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EXPLORING THE TRANSITIONAL EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

by

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Dedication

Dear my lovely Dad, Professor Jafar Farokhian, I couldn't be any prouder to be your daughter. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your unyielding love, support, and encouragement! I haven't had the chance yet to publish your poems, showcase your artworks, and share your life lessons with the world, but I pursued my doctorate as I had promised. Thank you for teaching me the values that always guide me through my life! I wish you were alive and could witness my accomplishments! This dissertation is dedicated to you!

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING THE TRANSITIONAL EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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This qualitative study aimed to explore the transitional experiences of international students at community colleges, along with the factors that impact their sense of belonging and persistence. The population of this study attended a large community college in Southeastern Texas. The purposeful sample consisted of 10 international students studying English as a second language (ESL) within the same college system studying in their second year. Individuals were interviewed and an inductive and deductive coding process was used to analyze and transcribe the collected qualitative data. The qualitative data revealed seven emerging themes: the barriers, such as financial hardship, language barrier, and lack of guidance or support, negatively impacted students' experience, and on the contrary a supportive system such as faculty, friends and family and well-equipped institution with varied resources positively impacted their transitional experience. The curricular and extra-curricular engagements,

faculty-peer relationships, and feeling healthy, safe, and comfortable enhanced their satisfaction and helped them develop a sense of belonging. Finally, it was concluded that the students' attitudes, such as their perseverance and resilience, can prevent dropouts, and the college's reputation, such as the ranking or quality of the program the college offers, had an impact on the international students' persistence and affected their decision to complete their degrees. The research concludes with implications and recommendations for future research based on the findings.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	xii
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Research Problem	2
Significance of the Study.....	3
Research Purpose and Questions.....	4
Definitions of Key Terms	5
Conclusion.....	9
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE	11
Defining International Students.....	12
International Students' Transition to U.S. Higher Education	23
Defining International Students' Sense of Belonging.....	30
Developing International Students' Sense of Belonging.....	32
Defining International Students' Persistence.....	37
Defining Factors That Impact Students' Persistence	38
Summary of Literature.....	43
Theoretical Framework.....	44
Conclusion.....	46
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY	47
Overview of Research Problem.....	47
Research Purpose & Questions	47
Research Design.....	48
Instructional Setting and Context.....	48
Participants	49
Participant Selection	51
Researcher's Role.....	51
Data Collection Procedures.....	52
Data Analysis.....	53
Validity.....	54
Reliability	55
Generalizability	56
Privacy and Ethical Considerations	56
Research Design Limitations.....	57
Conclusion.....	57
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS	59
Participant Demographics.....	59
Emerging Themes	60

Research Question One	61
Barriers and Challenges.....	61
Support System.....	65
Campus Facilities.....	70
Research Question Two.....	71
Social Interaction.....	72
Emotional Wellbeing	73
Research Question Three.....	76
Students' Attitude.....	76
Institution's Affordability.....	77
Conclusion.....	79
CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	81
Summary of the Findings.....	81
Implications For Practice.....	86
Recommendations for Future Research	88
Conclusion.....	89
REFERENCES.....	90
APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT: ADULT RESEARCH PARTICIPANT.....	113
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS.....	116

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1: Enrollment by Racial/Ethnic Category Fall 2022 50
Table 3.2: Student Demographic Data Fall 2022 50
Table 3.3: International Students' Enrollment by Type at the College Fall 2021..... 51
Table 4.1: Participating Student Demographics Per Race/Ethnicity 60

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The reasons why the United States (U.S.) universities and colleges, are preferred for the students globally, are the acceptance of the U.S. degree, varied opportunities for innovation or research, and promising job salaries (Leapscholar, 2023). International students are generally admitted on nonimmigrant visas like the F visa and M visa, so options to remain and work in the country are limited for them creating significant obstacles for graduates who wish to stay in the U.S. after they graduate college (FWD.US, 2022). There are 1.08 million international students with active study visas in the U.S. as of January 2023, compared to a total of 1.14 million in January 2020, just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (ICEF Monitor, 2023). During the pandemic, international students' numbers in the U.S. dipped below the one-million student mark (as of fall 2020) for the first time since 2014. However, new data shows that the number of active visa holders has recovered this year to almost match pre-pandemic enrollments (ICEF Monitor, 2023). The total number of international students represents around 4.6% of the nearly 20 million college students in the U.S. in 2020-21.

Researchers have been arguing that many international students experience challenges and adjustments culturally, academically, socially, and psychologically (Simpson, 2016). Even though most of the international students will enroll in the country's four-year universities, for various reasons others may purposefully choose to begin their postsecondary journey at a two-year community college (Hagedorn et al., 2016). Community colleges offer a variety of support services and cross-cultural programs, including tutoring, advising, career planning, study skills, and counseling and many of them are designed specifically for international students (Community College,

2022). This study will explore the transitional experiences and adjustments of international students during the first year of attending a community college. According to the Open Doors Data (2022), there were 2,972 international students enrolled at this college in the year 2022.

Research Problem

The journey of international students pursuing higher education is unique and may involve both positive and negative experiences. According to Hagedorn et al. (2016), the open admission processes and English as a second language (ESL) support is a reason international students may prefer to attend a community college. Mallman et al. (2021) implied that migrant students do not belong as full, legitimate, equal members of the student community. Some of the difficulties of international students manage to cope with, include acculturation, academic pressure, homesickness, loss of social support, discrimination, language barriers, loneliness, depression, and anxiety, and these difficulties impacts their success and academic performance (Banjong, 2015). According to Singh and Jack (2022), language and culture are influential in academic and social adjustment challenges. Parallel to this study, Monague (2020), investigated the international students experience and barriers that included difficulty with English language proficiency, adjusting to cultural differences, inadequate social support, feeling home sick, financial problems, lack of employment opportunities, and work hour related issues on campus or off-campus and these challenges continue to have a significant impact on the success of international students, especially their academic endeavors.

The studies show that students with a higher degree of sociocultural adaptation report a higher degree of college satisfaction, while higher levels of acculturative stress indicate decreased levels of college satisfaction (Bista, 2016). Some of the sociocultural, personal, and educational struggles of international graduate students affect their overall

health (Vakkai et al., 2020). In a similar study, it has been explored that political climate related to immigration policies impacts international students' wellbeing. (Yan, 2020).

The study focused on the international students' health and defined some of the risks including stress, weight gain, increased consumption of unhealthy diet, and drinking to cope with stress (Yan, 2020).

The international student' sense of belonging was investigated and revealed that international students reported the least sense of belonging when compared with domestic minority and domestic white students (Singh, 2018). Also, Glew et al. (2019) studied the persistence of international students and showed that the lower level of engagement and participation with the support negatively influenced their academic performance, contributed to students' drop out in their studies, and increased the attrition rate.

The implications from this study indicated a critical need for university staff to implement prevention and intervention strategies to facilitate academic and social success for international students (Singh, 2018). As international students continue to struggle with lots of challenges in their pre-departure and post-arrival, it is imperative that the gap in literature around their transitional and adjusting experience while attending the college to be addressed and the factors that impact their sense of belonging and persistence to be investigated that has not been studied before.

Significance of the Study

The community college which was the site of this study had a full-time undergraduate retention rate of 17.0% in 2022. Compared with the full-time retention rate at similar Associates Colleges 29.9% Community College had a retention rate lower than its peers (College Factual, 2023). By exploring the experiences international students have in their transition could potentially assist higher education in discovering what services to offer that would help these students with their unique needs. According to

Bustamante et al. (2019), studying abroad can be a daunting, overwhelming experience for students, so by ensuring that specialized social, financial, and support services are in place, the U.S. campuses can facilitate the adaptation and integration of international students.

International students' contextual awareness of social networks, academic culture, logistics, and the host country's culture influence college readiness and transitions (Trimpe, 2022). According to Trimpe (2022), the international students' experience navigating U.S. colleges and universities differs from domestic students, and the college readiness models should reflect the differences between the two populations. By using a college readiness model inclusive of international students' experiences and the responsibility of higher education institutions, educators can improve understanding of international students' experiences, enhance support, and work toward more equitable practice, both in the U.S. and other contexts (Trimpe, 2022). To explore international students' transitional experiences, and provide them the best support, the goal of this qualitative study was to explore their experience and probe deeper and more purposefully into the contributing factors to international students' sense of belonging and persistence at community colleges.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the transitional experiences of international students at community colleges. The following questions will guide this study:

- 1- What factors impact transitional experiences of the international students at a community college?
- 2- How do international students develop a sense of belonging at a community college?

3- What factors contribute to international students persisting at a community college?

Definitions of Key Terms

Academic Performance: Academic performance/achievement is the extent to which a student, teacher, or institution has attained their short or long-term educational goals and is measured either by continuous assessment or cumulative grade point average (CGPA) (Tadese et al., 2022).

Academic Success: Defined as inclusive of academic achievement, attainment of learning objectives, acquisition of desired skills and competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and post-college performance (York et al., 2015).

Acculturation: Acculturation is the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members (Berry, 2005)

Community College: Community colleges offer two-year programs leading to the Associate of Arts (AA) or Associate of Science (AS) degree. These colleges also have technical and vocational programs with close links to secondary/high schools, community groups, and employers in the local community. Not only community colleges may have a more flexible admissions process, but also it is usually less expensive to earn an academic credit, so it helps lower the overall cost of a bachelor's degree (Community College, 2022).

Cultural Expectations: The cultural expectations are the messages we internalize about what is and is not acceptable, given the standards of behavior and cultural norms put forth by our social systems. These messages live deep in our subconscious, yet they affect our judgment and how we react to certain situations (Wilson, 2023).

DSO/ISA (Designated School Official/International Student Advisor): DSO stands for Designated School Official. A DSO is responsible for reporting and updating the

information to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) about each F-1 student's situation.

English as a Second Language (ESL): A course of study designed specifically for students whose native language is not English (Common Data Set, 2022-2023).

Extracurricular activities: Special consideration in the admissions process given for participation in both school and non-school related activities of interest.

Higher Education Administrators: Higher education administrators are postsecondary education administrators who oversee student support service departments, academic departments, and faculty research at colleges and universities (BLS, 2021).

F1 Students: The F-1 Visa (Academic Student) allows international students to enter the U.S. as a full-time student at an accredited college, university, seminary, conservatory, academic high school, elementary school, or other academic institution or in a language training program. The international students must be enrolled in a program or course of study that culminates in a degree, diploma, or certificate and the school must be authorized by the U.S. government to accept them (USCIS, 2020).

I-20 form: After you pay the SEVIS I-901 fee to the SEVP-approved school, it will issue you a Form I-20. After you receive the Form I-20 and register in SEVIS, you may apply at a U.S. Embassy or Consulate for a student (F or M) visa. You must present the Form I-20 to the consular officer when you attend your visa interview (Homeland Security, 2023).

I-901 fee: After the SEVP-approved school accepts your enrollment, you will be registered for the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System) and must pay the SEVIS I-901 fee (Homeland Security, 2023).

International Department: An international office is equipped to deal with any specific needs students may have regarding studying at a particular institution. This can be

everything from entry requirements to applications and accommodation to scholarships (Smurthwaite, 2019).

International Students (ISs): A nonresident student who is not a citizen or national of the United States and who is in this country on a visa or temporary basis and does not have the right to remain indefinitely (Common Data Set, 2022-2023).

ISA/DSO (International Student Advisor/Designated School Official): The designated school officials serve as liaisons between international students, the college, and the U.S. government. They issue necessary immigration forms, guide students through the process of studying in the U.S., maintain records in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, known as SEVIS, and more (Homeland Security, 2023).

ISP (International Services and Programs): F-1 international Students with questions on adhering to the U.S. federal regulations governing their nonimmigrant status, may ask ISP to discuss their options. Non-compliance could jeopardize an F-1 international student's ability to remain in the U.S and complete his/her/their studies at the college (Homeland Security, 2023).

Language Proficiency: Language proficiency is the ability to speak in a certain language or the ability to perform well with different language tasks (Language Humanities, 2023).

Narrative Inquiry: It records the experiences of an individual or small group, revealing the lived experience or perspective of that individual, usually primarily through interview which is then recorded and ordered into a chronological narrative (Deakin University, 2023).

Non-Resident Alien: Any student who is studying in the U.S. on a temporary basis (Data USA, 2020).

Onboarding program: Onboarding is a continuous, individualized journey that begins upon deposit and ends when the student meets a goal of being successfully integrated into the community (Reid, 2020).

Perceived Organizational Support: Refers to the degree one believes their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

Persistence: Persistence “refers to the desire and action of a student to stay by studying in the system of higher education” (Berger & Lyon, 2005).

Retention: Is the rate at which an institution retains and graduates’ students who first enter the institution as freshman at a given point in time (Tinto, 2012).

Sense of Belonging: The extent to which an individual feels socially connected, included, respected, accepted, and supported by others in different social contexts (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992).

