), there is a gap in the current research regarding the Iraqi exchange experience. The gap was addressed in this dissertation.

This study investigated the ability of young Iraqi exchange students from Baghdad to adjust to a new environment in the United States. The researcher presented the factors that contribute to these successes, to aid in understanding how to encourage other students to follow the same path. The purpose of this study was to explore the cultural adaptation and adjustment processes of undergraduate Iraqi students in the United States through in-depth interviews. If researchers and university administrators can understand the etiology of intrinsic motivation, perhaps the information can be shared to help other groups who have experienced trauma to succeed. Researchers and university personnel that provide orientation programs, and cultural adjustment support, should

consider all groups of students to provide a network of resources, and customized support.

Statement of the Problem

The nature of classroom instruction in Iraq, coupled with the high level of violence in and around the major cities, presents challenges to students pursuing education in Iraq. Al-Hadethe, Hunt, Thomas, and Al-Qaysi (2014) contended that the increased prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms among high school students in Iraq has not yet led to augmented mental health services to help these youth deal with the ongoing trauma that comes from living in the current state of Iraq. The impact of PTSD on children may have included a decline in school work, sleep disturbance, reduced concentration, and loss of interest in normal activities (Two Thousand Eight Presidential Task Force on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, 2018).

Additionally, the instructor-centered classroom education style was prominent in Iraq. An educator with three decades of experience in Iraq, Mohammed-Marzouk (2012) shared his thoughts on the Iraqi educational system, which has focused on rote memorization and instructor-centered teaching for the past century. He asserted that critical thinking and meaningful memorization are left outside of the primary and secondary school classrooms (Mohammed-Marzouk, 2012) This claim regarding the nature of typical classrooms in Iraq may offer some insight into some of the challenges students face as they adjust culturally and academically in the United States. The Iraqi J-1 exchange population has not yet been explored in depth through research, and their experiences related to their education are largely absent from the literature. Their inclusion in the literature has been relevant due to the complexity of their backgrounds, and the importance of understanding how to aid this population in adjusting to life in the United States.

3

Research Question(s)

This dissertation explored the following research questions:

1) What factors contributed to Iraqi undergraduate students' abilities to adjust culturally, socially, and academically to life in the United States?

> a) How had Iraqi undergraduate students' educational experiences in Iraq prepared them for their college educations in the US?

> b) What support systems had Iraqi undergraduate students utilized to assist with their adjustment?

Definitions

Academic success: For purposes of this study, "academic success" has been defined as students who maintain at least a 3.0 Grade Point Average (GPA).

Adaptation is the process of altering one's behavior in response to the environment, circumstances, or social pressure (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013, p. 850).

Adjustment refers to the subjective experiences associated with adaptation, and may be assessed by mood states, self-esteem, self-awareness, physical health, self-confidence, stress, psychological and psychosomatic concerns, early return to one's home country, dysfunctional communication, culture shock, depression, anxiety, diminished school and work performance, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013, p. 850).

Culture Shock: A well-known term used to define the initial experiences of immersion in an unfamiliar culture (Lombard, 2014, p. 175).

Exchange Visitor: A foreign national who has been selected by a sponsor to participate in an exchange visitor program, and who had been seeking to enter or has entered the United States temporarily on a non-immigrant J–1 visa or who has obtained J status in the United States based on a Form DS–2019 issued by the sponsor. The term

does not include the accompanying spouse and dependents of the exchange visitor. (22 CFR Part 62 -Exchange Visitors; Subpart A--General Provisions Section § 62.1 Purpose, 2016)

J Visa: The Exchange Visitor (J) non-immigrant visa category has been for individuals approved to participate in work- and study-based exchange visitor programs. Participants are integral to the success of the program (U.S. Department of State, Department of Education and Cultural Affairs, n.d.)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):

> . . . the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to one or more traumatic events. The clinical presentation of PTSD varies. In some individuals, fear-based re-experiencing, emotional, and behavioral symptoms may predominate. In others, anhedonic or dysphoric mood states and negative cognitions may be most distressing. (American Psychiatric Association, DSM-V, p. 274)

Limitations of the Study

As multiple exploratory case studies, there are several limitations to the study. The results cannot be generalized to the larger Iraqi exchange population due to the small sample size, and purposive sampling of participants and site. Furthermore, interviews are subjective, and dependent upon the complete honesty of the participant. Future studies should focus on the larger populations of Iraqis in the United States, as their experience has also been worthwhile to understand and unique in nature.

Summary

After much isolation and exposure to intermittent education, many Iraqi students have demonstrated an ability to adjust well academically, culturally, and socially on campuses in the United States, while others struggle. The violence had an effect on the country's children and their educational experiences (Ismael, 2008).

The cumulative effects of surrounding violence, poverty and psychological trauma has created a host of social pathologies in Iraqi children and society, robbing Iraqi children of their innocence, and portending a future Iraq that will be dominated by the maladjusted and the violent. (Ismael, 2008, p. 151)

Despite this prediction, many have excelled academically in the United States, become involved in campus life, and have exceeded cultural adjustment expectations. A central motivation for this research was to investigate factors that had contributed to Iraqi undergraduate student successes. The next section reviewed the literature related to these factors.

CHAPTER II:

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter has summarized literature related to factors such as resiliency and adaptation, and how foreign exchange students have adjusted to life in the United States. The benefit of understanding student resiliency is broad and overarching. The results of understanding resiliency can change the way in which educators approach the academic, cultural, and social support provided on campus. In addition to understanding resiliency, exploring how Iraqi students adapt and adjust in the United States is paramount to understanding what resources on campus to allocate toward the support of Iraqi students. The chapter begins with a historical perspective of Iraq's educational reality and moves into other related topics such as international student adjustment, Arab student adjustment, social capital, safety, resiliency, the refugee experience, and its contrast to that of an exchange student, and the theoretical frameworks for the study. Finally, the theoretical frameworks have contributed to the purpose of the study and acted as a prelude to Chapter III. The presented frameworks served as lenses through which the data were interpreted in Chapter V.

Historical Perspective

Prior to the multiple conflicts that affected the country, Iraq's education structure had been one of the most innovative in the Middle East, North Africa (MENA) region (UNICEF, 2017; Santisteban, 2005). With compulsory education and a high rate of literacy, Iraq was a progressive country in the 1980s, which provided quality education to the children of the country, including the education in cities like Baghdad. (UNICEF, 2017). The literacy rate was marked at a high of 80% in 1987 (Santisteban, 2005).

With the onset of UN sanctions resulting from the Gulf War in the 1990s and subsequent international hostilities, the impact on education was overarching (UNICEF,

2017). School materials became outdated, school structures were destroyed, and the number of qualified teachers declined (UNICEF, 2017). These conflictual consequences continue in the current state of Iraq.

In addition to the numerous historical struggles, problems exist with the current Iraqi system. For example, a major problem with the schooling in Iraq currently is the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the borders of Iraq (UNICEF, 2017). IDPs are men, women, and children who have been forced from their homes but still remain in the country (Brookings Institution, 2009). In addition to children of families fleeing violence, many teachers have been displaced, reducing the number of qualified teaching personnel (UNICEF, 2016). Many of the standing school structures are housing IDPs across the country, meaning that classes are not able to be held in those locations. As many as 1.1 million children have been affected by the displacement crisis, and "One in five schools in Iraq is out of use due to . . . attacks on education facilities and personnel" (UNICEF, 2016).

As many as 9.2 million students in Iraq were attending primary and secondary school in 2015-2016 (UNICEF, 2017). The 2017 Iraqi population had been estimated at 39,192,111 with about 39% of the population between the ages of 0 and 14, or school aged children (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). However, enrollment has been much lower in rural and marshland areas than in cities like Basra and Baghdad (UNESCO, 2011).

Although there are legal structures supporting Iraqi education, such as the 2005 Constitution, that explicitly outline the right to a tuition-free education at all levels, and primary compulsory education (UNESCO, 2011) the "freedom of scientific research, and the right to receive education in one's native language" (UNESCO, 2011, p. 1), the current situation prevents uninterrupted educational pursuits from taking place.

Lack of physical infrastructure is one of the challenges of educational reform, with up to 80% of the primary and secondary schools in need of repair due to conflict (UNESCO, 2011). The unstable security situation also presents an obstacle to reform, as well as a lack of teacher training programs (UNESCO, 2011). DeFronzo (2010) explored the central factors that contributed to contemporary violence in Iraq and outlined the effects of the war on children and the education system. The fear of kidnapping and other violence prevented many children from attending school and receiving routine medical care such as vaccinations (DeFronzo, 2010). DeFronzo estimated that as many as 760,000 children were taken out of school environments around the country in 2007. While many Iraqis immigrated to other countries in the Middle East, millions of citizens remained in Baghdad and other major cities, with very sporadic access to education (DeFronzo, 2010).

The post-2003 events impacted every aspect of the country and those involved, including the U.S., the allied soldiers, and the citizens of the cities that were occupied. Steed (2016), U.S. Army officer and history instructor, has analyzed interviews, stories, documents, and timelines. He has presented US and Iraqi perspectives, including U.S. military members' documented post-traumatic stress disorders to those experienced by Iraqi citizens before the Iraq war, during the occupation, and subsequent insurgency. His narrative has exposed sexual assaults of women in the U.S. Armed Forces, Iraqi women, and in some cases, children. Student profiles presented in Chapter IV touch on the religious persecution and other violence the student participants experienced prior to their arrival in the United States due to its prevalence in the literature.

The higher education system in Iraq has suffered similar setbacks due to violence and war:

> Due to the chaos that overwhelmed the country, the looting, burning of the universities and the use of a large number of higher institution buildings by the US forces and emerging political parties and their militias as headquarters, numerous teaching institutions closed. (Jawad & Al-Assaf, 2014, p. 58)

The United States and allies had failed to prevent destruction to the education system in Iraq after 2003, resulting in substantially fewer graduates, and a lessened focus on the intellectual needs of society (Jawad & Al-Assaf, 2014). Iraqis' perseverance through significant conflicts such as the Iran-Iraq war, strict international sanctions, and the most recent invasion by the United States in 2003 had a socio-cultural foundation in the historical accumulation of Iraqi academic expertise. "The Iraqi intelligentsia was well ahead of their Arab compatriots in the region . . . and . . . helped to transform cultural and establish the education systems and the press in the Gulf countries" (Jawad & Al-Assaf, 2014, p. 59).

A longitudinal study detailed the effects of such violence on the psychological well-being of survivors, focusing on the consequences of bomb attacks on the citizens of Iraq (Freh, Chung, & Dallos, 2013). Since 2003, the capital city, Baghdad, and other cities in Iraq suffered suicide bombings wounding and killing thousands of citizens (Freh et al., 2013). These cities' habitants witnessed carnage and had known people who had been killed or injured in attacks (Freh et al., 2013). Severe traumatic distress as a result of bombings affected citizens' worldviews and sense of security (Freh et al., 2013). On the other hand, some of the study participants had resiliency, especially over time, and had developed a more positive global view and reported the ability to pursue their dreams (Freh et al., 2013). The notion of resiliency, and positive results after traumatic events, has been the primary rationale for this study.

International Student Adjustment and Challenges

There was consensus in the literature that international student mobility continued to increase diversity on US campuses even with the challenges of global recessions,

student visa difficulties, and changes in recruitment strategies (Gómez, Urzúa & Glass, 2014; Kim, 2012; Ngo & Lumadue, 2014; Selby & Woods, 1966). Therefore, international educators should be prepared to welcome these increasing numbers of international students to the country and to assist them in the adjustment process.

In a longitudinal study of enrollment trends of undergraduate versus graduate international students in the US, Ngo and Lumadue (2014) found an increase in overall international student enrollment in the United States during the initial decade of the new millennium. This trend continues, with most recent studies indicating over 1 million international students in the United States in 2017, a 3% increase from the previous year (Farrugia et al., 2017). In addition to contributing to diversity, these students help to "foster cross-border collaboration on shared global problems" (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2015, p. 7).

International student adjustment is an important aspect of the increasing population and has long been represented in the literature. In one of the first studies of its kind, Selby and Woods (1966) outlined the U-curve of student cultural adjustment, which includes a period of excitement, decline and resentment, and finally, recuperation. Selby and Woods (1966) noted that the U-curve had been cited many times throughout the decade preceding their study. The authors of this study diverted from the U-curve hypothesis and introduced into the literature the concept of institutional support having an influence on international student adjustment (Selby & Woods, 1966). They felt that orientation programs had a significant impact on the acculturation process and attempted to prove their hypothesis through a series of qualitative interviews (Selby & Woods, 1966). They concluded that students had frequently excluded leisure and social activities from their lives, which further challenged their adjustment. Faculty had been considered primary academic support sources for international students despite staff dedicated to

provide students' academic support (Selby & Woods, 1966). International students had come to the United States for study purposes only, rather than cultural exchange (Selby & Woods, 1966). More recent literature has challenged the notion of the U-curve, concluding that the concept is restrictive and minimizes the complexity of individual international student adjustment (Chien, 2016). Through a qualitative study that examined the nature of international student adjustment, Chien (2016) contended that the tenets of the U-curve theory fail to recognize the heterogeneous nature of cultural adaptation. While many international students have adjustment challenges in common, the U-curve hypothesis has not evolved to include considerations such as globalization and the advent of online communication (Chien, 2016). These progressive elements may have contributed to intercultural and global cultural exposure/understanding (Chien, 2016).

Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, and Todman (2008) elaborated on the trend pertaining to models of culture shock moving from a negative, medical problem to a positive, normal course of adjustment. They also noted the importance of providing on-campus academic, social, and cultural support to these groups of students, as they are internationalizing the campus, and working to increase intercultural understanding. Historically, literature and research regarding migration and international mobility has focused on the difficulties of cultural adaptation and socialization in a different culture (Zhou et al., 2008). Newer trends have moved toward the positive angles of adjustment and cultural exchange (Zhou et al., 2008). This is clearly demonstrated in their review of historical theoretical frameworks that have moved from grief and bereavement and value difference to social identification and culture learning (Zhou et al., 2008).

Glass, Wongtriarat, and Buss (2015) introduced the notion of civic agency, or the involvement of international students on campus in a manner equitable to the larger

student population. They contended that the voices of international students should be heard throughout the governance of the university, in the same way that other undergraduates are encouraged to be involved (Glass et al., 2015). With this level of immersion, the university governing body, including administration, staff, and faculty, can determine the needs of foreign students, and foster a sense of belonging (Glass et al., 2015).

There still exists a sense of perplexity regarding student adjustment, and postulations that more research is needed into the topic of acculturation (Bai, 2016; Gómez et al., 2014; Kim, 2012). Gómez et al. (2014) cited a lack of literature regarding the relationship of acculturation and adjustment with leisure activities and support networks in the new environment. The results of their regression analysis indicated a relationship between acculturation and leisure activities or social events (Gómez et al., 2014). Thus, their conclusions spanned backwards more than 40 years to Selby and Woods (1966) who postulated that a lack of leisure activities had been a problem for students during their period of adjustment. These conclusions have implications for international educators as they prepare to advise students in their pursuit of acculturation.

Kim (2012) concurred with the aforementioned studies that more research is needed in the area of international student adjustment. In this qualitative study, Kim extended previous research by integrating an ethnographic model that included copious field notes and in-depth interviews. Kim's focus was precise: identity formation of international students. Through the course of this study, the author elaborated on Oberg's U shape curve adjustment model and its implications. Participants, a diverse group of 22 19-25-year-old international students, were selected via purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Kim, 2012).

Based on the content gathered in the semi-structured interviews, Kim (2012) designed a new conceptual framework "International Student Identity (ISI) Model" (Kim, 2012, p. 107) as a new way to comprehend the developmental elements of "identity formation in international students, the psychosocial similarities and differences among the participants were examined and the ways in which the new environment interacted with their psychosocial identity formation were elucidated" (Kim, 2012, p. 107). Kim added six fluid phases (as opposed to four) which included the following: (a) Pre-exposure, (b) Exposure, (c) Enclosure, (d) Emergence, (e) Integration, and (f) Internationalization (Kim, 2012, p. 107).

Phase 1 (pre-exposure) includes the period of time before the intercultural experience begins, when students are still in their home country. Their international trajectory is often influenced by the home culture, including peer and familial groups. Phase 2 (exposure—opening self) refers to the post-arrival experience of the individual, and is a phase rife with unfamiliar situations and circumstances, including social, cultural, and academic challenges. During this phase, students tend to develop autonomy from home culture influences. Phase 3 (Enclosure—Securing Self) typically involves withdrawal from the unfamiliarity of the host culture, a sense of academic routine, and a search for the familial and peer influences from their home culture. Phase 4 (Emergence—Disclosing Self) is when students begin to emerge from their isolation and seek new and exciting experiences in the host culture (Kim, 2012). This stage is marked by a "time of self-disclosure, experimentation, search for new identities, and exploration of unfamiliar settings because of the identity conflicts they might encounter" (Kim, 2012, p. 109). Thus, a new clarity that an identity crisis may exist, and that a resolution is eminent (Kim, 2012). Phase 5—or the Internalizing self-phase, is entered upon resolution of the identity crisis, and demonstrates a new sense of self, which encompasses both the

14

home culture, and an awareness of the changes one has undergone in response to the cultural experiences in the host culture (Kim, 2012). Phase 6—Internationalization is the most self-aware developmental state, when a globalizing self emerges (Kim, 2012). This stage is reached when "transnationals" would be "inclusive of people who differ from their own backgrounds, and perceive themselves, as well as others, as members of a multicultural society, internationalized citizens in a global society" (Kim, 2012, p. 110).

The phases are more flexible than those presented in the U curve, allowing for regression and being present in multiple stages at once (Kim, 2012). The fluidity of the stages, and the expansion into the realm of student identity formation, contributed to the existing literature by adding a malleable framework for international student adjustment. Kim's (2012) conceptual model must be tested in future research for validity, reliability, and longitudinal aspects, but the model carries far reaching impact potential on international student affairs, and guiding students appropriately through the stages.

Studies have noted the importance of welcoming students to campuses in the United States (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). With the advent of diversity and inclusion efforts as well as the globalization of businesses, international students add important economic, social, and cultural multiplicities to campuses and surrounding communities (Wu et al., 2015). They face challenges adjusting to new classroom expectations and learning styles as well as building a support network in their host country (Wu et al., 2015). Even if students are fluent in English, slang and academic language often present a challenge for all international students (Wu et al., 2015).

Sullivan and Kashubeck-West (2015) posited that a balance of social support networks from the US and from the home country, results in lower levels of acculturative stress. The central purpose of the article had been to augment awareness of the correlation between acculturative stress, orientation programs, and social networks, with

the hopes of contributing to the design of interventions that meet individual student needs (Sullivan & Kashubek-West, 2015). There were several recommendations for practice from this study, including an emphasis on helping students to develop networks on campus and in the surrounding community, as these are positively related to acculturation (Sullivan & Kashubek, 2015). Bhochhibhoya, Dong, and Branscum (2017) noted that international students' sources of social support vary, but that as the length of stay increases, so does the need for support within the United States. They postulated that length of stay sparks changes in the needed social support network (Bhochhibhoya et al., 2017). As duration increases, so does the importance of becoming integrated into the local community as a source of social support (Bhochhibhoya et al., 2017).

Studies also noted the importance of international support across departments on campus (Briggs & Ammigan, 2017; Lertora, Henriksen, Starkey, & Li, 2017; Prieto-Welch, 2016; Urban & Palmer, 2016). Lertora et al. (2017) asserted that much of the existing research is quantitative, which fails to assess international students' individualized needs with the same effectiveness as qualitative or mixed methods studies. Further in-depth research can help to inform pro-active solutions across campus departments, to include customized interventions and orientation programs (Lertora et al., 2017). When foreign students are able to relate their international experience on campus to their professional and personal goals, this aids in the adjustment process (Urban & Palmer, 2016). The authors in the aforementioned study found value in advocating for international student rights in the United States to allow for equal opportunities for involvement across campus, and in the professional community, as they contended that the development of meaningful relationships also helped with cultural adjustment (Urban & Palmer, 2016).

While noting the importance of internationalization on campus and the local community, Prieto-Welch (2016) contended that international students benefit most from inter-departmental support at the university. Counseling centers, faculty, health care workers, and student affairs professionals are able to provide early and effective intervention when provided with multicultural training, and while working in concert with each other (Prieto-Welch, 2016). The author asserted that foreign students may perceive counseling services on campus as a formal, stigmatized approach to problem-solving that does not apply to their individual situations (Prieto-Welch, 2016). Given this perception, Prieto-Welch (2016) presented several recommendations for approaching international student counseling centers on campus, including awareness of international student needs, providing culturally sensitive support for international clients, and a mindfulness regarding immigration regulations and other support networks on campus. Briggs and Ammigan (2017) concurred that meeting the cultural, social, and academic needs of international students requires collaboration across campus, and provides benefits to all stakeholders, including for those concerned with retention rates. Further, international offices are at times underfunded, and focused on complex immigration matters, making cooperation across campus imperative for international student success (Briggs & Ammigan, 2017). Briggs and Ammigan also contended that the benefits of international exchange are not always balanced with the needs of the foreign students. While international enrollment increases are important to the financial well-being of universities across the United States, institutions often fail to consider the necessary increase in international student support throughout campus (Briggs & Ammigan, 2017).

There are valuable sources of information on building connections across campuses as a best practice in welcoming international students while pushing for the uptick in enrollment that many institutions are seeking (Glass et al., 2015). Glass et al.

(2015) presented fundamental strategies to create an inclusive, allied, and resolute campus atmosphere for international students. Their approach includes tactics that can be taken by any university or community college to assess their strengths and build on those in a customized way to intentionally provide an inclusive campus for foreign students (Glass et al., 2015). Like other researchers (Lertora et al., 2017), Glass et al. (2015), contended that more qualitative research is needed in the area of international student support in order to achieve what they described as "amplifying student voices" (Glass et al., 2015, p. 4). Universities and colleges that intend to increase their international student population should commit to an all-encompassing campus internationalization plan that includes changes in policies, cross-campus services, and initiatives to create a fundamentally positive environment that fosters the academic and cultural success of foreign students (Glass et al., 2015).

Mesidor and Sly (2016) concurred that customized, competent support for academic and cultural adjustment on campus is a significant key to success for typical international students who experience symptoms such as anxiety and depression as they navigate new cultural and academic expectations. Gautam, Lowery, Mays, and Durant (2016) also found language barriers to be particularly challenging to international students, as well as financial acumen.

Glass et al. (2015) recognized the complexity of impacting foreign student lives as international educators. A campus has many competing priorities and agendas across departments and throughout leadership (Glass et al., 2015). Thus, professionals need to navigate this multifaceted landscape in a strategic manner, aligning the international population's priorities with those of the institution (Glass et al., 2015). While many institutions are strategically focused on internationalization of the campus, many of these initiatives do not include increased resources for the international student population

(Glass et al., 2015). International student educators, then, must parallel their strategic goals with those of the overall institution, using the same language, and building on already articulated priorities to gain support across campus (Glass et al., 2015). Additionally, while orientation programs should focus on academic adjustment to the classroom in the United States, Glass et al. (2015) contended that faculty should also be the focus of training, with the goals of understanding their international students' culture and learning styles. Institutions should also diversify the type of data they collect on international students, to provide empirical support for changes in student services (Glass et al., 2015). Decisions need to have data to support them in various areas of the international student experience, including the varied backgrounds from academic preparation to financial resources of the individual international student (Glass et al., 2015). However, the authors caution that data must include qualitative stories of student experiences to provide impact on decision makers (Glass et al., 2015). Glass et al. (2015) concurred with aforementioned studies that collaboration across campus is the key to providing comprehensive support for international students, as well as advocacy as needed. The authors advised in their final chapter,

> Partnerships are necessary when multiple offices must coordinate to give voice to issues that are critical to international student well-being and success. Strong social networks built on trust and mutual support with administrators, faculty, and student groups across campus generate social capital that international students can draw on should they need to make their voices heard on a particular issue or act in their own best interest. (Glass et al., 2105, p. 109)

Glass et al. (2015) provided a final important best practice in their publication—to develop services around the voices of the international student. International students should be fundamentally involved on campus and be empowered to advocate on their own behalf (Glass et al., 2015).