SEVP-Approved School: Any U.S. learning institution that has applied for and received approval to enroll F and M nonimmigrant students (Homeland Security, 2023).

SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System): After the SEVP approved school accepts your enrollment, you will be registered for the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System) and must pay the SEVIS I-901 fee. The SEVP approved school will issue you a Form I-20 afterwards (Homeland Security, 2023).

Social Support: This refers to a student’s perception of how much others care about, values, and encourages his or her efforts to succeed (Chen et al., 2014).

Student Engagement: The amount of time and efforts students put into education. purposeful activities. The engagement includes not only students’ time and effort, but also includes the roles each institution plays in students’ participation in meaningful activities (Kuh, 2003).

Student Involvement: According to Astin (1999), student involvement refers to the physical and psychosocial energy the student devotes to the academic experience.

Student Satisfaction: refers to a “short-term attitude resulting from an evaluation of students’ educational experience, services, and facilities” (Weerasingheet al., 2017, p. 533).

Student Support Services (SSS): The SSS projects may provide individualized counseling for personal, career, and academic information, activities, and instruction designed to acquaint students with career options; exposure to cultural events and academic programs not usually available; mentoring programs, and secure housing. The goal of SSS is to increase the college retention and graduation rates of its participants (Student Support Services Program, 2022).

Student Success: A traditional measure of scores on standardized admissions test, grade point average, number of credit hours earned, enrollment in graduation programs, and performance on professional board exams and measure of student satisfaction (Kuh, 2007).

Transition: Schlossberg’s Transition Theory defines transition as any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles of the individual (Schlossberg, 2011).

Tuition: Amount of money charged to students for instructional services. Tuition may be charged per term, per course, or per credit (Common Data Set, 2022-2023)

Undergraduate: A student enrolled in a four- or five-year bachelor’s degree program, an associate degree program, or a vocational or technical program below the baccalaureate (Common Data Set, 2022-2023).

Conclusion

This chapter identified the need to explore international students’ experience in their transition to a two-year higher education institution in the U.S. The research

problem and significance of the study were reviewed, and the research questions were presented. A review of the literature focusing on international students, student support services, and factors that impact students' sense of belonging and persistence will be presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

International students have different experiences studying in institutions of higher education than do domestic students. The underrepresented student groups have reported significantly less satisfaction and a weaker sense of belonging than those in the majority groups (Fan et al., 2021). Also, according to Dost et al. (2023), a greater sense of belonging was associated with higher academic performance, and persistence. According to the literature the international students do not just keep our schools succeeding, they help our economy thrive (Krislov, 2019). Therefore, it is essential for international students to persist to completion once they are enrolled in U.S. post-secondary institutions (Marshall, 2020). The data indicated over 25% of the 583 U.S. companies valued at a billion dollars or more in 2022 were founded by international students (ApplyBoard, 2023). Also, the economic contribution of students last year, in 2022 was 19% higher than 2020/21 and during COVID-19 period, that still falls short of the alltime high set in 2018/19, when more than one million students generated \$40.5 billion and supported more than 450,000 jobs (ApplyBoard, 2023).

Numerous studies have been conducted investigating the international students' challenges, such as language barriers, cultural shock, homesickness, financial hardships, and depression (Choudaha, 2020; Gao, 2021; Vakkai et al., 2020; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Kim & Mumbauer, 2019; Bustamante et al., 2019; Monague, 2020; Singh & Jack, 2022; Uddin, 2021; Yan, 2020), and some have explored the factors that impact students' sense of belonging (Arslan et al., 2020; Baleria, 2021; Bettencourt, 2021; Mallman et al., 2021; Meehan & Howells, 2019; Peacock & Cowan, 2019; Viola, 2021; Worsley et al., 2021). However, only a few studies have investigated the transitional experiences of the first-year international students studying English as a Second Language in community

colleges (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Researchers have also investigated the potential impact of numerous factors including sense of belonging and perseverance on international students' persistence (Blekic et al., 2020; Bustamante et al., 2019; Cruwys et al., 2021; Desrochers & Staislof, 2019; Glew et al., 2019; Haverila & McLaughlin, 2020; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Perry et al., 2020). This chapter will provide a literature review exploring previous research conducted on: (a) defining international students; (b) defining students' transitional experience; (c) defining student sense of belonging; (d) developing international students' sense of belonging; (e) defining student's persistence; and (f) the factors that impact students' persistence. In addition, the theoretical framework for the study will be provided.

Defining International Students

The colleges and universities in the U.S. provide students with the general education courses, occupational training, and workforce development necessary to be competitive in the job market. Not all international students enroll in four-year colleges or master's degree programs, and many have discovered community colleges as both a way of reducing costs and improving English language skills prior to applying to 4-year colleges for their final two year (Hegarty, 2014). According to Mullin (2017), it was stated that unlike their university counterparts, community colleges have the power to grant access to international students of lower socioeconomic status (SES) since they are nonselective and relatively inexpensive. For many students, including international students, community colleges are more affordable options to obtain higher education (Raby et al, 2016). Studying at a college will provide students with exposure to other cultures and customs, and the opportunity to improve their soft skills and grade point average (GPA) (Mullin, 2017).

Affordability to study overseas has always been one of the biggest challenges for most aspiring international students (Choudaha, 2020). The financial challenge has become more intense for a range of reasons, including budget cuts, demographic changes, economic shifts, and immigration policies. Many universities, especially in high-income countries, are at risk of pricing themselves out of reach to a large segment of international students. Where an increase in direct cost due to a combination of two factors—tuition fees escalation and currency devaluation is a big blow to affordability. Higher education costs will vary according to the degree pursued, and the institution attended (Choudaha, 2020).

The international students' perceptions of their needs when going abroad were studied by (Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2018). The purpose of this article was to reflect on the different needs that international students have and what services they require. One of the key drivers for campus internationalization could be the level of satisfaction of students with a comprehensive provision of support services. A good satisfaction rate can increase the number of potential students, as well as the retention of students, and increase university reputation and visibility. When universities tried to include international students' perceptions and needs within their strategies, they found that the focus should be on those elements that contribute to the building of a good university (e.g., friendly teachers and professors and an enjoyable atmosphere) and to assure sound teaching (e.g., good professors teaching with adequate methods, fair student assessments). The consequence for universities could be to attain stronger positions within the higher education global market because they can attract more international students due to the high satisfaction showed by previously enrolled students (Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2018).

Regarding the support services, U.S. Department of Education (2022) have published that all Student Support Service (SSS) projects must provide academic tutoring of skills, subjects; advice and assistance in course selection, assist student with information on financial aid, benefits and resources, scholarships; and assistance in completing the applications. Also, the SSS programs may also provide individualized counseling for personal, career, and academic information, activities, and instruction designed to acquaint students with career options, exposure to cultural events and academic programs not usually available. According to the explanation provided, the goal of SSS is to increase the college retention and graduation rates of its participants (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

International students may have different transitional and adjusting challenges, however, according to Bustamante et al. (2019), they make valuable intellectual, cultural, and economic contributions to host-country colleges and universities. Some U.S. institutions enrolling greater numbers of international students offer a variety of specialized services designed to support students' social adjustment, academic achievement, and language development in ways that potentially lead to greater retention and international student engagement (Bustamante et al., 2019). The difficulties and problems adjusting related to international students can easily lead to compromised academic performance, decreased mental health, and the potential for dropout (Simpson, 2016).

Regarding the support services, Paul et al. (2019) suggests that frequency of consultations influenced academic success and retention. This study defines the profile of those who sought support, and the relationships between student support, retention, and academic performance (Paul et al., 2019). It suggests that frequency of consultations influenced academic success and retention. In developed countries, the impact of

globalization has contributed to increased student participation in higher education and with this widening of participation in tertiary education, students' academic literacy and English language capabilities have been identified as critical to their success and retention, particularly in clinically focused programs such as nursing (Andre & Graves, 2013).

Also, the studies found that research experiences create significant benefits for students that go beyond developing expertise in a particular field (Rodríguez et al., 2018). These experiences are as important for potential employers as completing a graduate program. Internships, on the other hand, are another way for students to experience hands-on learning, while being able to apply the information learned in the classroom in a practical setting (Kolvoord et al., 2016). The funds are awarded to institutions of higher education to provide opportunities for academic development, assist students with basic college requirements, and to motivate students toward the successful completion of their postsecondary education (Department of Education, 2022).

Functionalism sees society as an organism where all parts work together for the betterment of the whole, so when something disrupts the equilibrium, adjustments must occur to regain it (O'Connor, 2021). The equilibrium of the organization was disrupted by a sudden influx of international students. The analysis introduces both a structural and cultural change within the organization, to increase the levels of support for international students and add diversity into the decision-making process, which lead to increased retention of international students (O'Connor, 2021).

Balin et al. (2016) studied the international student services. According to the writers, the career development process is one of the most important aspects of the international student experience. Providing comprehensive and culturally competent

services requires institutional efforts that utilize best practices developmentally throughout the college experience and beyond. This article is based on the work of the International Student Services Committee of the National Career Development Association, especially the surveys conducted with international students, career development professionals and employers. The authors focus on three major themes from the surveys: knowledge about work authorization options, impact of cultural differences on job search, and specialized career services for international students.

The first-year international students' perceived impact of the ISS (International Student Services Office Chissoe, 2017). As international student attendance on college campuses in the U.S. continues to increase in record numbers of ISS offices across the country are tasked with providing services to aid the growing number and variety of international students in their transition to life on campus in the U.S. The study aimed to explore these perceptions by interviewing nine international students at the beginning, middle, and end of their first year of study in the U.S., interviewing the Director of the ISS office, observing three international student events on campus, and analyzing documents produced by the ISS office. The study found that the international students were generally adventurous, social, and determined people who had a decreasing amount of contact with the ISS office over the course of the semester. The students reported that the ISS office had an impact on only a few areas of their overall experience in the U.S., but those areas (e.g., travel documents, orientation to the campus, and enrollment) were vital to having a positive experience in the U.S. The findings suggest that the ISS office had a much larger impact on the lives of international students than they perceived (Chissoe, 2017).

The authors Cong and Glass (2019) focused on three students' service augmenters: educational support services, social support services, and campus support

services, as well as three traditional predictors: (a) language proficiency, (b) friendships with U.S. peers, and (c) welcoming institutional attitude. A focus on both educational service augmenters and traditional predictors adds needed emphasis on the university's responsibility in international student adjustment (Cong & Glass, 2019). Educational support services like writing centers, tutoring, and academic technology support, and social support services assures the one is cared for, esteemed, and part of a mutually supportive social network, and the campus support services offer administrative services, campus safety and security, financial aid advising, and maintenance services (Cong & Glass, 2019). Additionally, Wang et al. (2014) concluded, using campus climate surveys, provided insights to university staff, faculty, and decision makers regarding international student adjustments, leading to improved programs, services and interventions that assist all students.

Research has shown that the campus resources have an impact on students' academic achievement. Banjong (2015) studied the effects of campus resources, and international students enhanced academic performance. This article investigates international students' challenges, such as financial, English proficiency, loneliness/homesickness in the U.S. The quantitative methodology assesses how these students coped with such difficulties by making use of resources on campus, such as an international center, writing center, counseling center, and the student success center. Based on 344 responses, the results indicated that international students with language difficulties sought help from the writing and student success centers while those who reported financial stress and loneliness had visited the counseling center (Banjong, 2015). Similar to this study and analyzing the impact of the campus resources, Rod Welch (2019) studied improving Library Services in Support of International Students and English as a Second Language (ESL) Learners that provides librarians with a comprehensive guide to

effective practices for serving international students, contributing to their retention and success, increasing campus diversity, and helping the students better enjoy their collegiate experience in the U.S. The authors' main goal was to provide an informal but structured opportunity for student groups to share their initiatives, recruit new members, and collaborate with other organizations. The event also created a spotlight for the multicultural student groups and made them more approachable. It provided an opportunity for everyone to teach, interact, and learn something new and interesting. Most significantly, it reduced fear and ignorance, increasing the possibility to engage and cultivate shared experiences (Rod-Welch, 2019).

There were some suggestions on students' support through the studies. Maria (2020) suggested the international student office staff should commit to regularly reviewing and refining the services they offer to have maximum effectiveness, efficiency, and value. The system's perspective is helpful for understanding and ensuring the effectiveness of international student services. The formula presented provides a framework by which international student services may be designed for maximum effectiveness, efficiency, and value. They concluded that a systems perspective is helpful for understanding and ensuring the effectiveness of international student services. They proposed a critical race theory (CRT) model to address the increasing needs of mid-sized universities with international students. The findings from 14 faculty and staff participants point to professional development strategies that can help reduce or remove barriers for working with international students. This study highlights the need to build a support system for students from diverse cultural backgrounds that includes building advising teams, mentoring programs, learning communities, and resources and professional development for faculty members to become more effective in globalized classrooms (Center for Teaching and Learning, 2014).

The support needs of international students were developed by Pamela et al. (2015), that a three-stage data collection process was adopted: interviews with key support service providers in the university, student focus groups, and a large-scale survey. Emphasis was placed on identifying the issues that are significant to international students in terms of their study experience, the services they consider valuable and the factors that contribute to take-up. The findings revealed that, while most respondents felt that the range of support services provided is appropriate, current services could be improved by offering a more student-centered service structure and delivery. Issues identified as influencing service use include the institutional culture, perceived importance and awareness of services, the quality of information provided about those services, ease of access, timeliness of service provision and cost (Pamela et al., 2019)

The universities throughout the U.S. struggle with fiscal issues that can be improved by greater retention and graduation rates (Perry et al., 2020). One step often taken is to cut student service spending, which hurts students' ability to finish a degree. While some have advocated for greater spending in student services, they contend that current services may suffice. They found many students, both international and domestic, are not aware of available programs, which correlates to less use and perceived value of these services and programs (Perry et al., 2020).

Tertiary institutions need to rethink how they relate to and support international students for success (Heng, 2017). The findings for that study show the imperative for institutions to have international students improve their college experience so that all institutional members can benefit from the internationalization of higher education (Heng, 2017). Furthermore, Rodriguez et al. (2018) stated that mentoring received from academic advisors proves to be helpful in the success of the students as it fosters a sense

of confidence and awareness of available resources and career pathways. Also, Rodriguez et al. (2018) state that to engage and retain students, faculty serving as mentors is critical. Faculty members can differentiate experiences for students and strengthen student impact (Rodriguez et al., 2018). Finally, tutoring is an opportunity to enhance student learning while increasing student retention (Kolvoord et al., 2016).

Providing communities, and international student organizations can also assist in acclimating to college culture. Some resources that can help international students are like writing and learning centers, advisors, mental health programs, service-learning, and work-study (Nadal et al., 2022). According to the authors, those resources can help them talk, and share their experiences, working through issues, and discussing solutions with other international students can be helpful and cathartic. International students make valuable intellectual, cultural, and economic contributions to host-country colleges and universities (Martirosyan et al., 2019).

There is a need for program providers to develop an evidence based on academic literacy support strategies, which meet the needs of students who have gaps in literacy and language skills, as these are critical to their success in learning, progression, and retention (Arkoudis, 2014). The study conducted by Girish (2016) found that the retention of international students is not only the responsibility of international student advisors on the college campus. This research explored the necessary information and resources international students require to be successful. The results of this study showed that international students go through a period of struggle when they fail to integrate with the American education system, and they need more guidance from their academic advisors on course requirements, major requirements, and career information.

Participants wanted their advising sessions to be focused on international students' needs.

Recommendations include providing group advising, offering information sessions to help international students gain important skills and knowledge, and expanded training for advisors (Girish, 2016).

On the other hand, it was concluded that sociocultural challenges, and other discouraging factors including visa difficulties, feelings of being alienated, cultural differences, experiencing prejudice, and not feeling at home, negatively impact student development and learning (Bista, 2016). The studies show that students with a higher degree of sociocultural adaptation report a higher degree of college satisfaction, while higher levels of acculturative stress indicate decreased levels of college satisfaction (Bista, 2016). These findings indicate that institutions should offer quality academic and social support services to meet the needs and challenges of international students on campus. The findings suggested that culturally engaging campus activities have a greater influence on international student success and leadership self-efficacy than off campus activities. Participants reported that smaller and identity-based, multi-cultural, or international-friendly types of organizations positively impact international students' leadership efficacy and engagement on campus. The results of studies examining international students who attend American community college campuses, suggest international students are more engaged in academic activity and faculty interactions than their local counterparts. Findings also indicate that international students are more likely to participate in both required and non-required group study activities than domestic students (Bista, 2016).

The students' engagement with faculty peers has shown to have a positive impact on their adaptability. According to Peters and Yu (2019), the student affairs department needs to promote positive social relationships between international students and peers, cultivating partnerships between international students and the community. Diversity on

college campuses enriches the experience, strengthens innate creativity, and lays the groundwork for global engagement as students transition to their chosen careers. One of the suggested strategies to help students overcome barriers like staying focused is normalizing campus resources to decrease the stigma sometimes associated with help seeking and to ensure that international students did not feel singled out. Also, it was emphasized that the goals need to be measurable, and if the description of the program of services for non-English speakers ensures that the non-English speakers can meaningfully participate in the academic and special programs (Peters & Yu, 2019).

Leisure engagement could be an effective way to build up social support. Also, taking leisure seriously may have important effects on students to build strong social networks and obtain a sense of belonging that will help them adapt to school. A total of 190 Korean and Chinese international students were took part in a study to explore the relationships between the seriousness of leisure activities, social support and school adaptation among Asian international students attending U.S. colleges. The results indicated that although social support is a significant contributor of school adaptation, Asian international students tend to have a lack of social support (Chungsup et al., 2018). Also, the findings showed that engaging in leisure seriously has a positive association with gaining social support from friends. The researchers in the study of Lee, Sung and Zhou (2018), found that the seriousness of leisure involvement maintained a direct effect on college adaptation (Lee et al., 2018).

Student Services promotes learning through support resources such as educational planning, academic advising, counseling, admissions, and other administrative services that lead to student success (San Diego Miramar College, 2022). Also, according to the study, student support services programs are an important factor in the student experience (San Diego Miramar College, 2022). Assessment is the measurement of how well the

College is achieving their goals and outcomes that is vital in demonstrating the effectiveness and value of student support services and programs. Student Support Unit Outcomes (SUOs) are measurable statements that describe significant knowledge or skills students should learn or be able to demonstrate after receiving a service, support resources or participating in a Student Services Support program (San Diego Miramar College, 2022).

The literature has found that a more specific student support system not only enhances the student experience but also it helps them succeed. Ammigan and Jones (2018), evaluated the international student's satisfaction with different dimensions of their university experience, namely, their arrival, living, learning, and support service experiences. Using survey research methods and the analyses indicated that all four dimensions of satisfaction were positively associated with students' overall university experience, and the article reveals which of the four is the most influential. Results formed the basis of the study, which offers enhanced understanding of international student experience and satisfaction; support for institutions in interpreting their own results from international student experience surveys; help for campus support services in developing collaborative practices; support for institutional policies and practices and effective resource allocation for enhancing the international student experience; what matters to students and which services should be provided or enhanced; support for institutional recruitment and retention strategies, as well as the academic success of students (Ammigan & Jones, 2018).

International Students' Transition to U.S. Higher Education

The journey of international students can be both positive and negative experience. The international students are constantly pursuing their dreams of studying in a foreign country, and whether they are called foreign students, alien non-immigrants,

non-resident aliens, mobile students, or study abroad students, they are known as the other, and the local policies and programs are structured in such ways that they are special people who need treatments for corrections in language learning, adjustments, understanding campus values, and becoming normal people (Bista, 2016).

Reviewing the literature, the international students have different challenges including financial hardship. According to Marconi and Serra (2017), the currencies in some of the key emerging countries have devalued against the U.S. dollar. In addition to increasing direct cost, lower availability of funding opportunities from universities and governments, as well as tighter immigration and visa policies for finding work opportunities, is making it harder to recover the cost of education. Research has shown international students are also struggling academically, socially and emotionally (Asgedom & Even, 2017). It is important to view international students as regular students instead of categorizing, labeling, and creating stereotypes based on their sociocultural characteristics (Bista, 2016). The international students come to pursue a degree, many leave their countries to escape the hardships, while others do so to experience new places for fun and adventure (Bista, 2016).

On the other hand, the researchers evaluated the degree to which international students are satisfied with different dimensions of their university experience such as their arrival, living, learning, and support service experiences (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). The study evaluated the experience of over 45,000 degree-seeking, undergraduate international students at 96 different institutions in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. by using quantitative survey research methods. Multiple analyses indicated that all four dimensions of satisfaction were positively associated with students' overall university experience, and the article reveals which of the four is the most influential. This study brings key implications for how university administrators, practitioners, and

researchers might best allocate resources to support and enhance the experience of international students, that leads to more effective institutional recruitment and retention strategies (Ammigan & Jones, 2018).

Based on Tinto's model, Gao (2021) proposes the challenges international doctoral students confront from five domains: academic, social, cultural, psychological, and economic, which form the experience of international doctoral students collectively. The academic domain includes the relationship with the supervisor(s), peer and faculty support, and research challenges; the social domain includes family/spousal support and social networking; the cultural domain includes language barriers and cultural adaptation; the psychological domain includes identity issue and emotions; and the economic domain includes financial constraints (Gao, 2021).

The type of institution has shown to be an important factor on international students' decision to stay after they graduate. According to Bista and Glass (2016), the international students are the future members and leaders as professors, doctors, engineers, businesspersons, scientists, and other professionals of the 21st century. Despite the anxieties and uncertainties of our time, educators should not hesitate to aspire for, plan, and create the ideal situation where the focus is on the successful integration of international students and development of intercultural competences for all students (Bista, 2016). The study examines how factors such as gender and the types of institution attended, social connections, and motivations to study in the U.S. play an important role in shaping international students' post-graduation migration plans. In her study, participants indicate a better quality of life, more diverse society, better job prospects, more academic freedom, higher salary, and higher standard of living as factors encouraging to stay in the U.S. (Bista, 2016).

According to Wang and Sun (2022), the international students are treated less as a group of students who need academic and socio-emotional support, but they have been considered mostly as an economic return. International students, as important actors in internationalization, contribute to academic, cultural, economic, and technological developments, and global competency and reputation of the destination countries and universities. Although internationalization and international student engagement have been addressed in universities' diversity, equity, and inclusion goals, few researchers have examined U.S. universities' organizational attitudes and underlying assumptions toward their international students. The findings showed that despite a relatively high level of intercultural awareness in supporting international students presented in some universities, more provide limited support and present deficit thinking and even overt discriminative discourses on international students. Findings also revealed the necessity for universities to promote intercultural awareness, implement more inclusive university policies, and improve their support for international students (Wang & Sun, 2022).

Many of the international students are not even familiar with or aware of the services they offer at the university or college. Mesidor and Sly (2016) reports that international students have adjustment problems, they underutilize mental health services because of cultural mistrust, stigma associated with mental illness, and lack of financial resources. For example, studies show that international students either didn't rather seeking out counselors, or were not aware of available programs, which correlated to less use and perceived value of those services and programs (Perry et al., 2020).

International students experience significant difficulties as they adjust to the dominant culture in the U.S. (Kim & Mumbauer, 2019). According to these writers, there is a substantial gap between the reported academic and sociological distress these students experience and their help-seeking behaviors. This article reviews international

students' distinctive challenges in seeking professional help and proposes guidelines to effectively support these students by enhancing college counselors' multicultural counseling competence (Kim & Mumbauer, 2019).

The study conducted by Khanal and Gaulee (2019) defined the international students' challenges can negatively impact their academic success especially if they are not adequately supported. According to these two authors, studying in overseas institutions presents international students with exciting opportunities; and with these opportunities come challenges. They categorized those challenges into pre-departure, post-departure, and post-study. Some pre-departure challenges are the admission procedure, and preparing documents for visa acquisition, and post-departure challenges like language barriers, financial issues, and cultural adjustment, and some major challenges post-study are uncertain future and paperwork (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). The findings of this article have useful implications for government personnel, as well as administrators of educational institutions that seek to attract international students (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019).

International students studying abroad may experience stress and anxiety due to the different educational system. Isabelli-García et al. (2018) synthesized an empirical study on undergraduate language learners' experience abroad during their first year. They began their review by tracing the recent evolution of empirical mixed-method research on the learner, identifying problems and characteristics that language learners generally encounter in the study abroad (SA) experience to provide a framework. Also, they investigated the variables related to individual differences such as anxiety, motivation, and how the SA learning environments are treated. The gap in the literature was defined as the role that SA plays in undergraduate language curricula, where the objectives of the

experience are aligned with at-home (AH) curricula, a topic that has not been fully discussed in SA literature (Isabelli-García et al., 2018).

Some authors studied and explored the sociocultural experiences of international graduate students in universities in the U.S. (Vakkai et al., 2020). This study has revealed some of the sociocultural, personal, and educational struggles of international graduate students in American and how those struggles affect their health and wellbeing. The research shows that students face issues such as negotiating the U.S. health care system, the pressures of competency in American English, balancing financial concerns, social connectivity, and anxiety due to isolation from family and friends. These factors place students at risk for developing health problems. Significant findings have indicated that institutions and students' age play important roles in impacting students' successful adjusting experiences even though the struggle for acculturation is a personal task. The researchers organized the analysis and discussion around how to help graduate students to obtain sociocultural support and concluded with some suggestions on ways to address inadequacies within the institutional systems to make the schools welcoming for international students (Vakkai et al., 2020).

According to Singh and Jack (2022), language and culture are influential in a range of academic (language, supervision, research training) and social (group work, friendship) adjustment challenges. The analysis highlights how these challenges hinder academic success because of limited or frustrated pathways for students' linguacultural development. They conclude that future academic research and university policy to support postgraduate international students may pay greater attention to cross-cultural, linguistic, and linguacultural issues (Singh & Jack, 2022).