Arab Student Adjustment

There is a deficiency of research in the area of Arab international student adjustment. The implications for more research are far reaching, as the Arab population is growing in the higher education institutions around the United States. Additionally, some studies show that students from the Middle East, North Africa (MENA) region demonstrate higher rates of acculturative stress than other international groups (Bai, 2016). Students from the MENA region account for 9% of the international students in the United States, second only to Asia (Farrugia et al., 2017). The subject of Arab student adjustment is recognized in historical literature. Meleis (1982) recognized several structural differences in educational systems that presented challenges to the Arab exchange student. A US education has been coveted "by the majority [of Arab students and], to achieve a Western degree epitomizes the dream of many" (Meleis, 1982, p. 439). He further analyzed cultural orientations such as the tendency for the spoken word and verbal explanation over the expectation of written assignments and the orientation to time, which has been difficult for many exchange students overall (Meleis, 1982).

More recently, Bai (2016) examined how support networks relate to acculturation stress in international students. The findings indicated that comprehensive support across campus was the largest predictor of cultural adjustment (Bai, 2016). Bai asserted that the campus environment is a "small society" with notable influence on the overarching adjustment of students (p. 102). Significant among the findings are the increased rates of acculturation stress among students from the MENA region, as this group showed the highest stress in the study (Bai, 2016). According to Bai, this result is atypical, as many previous studies have findings that indicate Asian students struggle the most as a group due to cultural differences and challenges with language. Bai indicated that this may be

due to a lack of research into the etiology of cultural stress for African and Middle Eastern groups. While students from other regions experienced notable stress related to their host culture, MENA students overwhelmingly demonstrated stress related to acculturation (Bai, 2016).

One study found a correlation between acculturative stress and religious affiliation, stereotypes experienced by Arab international students, and remarkable cultural differences (Abunab, Dator, Salvador, & Lacanaria, 2017). The authors concluded that Arab students' interaction with American peers through extracurricular activities led to increased cultural adjustment (Abunab et al., 2017). Rabia (2016) found that pre-departure support, such as familiarity with Western cultures and academic expectations, eases Arab students' culture shock and adjustment in the United States. Further, Rabia (2016) found that fluency in the host language aids in adjustment to the host culture and suggested that every effort should be made to becoming fluent in English before arriving in the United States. Through a qualitative study that focused on Arab student adjustment and included a number of Iraqi participants, Rabia and Karkouti (2017) posited that extracurricular activities; support from family, friends, and on campus networks such as faculty; and student support services were directly related to the building of persistence in academics and success toward degree completion.

Iraqi Refugees

The struggles and successes of Iraqi *refugees* (as opposed to exchange students on a student visa) are beginning to emerge in the literature (Hollands, 2012; Jamil et al., 2007; Nelson, Hess & Isakson, Goodkind, 2016). While this study focused on J-1 exchange students rather than refugees, they may have had similar experiences in their home country; therefore, the following section includes a brief review of the literature surrounding the subject of Iraqi refugees.

The refugee experience differs in many respects from the experiences of exchange students in terms of economic, social, and cultural challenges. Exchange students are recruited to attend university degree programs, and this is their reason for coming to this country as non-immigrants. Refugees have fled their country to immigrate to the United States, many of them being unable to pursue higher education. There is a large gap in the literature pertaining to the lived experiences of Iraqi students on a J-1 or F-1 student visa. In general, international students arrive in the United States as non-immigrants with the purpose of studying and performing academically. They do not often have the ability to attend a school with a large population from their home country, whereas refugees tend to be grouped closer together with those who mirror their culture. Thus, "international students experience the process of adapting to life in the United States differently from immigrant groups, particularly with regards to the higher rates of marginalization and levels of acculturative stress" (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015, p. 7). The factors unique to the international student experience are isolation from family and home community, temporary visa restrictions, and the expectation of demonstrating cultural adjustment and academic excellence shortly after arrival (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

Many Iraqi citizens have been displaced, and have moved to locations within the Middle East, and a significant quantity has also resettled in the United States While the government grants about three months of financial aid to families who immigrate to the United States in refugee status; subsequent living expenses are the responsibility of the family (Nelson et al., 2015). The plight of an Iraqi refugee is often very challenging, with unexpected economic and social challenges at every phase of relocation. The temporary financial assistance that is offered is usually below the poverty line (Masterson, 2010).

Jamil et al. (2007) concurred that while many Iraqi refugees present with post-traumatic stress symptoms such as depression and anxiety, culturally-sensitive treatment and assessment can help clinicians develop appropriate treatment plans. Additionally, the authors recognized the ability of some trauma survivors to develop resiliency in the face of adversity by overcoming a multitude of obstacles related to educational advancement and career success (Jamil et al., 2007).

Salman and Resick (2015) focused on the unique needs and challenges of Iraqi refugee women and asserted that as many as 4.5 million Iraqis have fled the country due to the violent conditions in Baghdad and other cities, resulting in one of the worst refugee disasters in history of the MENA region. In this qualitative study, many Iraqi refugee women reported poor mental health statuses, including anxiety and depression, after their relocation to the United States (Salman & Resick, 2015). The authors agreed with previous studies that mental health professionals need to adapt to treating patients in a holistic manner by recognizing their violent history and cultural struggles (Selman & Resick, 2015).

A selection of recent dissertations has focused on the educational experiences of refugees in the United States (Al-Mandwee, 2015; Hollands, 2012; Patnaik, 2014). As Patnaik (2014) pointed out, "There is a paucity of research on the specific experiences of Iraqi refugee students in higher education" (p. iv). There is a scarcity especially of higher education research on J-1 or F-1 exchange students from Iraq. However, the experiences of various refugee students are demonstrated in the literature, as outlined in this section. The authors (Al-Mandwee, 2015; Hollands, 2012; Patnaik, 2014) concurred that research should be used to educate and contribute to on-campus administrations' quality of welcome and orientation programs.

Though the experiences upon arrival to the United States may be different, both refugees and exchange students have experienced violence in their home country of Iraq. This aspect of their lived reality has emerged in some sources (Jamil et al., 2007). With a goal of gaining insight into the health care needs of Iraqi refugees, Jamil et al. (2007) found that many refugees seeking mental health care suffered from PTSD, depression, and anxiety. Using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, 4th Edition or DSM-IV as a measure, the authors contended that men and women presented with verifiable symptoms of the aforementioned disorders. The DSM-IV is used by mental health professionals to diagnose and treat mood, and other disorders (Mallegg, 2012).

Social Capital

Related to the theoretical framework of hope theory, presented later in this chapter, are the elements of social capital in education. Social capital includes the notions of trust and safety in the campus environment, which have been found to have an impact on undergraduate student performance (Oranye, Ezeah, & Ahmad, 2017). While various definitions exist regarding the impact of social capital on higher education ambitions, Fuller (2014) recognized the foundational element of trust in social capital:

> Trust, particularly institutional trust, appears to be important because it facilitates a student's willingness to accept the legitimacy of the educational system in terms of determining future lives but also because it fosters a willingness to become actively involved with the school. (Fuller, 2014, p. 143).

In another study of minority, underrepresented students, the authors found that providing support for the development of social capital has a positive effect on the learning environment (Ovink & Veazey, 2011). Through a case study of a university intervention program, Ovink and Veazy (2011), explored formal, intentional methods that aided in building social and cultural capital, and a sense of community for minority students in the sciences. These methods included customized guidance programs and

personalized intervention programs, as well as structured peer interaction (Ovink &
Veazey, 2011). Alumni of the program cited these methods as having an overarching,
positive impact on their journeys toward graduation and eventual career aspirations
(Ovink & Veasey, 2011).

Some proponents of social capital include knowledge of language and culture as
elements of social networks that help international students to adjust to their
environments (Glass et al., 2015). The authors further contented that fostering sources of
social capital is part of the responsibility included in internationalizing a campus to
assure student success (Glass et al., 2015).

A recent study expanded on the concept of building social capital and resilience in
under-developed countries that have experienced tragedy or disaster (Cai, 2017). Cai
(2017) contended that with the advent of social media and photovoice, less-developed
countries are empowered to demonstrate the reality of local situations to the rest of the
world. The results can be "bridging" across cultures, transcending borders to build
support networks and foster resiliency for communities in need (Cai, 2017). Acosta
(2014) contended that Twitter in particular can aid people on a global basis to connect
with each other to build networks and create social capital. Drawing on data from several
higher education experts, Acosta concluded that social media involvement has the
potential to engage students, and encourage them to participate in campus activities.

Safety

Studies have similar findings regarding the significance of safety (Lee, Kim &
Madyun, 2018; McCarthy, 2016; Milam, Furr-Holden & Leaf, 2010; Zhang et al., 2016).
In a longitudinal study of immigrant adolescents in the US public schools, Lee et al.,
(2018) explored the etiology of immigrant academic under-performance. They
hypothesized that the belief that school provides an unsafe milieu, coupled with lower

confidence in educational expectations, have a negative impact on immigrant students' academic performance (Lee et al., 2018). Their research strongly demonstrated that the perception of school safety is directly related to academic performance (Lee et al., 2018). Other elements that contributed to negative academic performance were discrimination in social and academic networks, and influence from underachieving peers (Lee et al., 2018).

Studies also have focused specifically on community and school violence, and the relationship to perceived safety and academic performance (Milam et al., 2010). The objective assessments of neighborhood violence included specific measures of severe vehemence including "blood in the street, the presence of shell casings, police tape, memorials, people yelling, people swearing, and people fighting" (Milam et al., 2010, p. 460). Perceived safety in the community and in school was strongly correlated with academic performance in this study (Milam et al., 2010). School safety specifically has also been correlated with the development of positive self-esteem (Zhang, et al., 2016).

McCarthy (2016) outlined best practices in cultivating a safe environment for international students on campus, including pre-travel information sessions, and covering the topic at orientations. Further, McCarthy suggested that student affairs and other on-campus professionals work with international students to understand and mitigate risk, learn about differing laws and regulations, as well as anticipating challenges and offering solutions in certain high-risk areas.

Resiliency

While there is a gap in the literature regarding the specific Iraqi experience with resiliency demonstrated in the US classroom, there are studies focusing on youth and their ability to excel after traumatic events (Arastaman & Balci, 2013; Aviles de Bradley, 2011; DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; Grover, 2005; Luster, Qin, Bates, Rana & Lee, 2010).

Aviles de Bradley (2011) found that even the smallest sense of inclusiveness or act of kindness on the part of a teacher often fostered resiliency in terms of school performance. Children, then, often become resilient through support of stable and well-meaning adults. However, Grover (2005) warned that one should not overlook the potential of children to serve as advocates for their own resiliency and that of other children.

Grover (2005) asserted that children whose lives are touched by violence are often rightly seen as victims by the greater world but argued that simultaneous attention should be given to their potential as change agents, even activists. A new focus area in research, the idea of a child advocating for others and promoting resiliency was the focus of Grover's study. Grover addressed the question of why some children demonstrate incredible resiliency, while others from similar backgrounds, do not. Her major concluding factor is that these examples of resilience are fostered by "the impetus to advocacy" (Grover, 2005, p. 534), suggesting that adversity in some youngster's lives leads to advocating on the behalf of others. This finding may explain some factors relating to global resilience with respect to youth.

Some important studies focused on the adaptation of youth and demonstrated resiliency in international situations (Arastaman & Balci, 2013; Bates et al., 2010). In a study that focused on the resilience of secondary students in Turkey, Arastaman and Balci (2013) concluded that there were correlations between overcoming adversity and the support of family. Bates et al. (2010) concurred that family support networks and international connections with kin contributed to the successful adaption of Sudanese minors that relocated to the United States, and ultimately performed well in school, demonstrated positive acculturation traits. These studies lent credence to the idea that formal and informal support networks promote resiliency.

Resiliency in International Students

        The notion of resiliency in the area of international student research is present to a limited degree in the literature (Khawaja, Moisuc & Ramirez, 2014; Wang, 2009). Wang (2009) contended that elements of resiliency can serve as predictors of how well international students handle change, most specifically regarding adjustment to an international campus. Thus, identifying these characteristics is essential in understanding and supporting international student adjustment (Wang, 2009). The author found a correlation between resilience attributes and adjustment in the host culture, concluding that "resilience characteristics gauge one's ability to cope with change" (Wang, 2009, p. 38). Given these results, developing measures of resilience, and subsequent tools to build resilience in the international student population is recommended (Wang, 2009).

        While acculturation scales have been developed, and studied, they are not as commonly used in international student research and advising (Khawaja et al., 2014). In their study of culturally and linguistically diverse individuals in Australia and other Western societies, Khawaja et al. (2014) contended that that resilience scales can aid in determining the needs of this population. The authors developed a scale that measures the etiology of resiliency factors, including problem-solving skills, coping mechanisms, and solving multicultural challenges (Khawaja et al., 2014). They further contended that this measurement tool closes a gap in the literature by focusing on the *positive* adjustment process of culturally diverse individuals, and the attributes that build resiliency, which can subsequently be used by international and counseling offices on campuses to assess the progress of cultural adjustment (Khawaja et al., 2014). Khawaja, Ibrahim, and Schweitzer (2017) used this scale, the Acculturation and Resilience Scale (AARS), to measure the adjustment history of migrants and refugee students in Australian High

Schools. The authors concluded that resilience plays a faciliatory role between cultural adjustment and mental well-being (Khawaja et al., 2017). A significant conclusion of this study is the assertion that resilience can be fostered through expert support (Khawaja et al., 2017).

As a best practice, universities should change their lens from seeking to understand the "vulnerabilities" of international students to working on building on their "resilience and strength" (Glass et al., 2015, p.84). Glass et al. (2015) contended that creating a sense of welcoming and *belonging* on campus is related to building resilience and capacity building, explaining, "a strengths-based approach emphasizes the individual and group resilience of international students on campus" (Glass et al., 2015, p. 85). Glass et al. (2015) concluded that many researchers focus on the negative struggles, rather than the positive growth students experience through acculturation.

PTSD and Resiliency

The applicability of traumatic impact varies by individuals and situations. In the case of terrorism, a multitude of populations are affected, from the victims who live in the area to first responders, veterans, and witnesses (Steed, 2016). The effects are impactful and overarching, affecting all aspects of people's lives, resulting in anxiety, dread, and in some cases, unexpected positive outlooks (Morland, Butler, & Leskin, 2008).

As demonstrated previously, traumatic experiences with terrorism and immigration have resulted in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety in many Iraqi citizens (Jamil et al., 2007; Salman & Resick, 2015). While this reaction is quite common amongst those who have experienced trauma, specifically from terrorism, there are individuals who demonstrate resiliency in the face of adversity (Morland et al., 2008). Though historically, the studies of post-traumatic event periods

have focused on healing and recovery, studies of adjustment are starting to examine resilience, hope, and success as results rather than pain and failure (Morland et al., 2008).

There are certain misconceptions regarding the impact of a history with terroristic experiences, which include an assumption that PTSD might dominate one's life in a negative way. In reality, there is a continuum of reactions from shock and depression, to hope and resiliency (Morland et al., 2008). It is important for the psychological community to understand the sources of these results so therapists can work on building resiliency in treatment (Morland et. al., 2008). Morland et al. (2008) contended that research is trending toward studying groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in research—the groups that show resiliency in the post-event period. Those that fit into this category have been historically under-researched because they often do not seek counseling or clinical psychological help as frequently as those that experience impairment in functioning, which have often been the focus of clinical research (Morland et al., 2008). This follows the new focus of many psychological trends, a movement toward positive psychology and researching how to foster enlightening, functional outcomes after trauma (Joseph & Linley, 2008). Researchers are beginning to focus on the fact that some victims of violence uncover new meaning in their lives post-trauma (Morland et al., 2008). It is important to note positive and negative changes may simultaneously affect the victim, but there are clinical suggestions for fostering resilience after trauma (Morland et al., 2008). Trained clinicians can help patients identify strengths, learn to develop a positive outlook, along with hope, and build on existing coping strategies to challenge the stress in their lives (Morland et al., 2008).

Vasquez, Perez-Sales, and Hervas (2008) contended that the negative effects of PTSD are well-represented in research, including depression, hopelessness, and anxiety about the future. However, a new focus of research is beginning to recognize that through

individual experiences, there is a resiliency learned, perhaps, by adaptation to adversity in a post-traumatic period (Vasquez et al., 2008). A thematic effect of terrorism is a change in world view (Vasquez et al., 2008). One theory represented by the authors suggested that when a schema about the ideal world is shattered, one becomes more adaptable at rebuilding a new worldview, and hope for success in the future (Vasquez et al., 2008). They posited that much more research is needed in the area of positive, unexpected outcomes in order to foster positive coping mechanisms in counseling and other support areas (Vasquez et al., 2008). Regarding group resiliency, the authors postulated that the sharing in tragedy often builds patriotic views, and a strong sense of historical pride and purpose (Vasquez et al., 2008). These positive reactions and thoughts coexist with the negative, both on a community and individual level (Vasquez et.al, 2008). This leads into the theoretical frameworks for this study, covered in the next section.

Theoretical Frameworks

Research on resiliency in times of terrorism serves as an introduction to the theoretical framework of this study. The data collected in this study were evaluated in part through the lens of a relatively new theory proposed by Joseph and Linley (2005) titled the organismic valuing theory of growth through adversity. The theory includes the organismic valuing process (OVP), which refers to the intuitive ability of humans to prioritize and determine what inspires and fulfills them (Joseph & Linley, 2006). In the organismic valuing theory, there are three possible outcomes following a traumatic event in one's life. The authors described the tenets of the theory, explaining,

> First experiences are assimilated, leading to a return to the pre-trauma baseline, but also leaving the person vulnerable to future retramautization . . . second, experiences are accommodated in a negative direction, leading to psychopathology, such as borderline personality problems, depression, and helplessness. Third, experiences are accommodated in a positive direction,

31

leading to growth (e.g., living in the moment, valuing relationships and appreciating life (Joseph & Linley, 2008, p.13-14).

A second theoretical framework that is relevant to this dissertation is "hope theory." The tenets of the theory are based on the notion that goals are attained through two fundamental aspects: agency and pathways (Snyder et el.,1991). *Agency* refers to the internal resolve to reach goals, while *pathways* refers to the ability to create plans for reaching those goals (Snyder et al., 1991). Thus, hope is related to determination and foresight in planning, and subsequently reaching, goals (Snyder et al., 1991). A more pervasive sense of hope is positively correlated with higher academic achievement and psychological adjustment (Snyder, 2002). Bernardo (2010) elaborated upon hope theory to include both the elements of internal motivation and external agents that influence the concept of hope. External social support from family, friends, and a higher power were also found to be related to a sense of hope (Bernardo, 2010). In relation to international students, hope has been correlated with increased "career decision self-efficacy (CDSE)" (In, 2016, p. 526). Additionally, Bybell, Jackson, and Ray (2013) examined the relationship of the elements of hope and optimism, and depressive reactions in international students. Their results unequivocally supported the correlation between hope and optimism with positive acculturative reactions (Bybell et al., 2013).

Summary

Though Iraq once boasted a progressive education structure, instability and conflict have had a negative impact on both the K-12 and higher education communities in the country (Jawad & Al-Assaf, 2014; UNICEF, 2017). With increasing numbers of international students, including Iraqis, entering the United States, the higher education community should prepare to welcome and provide support to the increasingly diverse sojourner population on campuses throughout the country. From inter-departmental

support on campus through building resilience, there needs to be more research into the impact of support for international students in the United States.

Research regarding Iraqi refugee experiences and their backgrounds are emerging in the literature, but the lived reality of J-1 or F-1 exchange students is limited in published research. There are many factors to consider, including the aforementioned theoretical frameworks when explaining why some J-1 and F-1 exchange students demonstrate academic excellence and leadership on campus.

This study explored the experiences of the Iraqi exchange population through research into the etiology of their cultural, academic, and social adjustment. As noted in Chapter I, 1,727 Iraqi exchange students are currently pursuing higher education in the United States (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2015). As new generations of young Iraqis have been welcomed into the US higher education system, it has been critical to understand their backgrounds to help them succeed in the future.

CHAPTER III:

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the adjustment processes of undergraduate Iraqi exchange students in the United States through in-depth interviews. The following research questions were central to the study:

1. What factors contributed to Iraqi undergraduate students' abilities to adjust culturally, socially, and academically to life in the United States?

   a. How did Iraqi undergraduate students' educational experiences in Iraq prepare them for their college educations in the U.S.?

   b. What support systems did Iraqi undergraduate students utilize to assist with their adjustment?

This qualitative study may add to the literature by demonstrating to international educators how to aid exchange students from Iraq in adjusting to life in the United States. Though students may seem to adjust well, their backgrounds touched by violence have the potential to affect all areas of their lives. There is a lack of literature exploring the adjustment of Iraqi undergraduate students studying in the United States.

This study may help to fill this gap in the literature by qualitatively examining the experiences of the Iraqi exchange students that attended a large university in Texas. As a compliment to the student interviews, I explored various other points of view, including those from the international sponsored student office on campus, and advisors from the non-profit organization that administered the scholarship. This chapter addresses the research design, site and participant information, data collection, and analysis as well as a summary.

Research Design

This study utilized a multiple case study approach. The specificity of multiple case studies with a high level of detail allows educators the opportunity to capture a glimpse of real-life resiliency and the support networks that buoyed positive cultural and academic development for Iraqi undergraduate students. The case study research method has often been the most appropriate choice to contribute to the knowledge surrounding certain phenomena (Yin, 2014). The purpose of this qualitative design study had been to uncover cultural, academic, and social factors affecting Iraqi exchange student participant adjustment to U.S. social, cultural and academic environments.

The researcher gathered data through semi-structured interviews of Iraqi undergraduate students, staff from the international student office on campus, as well as advisors from the non-profit administering agency that supported the academic and cultural adjustment of the participants. Student interviews focused on the subjective academic, cultural, and social experience of each student. The target number was initially 8 to 10 undergraduate Iraqi students, either current or former alumni of the campus. Due to the sensitive nature of the dissertation topic, many prospective participants expressed hesitation to participate. The final number of student participants was seven. The researcher conducted interviews via video conference. Additionally, the researcher interviewed the staff involved with the orientation and academic guidance of the students during a site visit to the university in August 2017. These interviews focused on support networks built and encouraged by the university as well as prior knowledge specific to Iraqi undergraduate student challenges. Additionally, the researcher interviewed the advisors from the non-profit that administered the scholarship program, some in person, some by video conference. These interviews also focused on the cultural, academic, and social adjustment of the Iraqi undergraduate students.

Site and Participant Selection

The researcher identified a large university in Texas with over 50,000 students currently enrolled and a history of successful undergraduate students from Iraq. The researcher identified the participants of this study through purposive sampling at the university where the research was conducted. The researcher solicited study participants from alumni groups and current students who were between the ages of 18 and 28 and from any major Iraqi city. Coincidentally, all volunteer participants were from the same Iraqi exchange program. While each participant's experiences had been unique and critical, all were undergraduates and had entered the United States on a J-1 non-immigrant visa to study at the host university in an undergraduate program and had demonstrated academic excellence. In this study, academic excellence has been defined by a 3.0 or greater GPA. Students could be female or male, though the researcher sought a sample with a diversity of gender. The sample was comprised of seven students who have studied at the host university. The other participants were six staff who in the international office of the university in Texas. Based on the information gathered in the structured interviews with students, the author expanded the study to include three advisors from the non-profit that administered the Iraqi undergraduate scholarship to add perspective on the student participant experience and deepen the data collected on this topic.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to collecting data, the researcher received approval from the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Houston-Clear Lake as well as the IRB from the university in south-central Texas. Once approvals were granted, initial contact with the university was initiated, with the intent to explain the study, the potential benefits and the design, as well as the confidentiality intent of the study. The Director of

the International Office had been the first point of contact and was central to identifying the participants. She sent out an email to over 30 possible participants, explaining the nature of this study and asking volunteers to contact the researcher if interested. Once potential participants had been identified, the researcher recruited the students to remove any potential feelings of coercion they may experience if they were contacted by university staff.

Interviews

Prior to conducting interviews with the staff, students and faculty, the researcher had created a customized set of questions to guide the interviews, which were reviewed by a qualitative researcher and several content area experts (see Appendices B and C). Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher had collected, via recorded conversations, information regarding the academic history of the student in his or her home country, the perception of cultural and academic adjustment in the United States, and pre-departure exposure to culture of the United States. It was important to get the students' perspectives on their own success and the etiology of their intrinsic motivation. Additionally, the participants were asked about their major sources of support, including social networks. The topics covered included history of secondary school experience in Baghdad, factors contributing to adjustment in the United States, and pre-exposure to US culture and its impact on in-country adjustment. Additional topics explored included the level of involvement on campus, and the unique academic preparation provided by the Special School in Baghdad. Each session lasted approximately 1 to 2 hours per student and took place via the video platform "appear.in" online. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Staff interviews were also audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and occurred on campus in the international

37

office. The advisors from the non-profit administering agency were interviewed in person and by videoconference, lasting from 45 minutes to 1 hour. The inclusion of advisors and staff perceptions of factors contributing to Iraqi undergraduate exchange students' success has identified additional ways to support future Iraqi undergraduate students. The topics explored with the advisors at the university and the non-profit included factors contributing to adjustment such as support across campus and collaboration between campus networks/ non-profit administrators, grit and determination, and stringent selection factors.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data from interviews were carefully transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes. Once each interview was transcribed, the researcher had coded developing motifs, using a combination of a priori and emergent codes, and organized these critical themes into categories related to the research questions. The coding yielded major themes surrounding the social, academic, and cultural adjustment of the interviewees and the advisors who are responsible for aiding in the adjustment of the students. As there were multiple single participant interviews, the researcher had coded each individual transcript first, and then looked for commonalities across content. Themes varied based on the group of participants, which included students, advisors and leaders on campus, and advisors from the non-profit administrators. Once the themes solidified, the researcher had organized the data in a meaningful way for further analysis, including the relation of the data to the research questions. The inquiries into the cultural, social, and academic adjustment themes related to the students' experiences.

Validity

As an international educator, the researcher had required specific feedback and tutoring on reducing bias and maintaining an objective stance when conducting research.

The interview questions were carefully edited and reviewed by the committee members to reduce bias and increase the open-ended nature of the inquiries.

The researcher maintained an impartial affect while interviewing participants as much as possible to reduce personal bias. She also used member checking with students regarding the interview transcripts to ensure accuracy. Throughout the process of analyzing data, she had worked very closely with peers familiar with her background and opinions to ensure results were written in an objective manner. Throughout the theme analysis, the researcher had worked very closely with her Chair to remove biased language and hone in on objective techniques in analyzing data that would minimize bias. The researcher recognized that as a former advisor of Iraqi students, some bias would be inherent in her research pursuits and thus had practiced some critical self-exploration while analyzing data. In addition to receiving guidance from my Chair regarding objective data analysis, she had practiced "reflexivity" or self-reflection in my tendencies to editorialize or add biased language during data analysis (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Though bias is inherent to some degree, the researcher minimized it as much as possible through these techniques.

Privacy and Ethical Considerations

Prior to collecting data, the researcher had received CPHS approval from the University of Houston-Clear Lake as well as the IRB from the university in South-Central Texas. Once approvals were granted, initial contact with the university was initiated, with the intent to explain the study, the potential benefits, and the design, as well as the confidentiality intent of the study. The Director of the International Office was the first point of contact and was central to identifying the participants. Once potential participants had been identified, the researcher had recruited the students to remove any potential feelings of coercion they may experience if they were contacted by

university staff. The researcher shared an approved informed consent form and carefully explained the nature of the research to be conducted to all students, university personnel, and advisors from the non-profit that administered the scholarship on which the students came to the United States.

In order to protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were chosen for all interviewees, the university they attended in the US, the scholarship program they participated in, and the high school in Baghdad they attended. For safety reasons, the researcher had chosen non-Arab pseudonyms for the students as an extra layer of protection.

The researcher has stored the printed transcript copies in a locked file cabinet at home and have saved all electronic files on a cloud drive, which is password protected. The researcher will retain copies of all qualitative data for five years, after which all data will be destroyed.

Research Design Limitations

The research design presented several challenges and overarching limitations. While the researcher conducted in-depth interviews the participants, the Iraqi student sample size was very small (N=7) and was not randomly selected. This limits generalization of the findings, as they were also drawn from one university. Additionally, the participants were hesitant to share some information because of safety concerns, as the majority of their families reside in Baghdad. The emotional intensity of the topic also restricted participation and the disclosure of information throughout the interviews. As she had had direct experience with the participant experience, the researcher's bias was recognized by her and the dissertation committee. The researcher took several cautionary measures including the use of semi-structured interview questions with careful probing,

member checking, and frequent check-ins with the Chair of the committee. Overall, the findings are limited but potentially significant in many ways.

Summary

This qualitative, exploratory case study probed into the academic, cultural, and social lives of a very specific population; Iraqi students who arrived in the United States to study on a J-1 student visa. The intent of the study was to define the factors that contributed to the academic, social, and cultural adjustment of this particular group.

CHAPTER IV:

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors leading to academic, social, and cultural adjustment of seven Iraqi international graduate students. This chapter presents the thematic results of the data analysis for this study, as well as participant profiles outlining the pre-exchange experiences of the student participants. The researcher extracted the emergent themes by virtue of qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts. Interviews were conducted using structured questions for the student participants, the university staff, and the former non-profit advisors. The interviews explored the following research questions:

1. What factors contributed to Iraqi undergraduate students' abilities to adjust culturally, socially, and academically to life in the United States?

   a. How did Iraqi undergraduate students' educational experiences in Iraq prepare them for their college educations in the U.S.?

   b. What support systems did Iraqi undergraduate students utilize to assist with their adjustment?

The results were presented thematically subsequent to the Student Profiles. Several themes and sub-themes emerged through copious qualitative coding and analysis. The major common themes included Pre-Exposure to the United States Culture, Academic Preparedness and Natural Aptitude, Support Networks, and many sub-motifs related the overarching theme of Factors Leading to Adaptation.

Introduction to Themes

The seven student participants were part of a small scholarship program, funded by a large international company that offered a generous exchange opportunity as part of their goals to contribute to the recovery of Iraq after the decades of conflict the country

42

experienced. The company contracted a non-profit global scholarship company to administer the program on their behalf. As the philanthropic initiative represented one of the first of its kind in the post-2003 period when Iraq's American Embassies re-commenced issuing J-1 Exchange visas, there was not a precedent set for how students from Baghdad would adjust in a new academic and cultural environment.

According to the advisors at the non-profit agency that administered and designed the scholarship program, great care was taken to craft the program to be high-touch, with small caseloads, and a lot of personalized attention. The sponsoring company expressed concern that without customized attention, the students would struggle given the violence experienced in their past. The non-profit advisors explained in detail the structure of the program, which included pre-applicant advising, and a travel companion program. For many years, the advisors would travel to meet the scholarship students in Jordan or Turkey to accompany them through customs and immigration in the United States. They would also prepare the students for departure from Iraq, and for their visa interviews at the American Embassy.

Based on an explanation from advisors, the non-profit also provided extensive cultural, social, and academic pre-departure, and arrival orientations, which included such topics as Adjusting to the U.S. Classroom, Financial Acumen, Involvement on Campus and in the Local Community, and Cultural Adjustment Strategies. Advisors from the non-profit accompanied students to their respective campuses, and work with the international office at the university to plan semester campus visits. The visits included liaising with the students in their "space," as well as meetings with international student advisors, faculty, and academic affairs departments as necessary. University Counseling was an essential department, where students were often referred to address feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression from both university staff and non-profit advisors.

The student participants in this study were graduates of the Special School in Baghdad, a middle and secondary school for highly intelligent young individuals. At some point during their studies, they all learned of an opportunity to study in the United States through a scholarship program. The students in this study were selected to participate in the scholarship program and were admitted as undergraduates to a large university in Texas in various STEM fields. Great care was taken throughout this study to maintain the confidentiality of the study participants, the university, and the middle/secondary school in Baghdad; pseudonyms for participants and schools are used throughout this section.

Data regarding the Special School in Baghdad were provided by the participants, as the website is very limited, and only in Arabic. The researcher did solicit the assistance of two Arabic speakers from the MENA region, but neither was able to decipher the dialect on the website. Fred, a student participant, was able to provide some data regarding the Special School's goals and entry requirements. According to Fred, the school was founded in the 1990s. He provided further details regarding the mission of the program, stating:

> I don't recall exactly the official mission statement of the school, but I know it was advertised as a school for the mentally gifted students who are capable of digesting complex information compared to their peers of the same age, especially in the sciences. Therefore, with the sciences in focus, students were inevitably groomed to enter fields such as engineering, healthcare, and scientific research. I entered the school in the fall of 2001 as part of the fourth cohort, and as far as I know, no student from any of those first four graduating cohorts deviated from engineering or medicine.

Most of the content areas were instructed in English from the commencement of middle school through the completion of secondary school. Though the school was public, the entry requirements were very stringent, requiring multiple exams and a high

level of achievement in primary school. Students were vetted carefully and must have demonstrated a high level of talent throughout elementary school. As Fred described:

> Entry was contingent upon passing the IQ and sciences tests and then the interview. The entry process in my year was as follows: upon completing the 6th grade (the last grade of elementary education in Iraq), students could apply to take the [Special School] entry exam if they satisfied one or more of the following requirements: Having scored 100% on the final exams in both math and science in both 5th and 6th grades; Having scored as one of the top 5 students in the admission exams. If a student satisfied one or more of those requirements, they could take the written exam for the [Special School]. The written exam was mainly IQ and science questions. If a student passed the exam [cutoff unknown], they then qualified for an interview with a panel consisting of a college professor in chemistry, math, physics, biology, accompanied by a psychiatrist in the room who only observed the interactions. Again, the criteria for passing the interview were unknown. If one passed it, then they were offered admission into the [Special School]. The sciences were taught in English by college professors, and there were no electives (all students in the same cohort take the same classes). The curriculum in the 6th-9th grades included Math, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, English (these were all taught in English), Arabic, geography, history, physical education (all taught in Arabic).

Andrew explained preparation for college classes was due in part to the Special School in Baghdad, which had stringent selection criteria, including high intelligence quotient (IQ) testing. He and the other students shared that they felt prepared for the rigor of an undergraduate STEM program in the United States as a result of their academic experience at the Special School. Andrew elaborated on this point, explaining that the Special School only chose from certain high performing elementary schools in Baghdad:

> Among these schools, they pick the top ten people from each of these schools who like scored the highest in those admission tests, and then they give them another admission test to a gifted school . . . Kind of like a project to people who . . . Some students who are good enough to become something in the scientific field.

The Special School, according to Andrew and the other participants, was essentially an innovative concept, a "project" that included professors from local universities, instruction in English, and advanced math and science classes. Catherine, a

former advisor of the non-profit that administered the scholarship program noted that the scholarship students were graduates of a prestigious school with a rigorous curriculum, providing support for the students' descriptions of the school.

As evidenced in the following student participant profiles, the seven participants experienced violence throughout their middle school and secondary years at the Special School in Baghdad. The brief biographies include details of the unrest in the country of Iraq, the views of education in the family, and pre-exposure to the culture of the United States. Collectively, these factors are what prompted some of the students to consider an international trajectory. Many common thematic threads emerged upon full analysis of the data collected in the semi-structured interviews. The ensuing themes explore the factors that contributed to the student participants' academic, social, and cultural adjustment to life in the United States.

<div align="center">

Participant Profile #1

"Maxwell"

</div>

As evidenced in the description of Maxwell's journey to the United States, he is not risk-averse. On the contrary, he imperiled his life many times in his pursuit of a quality education. Maxwell graduated from a university in Texas in 2012 with a bachelor's degree in Computer Systems Engineering. Below is a brief profile that commenced his story and provided context surrounding his level of family support, his experience with violence in his adolescent years in Baghdad, as well as the source of his motivation to study in the United States.

View of Education in the Family

Maxwell's parents were especially appreciative of transformational educational opportunities, as they were both first generation college students. Though his mother was not able to finish her bachelor's degree due to family obligations, his father did graduate

from college in Baghdad. Maxwell is the eldest of a total of three siblings, whom he has not seen for several years. His situation illustrates that education transcends socio-economics, especially when parents instill the value of education at a young age. Maxwell stated:

> Yeah, so since we were very young, I mean it was very obvious we all knew that we were going to go to college and graduate. In fact, we kind of all knew that we were going to take a shot at graduate school, too.

The family environment in which Maxwell lived also generated a curious optimism and hope for the future, with an understanding that education was the conduit to success. Maxwell's parents taught him and his siblings that education was the key to a brighter future, to a life better than their own. He explained their aspirations, which were instilled very early in their lives. Maxwell asserted:

> Yeah, so we were aiming for the stars, you know, since we were young. But it was first generation. Like my parents never really went to graduate school. My dad was the only one who finished his bachelor's. But to kind of show you how important it is, my mother, in her 50s, went back to school to finish her last year and graduated.

The children learned significantly from the educational experiences of their parents and understood the importance and potential impact of an education. As Maxwell spoke of his parents' hopes and dreams for him and his siblings, his raw emotion was palpable and his eyes grew shiny in remembrance. "So, school is the prize, and it's very important since we were kids," Maxwell commented.

Reasons to Study in the United States

A common theme throughout many of the participant biographies was a drive to not only study higher education in safety, but that seeking a degree outside of Iraq was the only option given the violence at home. This is discussed later in this chapter.

However, in Maxwell's situation, financial and family resources were a barrier to simply moving abroad, as college education in Iraq is tuition-free.

> Well, so I had a preference for the US but at that time I was desperate for opportunities to study abroad. Any. So, I was reaching out to the universities in a couple of countries in the UK, specifically and several in the US but kind of quickly became clear that with no money and my family was not happy to cover the studies abroad, that that was kind of a semi-impossible task. So instead I started, once I understood that, I kind of took a few months and obviously, language was not as good, so and then I did not really have a good understanding of how the educational system works abroad. I mean, you're aware in Iraq it's free?

Due to the tuition-free system in which he lived, Maxwell was unfamiliar with where to find resources for his journey abroad. He explained, "So that idea of having to pay for it and scholarships, the whole concept of scholarships is kind of very new to me." Despite his family's hesitation, Maxwell began to research the notion of scholarships and pushed forward, motivated to find opportunities outside of his country. The source of his family's hesitation was multi-fold and included a concern for the risks involved in study abroad, both for him and for his family at home. Maxwell recounted an especially difficult situation that strengthened his resolve to pursue opportunities abroad:

> In fact, in my junior year and in my senior year, that kind of late 2006 time, was kind of the height of Al Qaeda. I mean they had an assassination campaign where they were targeting intellectuals, professors, so I mean it was kind of clear that higher education bureaucracy was kind of collapsing. I mean I personally knew many professors that were assassinated, but many more, especially the big, well-known professors kind of chose to travel and flee the country.
> So, I started looking for opportunities abroad and that's kind of how I came across a [scholarship for Iraqi students] but then, even then, I still had to finish my senior year and that's when things were really, really bad …

As Maxwell continued with his story, his voice cracked a bit, suggesting strong emotions, as he remembered the difficulties of getting to school and the experience of losing instructors due to assassination campaigns targeting intellectuals. Despite the danger involved in his trek to school, he continued to attend and thrive academically.

Once he found an international scholarship opportunity that he qualified for, he described how he experienced a surge of hope:

> In Iraq, I mean you get into the school and if you get good grades, and being from my school I kind of had the upper hand, I was basically automatically admitted into all the universities in Iraq. So, that, having to figure out how to get into a school was a pretty complicated process and I had to figure out all the nuances and what everything means and that took some time. And I don't think I actually figured out the whole thing before I found the [scholarship] thing. But at that time, I was kind of hunting for scholarships left and right, so when I came on the [scholarship] program I was pretty excited and thrilled for it because it kind of laid out, it was like this here we'll take care of everything for you if you get accepted, right? So, I'm like, okay, that solves all my problems.

He continued to articulate his primary aspiration, stating, "My biggest goal was to pursue an education away from violence." This notion of safety was explored as a theme throughout this dissertation and was included in the other participant profiles as well. In addition to Maxwell, some of the other participants noted this as a significant reason for success in their educations abroad.

Experience with Violence in Middle School and High School in Baghdad

As evidenced in his words below, a stable education with consistent instruction was an impossibility for Maxwell. Yet, he continued to attend school, demonstrating an appreciation for the limited learning opportunities that he had. He took advantage of the time he did have at school to learn and focus on new material. Maxwell shared:

> One of the big challenges was that those professors stopped coming to school, so we would go to school and get like one or two lectures and then we'd just kind of hang out for most of the days because the teachers won't come. They don't want to risk their lives. I mean, we've seen many dead bodies on the way to school and what not, and we kind of came across a lot of fire fights on the way. We'd have to turn around and hide or literally dodge bullets sometimes and run back.

A typical day at the middle school/high school, as described by Maxwell, involved several logistical challenges, including a dangerous journey to school. Maxwell

was often stopped by militants along the way and asked for identification. As Maxwell recounted, the extremists were often targeting victims based on religious affiliation.

> A couple of us, I mean, there were some Christian students there and there were other students there from backgrounds that Al Qaeda targets and myself, I mean I was never religious, but my last name is the "wrong name," right, at that time.

Maxwell explained that militants could determine religious affiliation just by looking at a surname, which is why they routinely asked to see identification. He was not keen on explaining further why he might have been persecuted, as the memories seemed painful to him, so this was not pursued further. As a senior in high school, Maxwell persisted in his school journey with the hope that graduating would provide opportunities to escape the violence. The war surrounding his home and school continued to progress, yet he insisted on returning to school despite the traumatic atmosphere.

> They [Al-Queda] later killed the math teacher, I think, on one of the following days. But and then kind of what happened that day there were five of them and they [Al-Queda] were actually, most of them were pretty young. I mean they were just a couple of years older than us, so they briefly had the older students kind of against the wall and the teachers, well they kind of moved the younger students to one of the classrooms. So, we were kind of standing against the wall that day and I mean, I remember thinking, because we're not much younger than them, so we can't really get away as students, you know?

Maxwell did return home safely that day but not without further trauma in the days to come. He explained that violence continued to escalate throughout his senior year and yet he and his fellow students persisted in pursuing their high school diplomas. On the last day of school in 2007, Al-Qaida invaded their school:

> And then obviously, they [Al-Queda] were not very focused on us, they were occupying the school. I mean, our school is pretty rich, so I think they were looking for some money inside and looking around, so we decided to kind of run away. I mean, there is no telling how things would have gone if we had not, but I mean with a lot of luck and then some we made it out. So, that was a pretty traumatizing experience, obviously. So, that was the last day in high school.

Maxwell's depiction of his last day of high school is illustrative of his entire middle and high school experience. He explained that each day he experienced some risk in his pursuit of education in Iraq. Today, Maxwell lives in the United States, where he works as a Computer Engineer.

Participant Profile #2

"Theresa"

As a woman interested in engineering, Theresa has faced a lifetime of global challenges in pursuing this field of study. As she explained in her interview, she started medical school in Baghdad immediately following high school because for a female in Iraq, there is an uncertain future in civil engineering, a specialization that had fascinated her growing up. A high school graduate from The Special School in Baghdad, she recently graduated with a bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering from a university in Texas. Her journey commences below with details of her family's support for her education, reasons for choosing to study in the United States, and her portrayal of life in high school/middle school.

View of Education in the Family

When Theresa expressed her interest in studying in the United States and pursuing a scholarship, her parents initially responded negatively. Theresa explained her delay in applying for any scholarships:

> I did one year in college in Baghdad because my family were not okay with it [going abroad], especially my father. So, it kinda took some convincing and that was one of the risks. I didn't know how that's gonna affect my relationship with my family.

It was Theresa's mother and sister who eventually started to support the idea of pursuing a higher education in the United States. She explained that her father never really demonstrated support for her international education. Though it was a divisive

51

issue with her parents, Theresa gained the eventual support of her mother and sister, especially when she doubted herself. She explained:

> So, my mom was . . . Encouraged the whole thing. In the beginning, she had her doubts about it but then she fought for this to happen mostly. And before . . . Two days before I leave I started having second thoughts. I thought I wasn't able to do this and I didn't want to come. Last minute I wanted to change my mind and stay. My sister helped me a lot in encouraging me to come here. My oldest sister.

The same sister had a career in architecture, a field with similar challenges for females in Iraq as engineering. Ultimately, her sister's encouragement and the professional struggles Theresa witnessed inspired her to accept the scholarship and travel to the United States as an exchange student. She knew her future in engineering would be difficult in Iraq, stating:

> I saw my sister. She had great interest in architecture and she studied architecture. She was in architectural school but when she graduated she didn't . . . The job market was really bad especially for a woman there as an engineer. Right now, she has a job but she's just teaching. She couldn't find a job in the actual field. I would assume it would've probably been worse for civil engineering.

One year after her high school graduation and initial university year in the Baghdad college of medicine, Theresa heard of a scholarship for Iraqi undergraduate students to study in the United States. She pursued more information and was ultimately selected as a recipient. As evidenced in the next section, this aligned with her dream of pursuing higher education in the United States.

Reasons to Study in the United States

As mentioned earlier in her profile, Theresa wished to study civil engineering in college, a difficult field of study for women in Iraq. A common theme throughout her interview was the motivation to pursue a degree in a safe environment, with other females. She knew this dream was not easily attainable and that leaving home would be difficult, especially given her father's reluctance. She expressed:

And I didn't know how I'm going to handle . . . I knew that this was gonna be a whole different . . . Like my life is gonna change a lot when I go there, when I come here but I wanted that. I just pretty much couldn't stay there any longer. It was really difficult for me to do that. Especially, I had interest in engineering and I would not have been successful as an engineer back home. So, that was one of the biggest influences of why I wanted to come here.

She had heard of the scholarship through former classmates, who were also accepted into the program. This was not her first experience with the idea of study abroad. As a 16-year-old, she traveled to the United States for a month, which influenced her decision to pursue higher education in the United States after secondary school. Theresa's face lit up as she discussed the opportunity to study in the United States, expressing again how limited her choices were at home, "I probably would have had to go to med school if I'd stayed there." Soon after, Theresa learned that she was accepted into a Civil Engineering program at a university in Texas.

Experience with Violence in Middle School and High School in Baghdad

Theresa offered a glimpse back to her secondary school years, as she shared many similar experiences as other study participants. It was evident as she began to remember those years that talking about the violence was not easy for her. Stories surfaced regarding religious persecution and targeting of intellectuals in Baghdad at the time. Theresa shared:

So mostly I think the biggest disadvantage, I remember when I was 16, which . . . I was in the 10th grade. There was like . . . The civil war was almost at its worst. Actually, that was when I was in the ninth grade. It was at its worst, and we had a lot of Shia professors, and our school was in a Sunni neighborhood. So, a lot of our professors decided that they're not gonna . . . Because we have a couple of professors who actually got killed.

Already in an unstable environment outside of school, things began to get worse with the potential violence against the students and professors inside the school. Theresa explained that the absence of professors had an overarching impact on her academic ability into her undergraduate years. She stated:

53

So, a lot of the others found it as a huge risk to come and teach us so for almost half of a year, we did not have a Physics professor. And especially for . . . Which, of course, at that time we were a little bit happy about it because we get to have periods of doing nothing but then . . . When I made it into engineering school, that was something that would have really benefited more if I had that knowledge.