The role of satisfaction variables as predictors of institutional recommendation for over 45,000 international students at 96 different institutions globally were studied

(Ammigan, 2019). Using data from the International Student Barometer, it demonstrates which aspects of the university experience are most significant in students' propensity to recommend their institution to prospective applicants. This article also discusses key implications and policy recommendations for how university administrators and international educators could enhance the international student experience and strengthen recruitment and retention strategies on their respective campuses (Ammigan, 2019).

Stress levels has been shown to be higher in international students and specifically female international students. Acharya et al. (2018) identified important stressors associated with depressive symptoms in college students across the subgroups of gender and domestic/international status and compared between-group differences across stress levels. Data was collected from 631 undergraduate students from October 2014 to March 2015. Participants completed an online survey containing measures of stressors (StudentStress-Survey), depressive symptoms (CESD scale), and demographics. The mean score of samples indicated high depressive symptoms. According to the findings of the study, the international students reported higher depressive symptoms than domestic students and students identifying as female showed higher depression symptoms than male (Acharya et al., 2018).

The study conducted by Yan (2020) discusses practices and strategies that colleges and universities may adopt to facilitate healthy behaviors and well-being of their international student population. According to Yan (2020), while transitioning from high school to college, all college students must go through the process of adapting to new educational and social environments. This process is particularly stressful for international students due to different backgrounds in terms of cultural values, languages, academic preparations, and study habits. Those challenges may cause risks to international students' health and well-being. Research has shown that international

students were stressed, gained body weight, increased consumption of unhealthy diet, and used drinking to cope with stress after they came to the U.S. Also, the research shows that international students' well-being has been closely influenced by the political climate related to immigration policies (Yan, 2020).

Defining International Students' Sense of Belonging

There are multiple definitions used in literature to explain a sense of belonging, including the desire to be accepted by others and to belong to a group (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). In a study conducted by Dost and Smith (2023), based on the theory of human motivation, they analyzed higher education students' sense of belonging, and they used multiple definitions such as self-confidence, self-respect, self-actualization, and self-fulfillment. In addition to Maslow's seminal theory, several other definitions are used in the literature; like 'sense of community' used by McMillan and Chavis (1986); 'fit in' used by Reay et al. (2010), feeling 'safe' used by Ignatieff (2011), and Lewis et al. (2016); 'sense of membership' used by Tinto (2012).

The definition of belonging encompasses not only the support of teachers and peers, but also spouses/partners and children in an off campus setting and this is an essential component in defining sense of belonging (Steinhauer & Lovell, 2021). In Viola's (2021) study, the term sense of belonging refers to feeling 'at home' somewhere, or with certain people and feeling valued by others, which in turn can yield a sense of comfort, familiarity, and safety. According to Gao and Liu (2021), belonging goes beyond familiarity, friendship, and academic support, and is defined as a sense of sociopsychological comfort, a connection to the depth and quality of intragroup dynamics, a sense of social validation and the feeling of being considered 'authentic' in the friendship cliquishness. When students feel partially connected and supported, or if they feel seldom valued on campus, they see belonging not as something provided or

facilitated by the institution, but as something that they have succeeded or created on their own (Dost & Smith, 2023).

In educational science, school belonging is defined by Goodenow (1993) as the degree to which students feel welcomed, respected, included, and encouraged in their school's social environment. It includes their feelings about themselves, their sense of importance and significance to the school, and their sense of value to the school (Arslan & Duru 2017). Using Goodenow's (1993) conceptualization of school belonging, Benner et al. (2008) also added the term 'fairness', which refers to the extent to which students believe that school rules are fair, and that all students are treated equally. Tinto (2012) also described the concept of sense of belonging as a generalized sense of membership that stems from students' perception of their involvement in a variety of settings and the support, they experienced from those around them. Van Ryzin (2011) concept of belonging is the perception of support students receive from their peers and teachers such as motivation and assistance for learning as well as personal care and support.

Having a sense of belonging provides students with a feeling of being a larger part of the institution. Hurtado et al. (2007) defined sense of belonging in higher education as psychological or normative sense of academic and social integration in their transition to college. According to the authors, a sense of belonging involves a student feeling like part of a particular community just the way they are, not having to conform to a particular set of form (Hurtado et al., 2007). In a study conducted by Masika and Jones (2016), it was concluded that being part of a university, feeling accepted, and being included, is important to university engagement because students who feel that they are part of the university are more likely to be engaged in their university and campus community. Similarly, Hurtado et al. (2007) interpreted sense of belonging in quantitative studies as

the extent to which the student felt part of the campus community, saw him/herself as a member of the college, and had a strong sense of belonging at his or her respective institution.

Developing International Students' Sense of Belonging

Studies have demonstrated that active learning environments in higher education facilitate social interactions and collaborations, and that formal and informal interactions at university are related to an increased sense of belonging (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). In the literature, a sense of belonging depends upon an interaction of factors in higher education – environmental, social, and cognitive – that allow students to feel connected to their university and to feel purposeful in their studies and career plans (Meehan & Howells, 2019). Students' sense of belonging to their university can be influenced by several factors, including individual characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status) and situations and contexts, such as school organizational practices, peer relationships, student-teacher interactions, institutional climate, or circumstantial changes like the Covid-19 pandemic (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Freeman et al., 2007; Goodenow, 1993; Rainey et al., 2018).

According to Wallace et al. (2012), there are four distinct factors that contribute to adolescents' sense of belonging: perception that they fit in with their classmates, generalized interaction to teachers, connection to a particular teacher, identification and participation in official school-sponsored activities. Samura (2018) notes that students have a unique opportunity to meet one another and develop and strengthen social relationships with each other and with their academic staff on campus, which is crucial for the development of a sense of belonging and a sense of security as a learner.

A greater sense of belonging has been linked with better wellbeing and mental health outcomes (Gopalan et al., 2022). There is compelling evidence demonstrating that

a sense of school belonging can help prevent anxiety, stress and depression (Arslan et al., 2020; Moffa et al., 2016), improve resilience for individuals and communities worldwide (Allen et al., 2021), increase academic motivation (Neel & Fuligni, 2013) and resilience (Scarf et al., 2016), decrease health problems and loneliness, and an overall increase in happiness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), contribute to interpersonal relationships and perceived competence (Rainey et al., 2018; Whitcomb et al., 2022). Among university students, loneliness was significantly found to be linked with anxiety, somatic complaints, and depressive symptoms (Werner et al., 2021) and aggressive behaviors (Yavuzer et al., 2019).

School engagement is closely related to a sense of belonging, as engagement is complex, multifold, and involves different elements: emotional, behavioral, and cognitive (Pesonen, 2016). A sense of belonging is one of the factors (emotional) that fosters overall school engagement. The construct of membership is closely related to the sense of belonging with its similar idea of supporting the equal belonging of everyone to the group (be its peer group, classroom, or school community). Social participation is related to a sense of belonging through its similar focus on an individual's successful experiences of feeling accepted, supported, and respected. The facilitator of sense of belonging consists of: (1) students' relationships with various adults, (2) equality among adults, and (3) supportive school climate (Pesonen, 2016).

The undergraduate experiences of international students compared to those of their U.S. classmates was studied by Horne et al. (2018). The researchers examined U.S. and international student responses to an undergraduate survey administered at nine U.S. research universities to identify similarities and differences in ways that these two groups perceive their experiences. Findings suggested that in many ways, experiences with faculty for the two groups are more similar than different. However, according to Horne

et al. (2018) international students consistently report lower levels of social satisfaction and feelings of being welcome and respected on campus, suggesting that interactions among students are a significant factor in international student sense of belonging at the university (Horne et al., 2018).

Also, in a similar study examining sense of attachment in international students, campus organization involvement was considered as a mechanism for social capital development Glass and Gesing (2018). Researchers used analysis of variance to examine variations in network size, strength, and composition for international students involved in different types of campus organizations. The researchers also examined the relationship of campus organization involvement to international students' sense of attachment to the university. Students who participated in major-based organizations or leadership programs had larger, less dense, more diverse networks that lead to social networks which are particularly advantageous to social mobility. Students who participated in campus organizations related to their own cultural heritage had networks built of friends from all cultures, creating a greater sense of belonging and attachment to the university (Glass & Gesing, 2018).

International student mobility to the U.S. has increased over the past two decades (Yao et al., 2019). Despite the increase in numbers, international students may experience racism, nativism, and other forms of discrimination within the U.S. context. The literature focuses on how international students can assimilate and cope with these issues rather than interrogating the systems of oppression that create negative student experiences. The research has utilized critical race theory (CRT), as a framework for interrogating how international student experiences are being portrayed. They argue that CRT must move beyond the rigid confinement within U.S. borders and expand to consider how

transnationalism and global exchange contributes to the fluidity and applicability of this theory (Yao et al., 2019).

Social bonds have been shown to exist more between international students compared to domestic ones. According to Wecker (2017), many of the international students develop lasting social bonds with their international mentees, forming a support network that can become invaluable when homesickness, academic pressure, or other challenges might seem otherwise insurmountable (Wecker, 2017). The findings suggest that international students are more likely to obtain closer relationships than their domestic peers when it comes to faculty and staff interactions (Garcia et al., 2019). These domains work collaboratively and mutually affect each other in shaping the experiences of international doctoral students' challenges (Gao, 2021).

Despite the volatility of internationalism in higher education environments, many American universities are committed to enacting, at minimum, first order changes or initial programmatic interventions that support multiculturalism (Pope et al., 2014). Universities interested in attracting and retaining international students might benefit from learning what other U.S. universities are attempting to do to support in facilitating international students' social adjustment and academic success when studying in the U.S. The findings showed both international freshmen students and domestic freshmen students had higher satisfaction of quality of interactions, satisfaction of supportive environments, academic success, and satisfaction toward their entire educational experience at private institutions (Pope et al., 2014).

Socio-academic integration was instrumental for sense of belonging for international students while social integration is also, to a lesser extent, significant to sense of belonging (Lee, 2010). The study conducted by Wu et al. (2015) explored the usage of the support services that were not used extensively, and many international

students only used counseling when they did not have friends or family to support them; additionally, some international students hold negative opinions about counseling services (Wu et al., 2015).

When individuals feel that they belong to the group, they are more likely to feel connected with other members of the group (Dost & Smith, 2023). These members are more likely to become trusted and respected by their fellow group members, fostering social cohesion within the group. Social cohesion can be understood as the practice of bringing people together by allowing them to feel like part of a group and to identify with that group (Dost & Smith, 2023). Recognizing and engaging with difference can also foster empathy and understanding, which are two important components of establishing relationships, which can enhance sense of belonging and curiosity (Baleria 2021; Worsley et al., 2021).

The term ‘social exclusion’ refers the situation in which individuals are excluded from social groups or other individuals, in such a way that they cannot build social relationships/interactions and satisfy their needs for belonging (Dost & Smith, 2023). This exclusion can take different forms, including majority and minority groups, or between different groups, or explicit and implicit. The issues that students engage with inside and outside university reflect their lack of belonging-specifically, and feelings of exclusion and marginalization (Viola, 2021)

In many cases, regardless of the background, social capital or culture, experiencing exclusion, and being made to feel invisible on campus, negatively affects the sense of belonging of students (Mallman et al., 2021). For example, mainstream students’ actions, such as laughing and commenting, contributed to relational divides between students, and adversely affected a sense of belonging when uncomfortable encounters caused embarrassment for students (Mallman et al., 2021). The struggle to

belong is entwined with complex intersectionality of race, ethnicity, gender, and language (Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021).

Defining International Students' Persistence

The involvement level of students in academic and social activities is one of the most significant factors determining their retention. Earlier higher education research studies have consistently paid attention to college students' sense of belonging because of its relation to how they persist at their institutions (e.g., Nelson et al., 2021; Wolf et al., 2017). Persistence rate is measured by the percentage of students who return to college at any institution for their second year, while retention rate represents the percentage of students who return to the same institution (Research Center, 2023).

According to Tinto (2017), persisting is another way of speaking of motivation. It is the quality that allows someone to continue in pursuit of a goal even when challenges arise. A student must want to persist to degree completion to expend considerable effort to do so. It follows that the question universities should ask is not only what they can do to retain their students but also what they can do to influence student motivation to stay, persist, and complete their tertiary degrees (Tinto, 2017). Tinto admitted Naylor's (2017) perspective, that students' view of their experiences can differ from those of the university. They should ask what they can do to lead students to be able to persist and complete their programs of study within the university. Universities must see the issue of persistence through the eyes of their students, hear their voices, engage with their students as partners, learn from their experiences and understand how those experiences shape their responses to university policies (Tinto, 2017). Only then can universities further improve persistence and completion while also closing the continuing equity gaps that plague our societies (Tinto, 2017).