Theresa shifted her focus to the positive aspects of her school experience in Baghdad, which was related in part to the motivation of the students themselves. Many of the participants had mentioned teaching themselves English and other subjects on their own time. Theresa shared some vignettes of the intrinsic motivation she and her classmates shared. She provided the following example of their self-learning experience:

But I would say, generally, we did better than most other schools just because we had . . . Just because it was kind of unconventional how things were. They gave us . . . We had more autonomy, and we were good students to begin with so even though if we didn't have professors, a lot of us had the interest to study things on our own. We were about 10 girls in my class and 10 boys. We had really strong relationships between each other, and we had projects. We did projects on our own. We started a magazine, we also . . . For like one year we decided we were gonna try and speak English to each other just to improve our English so that also helped.

Theresa smiled as she told me more about the learning she experienced in her school, in what she termed "unconventional" methods. Her English professor, in particular, had a unique style of teaching in the classroom. Theresa explained enthusiastically:

She gave us a really good basis for English and love for English as well because she didn't do things conventionally. She didn't have us memorize things and kind of repeat things and that's it. She actually gave us books and articles. She really expanded our knowledge in the language and she made the class very enjoyable. She kind of taught in unconventional way. So, back there [In Iraq] I remember my sisters and my brother they had to memorize passages and have to write them down. That doesn't really teach you anything. But we had some really great professors and I think that helped a lot.

Theresa applied some of these unconventional methods to her time in her civil engineering program in Texas, where she successfully completed her Bachelor's. Though

54

she had not seen her family in some time, Theresa was hopeful that it would happen soon. She closed the interview with the mention of missing her family, though she was grateful for the international opportunity the scholarship provided her. Her passion was still palpable for her degree field of study, Civil Engineering, as demonstrated through the quotes presented above.

Participant Profile #3

"Fred"

Fred's story illuminated a significant journey through middle and high school in Baghdad, a strong desire to study abroad, and a highly supportive family of medical field experts that influenced his academic and professional choices. His story is an anomaly, in that he was the only participant to pursue medical school outside of Iraq. Fred's story includes details of his current situation in an American medical school. As evidenced below, his interest in medicine began at an early age.

View of Education in the Family

The son of a nurse and oncologist, Fred and his sister demonstrated natural aptitudes toward science and math early in their academic careers. Their parents had an inimitable view of the medical field, encouraging their children only to pursue it if they realized they had a passion for this area. Fred began to realize through a multitude of factors that he was truly interested in the medical field, and his dad would emphasize the importance of thinking for himself. Fred shared a conversation he had with his father on the topic:

> Even though I remember like every time I mentioned that to my dad he would be like, "You don't want to do it just because people tell you you want to do it. Or just because I did it, or because your sister did it, or because you think it's a prestigious thing to do. You have to do it because you actually care about it." Which was kind of interesting because I felt like some other families were doing the opposite. They were kind of pressuring their kids to go into the medical field.

But my dad kind of tried not to do that because he saw other families around us and even some of our relatives who had the exact opposite experience, where their families kind of pressured them to go into fields their kids didn't like. And their kids didn't end up being too happy.

Fred also explained that his parents maintained very high expectations regarding his academic performance as well as his sister's, regardless of the field of study they would ultimately pursue. High grades and educational excellence were expected throughout his early school years and continued through high school. As he explained below, his parents' careers also put pressure on him to succeed:

So, education was like the most important aspect of my upbringing. My father is an oncologist and my mom is a nurse. My oldest sister was also a doctor. So, it kind of set the bar that we all had to achieve some level of success academically. Yeah, and it was kind of expected that you have to rise to the occasion and even if you struggle, you're going to have to find a way to circumvent that. So, that was the emphasis. I remember in elementary school the systems may be a little different than here but my parents expected perfect grades on everything. So, I remember like once I had a nine, and that was kind of like, why would you have a nine out of ten? That's not acceptable, you should have always tens.

And so, kind of like that was ingrained in me early on. And so, after elementary school I did well, and then I was accepted into the [Special] school like the rest of my peers. And at the [Special] school, we were like a small cohort of students. It was only nine students—actually it was ten students and then after ninth grade we were nine. And it was just like a tight knit group, and we were all focused on succeeding academically and I was that, I don't know, that student that always focused on trying to do his best to succeed. And my family expected that of me all the time . . . And I expected it out of myself. Honestly, after seventh grade I remember I didn't do as well on one of the tests, and I remember going back home and I was a little unhappy and I was talking to my family, and my family was like, "It doesn't matter, that's just one test." And I was like, "No, if it's just one test then it's going to be a whole bunch of other tests." So, it was this nerd in me that always wanted to do really well.

Fred continued his academic success, as well as his pursuit of a medical career on an international basis. He graduated from the special school in 2007 and was awarded the international scholarship a year later. He majored in Biology/pre-med and earned a bachelor's degree in Texas within 4 years. Fred was currently in his last year of medical

56

school at a different university than his undergraduate alma mater. As evidenced below, there were many complex reasons Fred decided to study in the United States.

Reasons to Study in the United States

Fred is from a Christian family in Baghdad and shortly after his graduation from the special school, they had to emigrate to Syria for the safety of their family. Fred elaborated somewhat on this portion of his story, but it was obvious that speaking about the threat to his family made him uncomfortable. He elaborated, sharing many details:

> But then my family was basically threatened in Baghdad, and so we couldn't stay in Baghdad, we had to go to Damascus, which was safe at that point in 2007. And so basically, I was in Damascus, attending college there would be so expensive, so we couldn't afford that. So here I was, finished high school, and I did really well and I really worked really hard to do well, and then I'm not ended up studying anything. I'm just like slinked down. It was devastating. It was not a good feeling. So, I was really depressed for like a month or so and then I realized that I needed to move on, so I started studying for the TOEFL, took the SATs and studied some French at the French cultural center in Damascus, because I've always wanted to study French. And I volunteered, I worked as an interpreter for a local . . . It was a local architect company, an Arabic English interpreter, and then I was applying to different programs and different scholarships. I wasn't just going through scholarship programs, I was actually sometimes applying directly to like American colleges.

The dream of going abroad, of pursuing academics that had defined him for much of his childhood, was realized when he discovered the Iraq Scholarship for undergraduate students. Fred's studying and hard work had finally paid off since the Iraq Scholarship was based on academic merit and intellectual potential as evidenced by the TOEFL and SAT scores. As with the other participants, Fred experienced significant violence in his middle and high school years. His experience is outlined below.

Experience with Violence in Middle School and High School in Baghdad

As a child in a Christian family living in a predominately Muslim culture, Fred was especially targeted during his years of transport to school. Collectively, his years at

57

middle and high school provided incredible academic opportunity, while the violence

outside jeopardized his family and future every day. On the drive to school, he was

forced to hide his identity and his identification card to avoid persecution. His family

came up with a very complex route to school to maximize chances of safety. Fred

explained:

> So, after the war in 2003, of course Iraq started having all kinds of problems and
> it was incredibly unstable. And then on top of that, the sectarian violence started
> happening, so Shiite and Sunni started, or not all of them of course, that extremist
> Sunni and extremist Shiite militias started attacking each other. And my family's
> Catholic in the Middle East, and so we were part of the minority, which was even
> a worse place to be in then just be a Shiite or a Sunni in Iraq at that time because
> you don't have the militia to support you pretty much.
> . . . And the government is too weak to protect you. So, it was really
> tough. I remember, so we lived in a neighborhood where the majority of people
> were Shiites, and they were okay with us. And then I remember we'd have to go
> . . . So, the [Special School] was in a Sunni neighborhood, and I remember we
> had to drive from my place to the school, and we had kind of like a designated
> driver that would drive a whole bunch of us that lived close in the same
> neighborhood to school. And he would drop us off at the edge of the
> neighborhood of the school because he was a Shiite, so he couldn't go in.
> And then we would have a different driver that would come and pick us up
> from that point, and go through the school's neighborhood down to the school.
> And on the way sometimes we would get bombs, and I remember once the car
> window's glass actually shattered—that was scary.

Fred went on to explain that inside school proved to be somewhat frightening as

well. His perspective parallels that of many other participants, with accounts of invasions

and threats from militia. The appreciation of the educational opportunities strengthened

with the violence outside. He shared an especially difficult story which illustrated the

conditions in which he studied at school:

> I remember one day actually we were in school and it was with [a friend] and in
> the middle of a test we heard like some shots outside of the school. And I
> remember we just looked at each other, and the professor was like, "Go ahead,
> finish the test." Like this is normal, this is part of your life. And we did. When
> you have an hour and a half to finish a test, and then you want to finish a test,

you're like, okay, it's May in Iraq and it's super-hot, it's like 110 outside, there's no AC in the school because there was no electricity and we just heard shots outside. It's not a great environment to take a test in. But those moments, and I don't know what it is, but I think we just developed a new technique of, okay nothing else matters for now, I cannot control the outside, I cannot control the electricity. I cannot control the explosions. I cannot control the gun fires outside, so all I can do is focus on my test, try to do my best, and whatever happens, happens.

Throughout the interview, I felt that we were building a trusting rapport. This was demonstrated when Fred commenced disclosing the private details about why his family was threatened, and the aforementioned immigration to Syria. Fred was chosen to travel to the United States with a sponsored exchange program for 1 month during a break from school when he was 17. This was a secret in his family because as Fred explained, even the perception of Western sympathy can prove precarious. When Fred returned to Baghdad, his family was indirectly threatened by a neighbor. Fred revealed the details, saying,

And then I went back to Baghdad, and that situation of course wasn't safe, so my parents didn't tell any of our neighbors that I went to the United States. However, somehow the word got out. And I remember one of our neighbors came to my mom and she said, "Oh you should never send your kid to the US, he's going to get Westernized, he's going to become an infidel and all that stuff. I know."

The following morning, Fred, his parents, and sister fled Iraq for the safety of Damascus, seeking anonymity and new opportunities. As mentioned, they struggled, and Fred especially felt that perhaps his educational upbringing was minimized by the new challenges he faced. He began to consider studying in Damascus, but all of the programs were in Arabic, and he had learned mathematical and scientific methods and formulas in English. He continued to research opportunities and was accepted into the undergraduate scholarship program in 2008. Fred was currently a 4th-year medical school student in the southern United States.

Participant Profile #4

"Renee"

Renee's interview illuminated some unique perspectives on reasons to study abroad, family education views, and her experience with violence in middle school and high school. While many colleagues focused on safety and security in their pursuit of education in the United States, Renee's dream included a sense of equity. Threaded throughout her interview transcript was a desire to be rewarded for honesty and hard work, free from nepotism.

Renee graduated from a university in Texas with a bachelor's degree in Petroleum Engineering. She left Texas shortly thereafter, to pursue a career in financial planning on the west coast of the United States. This profile provides context surrounding her level of family support, her experience with violence in her adolescent years in Baghdad, as well as the source of Renee's motivation to study in the United States.

View of Education in the Family

Renee had an especially difficult time speaking of her family, as she noted a persistent sense of homesickness throughout her studies in the United States. She attributed her parents with a noble sense of unwavering support for her future. Renee identified her mom as a role model, stating:

> For family, it'd definitely be my mom, in that I really respect how strong she is and going through all the things that she's been through. Because that's a completely different life that they live back home. Looking back at it, I'm very glad that I didn't spend as much time as they did back home. The fact that they did it and they did it while supporting me, supporting themselves and doing all of that, I wish I could be as selfless as they are to get through what they got through and still be giving me the positive energy that I needed to get through school here.

Renee explained further how much the support of her family meant to her, noting that her father also encouraged her to consider leaving Iraq, to ensure a successful future.

As a family, she explained that her parents supported the possibility of her studying

abroad. Renee explained her father's words regarding this matter:

> My dad was definitely one of the main reasons why I'm here. He really did push
> me to come here and he told me, I still remember this, "If you still want a future
> for yourself, if you still want to make something out of your life, you shouldn't
> stay here. You should leave it." That was definitely a reason why I was
> determined on coming here.

Renee then told me she has not seen her family since 2012, the year she came to

the United States as an exchange student. As an exchange student on a J-1 visa, Renee

was granted a single-entry visa, signifying that she could not travel back and forth to her

country. Her parents would not have been able to obtain tourist visas without traveling to

the center of Baghdad to visit the U.S. Embassy, a precarious journey. In order to obtain

tourist visas, families must show substantial monetary and often property investments in

their country to prove they do not intend to emigrate outside of Iraq.

Reasons to Study in the United States

The thematic analysis of this dissertation explored this motif more in-depth, but a

commonality amongst many of the participants was exposure to the culture of the United

States culture as a central motivation to pursue higher education abroad. For Renee, this

was especially influential. She shared:

> I came to the US back in 2010, for a visit. It was through this exchange program
> and I was 15. I was just in love with everything. I felt like I belonged here more
> than I did back home. I mean, I was 15, too, but it definitely had an appeal to me
> personally and I just loved everything here. I still remember, I talked to my dad
> while I was still in the States and I told him, I'm gonna do my best to come and
> study here because this is where I want to be. I really felt like I can live and be
> myself and I feel like I knew that if I worked hard enough, I would get rewarded
> for my work.

Renee elaborated on this sense of fairness she experienced in the United States,

noting a partiality in her country to religious affiliation and a dependency on the backing

of influential people to succeed in careers and education instead of merit. Renee began to hope that she would be able to succeed in the United States and be rewarded based on hard work. She expressed:

> My experience back home, even in high school, it was one of those things, like also we had some professors play favorites based on your religious backgrounds and so on, so it was like always one of these things that I hated back home. I've seen that with my family too, they never get rewarded for what they work for. It's all about who you know, who you are, your background. So, when I came here, I feel like nobody cares about your background. If you work hard, you'll get what you deserve so I really, really wanted to come here.

This sense of equality and justice is what Renee sought most when considering a scholarship for study abroad. She was awarded the Iraq scholarship in 2012, the year she graduated from high school. This marked the beginning of her journey to be judged on the merit of her character and academic ability.

Experience with Violence in Middle School and High School in Baghdad

When we discussed her experience with middle and high school in Baghdad, Renee focused first on some academic challenges resulting from the structure of the curriculum. She then moved on to elaborate further on her personal experiences with violence. As she explained below, the nature of the multilingual program was difficult to adjust to:

> It was pretty hard. The school was set in a way that kind of made it very, first it was hard to get in so then it was hard to stay in the school because everything was different, everything was taught in English . . . It had its goods and bads, but it was definitely a very different, unique experience than the usual high school experience that you would get in any other school . . .
>   But definitely, I had a hard time adapting to all the different classes in the beginning, but then it picked up and things got better. Then you just don't even notice it by the second year, like you're learning stuff in a different language.

In further discussing her school experience in Baghdad, the violence began to surface as a challenge. It is significant to note that Renee attended the same school as

other participants, though several years later than most. Yet, as evidenced in the example

below, her experience with violence paralleled that of other participants, who attended

the school before her:

> My first year actually, I probably went to school for a combined two, three
> months. Maybe I'm exaggerating but because it was like one of those areas or like
> neighborhoods back home that were very dangerous and it got very wow, like all
> the students were in there. One time we had Al-Queda coming in and they stole
> the buses, the school buses, and they had to hide all of us girls down in the
> basement because they [the teachers and school leadership] didn't want Al-Queda
> to know that it's a mixed school, because they would target us specifically.
>   But then afterwards, we moved to a different location and it got like very
> complicated there too, because you know, it was a smaller location and some of
> the professors weren't able to come to that location. Some students had to transfer
> to another school because of the neighborhood issues. Because some of them
> were Shiites, they didn't want to go to that city neighborhood because it was very,
> very dangerous.

The religious persecution motif surfaced with every participant interviewed in this

study. Again, the notable portion of Renee's story is in part the persistence of

discrimination and violence over the years. Her personal experience with the intermittent

access to education was very impactful to her. She elaborated in her further statements:

> I still remember some subjects like I had, like blank on my grade report because
> we weren't taught that class because there were no professors to teach it. Yeah, it's
> shocking. Looking back at it, it was definitely, very, like especially when I joined
> the school, it was back in 2006 or 2007, yeah that year, 2006, 2007 was one of the
> most dangerous years when I was back there so it was a very, very critical time
> for us to do anything, including school.

Despite the missing pieces of her academic journey at home, Renee persisted in

her search for an education opportunity abroad. She was accepted into an international

scholarship program which offered her full tuition, a visa sponsorship, and health

insurance in the United States. Renee graduated from a university in Texas 5 years after

entering the United States as an exchange student.

Participant Profile #5

"Andrew"

At the beginning of the interview, Andrew immediately assured me that he

volunteered with a strong purpose, saying "I love to share my experience," further

commenting "it's fun to talk about." His enthusiasm and willingness to share his story

were palpable through most of the interview, though some of the material seemed more

difficult to share. Below is Andrew's story, beginning with the details of the very astute

support of his parents, his personal reasons for pursuing an education outside of Iraq, and

his story of violence in middle and high school.

View of Education in the Family

As Andrew began to talk about his family, he was clearly hesitant to share

detailed information, instead speaking on a general level about family support. Andrew

clearly appreciated the support they gave him. He explained:

> My family was so supportive, my parents always wanted me to study abroad.
> Yeah, the mental support was a lot from my family. There was a lot of . . . There
> was also some support from my school. In terms of professors are very willing to
> give me recommendation letters and all that sort of things. Yeah, there's a lot in
> that school . . . there's a lot of people who would like to support you, motivate you
> to be what you want, but the situation in Iraq is so devastating that like, it's easy to
> give up. I was the only one in my . . . out of the nine people in my grade who
> applied for [The Iraq Scholarship] and got admitted, and applied for [a university
> in Texas] and . . . yeah.

When I probed further about educational values in his family, Andrew answered

in generalities surrounding his experiences, with very few details regarding his private

family members. I respected this distance and did not push him further to disclose any

information he was not comfortable with. Andrew did share his opinion that family is

influential, stating:

> Family, like . . . yeah, the house you're in. If you grew up with the mentality that I
> want to be something, I want to be an engineer, I want to be a doctor. It's more

likely that the child will get there than a house where they don't care. Like if you get the bad grade, whatever . . . Like if I got a bad grade or something, my mom would be a little bit worried. Like when I was in senior year, I didn't seem to be studying for my final test, and they just like tried to find out how much I know of the material and stuff. It was kind of like the role of parents.

Andrew credited his family with the idea to consider an international higher education trajectory. Though this support was accessible in his home, he struggled at the Special School due to his religious background and the general violence he experienced in secondary school. While his grades were above average, he continued to dream of pursuing electrical engineering internationally.

Reasons to Study in the United States

Andrew's desire for a quality education was what drove his study abroad objectives from the beginning, faulting the lack of diverse options in Iraq as a main reason he started his research regarding opportunities in the United States. He corroborated what many other participants mentioned: medicine was one of the only viable options in Baghdad at the time. He did not share an interest in the field and longed for an opportunity to build a future based on his true interests. Andrew explained:

> I decided to study abroad because . . . I know education in Iraq, higher education is so bad. It's nothing . . . There's no school that is as good as [a university in the United States], and in fact in Iraq. Also, the nature of what I wanted to study. Electrical engineering, I knew if I want to pursue that field then I have to study abroad because in Iraq, I feel like I'll end up with a not really good strong degree, and also if I graduate there won't be many job opportunities in Iraq. I'll probably end up . . . I would have ended up probably trying hard to get a Master's degree in the States too.
>
> But like yeah, most of my friends, even the people who wanted to pursue engineering, they ended up going to medical school because that's . . . Medical school's, like, one where you're guaranteed a job in Iraq more often than any other majors. The highest paid in Iraq, too. It's not as much paid as here, but still, it's more secure future in Iraq, as a medical school, medicine major than engineering. So, I didn't want to give up the . . . I wanted to pursue the field that I wanted.

Andrew's dream field of study was electrical engineering, an area that was not well supported by the higher education or professional communities in Baghdad at the

time. Andrew explained that he also wished to pursue an education without the fear of violence. His family was Christian and was very affected personally by some of the more violent crimes happening around the city of Baghdad. He was not able to finish school at the Baghdad Special School he had attended since seventh grade because his family was directly threatened by militants. He explained:

> We left Baghdad, yeah, in . . . There was like that event that happened where like we were threatened . . . my family's from a Christian background. And there was that event that happened about like terrorists taking over a church and killing like people in there.
> So, my family decided we will move to another city like Erbil, which was safer than Baghdad. And there were times like 2006, 2007, it was really hard to go to school. The school was in not a safe place [the Special School].

Andrew focused then on the fact that in Erbil, he went to a new high school, but it was not as advanced as his school in Baghdad. He missed his colleagues, though he was relieved to be in a safer environment. However, he took some time to reflect on his years at the Special School in Baghdad, as we began to talk about the violence he experienced in middle and high school.

Experience with Violence in Middle School and High School in Baghdad

With a Christian background, Andrew experienced direct threats and risked persecution for attending the Special School. He described what it was like to attend school, with violence prevalent outside of the classroom. Andrew became a bit guarded while describing the dangers, but he did give me a timeline and some details of his experience at the school, stating.

> I was there from 2006 until 2011. I didn't finish the last year at that school. My last, my 12th grade was another school. It was like I had to move to another city. I moved from Baghdad to Erbil last year, so I had to change schools. But I learned English from that school, and it was motivating. The teachers in that school were like college professors, some of them. We would almost do nothing for the whole day because not everyone can show up. It was not a safe place. And depending on your race or religion it might be safer or less safe for you to be in that area.

66

He talked next about the high expectations at the Special School, where he felt not all of the prospects of an elite education were possible because of violence. Andrew expressed his frustration with the situation, as he was a very precocious learner who was seeking new opportunities that education could provide him. He explained that the school in Baghdad was more progressive than his new school in Erbil, stating:

> Absolutely more advanced. Yeah, the purpose of the [Special] school, the last two years they're supposed to teach you college level science material, but a lot of times they failed to. Because the situation in Iraq, and a lot of professors had to leave the school. It was a lot of frustrating, like you know?
> We always felt like the school should have been better, should have been more motivating. I am the only . . . and we were not many people, like not many were just in 11th grade, junior year, we were just like three guys and six girls.

Andrew elaborated further on the concept of motivation, explaining that many of the students were so frightened that a feeling of hopelessness permeated the small classroom. He let me know that only he out of his class pursued an education abroad that year. Andrew struggled to inspire other students to become motivated to change their future, or as he expressed, to "study abroad, to pursue their dreams." Andrew currently lives on the West Coast of the United States, where he works as a computer engineer.

Participant Profile #6

"Zachary"

As evidenced by Zachary's brief profile below, his story parallels those of some colleagues because like many of them, he grew up in a Christian family, a minority group in Iraq. His story is unique because his family eventually immigrated to the United States. Though they live on the West Coast and he lives in the southern US, he is grateful for their proximity. Zachary shared details regarding his family's educational and religious values, as well as his experience with violence in school, and the reasons he pursued an education abroad.

67

View of Education in the Family

Zachary's parents modeled the value of education and hard work to Zachary and

his sisters on a daily basis. A self-described languid student in his primary school years,

his mother and father fostered a sense of purpose in Zachary through their proactive

encouragement. Zachary described his mother's hands-on support:

> . . . I'm a slacker, I'm not such a hard working . . . when I was very young. So, she
> would always be with me, trying to make sure I finished my homework, trying to
> make sure I take my exams. When I would take my exams, she would stand
> outside, she would come in early and she would wait for me the whole time taking
> the exam. She wouldn't even wait . . . Let's say I would get out of school at 12,
> she would be there at 11 or 10 and just wait for me. So, yeah, she really dedicated
> her life throughout elementary school for me to make sure I succeed and she has
> done that thousands of times. I wasn't born hard-working, I kind of learned it,
> picked it up.

His father provided similar inspiration for success, often working long hours to

provide financial support for his wife and children. To prosper in the economic situation

at the time, hard work and perseverance were essential to survival. Zachary's father

modeled humility through the nature of his work. Zachary explained:

> Yeah, my dad worked two jobs, he was out all day. This had to be the way for you
> to make a living in Iraq in the 90s and early 2000s because everyone was really,
> really, poor. For you to even just be able to have dinner everyone had to work two
> jobs. So, while my Dad was doing this, my Mom was trying to support us, made
> sure she raises us.
>   They shielded us from everything. I didn't have a need for anything and
> when we were very poor. My Dad, a lot of times, he was a PhD student at the
> university of Baghdad, but his second job was construction worker so he can have
> money for us. But he's a PhD student. You never see that here. No PhD student is
> working as construction worker after going to school teaching students.

As an adult with 10 years of experience in the United States, Zachary appreciated

fully the sacrifices of his parents and their impact on his educational aspirations. He and

his sisters benefited from the persistent support and encouragement at home. Pursuing a

higher education was expected in exchange for this support. Zachary noted:

What they did together was the hardest thing. I don't think I could dedicate my life to my children like this when I have some. It's kind of what they did the whole time is let's raise our children and let's shield them from everything that's going on, although it's impossible because I go out in the street and I see it.

But somehow, they just made me focus on . . . So, the whole deal was you make sure you study, you work hard, and we got everything else, which is nearly impossible because my Dad had to do two jobs and at the same time they wanted me to grow up very happy and very comfortable and that's incredibly hard. I mean, this is the way they dedicated their lives to me and my sisters. That was all they did in their 20s and 30s, the prime years. When I think about my 20s right now I want to travel, I want to meet people, I don't think about having children and centralizing my life, all, everything around them and forget everything I'm doing.

To further model the importance of higher education, Zachary's mother pursued an electrical engineering degree, though she chose to stay home to raise her children. His father was a civil engineer by education, and as illuminated above, worked a second job in construction to provide for his family. His parents and sisters have since immigrated to the United States and live on the West Coast.

Reasons to Study in the United States

As explained by Zachary in the portrayal of his family's educational values, his parents did not have the financial resources to support an education abroad. He had heard that other members of his high school had applied for an international scholarship, which piqued his interest. Zachary's exposure came through a volunteer opportunity at an international non-governmental organization (NGO) in Baghdad. The scholarship became a dream for Zachary as he learned more about the possibilities that awaited him in the United States, though he was realistic about his chances, "I wasn't too hopeful, not going to lie, it's a very competitive scholarship, everyone was applying. I didn't really know about it but I think a good number of people did". In 2008, Zachary learned of his acceptance into the merit-based scholarship.

Experience with Violence in Middle School and High School in Baghdad

The tale of Zachary's high school tribulations parallels the experiences of his colleagues in his year, as well as those before and after him at the same school. Zachary graduated in 2008, in the midst of much of the militia violence. He explained the ambiance of the neighborhood where the school was located at the time:

> The neighborhood was pretty much deserted, not under government control. A bunch of militias have control of the neighborhood, so we pretty much had to evacuate right then and there. A lot of times we . . . I mean, the high school was in a deserted place. Pretty much everyone had left. I'm talking shops, people that owned stores, whether it's convenience stores or restaurants or anything. Everything's been deserted, most of the houses.
>
> It was just kind of like us in the neighborhood, but we were really trying to get through senior year. We're almost there. That was pretty much like March or February and we were gonna be done in June. It was like four more months of this and we're done. No one wanted to just kind of let it hang. We had the option of just skip school for that year, but no one wanted to do it because we're almost there and we really want to graduate. If we stayed another year, we don't know how it would turn out.
>
> It was terrible, but when we finished the exams, it was kind of like a relief because, okay, we're done. Now, off to college, which is a whole other struggle, but at least we're done with this.

Zachary and his family risked persecution every day in Baghdad, not only in their pursuit of education, but also just by virtue of their religious affiliation. He and his family found themselves being threatened by militia in their home neighborhood, jeopardizing their safety. He explained to me the nature of his last years of high school:

> Yes, I had to leave my house, so we had to evacuate my house where I lived. It was not under government control, that neighborhood where I lived, so I had to evacuate. I went to my Aunt's house, stayed there for a little bit, went somewhere else. I kind of kept up dancing around until I was going to be done with high school. I was hoping things would stabilize.

During Zachary's time in Baghdad, things did not stabilize as he had hoped. He learned he received the international scholarship immediately following his senior year. Zachary traveled to Jordan to meet the administrators of the scholarship in 2008, where

he applied for his J-1 Visa. It was granted after 6 months and he was able to travel to the United States to pursue his undergraduate degree.

<div align="center">

Participant Profile #7

"Henry"

</div>

Henry's story illustrates many of the same challenges experienced by other participants, with some unique perspectives and triumphs threaded throughout. As a computer engineer, he has faced many adversities in his educational journey, since this field of study is not highly supported in his home culture, according to Henry. His brief profile provides a framework surrounding his level of family support, the source of his motivation to study in the United States, and an overview of his high school experiences in Baghdad.

View of Education in the Family

As the son of two highly educated parents, Henry was exposed to computers at a very young age. He explained that it was not typical at the time to have access to computer systems in the home. The nature of his parents' careers necessitated continuous access to computers, however. Henry explained:

> Both of their graduate work was in using computers, which was a novel idea at the time, to train people. In terms of how they see things and how they see videos of themselves and videos get analyzed and how that feedback cycle is a better way of learning than somebody just telling you didn't do the right thing, you should do this, you should do that.
>
> Their education level . . . my mother and father both have degrees in kinesiology. They're both athletic coaches. My mom has a master's degree in kinesiology and my dad has a Ph.D. in also kinesiology, motor learning, which is the scientific view of how athletes learn, one way to standardize it. Growing up, I guess mostly my parents . . . My mother's side is definitely more educated than my dad's side. More people have college degrees and favor education. My dad's side is less so. My mother's family were much closer. We lived near each other and everybody, even my cousins, they all continued to go to medical school or engineering and finished to do graduate studies. There was actually a push from my family towards pursuing my education.

While the educational models in his life, and the inspiration from his parents, encouraged him from a young age to appreciate the value of hard work and education, his parents initially opposed the idea of him leaving Iraq to study or work. This experience distinguishes Henry's experience from some of the other student participants, whose parents supported the idea of leaving Iraq to pursue higher education. Henry explained that migration to another country in general was not generally accepted, stating:

> It's not very common for people to leave their homes in general, even living there. I'm not even talking about going abroad. The idea of going abroad to study is not very common even within Iraq. The population is pretty big at least comparative to the countries around it, but most people generally stay where they are. You probably know this about the culture, but people who are not married usually stay with their parents until they're 30, 40. It's common to stay and live and work where they are. I think I just didn't have many experiences or things to look at in terms of people who've done this and succeeded. I had no idea what kind of hardships I was going to face. There's the risk of the unknown I guess is probably the biggest one.

Henry elaborated more regarding his passion for computer engineering and internet technology, an area which his parents and other family members did not support, as it was not a common field of study in Iraq. Since he didn't see a future for this area of expertise in his country, Henry began to consider an education abroad. As explained below, he realized his dream after many tumultuous months.

Reasons to Study in the United States

Similar to many of the other participants, Henry was influenced by his family to study medicine immediately following high school graduation. He had not considered a scholarship to study internationally yet and was pressured to begin college in Baghdad. He explained his family's opposition to the computer engineering plan, saying:

> What I was always getting is, "Why don't you study something that has good potential and good future? You can always continue to do whatever you like to do with computers." It was upsetting and not seeing it as a career, as something I can actually do and succeed at. They always say it as, "This is doomed to failure.

What are you going to do? You will become an IT guy in some shop." That's clearly not what I wanted to do and that was not my aspiration, but there was definitely a disconnect between what I wanted to do and how I viewed this field and how my immediate family and even my extended family viewed it.

Henry clearly explained that while he had an appreciation for medicine, this was not his passion. Through his studies in the field of medicine, he never lost his professional and personal desire to study computer systems. Henry came to the realization that going abroad would provide him the option to pursue his passion, primarily with influence from his high school cohort and other friends. He stated:

> You probably heard the same thing from the other folks you talked to, but we all really wanted to leave. We all really wanted to get out of there because the setting was not for us to do what we wanted to do or to succeed in what we wanted to do. It's very upsetting that you're passionate about something and you want to do it and you think you have the potential and you're willing to put in the effort and the time, but you know no matter what you do, given where you are, there is no future in that. You'll be deemed to failure. You will not be able to support yourself or reach your aspirations. It's very annoying. We all really wanted to get out of there, primarily on a personal level to do what we wanted to do.

Though he and his friends shared an ardent desire to leave their country and pursue their dreams, there were many obstacles to overcome, including a significant information gap. As a group, they were unsure about sources of information on a study abroad experience. Henry expressed:

> There wasn't much to . . . There wasn't a book to . . . Or at least I didn't know of any book to read to prepare for an experience like this, somebody to ask, other stories you know. There was just that big question mark.

Henry learned of the scholarship to study abroad through his friends from high school. Though he had commenced his 1st year of medical school, he still possessed a passion for computer engineering, which he was able to pursue at a university in Texas. As with the other student participants, he also experienced a high level of violence during his middle and high school years.

73

Experience with Violence in Middle School and High School in Baghdad

Henry smiled as he began to talk about his middle and high school years at his school in Baghdad. He explained the structure of his school day first, and it became clear he appreciated the opportunity to explore different areas of study through a longer school day. The nature of the school structure was anomalous to other schools in many ways. Henry elaborated on this point, saying:

> We also had a longer school day than the rest of the schools so this gave us the room to look at different areas. This was about the time when I would say one of probably the most interesting things that . . . Or the most valuable things that we had at that school is it wasn't seen as a bad thing if you become nerdy, for the lack of a better term. It wasn't like . . . In any other school, I feel like this would be . . . We would have a difficult time, but in our school, we all liked different areas and we accepted the fact that different people are going to like different things, they're going to explore more and they're going to become nerdy in these things. That was fine.
>
> Especially I think at a young age, people try to assimilate, people try to be the cool kids in school. For us, we didn't waste time and resources and energy to do that. We focused on what we liked. We got to explore different things. Again, since we were a small number of people, we bonded. We became very close and until now, very close with almost all the people I went to high school with.

The quotes above illustrate that Henry and his friends were very invested in school and learning at a young age. The impending violence in Iraq did not deter their precociousness. As described by the student participants, the school moved locations several times to avoid discovery of the co-ed learning environment inside. Henry felt that professors and students alike persisted in their appreciation of the unique learning atmosphere, though the situation became exceedingly difficult. Henry explained the effect it had on them as a group:

> Eighth grade is when the war happened. That year was just a mess, the whole year. The war was in March. Leading up to it and after it, that whole year was just a big mess, which we were at a very young age. I think we were as worried as the adults about it.

Despite the added stress, Henry and his friends experienced a sense of safety at school, a feeling of normalcy and stability that transcended the violence happening outside. He hesitated as he began to elaborate on some of the experiences he had each day on his way to school. Henry instead offered a unique insight on his relief experienced upon reaching school:

> I guess one thing I'd like to highlight . . . It's a positive aspect to everything that happened is . . . I don't know how to put it without making it insensitive. Everything happens . . . I'm not going to list all the bad things that happen all around you in the streets and going into the school and you got all types of militias and now and terrorists.
>
> Then at the end of the day, that's it. You make it to school and then you have a physics test that you have to study. There was kind of just two worlds that you live in where outside the school, you have to deal everything, the lack of resources at home and other problems that come with it. You can leave the news and all the messes in the street and the government and all of that. Then you basically live that all the way getting to school, but once you're at school, then you have a good ten hours for yourself. You get to focus on what you focus on. That was that kind of separation that, at least for me personally, gave me the view that it doesn't have to be like it's outside of school. It doesn't have to be like it's the mess that's outside.

Henry graduated from a university in Texas, and currently resides in the southern United States, where he is a successful IT Engineer. Henry's story and others gave me a glimpse into what they were seeking abroad—a common sense of normalcy and safety to learn, and to pursue, new and novel fields of study. Their passions and appreciations were also instilled by a multitude of influences at a very young age, giving them a sense of purpose that many other youngsters on a global basis seemingly do not possess.

Presentation of Themes

Exposure to and Appreciation for United States Culture

As a group, the seven student participants had some type of exposure to the culture of the United States prior to traveling for their respective academic experiences. The types of exposure varied from previous travel to the United States to media/social

media contact and friend/sibling network exposure. While the depth and nature of the experiences were diverse, there was consensus amongst the participants that pre-exposure had some influence on their drive to study abroad and their adjustment period once in the United States. Even those who only had exposure through media/social media sources interpreted their experiences as helpful. Henry pointed out:

> I would say you absolutely, even before coming to the US, you have a good grasp of the culture, at least the norms from media, from movies, songs, just generally that. They clearly don't portray life for everyday Americans, but you kind of get a good idea of what is okay or what is not okay.

All of the students cited at least some exposure to online networks, and eventually social media platforms such as Facebook. This increased their understanding of what to expect in terms of social, academic, and cultural expectations in the United States by learning about the experiences of other international students. As I introduce later in this section, many of the students also had friends or family who studied in the United States or had experienced prior travel themselves.

Maxwell concurred that Western influences affected his outlook and his study abroad trajectory. Additionally, learning English at a young age contributed to his confidence in adjusting to the culture of the United States. The Special School taught most content areas in English, including the science courses, which helped to prepare the participants for cultural and academic adjustment in the United States. As Maxwell explained:

> Obviously, I spoke the language, or I didn't speak the language as well as I could understand it. I mean, I could read books easily at the time, I could read and perhaps even write better than I spoke, because I didn't really have practice. But I was big fan of Western music, especially American songs and movies. And I think that kind of helped me at least get started easily in the culture . . .

Similar to Maxwell and Henry, Zachary had never traveled to the United States prior to the Iraqi Scholarship program. This did not stop him from becoming familiar

with the culture of the United States, as one of his sisters visited through a high school scholarship program through an NGO in Iraq. Zachary helped to promote the program through word of mouth with an extreme amount of discretion, telling others about the opportunity; discretion was required because, as evidenced in the participant profiles, the participants felt that Western travel or "sympathies" (learning English, etc.) were viewed by the dominant militias as unacceptable, with violent consequences. Zachary stated, "Anyway, a long story short, my sister ended up being in the program and a few of my friends from my high school ended up being in the program because I told them." He went on to explain that these experiences sparked his own interest in studying in the United States and increased his knowledge of the culture.

While Maxwell, Zachary, and Henry learned about the culture through exposure from afar, the other four participants had more direct experiences. As noted by Renee in her profile, her exposure to the culture came to fruition through a high school scholarship program, which consisted of 1 month in the United States. She reported that the most impactful piece was the concept of hard work and subsequent rewards, free of nepotism.

Theresa reported a similar experience, as she also went on a month-long exchange program in the United States. Through this brief experience, Theresa decided that she would try to solicit her parents' support to study higher education in the United States Through the few weeks in America, Theresa got a glimpse what she was seeking in her future: to be judged on merit, not on gender. She explained that in her field of interest (Civil Engineering) it is very rare for women to succeed in Iraq:

> Especially, I had an interest in engineering and I would not have been successful as an engineer back home. So, that was one of the biggest influences of what I wanted to come here . . . Because I'm a female. I saw my sister. She had great interest in architecture and she studied architecture. She was in architectural school but when she graduated she didn't . . . the job market was really bad, especially for a woman there as an engineer.

77

Fred had a similar experience around the same age as Theresa, when he was invited to the state of Ohio for a month-long exchange program, similar to the one Theresa participated in. It was the beginning of a strong interest in returning to the United States on a scholarship for undergraduate study. He explained that his interest in the Western culture began much younger:

> . . . One of the ways that we as seventh graders wanted to learn English was through American TV shows. And believe it or not, even under Saddam's time, because Saddam was there until like halfway through my eighth grade . . . It was American TV shows, American movies were very popular in Iraq, even though he [Saddam] would always go on TV and say unpleasant things about the United States.

The negative propaganda regarding the United States and Westernized culture in general did not influence Fred's perception that the United States was where he would like to study one day. On the contrary, he focused and learned more about the United States than ever before. Fred developed a very in-depth appreciation for various aspects of the culture, stating:

> So, that hypocrisy was there, but that was our way of actually picking up a lot of the English that we learned today. It's through watching American TV shows and American music and American films. And so, that was kind of like . . . And as teenagers growing up that was like the culture that we're fascinated by. And we looked out to the United States as the standard of development and that's where you go to succeed. And my family didn't have any issues with the United States personally. They had more issues with Saddam than they did with the United States at that point.

According to Fred, his parental support was very instrumental in differentiating between the government, and the individuals who live in the country. He explained a very evolutionary process of learning about the United States and building appreciation for the culture. He expressed:

> And so, I think we couldn't find any animosity towards the people of the United States per se. The disagreements with the government, that's a different issue. But my parents made sure that I understood the difference between government and

the people, just like I expected outsiders to tell the difference between me as an Iraqi citizen and Saddam Hussein as the dictator that was portrayed. So, my fascination to put it simply with the US it started with the language issue, and then kind of evolved by being exposed to American media. And then among us, me and my peers, we'd talk about like, oh do you want to go to an American university? Yes, I would love to. And then we would talk about how we could study for these tests. Even for in like ninth grade, as early as that.

Fred was very passionate about the United States' cultural influence on his life, as evidenced in his words. Similar to Renee and Theresa, Fred sought an environment of fairness and equity. He went on to articulate that even with the turmoil the overthrow of Hussein brought, he found it influenced intellectuals to be more open about their experiences in the United States. He felt closer to his dream of academic freedom and safety than ever before:

> . . . And then especially after Saddam was gone it became more realistic for us to actually come to the United States to study. And we had a couple of professors actually in school that did study in the US, and they would always tell us about their mentors in school here, and how wonderful it was to study in the US, and the freedom of speech and the things that we didn't have in Iraq. So, we're always like, oh wow, okay yeah we want to go there. The books that we studied sometimes were American books. And so there was a huge influence on our education coming from the United States. And combined with us being really young, malleable, exposed to American media. I think that all kind of built up the desire to come and study here in the US.

In addition to building ideas about studying abroad, the exposure through social media and media connected Fred and other students to networks that would provide eventual support to their study abroad journeys. The non-profit that administered their scholarship also provided pre-exposure to the United States culture, visa interview preparation, and overarching guidance on expectations through webinars, and strong email and verbal communication; this is discussed in a latter section. Also in drawing from Fred's words above, the students were "malleable" and ready for change.

Andrew articulated his development of his knowledge and appreciation for United States cultural equality as well. He was the fourth participant that had previous

experience in the United States. He, too, went on a 4-week exchange program as an adolescent, which commenced his interest in pursuing higher education in the United States. He voiced:

> So, that program was really . . . it was one of the reasons why I really wanted to come back to the States, and pursue my studies in the States. That was like the first real exposure to the culture, I got some friends from here [in the US] and people like my age.
>   . . . And we had a summer . . . kind of like a camp for two weeks in Virginia, and those two weeks, I don't know, we developed strong connections. I still have friends from there, from that time. And I really loved that program, and I decided that I really wanted to go back . . . to learn the best kind of things you know?

Andrew elaborated on his experience in the United States on this short-term exchange program, explaining that it provided him with a glimpse of what he had been seeking in Iraq, learning the best, progressive science and innovative math, with a sense of safety and security. While he was challenged academically at the Special School in Iraq, he described being exposed to harsh and violent conditions every day on his ventures to and from school. As a result, he wished for safety and security in addition to academic rigor. Adding to the direct exposure of traveling to the US, he had indirect exposure through social media to American films, books, and other mediums. He expressed receiving influence from "movies, music, rap songs, that kind of thing." He also cited his language learning as contributing to his adjustment in the United States, stating that, "Also my English helped me a lot." Andrew further elaborated, stating, "It was not hard for me [adjustment in the United States]. And the internet of course, yeah. It helped give a lot of exposure. The first time I came here was an important point in my life, you know?"

Andrew's appreciation and knowledge of the culture ultimately contributed to him becoming a successful undergraduate student at the university in Texas he attended to study computer engineering. The other six participants shared similar thoughts, stating

that they knew better what to expect upon arrival to the United States because of their prior exposure to American traditions, in terms of cultural expectations, and that their high school instruction in English was paramount to their success. The addition of social media and American pop-culture also exposed them to their host culture, which contributed to their successful adjustment upon arrival.

Academic Preparedness and Natural Aptitude

There was general consensus amongst the student participants that adjustment to the United States classroom at the university level was not as difficult as expected. While participants expressed that they struggled with new testing methods, and other stylistic adjustments, they were relatively comfortable with the content of classes, especially in math and science. Theresa elaborated on this point, stating:

> All my other science classes it was fairly easy except there were more multiple choice . . . For example, I was never used to multiple choice questions for a class like physics . . . It was kind of hard for me to do that because back home whenever we study things like physics, math, chemistry we had open ended questions. That was the—I don't know why. We took exams and having to do things like physics, multiple choice questions was a little bit tough.

All seven participants identified the necessity of adjusting to different academic expectations, especially with regard to study time outside of the classroom. Most of the participants (six of seven) stated that the advanced classes in which they were placed at the university included basic concepts that they had seen previously at the Special School. When asked about academic challenges during his adjustment period, Maxwell expressed, "I had some sort of the opposite experience. I discovered that I'm a little ahead of, in my freshman year, I'm a little ahead of students in that year. Which kind of made me a little cocky, I guess . . .." Zachary shared in this experience, stating, "Right, so I will be honest with you, most of the challenges . . . there wasn't much academic challenges." Henry concurred that content in classes was not a challenge as he commenced his

freshman year, expressing, "Academically speaking, I think especially in the beginning, I did not personally struggle much." Most of the students credited the STEM preparation at the Special School in Baghdad with their strong academic performance in the United States.

Some of the participants, while stating that the content was easier than expected, also identified certain struggles in adjusting to a university in the United States. These ranged in scope and impact from the nature of exams to transactional processes necessary to enroll in classes. Theresa's personal narrative demonstrates the diversity of adjustments well, as she experienced a balance of struggles and successes:

> So first of all, I was very confused with the whole registering for classes. I remember that was . . . The process itself was very confusing. Some of the classes that I took . . . So, science classes were very easy. I was studying things that I've already studied in high school. They were really easy. I already studied most of these classes in English so I didn't have any obstacle when it came to that but then I took this Mexican American Woman History Class and that was actually my only D throughout college. I ended up with a D in that class. That really lowered my GPA a lot. Made it harder for me to get into my major ultimately. The structure of the class was very different. I was not used to that. The fact that, for example, attendance count or that we had iClicker quizzes and we had to read books and write book reports about them. That was kind of really hard for me. I just didn't expect . . . I didn't know what I needed to do in order to succeed in that class. The class structure was kind of different for me, and that was one of the obstacles.

Theresa's comments illustrate some of the challenges she faced as she adjusted to life in the United States. While she felt academically prepared for the majority of the course content, since she had studied it in high school, she did struggle in one class with content to which she did not have prior exposure. However, she felt her struggles stemmed largely from procedural issues, such as registering for classes, and not knowing how classes would be structured or what the expectations were in her classes.

Andrew and Fred cited very similar examples of a brief period of adjustment to academic challenges combined with a sense of familiarity with the content of the math and science classes. Fred, the only pre-med major in the group of participants, acknowledged feeling uncertainty in the beginning, especially with regard to how much studying was required outside of the classroom. He explained the ambiguity in expectations, and his own personal struggle to determine how much he needed to study to do well:

> . . . Because I was like, do I study a little, do I study a lot? This is my first time being in an American classroom. And I was in introductory pre-med classes. So, our classes were at least 200 students at [the university]. And so, I was like, I don't know, coming from a small school with nine students where I knew the professor, I felt kind of lost. And then I took my first test, I remember and I did well, and I was like, okay I kind of know where to go from here. So academically I didn't actually struggle. I wouldn't say super easy, but it wasn't too difficult . . .

Andrew also expressed an ability to do well in math and science content areas, though initially he, like Fred, was confused about how much time he was expected to study outside of class. Additionally, he was able to do well on math placement tests. He explained his experience:

> . . . In terms of expectation, I did not expect like as much time . . . like how much it takes here, but other than that, I didn't find it difficult. I felt like I was prepared to . . . I had enough science in high school to be able to . . . Like I didn't need to take the first calculus class there [at the university in Texas].