Defining Factors That Impact Students' Persistence

For success, persistence, and completion to occur, students must become engaged and see themselves as a member of a community of other students, academics, and professional staff who value their membership (Tinto, 2017). This means they matter and belong, so it helps develop a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging may mirror students' experiences prior to entry that lead them to fear they do not belong at university, but it is most directly shaped by the broader campus climate and students' daily interactions with other students, academics, professional staff, and administrators (Tinto, 2017). The students who perceive themselves as belonging to a specific group or the institution generally are more likely to persist because it leads not only to enhanced motivation but also a willingness to become involved with others in ways that further promote persistence. By contrast, a student's sense of not belonging to the place or the classroom leads to a withdrawal from contact with others that further undermines not only the motivation to persist but also the motivation to learn (Tinto, 2017).

International students come to the country with many hopes and dreams, as well as a lot of pre-departure and post-arrival challenges and difficulty transitioning to the new environment, so the lack of adequate support may impact their retention and degree completion (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Paul et al. (2019) study highlighted the relationships that exist between student uptake of embedded academic literacy support, student retention and academic performance. Regarding academic performance, students who did not engage with the support had a lower level of academic achievement. The support strategies had an impact on student retention with those who took up the support being significantly more likely to continue in the nursing program (Paul et al., 2019).

According to Uddin (2021), international students may face many challenges including language barriers and cultural shock in their transition to higher educational

institutions that may hinder their achievement. Some U.S. institutions enrolling greater numbers of international students offer a variety of specialized services designed to support students' social adjustment, academic achievement, and language development in ways that potentially lead to greater retention and international student engagement (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Student retention is often reviewed as a measure of the quality of educational experiences, and this changing enrollment data raises questions about international students' engagement and sense of belonging within U.S. community colleges (Lee, 2010). In the exploratory study by Bustamante et al. (2019), researchers analyzed the types of support services offered by the top 20 U.S. universities with the greatest enrollment of international students in 2016. Implications were offered for U.S. higher education leaders interested in offering services to attract, support, and retain international students in an uncertain national political environment (Bustamante et al., 2019).

The authors Perna and Li (2006) focused on college affordability, describes trends in national indicators that contribute to ability to pay, and examined the trends in college pricing, including tuition and fees, unmet financial need, and student aid. The study also, suggests in order to promote equality of college access and choice, policymakers should consider ways to improve affordability, particularly by targeting financial aid resources toward students, so it will positively impact their persistence (Perna & Li, 2006). Current theoretical frameworks for understanding student retention are integrating Indigenous perspectives on education and placing greater responsibility on institutions to remove systematic obstacles for college completion includes financial, academic, cultural, and social barriers (Jensen, 2011)

Furthermore, Hunton (2015) defines that students choose to attend a particular educational institution based on pre-matriculation expectations, such as the academic,

social, and financial benefits and costs associated with the institution. If their pre-matriculation perceptions of anticipated costs and benefits are positive, they will choose to enroll. If their post-matriculation re-evaluation indicates that the costs and benefits compare unfavorably to their earlier perceptions, they may choose to withdraw. The study showed that tuition was related to within-year persistence, indicating that financial resources better enabled students to persist. Also, it demonstrated that when the financial aid package consisted solely of loans, students at more high-priced institutions were less likely to persist (Hunton, 2015).

Allocating resources in a way that supports student success can generate ROI (return on investment) for both colleges and students (Desrochers & Staislof, 2019). Desrochers and Staislof (2019) focused their research on strategic finance that is an approach that encourages colleges to shift their thinking from spending and budget balancing to a ROI approach. According to this study, a ROI approach helps colleges allocate their resources to programs and initiatives in a way that maintains educational quality, improves student success, and generates additional net revenue from items associated with that success including improved persistence, and retention. The study suggested that allocating resources in a way that supports student success can generate ROI for both colleges and students (Desrochers & Staislof, 2019). The shift in thinking from spending to ROI is increasingly important in an environment of constrained resources and declining student enrollments.

Some academic retention-focused interventions for international students were discussed (Kolvoord et al., 2016). Such interventions include faculty-directed research projects, internships, mentoring, and tutoring. According to the study, faculty-led research projects allow students the opportunity to participate in research that they might have otherwise missed, granting students the opportunity to learn new information and

develop new skills (Kolvoord et al., 2016). Mentoring is yet another way for higher education institutions to retain students as mentoring is associated with a higher G.P.A. and a stronger bond created between the student and the mentor (Kolovoord et al., 2016).

Furthermore, Perry et al. (2020), expressed that universities throughout the U.S. struggle with fiscal issues that can be improved by greater retention and graduation rates. The study conducted by Perry et al. (2020), looked at differences in perceptions between international and domestic students concerning awareness, use, and value of services available at a western U.S. land-grant university. The survey instrument was administered to 63 international students and 49 domestic students, with three respondents electing not to indicate a nation of origin. The findings of the study showed that many students, both international and domestic, were not aware of available programs, which correlated to less use and perceived value of those services and programs (Perry et al., 2020).

The impact of social identity change (SIMIC) on international students' academic performance, academic retention, mental health, and life satisfaction was studied (Cruwys et al., 2021). With data collected at three time points across a foundation year program in a large Australian university among international students transitioning to study overseas. The continuity of social identities predicted higher academic performance and better life satisfaction, and indirectly predicted student retention over time (Cruwys et al., 2021).

The relationship between academic literacy support, student retention and academic performance were studied (Glew et al., 2019). The authors report on the profile of who needed support, and the relationships between student support, retention, and academic performance. A total of 11,290 consultations were recorded during a 17-month period, and these consultations were initiated by 2,827 students. Among students who continued or are continuing in the program, those who did not seek support had a lower grade point average compared to those who sought support, suggesting that frequency of

consultations influenced academic success and retention. The findings show that regarding academic performance, students who did not engage with this support had a lower level of academic achievement. Also, a significant frequent engagement with the support was shown to positively influence academic performance, and this may also have contributed to student progression and retention in their studies (Glew et al., 2019).

Based on the study conducted by Ward et al. (2016), the institutions welcome international students, as they affirm their academic reputation and their claims to provide a global experience for domestic students. For the research, three groups of new first-time freshmen were compared: International students, students who were residents of Oregon, and students who were from other U.S. states (i.e., nonresident domestic freshmen). The data indicates that a traditionally at-risk population suffered from lower university GPAs as well as lower retention and lower completion rates. International students did not earn grades comparable to those of their domestic peers, but they performed better than their peers in terms of retention and six-year graduation rates. The findings show, in terms of the ultimate university outcome graduation international students were successful and were not at a disadvantage (Ward et al., 2016).

The factors that contribute to persistence of sophomore students were studied by Blekic et al. (2020). Results indicate that financial variables and transfer status are the most important variables in sophomores' retention. First-year college transition and success has been a focus of study, but sophomore success has not been as prominent a topic of study (Blekic et al., 2020). The results of the study improve our understanding of why students leave, help us better predict whether they are likely to stay, and suggest what institutions can do to be more receptive and conducive to student success (Blekic et al., 2020).

Finally, Haverila and McLaughlin (2020) investigated the variables affecting students' retention intentions between domestic and international students. Altogether, 15 variables related to retention intentions were examined and significant differences were found in six of these variables (Haverila & McLaughlin, 2020). Social integration, ineffective study skills, difficulty adjusting to college life, poor extracurricular activities, and poor housing arrangements were perceived to be significantly more important by international students, while poor quality of instruction was perceived to be significantly more important by domestic students. As the conclusion, it was discussed that international and domestic students require different retention strategies on the part of the institution, and support services are a somewhat contributing factor toward retention intentions (Haverila & McLaughlin, 2020).

Summary of Literature

The provision of adequate support services by higher education institutions can result in a higher level of satisfaction for international students. The goal for the universities is to implement a more inclusive university's internationalization strategy (Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2018). Per discussed, knowing the factors that impact international students' transitional experience will better prepare the institutions to support them and help them succeed. Some of the challenges the international students have include financial hardships, language barrier, acculturation, homesickness, and anxiety, that if these addressed it will improve their sense of belonging (Acharya et al., 2018; Gao, 2021; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Singh & Jack, 2022; Yan, 2020; Yilmaz & Temizkan, 2022).

The importance of the leadership portion in setting up a supportive plan for international students' specific needs during and after their studies, which includes recruiting, was discussed as well. Different support services are being offered in higher

education institutions, and a well-organized change management system is vital in case of dropouts and low retention rates (ApplyBoard, 2023; Chungsup et al., 2018; Kim & Mumbauer, 2019; Kolvoord et al., 2016; Maria, 2020; Paul et al., 2019). A well-formed institution of the international students' can organize a supporting system offering services based on the students' unique needs, so this will positively impact their persistence, engagement, and academic performance (Blekic et al., 2020; Glew et al., 2019; Haverila & McLaughlin, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

In research, the theoretical framework is the foundation of the dissertation through which the researcher is constructing their knowledge for the study, and it supports the rationale of the study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). "The theoretical framework is also viewed as a guide or blueprint that supports the study, which certifies how the researcher will philosophically, epistemologically, methodologically, and analytically write the dissertation" (Brooks, 2023, p. 14). The theoretical framework for this study was a combination of Schlossberg' four S's model in transition and adjustment, Baumeister and Leary (1995) belongingness framework, and Tinto's persistence model.

Schlossberg (1984, 2011) that is well-known for its four S's model, is one of the theories used in this study. Schlossberg has argued that all transitions are characterized by certain common features, represent potential strengths or deficits that individuals bring to a transition and shape the possible ways in which they adjust to new life events and circumstances. These can be grouped into four major categories, traditionally defined as the Four S's: (1) Situation - the situation at the time of the transition; (2) Support - the people and assets that strengthen and encourage the student; (3) Self - who the student is (identity), his or her optimism level, and dealing with ambiguity; (4) Strategies - ways and functions of coping. Incorporating the Four Ss as standard components ensures a

holistic approach in bolstering student success and retention (Barclay, 2017). The present study uses this framework to examine literature and proposes a way to conceptualize international students' adjusting to the new life, based on this framework.

The second theory, the theoretical underpinnings for a sense of belonging are found in psychology, that relates to the individual's need to belong and feel accepted and supported (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Baumeister and Leary (1995) also point out that people who have active social relationships, which can help them feel connected and accepted, appear to be mentally and physically in better condition than persons who are isolated. Similarly, Juvonen's (2006) sense of belonging model suggests that persons who have close relationships with others and have feelings of belonging have better outcomes in mental and physical health and performance. Faircloth and Hamm (2005) have also proposed a model for a sense of belonging in an educational institution that suggests that belonging is a mediator variable for explaining academic success. The feeling of emotional connection within a setting can accordingly result in the feeling of rejection if unsatisfactory, or belonging if satisfactory (Pardede et al., 2021). In this study, the focus is on the social aspects of belonging (e.g., social participation, engagement, and membership), and feeling accepted can be fostered for the international students and how these experiences can help them succeed and persist.

The other theory, or Tinto's integration model (2017) was chosen as a theory to examine and assess the research examined in this study regarding the factors that impact persistence. According to Tinto (2017), persistence occurs when students successfully integrate into the college setting academically and socially. The more students integrate into the life of the college, the more successful they will be and the more likely the student will remain in school until graduation (Samoila & Vrabie, 2023). Positive college experiences intensify the goal of degree completion and heighten the commitment

between the individual and the institution; negative experiences weaken the intentions and commitments and lead to a higher chance of leaving without a degree (Samoila & Vrabie, 2023). Tinto (2017) emphasizes the impact of students' perceptions of their social integration on their persistence that means that students who feel connected to their peers and feel satisfied tend to persist. On the other hand, the students who feel isolated, unsupported or do not feel engaged in the life of the institution are more likely to drop out.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed above provided a framework for the ideas involved in this study exploring the international students' transitional experiences. The international students' transitional experience and the factors that impact students' sense of belonging and persistence were identified. The next chapter will provide the methodology on how the study will be conducted. It will include an overview of the research problem, research purpose and questions, research design, data collection procedure, data analysis, privacy and ethical considerations, and limitations for this study.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the transitional experiences of international students at community college. A purposeful sample of second year international students, enrolled in a large community college, located in Southeastern Texas, participated in this study. Data were analyzed using a Constant Comparative Method (CCM). This chapter will provide the following: (a) an overview of the research problem; (b) research purpose and questions; (c) data collection procedures; (d) data analysis; (e) qualitative validity; (f) privacy and ethical considerations; (g) research design limitations; and (h) conclusion.

Overview of Research Problem

Singh (2018) found that international students report the least sense of belonging when compared with domestic students, so there is a critical need for university staff to implement prevention and intervention in international students' transition. The rising cost of the U.S. higher education, student visa denials, travel bans, and COVID-19 pandemic caused declining enrollment of the international students in the previous years (Batalova & Israel, 2022). Some of the transitional experience and difficulties that impact the international students' academic performance based on Banjong (2015), Herath (2018), and Mongrue (2020) are culture shock, homesickness, loss of social support, discrimination, language barriers, acclimation, financial issues, loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Also, lack of employment opportunities, and limited work hours may have a significant impact on their success (Mongrue, 2020).

Research Purpose & Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the transitional experiences of international students at community colleges. The following questions guided this study:

1- What factors impact transitional experiences of the international students at a community college?

2- How do international students develop a sense of belonging at a community college?

3- What factors contribute to international students persisting at a community college?

Research Design

For this study, the researcher used a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is used to understand and explore concepts, thoughts, experiences, and theories, so it enables researchers to gather in-depth insights on topics that are not well understood (Streefkerk, 2023). Qualitative research aims to address questions concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of humans' lives and social worlds (Fossey et al., 2002). Data were collected by conducting interviews from a purposeful sample of second year international students, enrolled in a large community college located in Southeastern Texas. Data were analyzed using a constant comparative method.

Instructional Setting and Context

The participants in this study were students at a public, community college in southeastern Texas. The selected region is one of the largest in the state of Texas. The college was ranked 1st among community colleges nationally in the Associate's Institutions Hosting International Students AY 2017-18 (Open Doors Data). There are 21 different locations across the area. The interviews focused on students attending the central and west campus located in the western side of the city. The community college has 53,613 students including the international students who have come from more than 50 different countries (Community College Fact Book, 2021). In fall 2022, there were 55 American Indian/Native American, 5,800 White, 12,814 Black/African American, 4,889

Asian, 17,503 Hispanic, 40 Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and 789 students with other races (Univstats, 2022).

Participants

The target population for this study were all students who indicated that they are international students on their application to the regional two-year community college in southeast Texas. According to the Open Doors Data (2022), there were 2,972 international students enrolled at this college in the year 2022. After going through CPHS, the researcher started to collect the data. The interviewer solicited a purposeful sample of participants who were all students studying ESL in their second year, so they had perspective on their experiences during their first-year transitioning into college. Prior to the interviews, the researcher contacted the students via text to ask for their voluntary participation in this study. The text included the purpose of the study, the interview process, and efforts to ensure confidentiality. The college has a diverse population of 53,613 students. This includes both full-time and part-time students as well as graduates and undergraduates. At the participating community college, the graduation rate is 17% within 150% normal time, the retention rate is 63%, and the transfer-out rate is 17%, as of August 31, 2022. Table 3.3 displays the international student's enrollment by type in the participating institution.

Table 3.1:
Enrollment by Racial/Ethnic Category Fall 2022

	Non-Degree Seeking	Degree-Seeking Undergraduates	Total Undergradu
Nonresidents	679	3,469	3,872
Hispanic/Latino	3,559	13,917	18,424
Black or African American	1,834	10,926	12,582
White	681	4,122	5,473
American Indian, Alaska Native	15	65	71
Asian, non-Hispanic	757	3,724	4,996
Native Hawaiian	4	26	27
Two or more races	157	848	1,065
Race and/or ethnicity unknown	197	774	1,649
TOTAL	7,883	37,871	48,159

Table 3.2:
Student Demographic Data Fall 2022

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Hispanic/Latino	17,501	37.1
African American	12,928	27.0
International	4,314	9.8
White	6,291	12.1
Asian	5,258	10.1
Multi-Ethnic	1,063	
Unknown	860	
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	48	
Male	18,506	40.4
Female	29,823	59.6

Table 3.3:*International Students' Enrollment by Type at the College Fall 2021*

Visa Type Group	AY 2018	AY 2019	AY 2020
F1-Students	6,490	5,666	4,688
Other Types	2,377	1,967	1,674
Total International Students	8,867	7,633	6,362

Participant Selection

The sample for the study consisted of a purposeful sample of international students who agreed to participate in the study and were asked to participate in a semi structured interview. The second-year international students who agreed to participate in this study provided insights regarding their transitional experience, based on the interview questions. International students were invited to participate in individual interviews. The participants needed to meet the following criteria: International students at the community colleges, studying ESL in their second year. The interviewer asked questions related to the international students' experience (see Appendix B). The researcher recorded the interviews using zoom and used the written zoom transcripts to capture the participants' responses. The pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of each interview participant, the colleges, and universities in the transcribed materials.

Researcher's Role

The researcher's country of birth and undergraduate level education is from another country. She has 20 years educational commitment, including as director, lead faculty and researcher, which has prompted her investigation into how the participants are experiencing their professional transition into the two-year college. The researcher

currently assists the international students at the college to acquire adequate English language skills for them to qualify for entry into higher education programs in the U.S. The researcher's experience of working with international students in the field, with the associated challenges they faced, gives unique and foregrounded knowledge about their transitional experiences in a two-year college. As a former director of ESL departments, and a college ESL instructor, the researcher's positionality allows for trustworthiness in data collection, and strong knowledge of the participants' experience landscape which has been learnt throughout the eight years of her direct interactions with them. Also, no students participated in the interview who the researcher currently works with at the college.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher gained approval from the University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL) and the Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) before any data were collected. Data collection was captured by conducting semi-structured interviews. Most often, interviews are used in qualitative research to gather detailed narrative accounts of the participants' perception (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The interview process allows the researcher to ask open-ended questions as well as follow-up questions for clarification (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One strategy to ensure accuracy of responses for analysis included recording the interviews from start to finish.

A purposeful sample of second year international students were selected to gather a variety of level responses. The diversity of participants mirrored the diversity of the international students attending the college. Participants were emailed a letter of informed consent explaining the purpose of the interview, the interview protocol, the length of the interview (30-45 minutes), ethical considerations, and confidentiality measures (see Appendix A). Once informed consent was granted by electronic signature, the researcher

began to schedule virtually or in person at a location of their choice. Interview questions were open-ended to allow the participants an opportunity to thoroughly explain their experiences and perceptions (see Appendix B).

Zoom, a videoconferencing platform, was utilized to conduct interviews and record responses for those participants who opt to do the interviews electronically. Zoom provided the option to record interviews and create interview transcripts. To ensure that the interview accurately captured the remarks of the participants, the researcher sent participants a copy of their transcript for member checking.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved reviewing audio, video, and text data to confirm or explore study participant responses (Mihas, 2019). According to Pawluch (2005), Constant Comparative Analysis is used where the researcher wants to compare the responses of the participants with each other and comparing their remarks within their same interview to the various questions using data display matrices. This comparison helps also identify reoccurring themes, and the analytic induction helps to identify responses that are very different from each other so that it is not assumed that all participants have the same views (Pawluch, 2005). According to Pawluch (2005), qualitative researchers can make conceptual comparisons across substantive contexts to produce more formal theory (Pawluch, 2005).

The interview data were organized into themes that emerged. The researcher first did the coding of the data to identify repeated categories, then from these data categories the repeated themes were derived. The key themes that the researcher found were: Student Support Services and barriers like high tuition rates and language difficulties directly affect the international students' transitional experience. Also, higher amount of social interactions, and better faculty-peer relationships may develop international

students' sense of belonging and factors such as students' attitude, and institutional commitment impact their persistence. This process analyzed transcripts line by line and coded participant's responses by frequency of words or phrases that were used to describe an experience, i.e., emotions, actions, and feelings. The researcher reviewed all transcripts, to create a list of common themes for coding analysis. Common themes in participants' responses were determined by reading each interview transcript and noting similar perceptions and experiences.

Validity

The multiple data sources and varied participants with the same experience provided data source triangulation. This, combined with the researchers' experience, ensured that attention is paid to the most relevant themes across participant stories. The researcher interviewed participants who were international students studying ESL in their second year at the community college which is the target population of your study. The collection of data, and the goals of storying and restoring emergent themes ensured reliability of account within the individual stories. Participants received copies of the transcripts of their interviews to validate their stories. Member checking was used to check the transcript for internal researcher accuracy.

Korstjens and Moser (2018) stated that all qualitative research must include trustworthiness, which includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure its validity. According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), credibility in qualitative research is the equivalent of validity in quantitative research. The researcher promoted credibility through narrative truth. Researchers made every effort to foster a sense of rapport while conducting their research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Full disclosure regarding the purpose of this research was outlined in the Informed Consent (see Appendix B), since this research was designed to gather information that will

potentially benefit the educational community. Bias was eliminated when research participants provided honest and detailed answers to research questions, thus improving research credibility.

Research transferability relates to outlining experiences in context, so they become meaningful to an outsider, according to Korstjens and Moser (2018). The researcher created an opportunity to determine common themes through open-ended research questions. When common themes were determined, the findings of this qualitative research became relevant to the scientific community. All research should also have dependability since dependability is a significant factor in establishing trustworthiness. Korstjens and Moser (2018) pointed out that in qualitative research, dependability is related to the stability of the research findings over a period. The study participants responded to the open-ended research questions, which made the study naturally become more dependable.

In qualitative research, confirmability refers to the degree to which research findings were derived from data analysis and can be confirmed by other researchers. Korstjens and Moser (2018) highlighted the difference between dependability and confirmability by stating that dependability includes aspects of consistency while confirmability involves aspects of neutrality. To ensure confirmability, the researcher maintained reflexivity throughout the research study to determine whether responses fit into emerging patterns (or common themes). According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), the scientific community looks for consistency in observations and perceptions of study participants to confirm research results.

Reliability

Before conducting the interviews with participants in this study, the researcher piloted the questions with the students who are in the same role and situation as those in

the study. None of these pilot participants' data were included in the final study. The researcher conducted a trial interview to receive feedback on questions. With the researcher's knowledge from the piloted interviews with the international students, the researcher revised the interview questions. Once the researcher had the interview questions doubled checked for accuracy, the researcher used the exact interview questions with the participants of this study.

Generalizability

This study was conducted to grant students, educators, researchers, and higher education personal insight into the transitional experience of international students. The lack of effective practices to use with international students who are at risk of drop outs may have severe implications for the academic success of international students. The results of this study cannot be generalized to international students within the general college population because the data collected only utilizes a small population. In addition, not all international students may exhibit the same transitional experience as students observed in the study. However, the purpose of the study was to suggest future practices that may be useful to all colleges and universities in settings that educate international students.

Privacy and Ethical Considerations

The researcher gained approval from UHCL's CPHS before any data was collected. Participants of the semi-structured interview were given informed consent forms (see Appendix A) that explained the purpose of the study, and the time commitment, and explained to participants how their responses and personal identifiable information was kept confidential. Interviewees were given pseudonyms to protect their identity and the community college's name was also provided with a pseudonym. The data will be kept in a secure office in a password-protected folder on the researcher's

computer. The researcher will maintain the data for five years and when the five-year time frame has elapsed, the researcher will destroy the data.

Research Design Limitations

The research design consists of several limitations. The first of the limitations of this study was the location of the study. The study only focuses on international students studying at a community college in the Southeastern part of Texas, and the information might not be applicable on a global or national scale. The second limitation of this study is the data. Given the small sample size of students interviewed, it might reduce the impact of the study, and generalizations should be interpreted with caution. Third, the lack of information regarding students' expectations and experiences prior to arrival is a limitation. These experiences have the potential to limit or expand the baseline skillset of an international student, which may skew data regarding alignment. Fourth limitation relates to differences in the international student's exposure to consistent observations, ongoing feedback, available resources, campus support, and other collaborative efforts, i.e., counseling/advising/mentoring etc. The fifth limitation is that the validity of student satisfaction is an inherent limitation due to the subjective nature of it. The lack of trust could always be a limitation in an interview.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the focus of this chapter was on the methodology of this study, that provided research design, instructional setting and context, participant selection, participants, researchers' role, data collection procedures, interviews, data analysis procedures, validity, reliability, generalizability, privacy and ethical considerations, and research design limitations. By understanding the international students' challenges and their perceptions of the resources through their transition, the administrators can identify

better support systems in a two-year community college based on their unique needs. In Chapter four the data will be presented, analyzed, and discussed in further detail.

CHAPTER IV:

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the transitional experience of international students studying at a two-year institution. This chapter presents the findings of qualitative data analysis of the study. First, an explanation of the participants' demographics of the study is presented, followed by results of the data analysis. This chapter presents the data analysis for each of the three research questions. It concludes with a summary of the findings.

Participant Demographics

Ten students consented to participate in the interviews. Student selection criteria provided a diverse set of responses based on gender, race, age, and experience. Efforts were made to gather a sample of students that were demographically representative of the international student population that are studying ESL at the community colleges. Table 4.1 provides pseudonyms participating student demographics per ethnicity. Six students indicated they were female, while four students indicated they were male. All participants indicated their race/ethnicity. The students indicated they were Algerian, Venezuelan, Congolese, Persian, Libyan, Afghan, Burkinabé, Brazilian, Sudanese, and Mexican.