Renee cited more academic struggles than the other participants, mentioning many of the same challenges, though to a different degree. However, she maintained a high-grade point average at the university in Texas, with a major in petroleum engineering, a heavily science-based area. She explained her own personal challenges with adjustment:

> I faced a lot of struggles because going into a school like [the university in Texas] it's like, a lot to take in at once. It's cool, it's a nice city, and then you just get distracted. You still haven't developed the study habits and, honestly, the system

here is structured very differently from the system back home. The way they explain things, the way they teach things, the way they do everything, like the homework, exams, everything else, it was very, very different for me. So, it was very hard trying to know how to study for things and what to focus on. I still remember, times I would spend so much effort on one specific subject, then I learned that wasn't as important as other things. It's just like getting the hang of it and understanding how things are done in a particular school, not to mention in a completely different country.

Renee's experience demonstrated that like Theresa, Fred, and Andrew, there were struggles beyond the classroom that included logistical challenges on campus. Renee, in particular, cited that distance from her family greatly affected her mood at times. However, she demonstrated persistence and grit by getting involved on campus and trying different methods of studying until she adjusted.

As a whole, the group described how they adjusted well to new challenges presented to them in the United States' higher education classroom, and overcame obstacles related to the study time outside of the classroom, working in groups, understanding expectations, and other logistical matters regarding life on campus. As evidenced in the following quote from Renee, the concept of working in groups was new to a degree for her and the other students:

> For me personally, I like working in groups and I like working with people. And I didn't know that until mid, was it end of freshman year, beginning of sophomore year? That was very, very helpful because then it kind of forces you to study any kind of questions you can immediately ask, and you kind of teach each other things so it sticks in your head—so that was very helpful.

Despite the newness of working in groups, learning how to study, and other obstacles, these students persisted and adapted to their new environments. In some cases, like when Renee spoke of how she enjoyed working in groups, students appreciated the changes. In others, students had to learn and adjust to a new school system. Their abilities to adjust and adapt, as well as their academic preparedness, contributed to their academic success.

Scholarship and University Advising Staff Perspectives

Participants had advisors, both on campus and through the non-profit, that provided additional data and unique perspectives on the students' success. Analysis indicated themes related to academic preparedness, rigorous selection criteria, determination and grit, and the English language aptitude as factors related to success. Catherine, a former Exchange Student Advisor at the non-profit, provided further insight into the ability of the students to overcome stressors, explaining:

> . . . It was just I think so much of why they're as successful. It's because of the super duper high stakes, and the stress that they experienced in their regular life was just . . . I think for them and for the average student, their experience in the US is really high-stress. They couldn't go home, but it just paled in comparison to what they had been through in the last 10 years.

Catherine's interpretation is notable because she was the only interviewee to mention this perspective. As discussed previously, the Iraqi students were not able to travel in and out of the country because of the nature of their single-entry J-1 exchange visa. In other scholarship programs on which Catherine was an advisor, she commented that it was encouraged for students to travel home often to stay connected to their home culture, as a strategy to reduce reentry culture shock and maintain family and friend support networks. In contrast, the Iraqi students were expected to build their own networks in the United States and cultivate social capital within this country. The stakes were high in part because of the risks they took to come to the United States, including jeopardizing their safety and that of their families.

In addition to Catherine, other advisors from the campus and the non-profit administrators had thoughts surrounding the aptitude and academic preparation of the scholarship students. Darrin, also a former non-profit advisor, noted that the high level of English required by the scholarship influenced those students with a high level of

aptitude to apply. He explained that students had to have a 91 (out of 120) on the TOEFL

in order to be considered or selected. Darrin said in the interview:

> I think in a way, the scholarship, because you have to have good English to come on the scholarship, I think the scholarship filtered in students who were high achievers in high school, students who maybe would adapt better to Western culture and then students who come from more traditional families in Iraq, they didn't even know about the scholarship maybe.

Edith, a former advisor from the non-profit, concurred with Darrin that the

English ability the students demonstrated attributed to their academic success, and

ultimately, their ability to obtain the scholarship, noting, "So, English wasn't a foreign

language to them. They had spoken it pretty much since they were in high school, or

before that in elementary school." Many of the advisors, including Edith, noted grit and

determination as contributing to the success of the students as well, stating, "They were

driven. I think it's also probably because of the political situation in their country, the war

and everything. They were just so driven to be successful . . .."

Donna, a senior administrator at the university in Texas, noted that students were

vetted in the selection process by the non-profit scholarship program, which required a

high level of academic achievement in high school. As a result, they did not find the

classes at the university as difficult as some other international students. Donna noted:

> So, I remember, like with the undergraduates, it was not much of a struggle I would say, in general, academically. And I don't know if that's because the ones that were chosen by the [the non-profit] and such, they seemed to be more prepared for the academic side of it . . . I mean, they had to . . . like I said, those guys must have really just had the aptitude, plus . . . I don't know . . . I'm not saying that none of them ever struggled at some point, but they did not struggle like you might anticipate, or like some other populations.

Tammy, an Assistant Director of exchange programs from the international office on

campus, augmented the information that Donna provided, adding that the undergraduate

students from Iraq on campus seem to struggle less than other students, including graduate students from the same country:

> They [undergraduate students from Iraq] were very motivated academically. A lot of them were pre-med or planning to go into law [or engineering]. I think they were pretty solid students, the graduate students definitely struggle academically, except for the ones who are here in the English literature program . . ..

As evidenced throughout this theme, the students from the Special School in Baghdad were academically prepared to take on the rigor of a large university-level program in the United States. Throughout the exploration of their academic preparation, they were very expressive and transparent regarding the obstacles they overcame during their adjustment period, including learning the logistics of a university, academic expectations, and how to study outside of class. The scholarship program and university staff added an additional layer of data that reinforced the postulations of the participants, and augmented the ideas by discussing their academic preparedness, the Special School in Baghdad, and the selection process for the scholarship. The culmination of these data demonstrates how these factors positively influenced participants' ability to succeed in an American university. Several other factors contributed to their academic, social, and cultural adjustment, including pre-exposure to the culture of the United States.

Factors Contributing to Adaptation

This section explores the factors that helped to build resiliency and adaptation in the participant experiences by probing into the data related to attitude and perseverance. Various elements contributed to a sense of determination to succeed including an openness to new experiences, safety, involvement on campus and in the community, as well as a strong sense of hope. The seven student participants, administrators from the university, and advisors from the non-profit provided examples in their interviews of these emergent sub-themes.

Safety and Freedom

Many of the participants cited safety and security as part of their appreciation for their new environment. They also voiced an appreciation for freedom of expression, as well as equity in academic pursuits, and liberty from religious and gender-related persecution. Maxwell demonstrated a frame of mind that the benefits outweighed the risks with regard to safety and security. When asked about risks related to studying in the United States, he voiced:

> So, this is a very valid question to ask, but it is kind of not applicable to my situation because for all risks, whatever they are, were insignificant to the fact that I needed to get outside the country [of Iraq] to save my life . . . my biggest goal was to pursue an education away from violence . . . so further risks that could come, whether they're social or financial, they're insignificant. So, I didn't really bother thinking about risks because I just needed to get out.

As evidenced through Maxwell's words above, he was able to balance a positive, hopeful outlook after the trauma he had in his secondary school years. Many of the students cited freedom from violence as a driver in choosing to study in the United States. Additionally, most of the participants demonstrated openness, and maintained a sense of hope, despite the violence they had experienced in their pasts, including those outlined in the participant profiles.

Zachary also appreciated safety and making new friends as an undergraduate at the university. As cited below, he had not experienced crowds of people like in a university environment while feeling safe. He was appreciative of the opportunity to concentrate on social and academic matters while not having to worry about the violence he experienced back home. He explained further, stating:

> I hadn't seen a lot of people growing up. I was very school to home, home to school, because I had to survive. Any extra step you take you could endanger your life. So, that was the first time that no one's endangering my life, I'm free, I can go anywhere I want. I can meet as many people as I want, I can be out as late as I want.

Zachary explained that there were curfews to contend with in Baghdad as a safety measure. The opportunity to stay out late at night while feeling a sense of physical safety was new to him. As demonstrated in his quote, he relished the safety and freedom he experienced in his new environment, as did other participants.

During their interviews, many of the participants explained what they were hoping to find in the United States, which included a sense of freedom and safety. Therefore, an impetus of their resiliency may have stemmed from finding what they were looking for once they arrived. Henry explained what he had found so appealing about the Special School in Baghdad, and what he was seeking away from violence he had experienced in the past:

> There is room to move, to improve, to learn, to feel passionate about something and work on yourself. I think that was very empowering. That pushed us [Henry and other students] because we weren't submerged in all the bad things that were happening all the time. Every day, we had this—it was like an out of body experience, where you're away from everything and you're living in this utopia-where this is science and education. It's a small school and well-maintained. You are respected. Everybody around you also has the same passions and they are trying to improve or trying to do something.

Henry was able to come to the United States and ended up continuing his passion for the hard sciences. He was so involved on campus that he was chosen as the only undergraduate for a special project for a high-profile space program. He explained his experience citing the other "utopia" he had found on campus, the research lab. Henry shared his experience in detail, stating:

> Then there was the opportunity to work in the satellite design lab. They did work for NASA and Air Force research labs. That was automatically very cool and these are guys who were making actual artifacts that would go to space. There is no room for error. This is as real as it gets. I was definitely one of the younger folks who worked in that lab. The majority of the people there were grad students. They pretty much never took undergrads, but most of the people who work there are aerospace engineers. They're not software engineers [like me].

Henry articulated that this experience helped him to find purpose through his adjustment, demonstrating resiliency that he may not have even realized he possessed. The academic "utopia" he experienced on campus also provided an additional support network for him throughout his experience as an undergraduate. Henry found the freedom to express his views and the safety he sought while he was a young student in Iraq.

Fred revealed a similar experience, an appreciation of what he had been missing in Iraq: academic freedom in an environment free of discrimination. He also told his story in detail, focusing on aspects of resiliency and adaptability. He explained what helped him to adapt in the United States, and what he sought that he was not finding in Iraq:

> . . . It was also just the fact that I experienced something that I didn't experience in Iraq, which was just being free and not having to conform to cultural norms that I was a little bit tired of in Iraq. So, it was a good incentive for me to try to come back here to the United States. And so, I knew that I wanted to do that. And I actually remember speaking to the family and they bought me a couple of books on how to come to the United States as an international student.

As mentioned under the theme of "Exposure to the United States," Renee explained her impressions of the United States during her exchange program at the age of 15. Her most impactful learning experience included the freedom to work hard and be rewarded based on virtue, rather than nepotism. She expressed her appreciation for equality, saying, "I really felt like I can live and be myself and I feel like I knew if I worked hard enough, I would get rewarded for my work." Theresa also expressed an appreciation for the gender equality she witnessed while in the United States. She felt that pursuing Civil Engineering in the United States would provide her the freedom to pursue internships and other opportunities, which were rare for women in Iraq.

As evidenced by the supporting data from students in this sub-theme, freedom and safety were important to all seven of the participants. The ability to feel secure in crowds

90

and experience freedom from persecution contributed to their adaptation in the United

States. In broad, overarching ways, the ability to pursue their dreams by virtue of hard

work and equality aided in the resilience they demonstrated in the United States.

Openness

An open mind was a quality that many of the interviewees demonstrated through

their stories. When elaborating on the adjustment period, Maxwell had several vignettes

to share regarding his adaptation in the United States, including a willingness to make

mistakes and learn from them. Maxwell stated:

> So, there was a big learning curve, obviously, about the nuances of the culture and
> you know what's offensive, what's funny, all these things you kind of get an initial
> idea in the beginning but then you have to look it up. But I'd say I had kind of a
> good start. At least maybe I guess on social issues, on the spectrum I was already
> on a liberal side of the street. Not slightly extreme. So, that was kind of very
> helpful to acclimate and when I got here, so it's not necessarily unique to the
> culture, but it kind of just helped me. It did not become a barrier when I came
> here.

As evidenced in his quote above, Maxwell maintained hope and a positive outlook

regarding his ability to adapt to a new culture, demonstrating positive coping strategies

that many of the other participants shared. Zachary had a similar experience with an

openness to learning from feedback from his friends. In an example that could have been

interpreted as an embarrassing encounter, Zachary demonstrated a willingness to learn

from a difficult situation:

> So, everyone is hanging out with everyone and I'm meeting at least ten more
> people every day, ten new people. I'm making a lot of friends, I can't even keep
> track of things, I hadn't had that many friends. We are a very small group of
> people. All my life I've been around very few people. So, it's kind of like wow,
> this is a huge school. Everyone's nice, no one was really rude to me my freshman
> year . . . and a lot of times I would say stupid things that don't make sense,
> phrases that don't make sense. They would kind of giggle and they'd explain
> things to me.

91

Rather than experiencing embarrassment, Zachary faced the comments and laughter from friends with a sense of humility, viewing the experience as an opportunity to learn. He admitted to having a lot to learn about his new host country, as well as the world, and he thrived with learning from all of the people at his undergraduate university. Zachary also shared that he was thrilled with so many new experiences in his life, expressing:

> . . . Then so many people from so many different places too. So, I met a lot of people from South America. I didn't even know they spoke Spanish in South America. Just things like this would blow my mind every now and then.

Renee had similar experiences with the environment at the university. She explained that overcoming challenges was hard at times but that keeping a sense of sincerity in interactions with people helped to move along her adaptation. She specifically stated that an "open mind," was the key to her adjustment and transforming challenges into opportunities, elaborating:

> But the key to that, to me being able to overcome all of these challenges was just have an open mind and don't always compare things, like this is how I used to do it. It's just things are different. Once you keep an open mind to it, and you don't have to do everything the way they do it. You don't have to just stick to the American norm or the cultural norm. You can pick and choose things but you can always incorporate your culture and American culture. If you just keep an open mind and just be mature about it and find the right people honestly. Meeting people from different backgrounds definitely helped me because the nice thing about the culture here is that there's not one thing of whatever. There's so many different things . . . You will find the people that meet you halfway and you're able to have fun with and be yourself with.

In a similar fashion, Theresa found that an open and clear mind was necessary to undergo many changes. She stated briefly how she adjusted well, by finding similarities and appreciating differences: "It makes it easy [to adjust] when you see people going through the same thing that you're going through." Andrew shared a similar view in his interview. When asked what advice he would give to future Iraqi students wanting to study abroad, he stated the following:

I think they already have the qualities. All they need to do is just try. Like not be afraid to take opportunities. Do your research online on the colleges and all that. And just give it a try. Yeah, I know a lot of people who did not get what they want because they just believe they cannot.

Fred also brought up an openness to new ideas, including the concept of counseling. Once he was in the United States and he struggled, he sought counseling at the university to help him focus in school. Fred had an overall positive attitude that helped him to adjust and try new experiences, but his junior year, he found himself struggling with symptoms of depression. He adjusted well to this new reality because he sought counseling to help him:

> In junior year, I was super depressed. And that's when I sought the therapist and I would say she helped significantly because I had to learn new techniques to sustain that positive voice, to sustain that persistence, to figure out new coping mechanisms.

Fred's experience demonstrated the openness so many of the participants cited as helping their adjustment in the United States. Other students cited counseling on campus as part of their support network as well.

Convenience contributed to the grateful attitude of many of the participants and provided them with additional freedom. Even the smallest expediency was not lost on the participants' senses of appreciation. Zachary had an example to share, explaining:

> Calling a cab for me was a big deal. Because I'm like wow, you can just call a cab? I mean, usually in Jordan or in Iraq or in Syria, you just kind of stand in the street and you keep waving until someone stops. But here it's like I call a cab and it comes to my door and they ask for my name. It's like wow, this is very convenient. I think most of the things were just the conveniences, wow, this is amazing, I'll call them for delivery. I hadn't seen delivery before. I was ordering Domino's in my dorm room—was funny.

Not only did Zachary appreciate the convenience of being able to have food delivered to his room or arranging a cab ahead of time, his quote also speaks to his appreciation of, and openness to, these new experiences. This openness was also evidenced in the other

participants' experiences shared in this section. The participants all demonstrated an openness to new cultural experiences, which aided in their adjustment and success as international students.

Edith, from the non-profit organization, served as an advisor to the Iraqi undergraduate students for many years. She had also advised students from Russia and Indonesia, as well as graduate students from Iraq. When reflecting on her past experience with all of these groups, she focused on the Iraqi undergraduate population's overarching success on campus, socially, academically, and culturally, stating, "For the undergraduates [from Iraq], just on their age and their generation, they have less biases to overcome, I guess. They are more open to new experiences". She concurred with the students that this sense of openness contributed to their abilities to be successful and adjust to life on campus.

Connecting With On-Campus and Local Community

A willingness to connect with the local community and on-campus organizations proved to be an important element of adapting to their new environment and building resiliency for the participants as well. All participants cited that they were involved in volunteering in the local community and/or on campus community, to include sports, honor societies, and other important opportunities. Zachary shared his experience supporting the local homeless community:

> I did a couple of something called "Taco Tuesday," which is with an organization [in the community]. We just make tacos for the poor and hand it out. Yeah, I would say I was just really open to anything that comes up. I would always be down—let's check it out and see what happens. From that, I just kind of built a network.

Given the distance from family and friends in Iraq, Zachary's willingness to help others included the added benefit of expanding his support network. In addition to

94

demonstrating benevolence to the surrounding community, Zachary connected with on-campus and off-campus opportunities to improve his experience in the United States.

Renee was an officer in the International Student Council in addition to being a member of several honor and engineering societies. She postulated that these experiences helped her to relate to other students from around the world, and to build a strong support network. She explained:

> When you meet people from different backgrounds or kind of similar backgrounds, it just kind of restores the whole, like I'm not alone. There are a lot of students out there that are doing the same thing and they're even doing it, maybe they're better than me. Maybe I could learn from then how they're doing it.

When asked what guidance she would give other Iraqi students, Renee continued on with the theme of getting involved in the community, as a means of support. She stated:

> . . . If it's like classes or student organizations, I was very heavily involved in that, and it was very, very helpful. I was very involved in the International Student Council, and that was so helpful. I got to meet so many students from so many different countries that are experiencing pretty much the same thing, not to the same extent, 'cause they were able to go back home, but at least they have that, that defines us. We would always get together and do a lot of activities together, so definitely, if I were to give out advice to anyone who was new to the States, I would say get involved as much as possible in different [activities].

Renee's experiences illustrated how participating in organizations helped her adapt to her new surroundings. Interacting with other international students provided Renee with support and she felt these connections helped her learn and grow. These experiences were not unique to Renee, as all of the Iraqi students reported that they participated in some sort of on-campus or community group; this offers evidence that they found this involvement to be a positive experience.

Hope and Determination

As the data in the participant section demonstrate, many students built resiliency through maintaining an openness to new experiences, an appreciation for safety, and involvement in the surrounding community. The administrators of the program and the university staff added a unique angle on the building of adaption and resiliency: hope and determination. Along with the students, they recognized that distance from family and past trauma often result in a negative outlook. This section demonstrates the magnitude of hope and determination demonstrated by the students through the lenses of the advisors from the non-profit agency and the university staff.

The advisors from the non-profit support agency, and the university international support network, had additional thoughts on the etiology of the resiliency and adaptation shown by the students. Tammy, who is an international student advisor at the university in Texas, postulated a comparison between her experiences with graduate students versus undergraduate students from Iraq:

> And it's such a big difference between the grads and the undergrads, because the graduate students tend to be older and have families, and they seem to have a lot of history and baggage there, and the undergraduates come and they're . . . "we're all just kids and we're gonna get through this together." They seem to have a lot more positive attitude, where the graduate students are very negative.

Edith, former advisor for the non-profit, added to this sentiment when elaborating on some of the differences she noted from younger students. When explaining her experiences with graduate versus undergraduate students, the variances in their openness was apparent. She noted:

> They [undergraduates] just seem to be more . . . They don't hold back as much as the mid-level career people for [a graduate scholarship program], for example. They [graduate students] are at that stage of their life where they feel like they know a lot, etc. They are not as open to new experiences as the undergraduates. So, the undergraduates also have . . . I don't know if it's generational, as well, but

they just have a drive and . . . I want to say at some level a greater appreciation, most of them, for the experience of being here.

Catherine, also a former advisor from the non-profit, concurred that the undergraduate students' age played a role in their adjustment. She explained that the younger students needed more support, but also demonstrated determination and eagerness. Catherine voiced her opinion of their humility:

> Yeah, I guess I just think the younger students are, they are a little more eager and all of them are really awesome, and I guess they don't have—I don't know. I don't know how to explain it. Their eyes aren't as open to how excellent they are. I guess I'll put it that way. So, they have a different type of humility and flexibility I think, they younger they are.

Tammy, from the university, expanded on the aforementioned topic of positivity and hope of the younger students. She elaborated on her comments regarding the positive attitudes contributing to adaptation. Tammy stated:

> I think it might be easier for the younger ones to have that positivity of, "I've seen some really bad stuff. I've been personally threatened. My family's house was burned down because I came to the US for this program," which we saw happen . . . maybe it is 'cause they're younger and it's just easier to have hope when you're younger.

Donna, one of the on-campus advisors, continued down the path of the resiliency topic, noting that while students did well academically, there were quite a few stressors that plagued them, even though they themselves were safe in the United States. She explained that they were able to still function well, showing grit and determination to adjust:

> . . . There were stressors from home, the situations they were coming from—there had been bombings in their city, worrying about their parents, and their family, worrying about if people knew they were in the United States. We had a lot of those conversations, homesickness, not being able to go home, not being able to connect [with their families] . . . and so that was really different as far as a population, and I think the stress that they carry for what they were needing to do for their families, the sacrifice that had been made was really high.

Her example demonstrated some of the stressors the Iraqi undergraduate students faced each day while in the United States. However, despite the various sources of stress, the students seemed to exhibit resiliency and adjust to student life in the United States. All students who participated in this study entered the United States as J-1 Exchange Students, on single entry visas, meaning they could not travel outside of the United States for the duration of their undergraduate studies. When describing the challenges and subsequent adaptation to the culture and classrooms of the United States, the seven participants also cited separation from family as one of their most difficult adjustment trials. As Andrew mentioned, "I am by myself almost all of the time. Like I have friends from college, I have friends here, but they cannot really replace family, so. That is the biggest challenge, living with no family here, and stuff." As they faced this and other challenges, each of the students demonstrated adaptation in some capacity, which were explored as major emergent themes in this section.

These examples were diverse, but were shared by most of the participants, and many of the on-campus and non-profit advisors. Participants demonstrated in myriad ways hope and determination to adapt in a new culture, a willingness to learn, an appreciation of safety, and, most profoundly, an openness to new experiences. Freedom from violence and, in a cultural sense, freedom to try new things with an open mind, contributed to the building of resiliency factors.

Support Networks

The advisors at the non-profit that administered the scholarship program and the host university staff concurred that the level of support provided by their respective entities aided the students in their adjustment to the United States. Though few Iraqis had entered the United States prior to the first scholarship cohort, the advisors shared that they had anticipated a lot of their needs and felt ready to accommodate any struggles

students might encounter. The two groups (the host university and the non-profit) were in constant communication with each other regarding topics of orientation, and individual adjustment support, far in advance of the arrival of the Iraqi undergraduate students. The non-profit advisors were in contact with the students from the moment of selection, supporting them through their visa interviews and preparing them for undergraduate life in the United States, while simultaneously fostering a sense of independence. Edith advised Iraqi students for several years at the non-profit, and explained her approach:

> A lot of students actually overcame their challenges just by talking and using the resources that we have available both at the [non-profit] and also the university campuses. So, making sure they are engaged in their communities through the International Office through different associations within their department, and just talking to the [non-profit] advisor seems to be really helpful. It seemed to help a lot in overcoming these challenges. They had to be actively involved in finding solutions to these challenges. That is when they are successful.

Edith elaborated on her responsibilities that included campus visits each semester, as well as required phone check-ins with the students. The caseload for this program allowed the frequent check-ins, as most advisors had fewer than 15 undergraduate students at any given time. Edith elaborated, stating that meeting the students on their terms and involving them in the planning of the campus visit each semester, made them feel even more autonomous. She stated:

> It was very helpful for the students to . . . when you go to visit them, it's very helpful for them to feel a sense of family and belonging and to go to visit them in their environment, in their space. . . . And, also, they get really excited. They show you where they work, where they take classes, give you a tour of their campuses. It's very helpful in making that connection.

Given the distance of their families, the non-profit advisors and on-campus networks contributed to the collaborative support that seemed critical to successful student adjustment. Involving the students in planning the visit built a sense of pride and independence. Typically, for other scholarship programs administered by the non-profit,

99

they conducted visits once a year but they anticipated the needs of the Iraqi students to have more frequent visits. Per the non-profit advisors, this was due in part to the young age of the participants. As Edith explained:

> My experience working with undergraduate students was indeed a lot more hands-on. I understand they are younger, and they are far from home. So, they tend to have more questions. They need a little bit more guidance and more hands-on [support].
>   Initially it's usually feeling homesick, feeling out of place, trying to find where they fit in in the community. They are away from their parents, not being able to do their own laundry . . . or being able to cook, missing the food from home. Just missing somebody taking care of them.
>   . . . Socially, it's just fitting in because most of them are coming from a place where they've lived most of their lives. So, they know practically everybody in their social circle. So, having to find where they fit in in a new culture, in a new country, sometimes is challenging for most.

Catherine, who also worked with Iraqi undergraduate and graduate students as a former advisor for the non-profit, went into detail regarding the fundamental support the students received. She now works at a community college on the West Coast of the United States and she explained that she has gained a deeper appreciation of the customized support the non-profit provided, as the community college where she works does not offer the same individualized attention:

> I think the level of support we provided, and they [the students] didn't understand until later, was just so above and beyond but not in an unnecessary way, in a way I think really enabled these students, especially the super young ones to really thrive and succeed, at least as much as they were able to. I just don't understand how students succeed otherwise.

The support cited by Catherine included frequent campus visits and ongoing orientation sessions in person and through webinars. Catherine gave some examples of the topics covered in the extended orientation sessions, which included a focus on a variety of topics.

> I remember working on with [another advisor on] some of the like, "What is a checking account?" Kind of prepping to go with students to the bank, of like the

difference between checking accounts and savings accounts, and credit cards. Okay, they're gonna ask you do you want your transaction to be declined, or you want to let the bank let you overdraw if you don't have sufficient funds, and what does all that mean.

I think [the non-profit] was very, very key in that [overall adjustment] too because I feel like we were always super accessible to them and supportive for all those things. I remember putting together care packages. That is not quite the right term, but it's kind of the right term, like, "Okay, these are the things you need in your apartment," like, "Here is a blanket and a flashlight," and all of these things for emergencies . . ..

The level of attention described in Catherine's quote above demonstrates services customized to the Iraq Scholarship program. Given the young ages of the students and their unique situations, the advising program was specialized to meet their needs. The other scholarship programs administered by the non-profit included a broader, more general orientation program, as many of the students were studying at the graduate level and were from countries with a longer history of exchange.

Darrin, a former non-profit advisor, explained that although he no longer worked with the program, he still provided mentorship to the alumni of the scholarship. During the interview, he went into detail regarding the support network he helped to create for the students from Iraq. Darrin was an advisor for the students for over 4 years, and he recalled some of the support he provided in the past, and would still provide to those students in his cohorts:

I volunteer my time to help them if needed [now]. Yeah. There are certain ways we would support them, like with their academics and recommending . . . the American university system is different than the university system in Iraq so if we saw a student who needed to talk to an academic counselor or talk to somebody, some support staff on campus, we could identify that through conversation, through grades, whatever and recommend that. That's mostly the support we provided.

Based on the advisors' comments, the support provided by the non-profit from Darrin and other advisors was highly attentive, and they worked in concert with the university. This resulted in individualized interventions, cross-campus support, and

ultimately, successful adaptation. The non-profit webinar foci included getting involved on campus, adjusting to US undergraduate classrooms, and building social networks.

The students and advisors cited the university international office and faculty as providing important support networks as well. The office at the university offers an extensive orientation program for students from over 100 countries. They have ongoing on- and off-campus activities that encourage students to get involved with the university community as well as the local community. One of the senior international professionals on campus, Tiffany, explained the coordination role of the international student office, stating that when emergencies arose, a variety of departments worked together to solve the problem. Tiffany stated:

> And so sometimes yeah that is our office, it might be the student emergency services, it might be the student's office, it might be somebody in the department. And in the bigger cases where we truly have a situation where we're really seeing the student struggle, then we all come together, usually in person, sometimes by conference calls and just work it all out together so we're all on the same page to support the student. So, we're not doing it in a vacuum and not knowing what each other is telling a student.
>
> So, I think [the university], for as big as it is, people in the departments and around campus just really care about their students, right? And so, it's really up to the student themselves to figure out who they trust and who they have a connection with of where they get that support.

In addition to the cross-campus support Tiffany articulated above, she went on to explain the structure of their international office on campus. Due to an increase in scholarship students, referred to as "sponsored students" on campus, Tiffany and her leadership team changed the structure of their department to provide specialized support. She explained that around the time of the commencement of the Iraqi Scholarship Program, the international department started to provide customized services:

> And so, we started providing specialized services to sponsored students, whereas previously they were just integrated with all of our other matriculated students . . .

102

And it allowed us to have not only one full-time person but also a graduate student to support them and really be the point person for them to access resources at the university if they didn't know how to do it. And just that point of contact, right? To make it a smaller community. In addition to what they were getting through the department and such.

Patsy, also a high-level administrator at the international office, explained that building trust on campus, and within the community, was important for the Iraqi students. Specifically, on a campus with over 50,000 students, they would depend on each other for resources, and it was not always easy to build their trust. She explained:

And when they do [seek support] it's because somebody else has told them about a resource, or, so I think it's just mainly earning the credibility where they feel like they and where they feel like they can trust the information that is coming to them . . . And when you have the trust of quite a few of them, the rest are trusting, but they do share a lot of information amongst each other.

Patsy also went into depth regarding the cohort system as an asset in building support networks. All students cited making friends outside of their own Iraqi community, but as Patsy pointed out, there were advantages to knowing others from the same country. She noted some of the ways in which this helped the students succeed:

I think both in navigating the culture, the American culture and also in just continuing to support each other through whatever is happening in their homes, in their communities, they are a tight knit community. Tammy and I will have events on a regular basis with them.

Thus, as evidenced by Tiffany and Patsy's information, the university also provided individualized, customized support to the students. They sought to build support networks and a sense of community on a large campus. The following section explores similar support provided by the non-profit.

The majority of the Iraqi participants cited the non-profit scholarship advisors as part of their support networks. During the interviews, they were asked about social, cultural, and academic support networks, and many focused on the non-profit as a primary source of positive adjustment. The participants' levels of detail varied, but there

103

was consensus that the non-profit provided support before, during, and after their

academic experiences. Henry explained his perception:

> The tremendous help that we got from everybody before we got to the US . . .
> Even having [the advisor] at the time coming to Jordan, that was tremendous for
> somebody [to do] . . ..
>> There is that rush that we all really want to go and yes, finally . . . I've
> been dreaming and working for this very hard and finally got my dream. There is
> also a risk. We don't really know what to expect. Having that support from a
> completely unbiased people . . . [the advisors] are doing this clearly to support us.
> There is no agenda . . ..
>> Everything [the advisors] said in all these cultural orientation sessions,
> they really spoke to us. A lot of it looked like textbook stuff, but no, these were
> actually the concerns we were having. They answered all these questions and
> that's when I felt like, "These guys really know what they're doing. They are
> professionals in this field. They are answering the questions without us even
> asking." A lot of it is kind of awkward or embarrassing. Just having somebody . . .
> making you feel like, "Okay, we got you," this was very encouraging. I can't find
> a better word than that.

Henry's account included a description of the pre-academic support students

received before traveling to the United States, including visa interview preparation and

travel arrangements for his cohort to Amman, Jordan, where the visa interviews were

held at the American Embassy. Henry also shared that the advisor met them in Jordan in

order to travel to the United States and prepare the group for entry through customs and

immigration. Fred cited the non-profit advisor as a source of personal support, especially

during his academic program:

> She was always there, she was always answering my own questions. She would
> always even go above and beyond. I remember when I was trying to figure out
> what to do after graduation, she was giving me certain, different ideas, she'd sat
> down and brainstormed as what we can do from after graduation. I thought that
> was . . . that was not necessarily part of her job but I really appreciated that.

Theresa also cited the support of the non-profit, including the annual "special

event" in which students on the scholarship program, from various universities, were

reunited in a large, urban city in Texas. When asked what kind of advice she would give

students who were thinking of applying for the scholarship, she mentioned the value of this and other programs: "Take advantage of orientations and things like the [special] event. Things like that in which they meet people that are in the same shoes as they are." Theresa's quote demonstrated that having a connection with the other international students aided building a strong support network, as they faced many of the same struggles. In conjunction with the support from the non-profit and across campus, this enhanced the students' ability to build resiliency, trust, and adaptation strategies.

In addition to the non-profit support, students cited myriad support networks on-campus. While some students mentioned the international or counseling offices, others mentioned faculty in their respective majors. Andrew cited:

> . . . The major I was in, the department, they had so many good professors. So good in their fields, and that alone just was a huge source of motivation. Taking classes with a professor that's the top in his field. For example, he is like famous.

Henry also cited the lab and the professors in his field as providing strong leadership and inspiration for him. In addition to the strong orientation the campus and non-profit provided, he found encouragement through the challenge of academics, just as he had back in Iraq. He went into detail regarding his academic support:

> We had really good leadership within the satellite design lab. We had the grad students, we've had people doing their post-doc. It was very diverse. That was definitely something distinguishing that worked. We had people . . . just diversity of the project and different ages.

Additionally, when asked what advice she had for this group, Theresa, a student participant, advised new Iraqi exchange students to consider counseling. She explained this source of support as being helpful to new students. When asked about advice for new Iraqi exchange students, Theresa suggested considering counseling:

> To have someone that they can talk to. It could be a little bit hard especially if they have just come here and they would most likely want someone who is more similar to them to talk to and that might be a challenge with counseling, but it's

still better than just dealing with things on their own because there are a lot of sources for help.

Even when there were struggles, the students described how they adapted well to change in their new environment, citing the support and encouragement of their non-profit advisors, who worked with the university and across campus to identify struggling students and encourage counseling as appropriate. Tiffany, a senior level international administrator on campus, pointed out that there were collaborative efforts between departments to identify and resolve challenges with students:

> If they have a trusted person in their department, an advisor or a faculty member, I think that they, and what I've seen is that they will go to them and try to figure things out. But also, having a sponsor student advisor in our office and building that trust has also been really important to where I think students do see us as an area where they can come feel safe and get help and try to navigate what's next. And we're also very attuned in working with the dean of students' office. If they are getting into some sort of situation whether it be financial, or behavioral or in mental health, conduct-related that hasn't crossed the line yet, those sort of things are also where we work really closely with the dean of students to support the students to help them get on the right track . . . In trying to figure out what's the best path for a student when they've found themselves kind of in the . . . Going back to mental health and otherwise financial situations is how do we help them get out of where they are and make the right decision for what's next.

The university in Texas appeared to demonstrate solidarity and cooperation across campus, with a wide range of support services offered to students. The members of the support networks at the university also liaised with non-profit advisors to offer consistent and collaborative support for students. The coordinated, customized support provided by the non-profit and university faculty and staff culminated to create a strong network for the cohorts of Iraqi students that participated in this study. As evidenced by the exploration of this theme, the support commenced upon selection for the scholarship, while the students were still residing in Iraq, and continued throughout the post-graduation period.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a summary of the thematic deductions resulting from an in-depth, qualitative analysis of the data. The data implicated that comprehensive support networks as well as strength of character are important elements in adapting to a host country. The students were also able to share, in graphic detail, the violence they experienced before coming to the United States. Chapter V continues to explore the significance of the results through Summaries, Implications, and Suggestions for Future Research.

CHAPTER V:

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The student participants in this study were from Baghdad, Iraq, where they experienced a high level of violence in their middle/high school years. As evidenced in each student profile, the students' education at the Special School was interrupted by conflict throughout their years of study. Their experiences paralleled much of what is presented in the literature, including a high level of violence and resulting trauma in the post-2003 period in Iraq, with a significant negative impact on the education system (DeFronzo, 2010; Jawad & Assaf, 2014; Steed, 2016; UNESCO, 2011; UNICEF, 2016, 2017). Freh et al. (2013) noted the traumatic psychological effects of the habitants of Baghdad, as well as positive effects such as a new, more optimistic global view and the ability to demonstrate resiliency over time. The students in this study demonstrated hope and determination, the ability to adapt in the face of adversity, and a high level of achievement in academics, social adjustment, and cultural adaptation.

There are two central framework lenses through which I had interpreted the data resulting from this study: the "organismic valuing theory of growth through adversity" and "hope theory." An important tenet of the organismic valuing theory of growth through adversity is the OVP, through which individuals regulate their sources of inspiration (Joseph & Linley, 2008). OVP includes a process of integrating experiences, which may lead to vulnerability, psychopathology, or a third trajectory in which "experiences are accommodated in a positive direction, leading to growth (e.g., living in the moment, valuing relationships and appreciating life)" (Joseph & Linley, 2008, pp. 13-14). As evidenced in the results of this study, all students demonstrated a positive outlook, as well as growth in their academic, cultural, and social adjustment periods.

Summary

The data collection in this dissertation was aimed at answering specific research questions related to the cultural, social, and academic adjustment of Iraqi undergraduate exchange students in the United States. The purpose of this study was to determine the factors that led to the demonstration of expeditious adjustment, resiliency factors, and academic excellence by the student participants from Iraq. As evidenced in Chapter IV, several emergent themes were unveiled during data analysis that contributed to the aforementioned characteristics.

Exposure to the Culture of the United States

While some of the participants had not previously traveled to the United States prior to their undergraduate years, all of the students noted some exposure to, and appreciation for, the culture of their future host country. Prior to 2003, their acquaintance with American culture was limited due the isolation of Iraq but they found social media, television programs, and movies to be novel and compelling. All participants built an appreciation for the English language and the general cultural norms that they dreamed of experiencing in their higher education pursuits.

Four of the seven students participated in short exchange programs to the United States for up to 1 month while in high school. The others learned from their colleagues' experiences as well, citing gender and religious equity, rewards for hard work free of nepotism, and academic freedom as customs they appreciated in the United States. This contributed to their motivation to apply for scholarship programs for study in the United States. Once selected, the non-profit that administered the scholarship program provided a high level of exposure through webinars and preparation for academic, cultural, and social adjustment in the United States.

Academic Preparedness

Despite experiencing a high level of terroristic activity throughout their secondary school years in Baghdad, the Special School's curriculum prepared the student participants well for the academic rigor of an undergraduate program in a large university in the United States. The students all cited academic adjustment as the least stressful aspect of their acculturation due to their academic preparation in Baghdad, especially in math and science. Some of the more logistical changes were indeed challenging, such as how much to study outside of class, how to register for courses, and adjusting to the nature of testing structures, such as multiple-choice questions. Also, in their secondary and middle school in Baghdad, many of the classes were taught in English, giving the students an advantage of near fluency in the host country language.

The data from the academic preparedness motif also suggested that the students had a high natural academic aptitude. In addition to stringent elementary school testing to enter their middle/high school in Baghdad, the scholarship requirements made the program very competitive. Some of the university staff and non-profit advisors noted the stringency of the selection process, including high score requirements for the TOEFL and SAT exams.

Factors Contributing to Adaptation

Several common sub-themes were unveiled during the data analysis phase of this study related to the adaptation process of the student participants. In addition to open minds, all of the participants demonstrated an appreciation for the freedom and safety of their new host campus environment in the United States. The general consensus amongst the student participants was that their new environment provided a sense of security for physical safety, combined with a freedom from religious or gender-related persecution. This was in part what they were seeking when deciding to pursue studies outside of Iraq.

Research has demonstrated that the perception of a safe environment is correlated with stronger academic performance (Lee et al., 2018; Milam et al., 2010). Despite extreme terrorism experienced in Baghdad, the participants from this study were well-prepared academically for life in the United States. All of the participants cited academic preparation from the Special School as having an influence on their strong science and math performance in their United States undergraduate programs. Additionally, many of the participants, especially Maxwell and Henry, cited safety as a central motivation for seeking higher education opportunities in the United States. Being in a safe environment for their undergraduate degrees may have contributed to their academic performance.

An exploration of the current research on building social capital on campuses correlates the elements of trust and safety with positive undergraduate academic performance (Oranye et al., 2017). The experience of the undergraduates in the Iraqi Scholarship program supported this conclusion, as the structure of support on campus and by the non-profit specifically focused on building social capital related to trust and safety through individualized attention throughout the scholarship program. Once in the United States, the student participants in this study experienced a sense of safety in transit to their classes, in crowds, and during their labs or other extra-curricular activities. Staying out late, without a curfew, was also a novel, safe experience that the participants cited. They were intrigued and motivated by the freedom and safety they felt in their everyday lives. Some of the students felt the independence from nepotism and academic freedom outweighed the significant risks in pursuing an education in the United States.

All of the student participants demonstrated an openness to new experiences, and a deep appreciation for the freedom and safety they found during their academic, social, and cultural experiences. Most of the students expressed the sentiment that they had found what they were seeking outside of Iraq, and the feeling that the benefits of studying

abroad outweighed the risks. These factors were coupled with a drive and determination demonstrated by each student throughout their undergraduate experiences. Despite social and cultural challenges, the student participants exhibited a strong drive to succeed and pure "grit" in their characters as they adapted to life in the United States. Maintaining a sense of hope through the adversity was another commonality amongst the students. Drawing from hope theory (Snyder et al., 1991), the participants demonstrated both agency and pathways through their pre-departure and arrival adaptation experiences. According to the conclusory data in Chapter IV, this led to a high level of success academically, socially, and culturally.

Another major factor in successful adaptation was a high level of involvement on the campus and the surrounding community. Research has indicated a positive relationship between acculturation and opportunities for social interaction (Gómez et al. 2015) All of the students were involved in a number of clubs and organizations on campus, as well as with the international office and their non-profit advisors. Some of their involvement reached beyond the campus and into the surrounding community, leading to expanded support networks in the United States. Sullivan and Kashubeck-West (2015) concluded that building social networks via involvement in the community contributes to cultural adjustment. The culmination of strength of character, an openness to new experiences, and an appreciation for a safe environment led to a high level of resilience demonstrated by each student.

Glass et al. (2015) contended that giving voice to international students on campus, and throughout the governance of the university, helps to differentiate individual needs, and provide support and intervention opportunities, all with the goal of aiding adjustment. The university in Texas appeared to follow this model closely by collaborating with the non-profit advisors, encouraging on-campus involvement for the

112

students, and soliciting the support of various on-campus entities. They anticipated the needs of the students from a country with a violent background and intervened collectively when necessary.

Support Networks

All seven of the students cited comprehensive support throughout their scholarship experience. The participants focused on support from their on-campus international advisors, as well as those from the non-profit, and other entities across campus. High-level administrators from the university in Texas confirmed that their support and intervention strategies included involvement from across campus, including the counseling center, student affairs office, and faculty members. This strongly supported the literature regarding the significance of comprehensive student support across campus (Briggs & Ammigan, 2017; Glass et al., 2015; Lertora et al., 2017; Prieto-Welch, 2016; Urban & Palmer, 2016; Wu et al., 2015).

In addition to the new networks built by the involvement on campus and in the community, the structure of the scholarship program was designed to provide a high level of support for students entering the United States as undergraduate exchange students. Several common themes emerged through the structured interviews conducted with the student participants, and those participants from the non-profit and the host university. As the non-profit and university had worked with students from various countries, they had a high level of expertise regarding personalized and customized support for students facing adversity. The university's international office on the campus in Texas also involved several campus departments in providing support tailored to the needs of each individual student. Some of the students also cited inspiration and support from faculty as elements that fostered adaptation. The interviewees also noted that the university had a "sponsored" student office for exchange students with scholarships.

113

An example of a new, flexible conceptual framework is the "international student identity (ISI) model" (Kim 2012), which allows for growth through stages but expands beyond the U Curve example to include fluidity between stages, allowing for a more flexible and individual approach to adjustment (Kim, 2012). The student participants in this study demonstrated a high level of individuality in their adjustment experiences, and the support they received was highly customized by the university and the scholarship administrators to meet their needs.

All of the student participants also cited support from their immediate families in pursuing a higher education in the United States. As demonstrated in the profiles and individual data from the interviews, all students credited their families with encouragement throughout their search for opportunities in the higher education and scholarship networks in the United States.

Implications

Implications for Campus Leadership and International Educators

University governance, faculty, and other staff need to recognize individual student experiences, as well as give them a voice on campus. Only then can students receive the customized support they deserve from their advisors. Since it is a reality that many international offices are underfunded (Briggs & Ammigan, 2017), support across campus is a critical tool in aiding in the social, academic, and cultural adjustment of students. Thus, campus leaders can speak with one voice, recognize when students are struggling, and intervene when necessary. Collaboration on campus benefits not only the international students but the overarching governance of the university, as this leads to higher adaptation, and subsequently, increased retention rates on campus (Briggs & Ammigan, 2017). While the topic of retention rates was not explored specifically in this dissertation, campus leaders need to recognize that their pursuit of institution-wide

internationalization must parallel with retention initiatives customized for international students.

The findings presented in this study supported research that contended a balance of support from the home country and in-host country networks contributes to a higher level of acculturation in the United States (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). The students in this study demonstrated this balance, with highly supportive families in Iraq, coupled with on-campus and non-profit support networks in the United States. As noted in the student profiles, many participant families risked their safety to allow their children to pursue higher education outside of Iraq, as this was considered taboo by the militants in their country. The university worked with the non-profit agency to build networks within the United States that aided in the adjustment of the students. The students cited networks on campus and the surrounding community as aiding in their adjustment to life in the United States. For students who are not able to travel during their time in the United States due to visa restrictions, it is especially important for international advisors to help balance networks between the host and home countries, by providing ample opportunity to engage with the surrounding community and on-campus.

Fuller (2014) contended that building trust on campus ". . . fosters a willingness to become actively involved with the school" (p. 143). Each of the students represented in this dissertation was dynamically involved on-campus, in their respective research labs, and many in the surrounding community; campus staff may want to encourage future students to take advantage of opportunities to become involved on their campuses as a way to assist in their acculturation.

Some researchers viewed the building of social capital as a fundamental responsibility of international host campuses (Glass et al., 2015). As demonstrated in the themes unveiled in this study, the university studied in this dissertation illuminated this

115

finding by providing cross-campus support, with individualized intervention plans to aid in student adjustment from pre-departure phase through the end of the scholarship period. Campus leadership should embrace the international student population as part of their community, and advocate for the well-being of these students, while recognizing their contribution to the diversity of the campus.

All student participants in this study reported involvement on campus, including student organizations, and some reported involvement in the surrounding community, such as volunteering with the homeless population off-campus. This supports research that posited that international students adjust and progress more expeditiously when they become involved on-campus and in the surrounding community (Glass et al., 2015; Gómez et al., 2014). Campus leaders should be intimately familiar with research-based solutions, including a focus on qualitative research to augment the many quantitative studies regarding social, academic, and cultural adjustment of the international student.

A fundamental finding of this research study was the impactful nature of pre-departure support in arrival adjustment. Non-profit advisors helped to navigate the complicated immigration landscape, as well as entry exam requirements including TOEFL and the SAT, which required international travel to surrounding countries, including Syria and Jordan, for some participants. The non-profit also introduced the concepts of cultural adjustment, American classroom expectations, and opportunities for involvement on campus. This supports existing research that asserted the following: customized, individual support in advance of travel to the host country aids in adjustment upon arrival, in particular with students from the MENA region (Rabia, 2016). If university advisors and the administering agency connect with the students prior to arrival, it aids in adjustment upon commencement of the university experience. Many programs may not have the resources to implement a travel companion plan, but with the

advent of social media and the increase of online communications, advisors can offer information on what to expect at the American Embassy Visa appointment, travel through U.S. Customs and Immigration, and how to build resiliency behaviors before arriving.