Table 4.1:*Participating Student Demographics Per Race/Ethnicity*

Name	Age Group	Gender	Country	Prior Degree	Grad/ Undergrad	Semester
David	31-41	Male	Algeria	Masters	Grad	Four
Emma	51-61	Female	Venezuela	Doctorate	Grad	Four
Fransisco	21-31	Male	Republic of Congo	Bachelors	Undergrad	Four
Melanie	31-41	Female	Iran	Doctorate	Grad	Five
Micah	21-31	Male	Libya	Bachelors	Grad	Five
Monica	31-41	Female	Afghanistan	Diploma	Undergrad	Four
Oscar	31-41	Male	Burkina Faso	Masters	Grad	Four
Pheba	21-31	Female	Brazil	Bachelors	Grad	Four
Stella	21-31	Female	Sudan	Masters	Undergrad	Four
Talia	41-51	Female	Mexico	Diploma	Undergrad	Four

Emerging Themes

To capture a more in-depth understanding of the students' transitional experience, ten students were interviewed regarding their perceptions on the issue. Each participant provided their experiences on their experience, the support, and their perception of factors that impact their sense of belonging and persistence. Each participant was interviewed once. The interviews consisted of 15 open ended questions that looked at students' experience, their challenges, the support services, and what factors influenced their sense of belonging and persistence (see Appendix B). The themes that emerged from the interviews offered a comprehensive perspective of how the participants perceived the

college support during their transition to the college from their home country impacted their sense of belonging and persistence.

Research question one focused on the transitional experiences of the international students at a two-year institution. Research questions two and three focused on the factors that impact the international students' sense of belonging and their persistence at a two-year community college. The data related to these research questions were categorized into themes that focused on several aspects of the participants' experiences. The consistent themes that emerged throughout the study were: (a) barriers, (b) support system, (c) campus facilities, (d) social interaction, (e) emotional wellbeing, (f) students' attitude, and (g) institution's affordability. The emergent themes and sub-themes obtained from students' responses are provided below followed by a sample of the students' comments.

Research Question One

Research question one, *What factors impact transitional experiences of the international students at a community college?*, was answered using a qualitative inductive coding process. Ten participants responded to this question and other related interview questions. An inductive coding analysis derived additional themes based on the responses concerning students' experience: (a) barriers such as how financial hardship and language barrier may have impacted their experience, (b) support system such as how well the family, friends and college have been helpful, and (c) campus facilities such as different parts of the campus including library, bookstore, computer labs, cafeterias, etc. and different offices like admission office, and international students office, etc.

Barriers and Challenges

Based on the interview responses regarding the transitional experience, all of the student participants had experienced challenges with high tuition rate, and language

difficulties. The students were asked three questions pertaining to the barriers they had. The response to these questions can be broken into two categories: (a) financial hardship (b) language barrier.

Regarding the financial hardship, one of the participants expressed being ashamed and embarrassed that he still needs to request money from his family after two years of study. Fransico said:

When I see still my dad (he was close to tears) is expected to send me the tuition, I feel embarrassed. I just hope I can get a degree soon and go back to my country to be helpful.

According to the interviews, tuition affordability will ease the burden and allows the students to focus on academics. All the student participants' responses regarding their college experience included the financial hardship, and high tuition rates. Oscar was frustrated:

There is no scholarship, and you can hardly manage the expenses here in the U.S. Also, you are not allowed to work as an international student, so think how the student from another country can afford to pay the educational expenses. He compared some of the education styles in his country with what he has seen here in the U.S. and said:

Many of the students who manage to come to the U.S. and study have been smart, but you may see them getting not good grades only because they are sad in heart! So, they cannot focus on their studies well. They need to be understood, and opportunities for them need to be provided. And continued: "Yes, I felt like a stranger! Everything is limited or different for the international students." As the interviewer, I needed to remind him how valuable their efforts are to pursue a degree despite all those challenges. He was satisfied with the teachers and did not have any issues with them from the beginning. Melanie had similar beliefs about the education

equity that international students need to make more efforts to make it happen; tried to talk about some of the barriers she had experienced. When asked if she had received any financial support, she commented:

No, because I had evaluated my degree here in the U.S., and I was not approved to get the financial aid. The high tuition rates and the high expenses prevented me from studying well. I couldn't focus on my studies as I was worried all the time if my family could support me, or if I had the chance to register for the other semester. I couldn't ask my parents to send me money either, because I knew it is so hard for them to prepare it for me. In the U.S., sending and receiving money from Iran (her country) is not allowed due to the sanctions. We must trust strangers for money transfers!

When I asked David about the barriers, he said due to financial hardship he had to take the risk and work extra hours! He mentioned, has always been sleepy during his classes, as he did not have time to study well. He explained:

I am not a teenager, and I can't ask my parents to send me money to continue my studies. They have their own problems, and at least I shouldn't ask them for money if I can't help them.

He was too tired in the interview and was working while trying to answer the questions. Another student had an opposite view on this matter, and said if someone comes to study as an international student, she or he needs to be fully aware of all the expenses, and costs for studying and living here in the U.S. Francisco admitted that:

I understand that the college tuition can't be any lower as in most countries, even in my country the international students' tuition is high, almost four times more than the residents' tuition. But the positive point is that classes are not crowded and there

are not many students in each class, so we can easily focus on what the teachers say.

He suggested: If they offer students some types of discounts, grants, or scholarships besides those high-interest loans, they may prevent them from experiencing financial hardships. Emma said: The tuition is so high that it doesn't allow us to breathe. We only must study, and work if we can.

Talia and Emma had the very same point of view on the difficulty of managing expenses and being obliged to work in jobs and positions that they don't like. Talia said: "I have been through a lot of difficulties back in my country. Now, I need to take advantage of this opportunity, and try my best to survive." She looked so tired and emphasized the reason: "If I don't get a degree, I have to work in such positions and such companies all my life." But Emma had an opposite background in education, and she used to be a medical doctor in her country Venezuela. She explained:

The situation in my country is terrible, and I can't go back. I used to be a doctor in my country but here I am studying English to be able to get a certificate for a two-year program related to the medical field. Unfortunately, because of COVID-19, I couldn't study well in past years, but I am a caregiver now and I am feeling better. When asked about any other barriers, the responses indicate that ESL international students experience multiple problems with inadequate English Language Proficiency (ELP), impacting on their ability to communicate effectively inside and outside of the classroom. Melanie admitted that:

Not knowing English caused a lot of stress for me at the beginning. I used to listen to podcasts anytime during the day, to learn English with the right accent. I had my bachelor's in English in my country but when I came here, I couldn't communicate with people well.

Also, Monica had to tell this repeatedly that the language barrier caused a lot of stress and anxiety for her at the beginning. She added: "I had to bring my family (her husband and three-year old child) to the college to register, or ask a question because his English was better, so he could communicate better."

Two participants also emphasized the importance of housing to have a smoother transition. When speaking to Micah, he expressed: "Regarding the high amount of tuition, and the risks with living alone, that would be safer and more affordable to pay for a dormitory than renting a place to live." Micah used to live alone but his younger brother is coming to the U.S. to study at the same college, and he will join him soon.

Support System

Based on the interview responses regarding the transitional experience, all the student participants agreed that factors such as on-campus support services and the facilities have a direct impact on their experience. The students were asked three questions pertaining to the support they have. The response to these questions can be broken into three categories: (a) family friends support (b) collegial support; faculty and staff including advisors, DSOs. counselors, librarians, etc. at the campus.

Micah said: "I am blessed to have supportive parents who are still supporting me financially." Francisco repeatedly mentioned that he is being supported by his family and friends. He expressed: "I feel embarrassed due to this pressure that my family is experiencing because of me and the high amount of tuition that they need to cover. He stated," As an international student, we are not allowed to work here, this has made me stressed, and I hope I can finish and complete my program with good grades to make them happy."

As a response to the question if he feels a sense of belonging or feels like a stranger, he said "Yes, I feel I am a stranger because everything (he meant rules, fees,

events, processing,) is separated and different for us (international students). “But I feel good as my classmates and I have a WhatsApp group, so we can ask and answer questions.” Monica, Oscar, and Fransico had similar experiences of being in groups that have caused them to feel connected and belong. Another participant was so happy to be in a group of international students, that they were experiencing the same challenges and issues together. Talia said:

I have a friend who used to work in the same place, but she studied hard, finished her English program, and studied nursing at the college, and now she is a nurse! She helps me with anything when I need assistance.

Regarding this, Stella had a similar experience with friends and their support. She stated: "When we came to this country, I knew no one but now I have a lot of friends with whom we can have lots of fun and enjoy going out or studying together." She felt lucky to have these friends here and explained when she together with husband came had no one to talk with, but now they have friends who they can spend time together. She commented, "They are like my family; actually, we are a family now."

One of the participants made a very positive comment on having friendships and having peer groups. Micah mentioned: “As soon as we had a project or an assignment that we needed to work on in groups, my friends and I were ready to start." He explained how much fun he had working in peer groups and continued "Not only did my classmates and I learned and studied together really well, but also we had a lot of fun, and used to laugh a lot while doing the exercises."

When asked to describe on campus support all the participants chose to give their own experiences of the personnel and employees at the college The descriptions of support varied by participant based on their current level and status, but an overwhelming theme was the lack of admission staff support. However, all participants felt supported

and assisted during their studies by their teachers, but several participants expressed their frustration, and eight students were disappointed by the advisors' support. Pheba said: As you know, I used to do martial arts and I am an athlete. I wanted to engage in sports and clubs, but I had no time. She explained: I had to babysit for the family who I was living with, and they've been paying too little for taking care of their two kids. I had no chance other than to stay and tolerate it.

She remembered a friend of hers quit his studies because of the frustration they caused for him at the enrollment center. When asked Phebe, if she can explain, she replied: The staff are not sure about anything. Our life is very complicated and there are many problems. My friend decided not to take his course and left college because of that! They sent him to different places like department A to Z and Z to A again and again, when going there they kept referring him to another department and generally a lot of miscommunications.

She continued:

Whenever I want to get information, I know it is a headache. Nobody is going to give you the right information. They are either hesitating to tell us or simply they don't know it. I already know for simple and the most basic guidance we need to waste a lot of time and energy.

She was angry when trying to remember the bad experiences and said, "They work as if they don't like working there or care about you and your problems." Talia said: They kept sending me to other campuses, and after visiting the 4th or 5th campus I finally understood what I needed to do. They were ignorant and didn't respond well. She finally registered and is doing her GED at the college but there was a lot of frustration for her at that time, as she said she couldn't sleep well and had nightmares all the time. She feels relieved now though. Melanie had the very same opinion and had experienced confusion

when asking advisors to help. She commented, "I always reach out to the DSO as they know a little more." When asked if she had any suggestions, she responded, "It seems they lack updated information."

Emma had a positive experience with her teachers, but she said she was not guided well at the beginning, so this caused her a lot of trouble in the semester after. She remembered: "During the course, I had no problem, and I was doing okay. After we finished the course they said, I hadn't taken a prerequisite for the course I wanted. This put me in a lot of trouble." She said: "I was shocked when I heard all the other students had been studying the prerequisite course besides the class that they had together."

When I asked how this could happen, she said, "It was my first class at the college and we didn't have a social group for our class, so I wasn't informed. The advisors didn't tell me about that either." When asked about the use of services, she simply said, "I have used nothing!" I asked, if possible, to provide some explanation or reasons why she had not used any other services. She said: "I was a doctor in my home country but here I was nothing. I had to build from scratch. "Another participant regretted not being able to use the resources as she has been busy with her studies and work." Melanie said: As someone who enjoys being in teams and working with others, I heard of a variety of activities that I could enjoy participating in like library meetings, cultural events, and workshops. Unfortunately, due to lack of time, I could never take advantage of those services.

Oscar was so satisfied with using the technology, lab, and the library. He said: "They are so useful." Oscar continued that due to a lack of budget, he missed the deadline, and couldn't attend a class.

But I have a terrible experience regarding advisors; I was informed of a prerequisite late, and it took five days for my family to send me the money, when I was back to

enroll in the class, it was full. The advisor recommended me to get one of the classes online, but the timing didn't match. So, I asked if I could have both classes online and she admitted and gave me the key. After one week of attending classes, I received an email from the international office that you are not allowed to take both classes online, and your will be dropped.

He added: "If the advisor was aware of the policy, he could simply advise me not to do so." And he expressed his frustration that this could have prevented a lot of miscommunications and confusion." Nearly all students had good relationships with their professors, experienced supportive faculties and were very satisfied. Oscar explained how helpful all his teachers have been since the beginning. "They are supportive, and whenever I have a problem or ask questions, most of them respond quickly which is great." Also, regarding the support from teachers, Monica had a similar positive experience. Monica said: "During the time I was pregnant my teacher helped me a lot and she even recorded the sessions so all the students including me could review it anytime we wanted."

All participants had positive experiences related to their professors, and when I asked about the suggestions, Melanie mentioned a very important point:

That would be great if the professors could consider one session at the beginning of the course to explain about the portal, Canvas, MyELT, Cambridge one assignments, grading, books, and generally the syllabus or any other instruction related stuff, so that will reduce a lot of confusion for us.