Finally, the results of this study demonstrated the significance of having research-based solutions, with globally aware international student advisors. Students coming from certain countries may have PTSD to address, or a violent history with which to contend. As research leans toward positive psychological results from trauma, such as resiliency building and hope theory, international educators are obligated to be on trend with their policy development, with sound research to support their decisions.

As stated in previous sections, involvement in the campus and community outside of campus can aid in adaptation (Glass et al., 2015; Gómez et al., 2014; Selby & Woods, 1966). This study supported this conclusion, as all of the students cited involvement in campus and community as a means of building support networks. This also helped them to interact with other international students and American students in an academic, cultural, and social context. Though the international students in the cited studies were not necessarily from the same country, as the students in this study were, they experienced similar challenges such as immigration regulations, cultural adjustment obstacles, and academic adaptation. These opportunities should be provided for students from around the globe by on-campus advisors, as this is proven to aid in building support networks and subsequently, adding to the probability of successful adjustment. Given the evidence in the research, international student offices and campus leadership should encourage immersion in the campus culture and surrounding community as a means of building support networks that aid in adaptation. Involvement on campus also provides

advocacy opportunities to give voice to international students and a recognition of their individualized needs.

Research has shown that familiarity with the host culture and fluency in the host language increases the ability to adjust once in the United States, especially for students from the Middle East, North Africa (MENA) region (Rabia, 2016). Students in this study had a variety of pre-departure experiences, as well as differing levels of familiarity with and nature of exposure to the culture of the United States. However, the common thread amongst the participants was English proficiency and some knowledge of what to expect in an American classroom and through cultural adjustment. With increased use of social media, international offices should build a familiarity with the host country in advance of travel. All of the participants in this study had customized pre-departure support, and it made a significant impact on their understanding of what to expect upon arrival. They also had English taught as part of their secondary school curriculum and sought experiences to help improve their English proficiency in informal ways, such as music, television, and through networks of other students looking to study abroad.

The student participants in this study experienced a high level of support from their families, most of whom risked their safety to allow their children to study in the United States. Most of the students had difficulty with the separation from their families upon arrival and cited the importance of pursuing their dreams and building new support networks as integral to their success. Two critical ways students built support networks were involvement on campus and in the surrounding community.

The study unveiled two important etiologies of success for the student participants: hope and determination. As summarized in Chapter II of this dissertation, a sense of hope has an impact on academic achievement and adjustment (Snyder, 2002). Bernardo (2010) contended that internal motivation, coupled with external support

118

networks, contributed to a sense of hope. The student participants in this study demonstrated a positive sense of hope and had support from family at home to pursue higher education study in the United States. The university administrators and the non-profit advisors corroborated that the students demonstrated a sense of hope in their academic, cultural, and social pursuits, even after experiencing a high level of terror in their home country. International educators should familiarize future students with the tenets of hope theory in order to build an optimistic and self-supporting plan to reach goals. Students who have experienced violence should especially consider exploring this theory as a strategy builder.

The students demonstrated fortitude, intrinsic motivation, and detailed, persistent planning on their paths to reaching their goals. Determination and "grit" were also common characteristics shown by the participants throughout their scholarship experiences. The research showed a direct correlation between hope and optimism, and cultural adjustment (Bybell et al., 2013). Prospective international exchange students should learn from the Iraqi student experience described in this study by understanding the important role of hope and determination in their international journeys. Framing adversity as a challenge that can be overcome fostered a sense of hope and determination with the Iraqi students in this study. The openness to learning and the flexibility demonstrated by the students can also be a point of emphasis when advising future exchange students.

Recommendations for Future Research

The nature and focus of future international student research need to evolve at a similar pace as globalization. Research has begun a trend toward positive psychology and identifying the etiology of resilience characteristics (Glass et al., 2015; Khawaja et al., 2014; Wang, 2014). However, few instruments have been tested or implemented that

119

measure and predict resiliency (Khawaja et al., 2014; Wang, 2009). For those students from countries experiencing violence, focusing on understanding and building resiliency can aid in building positive outlooks and hope toward the future (Morland et al., 2008). Negative effects of PTSD have been researched yet there exists a gap in the literature focusing on positive outlooks and strategies to foster characteristics of resilience (Vasquez et al., 2008).

The qualitative research conducted in this dissertation supports the assertion by researchers that more qualitative research is required to determine the etiology of cultural, academic, and social adjustment (Glass et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2017). Historically, research has focused on a homogeneous, more quantitative approach to exploring adjustment, such as the cultural adaptation U-curve (Selby & Woods, 1966). More contemporary literature challenged the U-curve approach, contending that objective U-curve research fails to recognize the individual nature of cultural adaptation (Chien, 2016).

Additionally, more qualitative research in general on international student adjustment is warranted to differentiate individual needs. There should also be additional exploration on students who do not get a high level of individual support, and those who may not have attended a secondary school with a gifted focus. Researchers must continue the trajectory toward positive adjustment, building resiliency and social capital, and creating a safe environment for students. Given the current global reality of rapidly changing immigration laws, in-country violence, and persecution of those who pursue education in Western countries, this is even more critical in today's world.

Previous research showed that students from the MENA region have experienced more significant adaptation challenges than students from other world areas (Bai, 2016). This is one of the largest populations entering the United States as international students,

as MENA students account for 9% of international students in the United States (Farrugia et al., 2017). Thus, educators have an obligation to gain insight into students that originate from this world region. There is a paucity of research specifically on students from Iraq who enter the United States as J-1 exchange students. Exploring this population may help international educators understand more about how to serve students from other countries experiencing violence from other world regions such as Central America.

While the concept of international student resiliency at present has been studied, the research related to *predicting* resiliency is limited (Khawaja et al., 2014; Wang, 2009). Predicting resiliency is a tool that can help international educators anticipate how students will adjust to a new, international host campus (Wang, 2009). Identifying and supporting resiliency characteristics is a strategy that may help international educators in providing customized support to international students, especially those who have experienced violence in their home countries. Resiliency scales have been developed in very limited quantities, with one example presented in Khawaja et al.'s (2014) research on resiliency in international students. The authors contended that their measurement tool, which focuses on such factors as multicultural adjustment, coping mechanisms, and solving multicultural challenges, aids in determining customized advising, focusing on positive adjustment skills that can be augmented through attention from international advisors. Researchers should follow the trend of customized, qualitative research to identify individual factors that may aid in adjustment.

Research has begun trending toward equality and advocacy for international students on campus (Glass et al., 2015). As concepts of cultural adaptation and resiliency change and adapt to global conditions, the trajectory of research must follow suit. Drawing from the literature, it is also important to note that advocacy for international student rights across campus and in the community, leads to building meaningful

121

relationships, which is critical to adaptation (Urban & Palmer, 2016). Though this specific topic was not explored in detail as part of this dissertation, it is an important obligation to consider. At a time when immigration laws are changing, contemporary research must grow and adapt with the perpetual shifts globally and in the United States. The research recommendations are impactful for future international students, staff and faculty involved with exchange students, as well as the overall governance of the university. Multi-faceted support aids all stakeholders, as it promotes increased retention rates, international adaptation, and increases the diversity on campus, and in the surrounding communities.

REFERENCES

Abunab, H. Y., Dator, W. L. T., Salvador, J. T., Lacanaria, M. G. C. (2017). Solitude, religious and cultural uniqueness in a foreign environment: Adjustments as an Arab student. *Journal of Religious Health, 56*, 1701-1718. doi:10.1007/s10943-017-0425-x

Acosta, D. M. (2014), Tweet up? Examining twitter's impact on social capital and digital citizenship in higher education. *About Campus*, *18*, 10-17. doi:10.1002/abc.21139

Al-Janabi, F.S., & Anderson, D. (2011). Reforming the higher education system in Iraq: Internationalization visa decentralization. *Journal of Educational Technology*, *8*(3), 1-14.

Al-Hadethe, A., Hunt, N., Thomas, S., & Al-Qaysi, A. (2014). Prevalence of traumatic events and PTSD symptoms among secondary school students in Baghdad. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, *5*, 1-5. doi:10.3402/ejpt.v5.23928

Al-Mandwee, S. (2015). *An examination of the relationship among Iraqi high school students' science achievement and perceptions of the value of education, parent support, and peer support in the United States. (*Order No. 3700575). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order 1680020274). Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/1680020274?accountid=7108

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.

Arastaman, G., & Balci, A. (2013). Investigation of high school students' resiliency perception in terms of some variables. *Educational Sciences, 13*, 922-928.

Aviles de Bradley, A. M. (2011). Unaccompanied homeless youth: Intersections of homelessness, school experiences and educational policy. *Child &Youth Services, 32,* 155-172. doi:10.1080/0145935X.2011.583176

Bai, J. (2016). Perceived support as a predictor of acculturative stress among

    international students in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, *6*(1),

    93-106.

Bernardo, A. B. (2010). Extending hope theory: Internal and external locus of trait hope.

    Personality and Individual Differences, 49, 944-949.

Bhochhibhoya, A. A., Yue Dong, Y., & Branscum, P. P. (2017). Sources of social

    support among international college students in the United States. *Journal of*

    International Students, *7*, 671-686. doi:10.5281/zenodo.570032.

Briggs, P., & Ammigan, R. (2017). A collaborative programming and outreach model for

    international student support offices. *Journal of International Students*, *7*(4),

    1080-1095. doi:10.5281/zenodo.1035969

Brookings Institution (2009, November). Resolving Iraqi displacement: Humanitarian

    and development perspectives. University of Bern Project on Internal

    Displacement Proceedings, Doha, Qatar. Retrieved from

    http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4c514e3f2.pdf

Bybell, D., Jackson, M. M., & Ray, S. (2013). International students in the U.S.: Social

    and psychological adjustment. *Journal of International Students*, *3*(1), 17-28.

Cai, Y. (2017) Bonding, bridging, and linking: Photovoice for resilience through social

    capital. *Natural Hazards 88*, 1169-1195. doi:10.1007/s11069-017-2913-4

Chien, G. C. (2016). After six decades: Applying the u-curve hypothesis to the

    adjustment of international postgraduate students. *Journal of Research in*

    International Education, 15(1), 32-51.

Code of Federal Regulations (2016) retrieved from:

    https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/collectionCfr.action?selectedYearFrom=2016

    &go=Go

DeCapua, A., & Marshall, H. W. (2011). Reaching ELLs at risk: Instruction for students with limited or interrupted formal education. *Preventing School Failure, 55*(1), 35-41.

DeFronzo, J. (2010). *The Iraq war: Origins and consequences*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Farrugia, C., Bhandari, R., Baer, J., Robles, C., & Andrejko, N. (2017). *Open doors 2017 report on international educational exchange.* New York, NY: Institute of International Education.

Farrugia, C. A., & Bhandari, R. (2015*). Open doors 2015 report on international educational exchange.* New York, NY: Institute of International Education.

Freh, F. M., Chung, M. C., & Dallos, R. (2013). In the shadow of terror: Posttraumatic stress and psychiatric co-morbidity following bombing in Iraq: The role of shattered world assumptions and altered self-capacities. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, *47*, 215-225. doi:10.1016/j.jpsychires.2012.10.008

Fuller, C. (2014). Social capital and the role of trust in aspirations for higher education. *Educational Review*, *66*(2), 131-147. doi:10.1080/00131911.2013.768956

Gautam, C., Lowery, C., Mays, C., & Durant, D. (2016). Challenges for global learners: A qualitative study of the concerns and difficulties of international students. *Journal of International Students*, *6*, 501-526.

Gebhard, J. (2012). International students' adjustment problems and behaviors. *Journal of International Students*, *2*, 184-193.

Glass, C. R., Wongtrirat, R., & Buus, S. (2015). International student engagement: Strategies for creating inclusive, connected, and purposeful campus environments. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

125

Gómez, E., Urzúa, A., & Glass, C. R. (2014). International student adjustment to college: Social networks, acculturation, and leisure. *Journal of Park & Recreation Administration*, *32*(1), 7-25.

Grover, S. (2005). Advocacy by children as a causal factor in promoting resilience. *Childhood*, *12*, 527-538.

Higher Education Statistics Agency. (2018). *Figure 11 - top ten non-European Union countries of domicile in 2016/17 for HE student enrolments 2012/13 and 2016/17*. Retrieved from https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/sfr247/figure-11

Hollands, L. (2012). *Student engagement and academic performance of Iraqi refugee community college students in America* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1697499401)

In, H. (2016). Acculturation and hope as predictors of career decision self-efficacy among Korean international undergraduate student. *Journal of Career Development, 43*, 526-540.

Ismael, S. T. (2008). The lost generation of Iraq: children caught in the crossfire. International *Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, *2*(2), 151-163. doi:10.1386/ijcis.2.2.151/1

Jamil, H., Farrag, M., Hakim-Larson, J., Kafaji, T., Abdulkhaleq, H., & Hammad, (2007). Mental health symptoms in Iraqi refugees: Posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression. *Journal of Cultural Diversity*, *14(1),* 19-25.

Jawad, S. N., & Al-Assaf, S.I. (2014). The higher education system in Iraq and its future. *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, *8(1),* 55-72. doi:10.1386/ijcis.8.1.55_1

Johnson, B., & Christensen, L. B. (2012). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Joseph, S., & Linley, P. A. (2005). Positive adjustment to threatening events: An

    organismic valuing theory of growth through adversity. *Review of General*

    *Psychology, 9(*3), 262-280. doi:10.1037/1089-2680.9.3.262

Joseph, S., & Linley, P. A. (2006). Growth following adversity: theoretical perspectives

    and implications for clinical practice. *Clinical Psychology Review, 26*, 1041-1053

    doi: 10.1016/j.cpr.2005.12.006

Joseph, S., & Linley, P. A. (2008). *Trauma, recovery, and growth: Positive psychological*

    perspectives on posttraumatic stress. Hoboken, N.J: John Wiley

Khawaja, N. G., Ibrahim, O., & Schweitzer, R. D. (2017). Mental wellbeing of students

    from refugee and migrant backgrounds: The mediating role of resilience. *School*

    Mental Health, *9*, 284-293.

Khawaja, N. G., Moisuc, O., & Ramirez, E. (2014), Developing an acculturation and

    resilience scale. *Australian Psychologist, 49,* 171-180. doi:10.1111/ap.12052

Kim, E. (2012). An alternative theoretical model: Examining psychosocial identity

    development of international students in the United States. *College Student*

    Journal, 46, 99-113.

Lee, M., Kim, Y., & Madyun, N. (2018). Do relational and structural characteristics of

    negative school environments independently predict immigrant adolescents'

    academic achievement? *Social Psychology Education.*

Lertora, I., Henriksen, R.C., Starkey, J., & Li, C (2017). International students' transition

    experiences in rural Texas: A phenomenological study. *The Qualitative Report,*

    22(7), 1989-2005.

Lombard, C. (2014). Coping with anxiety and rebuilding identity: A psychosynthesis

    approach to culture shock. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, *27*, 174-199

Luster, T., Qin, D., Bates, L., Rana, M., & Lee, J. A. (2010) Successful adaptation among

    Sudanese unaccompanied minors: Perspectives of youth and foster parents.

    Childhood, 17, 197-211. doi:10.1177/0907568210365664

Mallegg, K. (2012). DSMIV. *Acronyms, Initialisms & Abbreviations Dictionary*, 46th

    ed., vol. 2, Gale Virtual Reference Library. Retrieved from www.gale.come

Marr, P. (2012). *The modern history of Iraq* (3rd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview

Masterson, D. (2010). An American dream: The broken Iraqi refugee resettlement

    program and how to fix it. *Kennedy School Review*, 104-7.

Matsumoto, D., & Hwang, H.C. (2013). Assessing cross-cultural competence: A review

    of available tests. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 44*,849-870.

McCarthy, C. (2016). Improve safety of your international students. *Campus Security*

    Report, *12,* 1-6. doi:10.1002/casr.30143.

Meleis, A. I. (1982). Arab students in Western universities: Social properties and

    dilemmas. *The Journal of Higher Education, 53*(4*),* 439-447.

Mesidor, J. M., & Sly, K. F. (2016). Factors that contribute to the adjustment of

    international students. *Journal of International Students*, *6*, 262-282.

Milam, A. J., Furr-Holden, C. D. M., & Leaf, P. J. (2010). Perceived school and

    neighborhood safety, neighborhood violence and academic achievement in urban

    school children. *Urban Review*, *42*, 458-467. doi:10.1007/s11256-010-0165-7.

Mohammed-Marzouk, M. R. (2012). Teaching and learning in Iraq: A brief history. *The*

    Education Forum, 76, 259-264. doi:10.1080/00131725.2011.653869.

Morland, L. A., Butler, L. D., & Leskin, G. A. (2008). Resilience and thriving in a time

    of terrorism. In S. Joseph & P. A. Linley (Eds.), *Trauma, recovery, and growth:*

    Positive psychological perspectives on posttraumatic stress (pp. 39-62). Hoboken,

    NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Nelson, M., Hess, J.M., Isakson, B., Goodkind, J. (2016). Seeing the life: Redefining self-worth and family roles among Iraqi refugee families resettled in the United States: *International Migration and & Integration. 17* (7070. doi:10.1007/s12134-015-0441-1

Ngo, C., & Lumadue, R. (2014). A longitudinal comparison of international student enrollments in 4-Year institutions of higher education in the United States. *International Journal of Scholarly Academic Intellectual Diversity*, *16*(1), 1-14.

Oranye, N. O., Ezeah, P., & Ahmad, N. (2017). Elements of social capital and academic performance of undergraduate student. *Social Indicators Research, 131*, 305-319. doi:10.1007/s11205-016-1249-x

Ovink, S., & Veazey, B. (2011). More than "getting us through": A case study in cultural capital enrichment of underrepresented minority undergraduates. *Research in Higher Education, 52*, 370-394. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/41483791

Patnaik, G. (2014). *Lived experiences of Iraqi refugee students in community colleges.* (Doctoral Dissertation). Available from Proquest (Order No. AAI3633159).

Prieto-Welch, S. L. (2016), International student mental health. *Student Services, 2016*(156). 53-63. doi:10.1002/ss.20191.

Rabia, H. M. A. (2016). Undergraduate Arab international students' adjustment to U.S. universities. *International Journal of Higher Education, 6*(1). 131-139.

Rabia, H. M. A., & Karkouti, I. M. (2017). A qualitative investigation of the factors affecting Arab international students' persistence in the United States. *College Student Journal, 51*(3). 347-354.

Salman, K., & Resick, L. (2015). The description of health among Iraqi refugee women in the United States. *Journal of Immigrant & Minority Health*, *17*(4) 1199-1205. doi:10.1007/s10903-014-0035-6

Santisteban, A. V. D. (2005). Sanctions, war, occupation and the de-development of education in Iraq. *International Review of Education, 51*. 59-71. doi:10.1007/s11159-005-0587-8

Selby, H., & Woods, C. (1966). Foreign students at a high-pressure university. *Sociology of Education, 39(2),*138-154

Snyder, C. (2002). Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind. *Psychological Inquiry, 13*(4), 249-275. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/1448867.

Snyder, C. R., Harris, C., Anderson, J. R., Holleran, S. A., Irving, L. M., Sigmon, S. T., & Harney, P. (1991). The will and the ways: Development and validation of an individual-differences measure of hope. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *60*, 570-585. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.60.4.570

Steed, B. L. (2016). *Voices of the Iraq war: Contemporary accounts of daily life*. Denver, CO: Greenwood.

Sullivan, C. S., & Kashubeck-West, S. S. (2015). The interplay of international students' acculturative stress, social support, and acculturation modes. *Journal of International Students*, *5*(1), 1-11.

Two Thousand Eight Presidential Task Force on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. (2018). Children and trauma; update for mental health professionals. Retrieved from http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/children-trauma-update.aspx

UNESCO. (2011). *UNESCO national education support strategy; Republic of Iraq 2010-2014.* Retrieved from http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002168/216873e.pdf

UNICEF. (2016). *UNICEF Iraq briefing note education*. Retrieved from

    https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/unicef-iraq-briefing-note-education-30-september-

    2016

UNICEF. (2017). *The cost and benefits of education in Iraq*. Retrieved from

    https://www.unicef.org/iraq/TheCostOfEducationInIraq-EN.pdf

Urban, E., & Palmer, L. L. (2016). International students' perceptions of the value of U.S.

    higher education. *Journal of International Students*, *6*(1), 153-174.

U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (2018). World fact book; middle east: Iraq. Retrieved

    from https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html

U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. (n.d.). *J-1 Visa*

    exchange visitor program. Retrieved from https://j1visa.state.gov/basics/

Vasquez, C., Perez-Sales, P., & Hervas, G. (2008). Positive effects of terrorism and

    posttraumatic growth: An individual and community perspective. In S. Joseph &

    P.A. Linley, (Eds.), *Trauma, recovery, and growth: Positive psychological*

    perspectives on posttraumatic stress (pp. 63-92). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley &

    Sons, Inc.

Wang, J., (2009). A study of resiliency characteristics in the adjustment of international

    graduate students at American universities. *Journal of Studies in International*

    Education, 13(1). 22-45.

Wu, H., Garza, H., & Guzman, N. (2015). International student's challenge and

    adjustment to college. *Education Research International, 15*(9), 1-9.

    doi:10.1155/2015/202753

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods.* Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Zhang, X., Xuan, X., Chen, F., Zhang, C., Luo, Y. & Wang, Y. (2016), The relationship

    among school safety, school liking, and students' self-esteem: Based on a

multilevel mediation model. *Journal of School Health*, *86*(3), 164-172. doi:10.1111/josh.12364

Zhou, Y., Jindal-Snape, D., Topping, K., & Todman, J. (2008). Theoretical models of culture shock and adaptation in international students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, *33*(1), 63-75. doi:10.1080/03075070701794833

APPENDIX A:

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your high school years in Iraq.

   a. What was a typical day like

   b. Did you attend regularly? If you did not, please explain.

   c. Did you learn English in High School? If not, how did you learn English?

2. How would you characterize your family's view of education?

3. How did you decide to study in the United States? Explain any risks and benefits.

4. What was your major source of support before you left Iraq?

5. How long have you been in the U.S.?

6. Upon arrival, were there any struggles you faced academically?

   a. Culturally?

      Socially?

      What did you do to overcome these challenges and do you still face struggles?

7. How much exposure did you have to the U.S. culture before traveling here for the first time? Where did the exposure come from?

8. How did your previous expectations meet the current reality at your university?

9. What is the biggest challenge you have faced so far?

10. Who has continued to be your biggest support network since you arrived?

11. Are you here with family or alone? If yes, who is here with you? Are they physically located near you?

12. Is your family back home supportive? How? Are friends back home supportive as well?

13. What advice would you give other Iraqi exchange students hoping to study abroad in the United States? What three qualities do you think an individual needs in order to be successful in the United States education system?

14. What activities, clubs or organizations are you involved with on campus? Off-Campus?

15. Do you feel you are successful academically?

    a. Socially?

    b. Culturally?

    Why do you feel this way?

16. How, if at all, have you tried to fit in with your peers on campus?

17. How accepted do you feel by your peers? Any changes compared with when you first arrived?

18. Who would you characterize as a role model for yourself?

APPENDIX B:

STAFF/ADVISOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your position at the university/non-profit.

2. Tell me about your experience with Iraqi students over the years.

3. What were some of the struggles you observed academically with regards to Iraqi students?

    a. Culturally?

    b. Socially?

    c. Did students overcome these? If so, how?

        What are some of the triumphs you have observed in regard to Iraqi students?

4. Were you a part of the Iraqi student support network? If so, how?

5. Do you believe this university or non-profit offered culturally specific support to students from Iraq? If so, please describe.

6. Share some stories of student resiliency, if you have experienced this. How would you characterize the perceptions of other students toward Iraqi students?

7. What resources are available to international students?

8. Are there any activities, clubs/organizations for international students? Are any of these specifically marketed/focused on meeting Iraqi students' needs? How are these resources communicated to students?

9. What other types of support (academic, social, cultural) does the university or non-profit offer to international students?