Stella used to study at the library and use laboratory computers and printers a lot before, but now she is a mom to a new child, so she cannot study at the library anymore. Half of the students, when asked about the campus facilities, either had no or little experience of utilizing other services or facilities. I reminded them of some of the resources, so they

had an idea if they had ever used one before. Their responses showed not many of these international students had either no time or no interest in using those services.

Campus Facilities

Based on the interview, and regarding the campus facilities, participants talked about the importance of having a well-equipped campus to feel comfortable. It could be concluded that the facilities and resources had a direct impact on their experience. The students were asked three questions pertaining to the resources they have. The response to these questions can include the library, bookstore, fitness center, clinic, computer labs, cafeterias, day care, etc.

Regarding campus facilities, students had different ideas. Some mentioned there is great support as the college offers a variety of curricular and co-curricular activities to the students. Some of them had great experience of being able to participate in multiple events and workshops but some had never had any extra curriculum engagement. Talia, when talking about resources, said: "I love the library at the campus; it is huge, and I can either use a computer and do my assignments on Canvas or Cambridge or I can read, study, and use printers."

Three students discussed how important the structure of the campuses may positively impact their experience. When talking about the experience, a student stated: "Once, I purchased books online, but they didn't have the code to access portals. Later I understood that I needed to get them at the college bookstore and only one of the campuses had it." She continued: "I had a hard time returning the book I had purchased online and difficulties going to the campus that had a bookstore inside". This shows a lack of guidance, or onboarding problems that need to be enhanced.

According to the participants, and eight out of ten interviews, the structure, environment, and materials are so important. As the international students are required to

spend at least seven hours on the campus, the resources and facilities seemed to have an impact on their experience. Fransisco said: When I see everything is clean, and well-organized I love to stay, study or spend time there and feel like home. Regarding the resources, Fransisco said: “The college environment, like its safety and security, is so good, so we really feel comfortable. He continued: “The advantage of maintaining facilities to be upgraded and modern at the college, for everyone at the college including the students, teachers, and all the personnel is that they can effectively focus on their own goals, and responsibilities.”

According to the interviews, and the questions regarding the students’ transitional experience, the participants explained some of the support and the barriers they had during their first year. Nearly all the participants had overall satisfaction of their faculty and they admitted that the campus resources were helpful. However, the most significant difficulty that they have been through was financial hardship, language barriers, limitations, and misguidance. They all agreed that it took a while for them to gain awareness about the culture, city, and norms. The participants had different viewpoints and perceptions of the support and many of them were not aware of all the different types of services available at the college.

Research Question Two

Research question two, *How do international students develop a sense of belonging at their respective institutions?*, was answered using a qualitative inductive coding process. Ten participants responded to this question and other related interview questions. An inductive coding analysis derived additional themes based on the responses concerning factors that impact sense of belonging: (a) social interaction such as involvements, engagements, and relationships (b) emotional wellbeing such as how well the students feel healthy, safe, and comfortable.

Social Interaction

Based on the interview responses regarding factors that impact their sense of belonging, all ten student participants had similar expectations that they need to have social interactions to feel if they belonged to the new environment. The students were asked two questions pertaining to social interaction. The response to these questions can be broken into three categories: (a) student involvement and engagement in groups (b) class extracurricular activities, (c) relationships.

Micah, who seems powerful in managing his life and having good control over his plans, said: "I tried to join in groups, social media, Facebook, workshops and events as much as I could." Micah is a student at university now studying the major he wanted. He added: "When you build connections and networking, everything will go smoothly toward your success. Melanie acknowledged that she would have a better feeling of belonging if she were a member of a team, club, or student association. She admitted that: By engaging in different activities and having responsibilities you feel that you are being accepted. Unfortunately, I didn't have the opportunity to have any type of participation in extra-curricular activities, but I am pretty sure they can help build a sense of belonging for the students.

The other participant had the idea that having relationships can greatly impact students' sense of belonging. Talia added:

I am blessed to have friends who are of help and assistance. I knew no one at the beginning and had lots of issues that I didn't know who to ask about. Now, I am in a group of friends who can tell whatever problem I come up with.

Stella felt fortunate to have social networks and groups of friends and classmates. She stated that:

I have two kids now, and it should be much harder than before, but it is the opposite! Now I have reliable friends whom I can trust. There is not that much need for me to ask every little question from an advisor, as I have friends who have been through all such difficulties. We help each other as we need to have relationships to feel comfortable in the new country.

One of the participants, who married during the program, made a very eye-opening comment on a sense of belonging. "Separation prevents students to feel welcomed or that they belonged." Pheba who got married to an American athlete now said: "The students' sense of belonging will positively be improved when everything and everyone around is just the same as what you experience outside the college." She commented: "When they don't allow you apply for different scholarships and grants, and separate you or limit your activities, just because you are an international student, this will cause depression or sadness." Emma commented:

Wow, I have found many friends from many countries. This would have been impossible if I traveled to their countries. I have learned a lot about their culture and traditions. Also, usually we have a culture day, and will try different food from different countries on the last day of our classes.

She was so happy to have such an opportunity to be in a diverse environment that mirrors the value of the college well. Most of the participants mentioned the opportunity to interact with a friend or a classmate had helped them feel connected and supported as well.

Emotional Wellbeing

Based on the interview responses regarding the factors that impact their sense of belonging, it could be concluded that the students may develop a sense of belonging, if they feel healthy, safe, and comfortable. The students were asked two questions

pertaining to emotional wellbeing. The response to these questions can be broken into two categories: (a) health; body and mind, (b) environment; sense of safety and comfort.

Most of the participants experienced a lot of stress in case of an illness or health problem. Three of the participants had some health issues during the program and had to seek medical attention and care. One of the participants, who was pregnant with her second child during the program had experienced lots of issues and troubles for her health concerns. Stella added:

Oh, I wish I knew many things sooner. I learnt about the 24-hour nurse line late, and generally didn't know how to use AHP for my appointments. Beside all those normal concerns for a mom and her baby, I was worried if I could afford the well checkups, ultrasounds, medications, and the delivery. The worst thing was when the doctor said there may be a problem in my baby's heart! Oh, my god, I had a terrible semester, thinking what will happen, and... But everything is good now, and I have a healthy one-year old son.

David had a feeling of being supported when he was able see doctors and get medical treatments whenever he needed. He admitted that: "We are paying a lot for the health insurance, but it is necessary in case of an emergency as medical costs are crazy in the U.S.!"

Emma had a complicated experience during the COVID-19. She said: "The situation in my country was and still is terrible." She was a doctor in her country but before COVID-19, her dream was to pass a test and continue her profession here, but during that period lots of things happened and she had no other option but to take another course. She is a caregiver now and feels better. She explained:

I couldn't go there for a while to visit my family. My dad was terribly sick, and I didn't have the chance to see him. Then I got covid that took a long time for me to

feel better. Most of the classes were online, but I couldn't register for the classes that I wanted. I had to change my mind and started studying another major but in the same field.

Three of the participants seemed to have depression or anxiety but they either did not know about the medical and counseling services or were not willing to follow-up about this matter. Fransisco said: "I will go back to my country, and everything will be ok. I should tolerate and try my best to get the degree I want." None of the participants had experienced talking to a counselor regarding their concerns and anxieties.

Regarding sense of belonging and the environment, all the participants were satisfied with the environment and admitted that they feel safe and comfortable at the college, which has helped them feel belonged. Talia mentioned the feeling of comfort diversity and multicultural college: "It has a good feeling when during lunch time you go to the hallway, you'll see many students from different countries that are eating their special food and talking in different languages." Talia felt this is one of the reasons you may feel belong and are culturally accepted.

David stated: "Not only this college but generally the city has a good diversity. This is one of the reasons I chose here to study." As a response to the question of whether he had ever felt like a stranger, he said "No, not at all! Everyone is from different countries and there is no feeling of being ashamed because of your skin color, religion, or clothing". He had a positive feeling toward this matter as he emphasized "We never see discrimination in this country at all". When asked the same question to another participant, he replied "Neither of my friends nor I experienced discrimination, but a classmate had the experience of being bullied".

According to the interviews, and the questions regarding the factors that develop students' sense of belonging, it could be concluded that factors like being physically and

mentally healthy and feeling safe and comfortable help them develop a sense of belonging. Engagement and involvement in both curricular and extra-curricular activities, workshops, events, and student organizations helped them overcome their loneliness, and improved their social skills. Also, studying in a diverse community, and a multicultural city was something that all the participants felt inspired, motivated, and accepted.

Research Question Three

Research question three, *What factors contribute to international students persisting at community colleges?*, was answered using a qualitative inductive coding process. Ten participants responded to this question and other related interview questions. An inductive coding analysis derived additional themes based on the responses concerning students' persistence: (a) students' attitude such as how perseverance, resilience and optimism can impact the student complete the degree, and (b) institution's affordability such as what ranking, or quality of program the college offers.

Students' Attitude

Based on the interview responses regarding factors that impact the international students' persistence, nine of the student participants admitted that they need to have enough perseverance to be able to stay in the program. The students were asked two questions pertaining to the students' attitude. The response to these questions can be broken into two categories: (a) academic achievement and (b) degree commitment.

In one of the interviews a student mentioned that despite difficulties and lots of challenges she had during her transition, she did not give up and kept up attending the classes and doing the assignments as she was a goal achiever. Monica told that "There were a lot of academic pressure and also family problems, but I didn't pay attention and didn't let them prevent me from continuing my studies." Another student mentioned that: Two groups of people can never learn and improve, the group that is shy, so they never

ask questions because of this style and the other group that won't succeed is the one who believe is a know-it-all type and are not motivated enough to learn. David has his work permit now and has the goal to work at the embassy of his country soon. He has been trying his best to overcome the financial hardship by working a lot and is totally independent from his family. He added "You need to be a role model for your child, so when they grow up your experience and knowledge will shed light to them, and they'll know what to do."

A student mentioned that she is living her dream. "I loved to study to get a degree, but I couldn't do it in my country. Talia expressed "There were many problems (she later explained about the poverty, inflation, and political issues), so I never had the chance to go to university in my country. Now, I am happy to be able to study and having the opportunity to follow my goals."

When I asked about the factors that impact students' persistence, Oscar commented that: "You should be a goal achiever in order to accomplish your goals." Micah, who used to work and study hard, is doing fitness every day in the evening, and plays soccer on the weekends. I was thrilled by his perseverance and attitude. When I asked the question how do you manage this stuff? He laughed and said:

Well, you shouldn't sit and relax. Never give up! You must love yourself and try your best to work hard for your goal. If you work hard, then life will pay it back to you; soon, you will have a better career, better position, and a better future.

Institution's Affordability

Based on the interview responses regarding factors that impact the international student' persistence, five out of ten student participants admitted that overall academic quality and reputation are factors that help them persist. The students were asked two questions pertaining to the institution's affordability. The response to these questions can

be broken into two categories: (a) financial support, tuition affordability and (b) job opportunity, career services and internships.

According to the interviews, nearly all the participants mentioned affordability, involvement, engagement, and being supported academically, and socially motivates them to persist. The financial problem was something that all participants had in common as one of the barriers we discussed at the beginning of the chapter. As discussed, financial hardship had affected their overall well-being and academic performance.

Emma commented “If the colleges consider a more affordable tuition or offer some grants and scholarships, this not only helps them pay easier, but also it will cause a better reputation.” When asked about the college characteristics, Talia commented:

My friend graduated from the same college. She used to have some good and bad experiences there, but overall, she was satisfied with the service. She recommended me to select the same college as she liked the quality of the instruction.

She added: “As soon as there is a problem or something that I don’t understand, she guides me through.” Monica admitted that:

I had no idea which college to go to, but I heard this college offers less expensive and more intensive programs compared to the other colleges. As a result of this the students can learn a skill or get a certificate at a cheaper price. Also, the classes are not crowded, so we can communicate more in our English classes.

When I asked Melanie about the factors that may impact the international students’ persistence, she said: “Providing possibility of more work-study hours and job opportunities or giving scholarships and grants would greatly impact the students who have lack of family support.” And suggested this: “They need to improve the onboarding programming. The more students know what and how they are going to study, and what the requirements are, the less difficulties to realize almost everything gradually.”

Regarding the tuition affordability, Stella said: “After I finish my English classes, I will take the prerequisite for optometry here, then will transfer my credits to study at a university.”

According to Mavondo et al. (2004), the decision of prospective international students to select an institution is based on several factors, such as institutional reputation, safety and security, university environment, quality of life, and visa requirements. However, the recommendation from family, friends, and acquaintances can be one of the most influential motives in their decision-making process (Mavondo et al., 2004).

In my study all my participants were enrolled in the college through word of mouth and the good reputation. Two of the participants had their siblings graduate from the same college, four participants knew friends or people from their hometown who had studied at this college, one was recommended this college by the attorney who had helped him with F1 visas and three had heard about the reputation and the ranking.

As per the interviews, the factors that impacted their persistence were related to their level of perseverance, institutions’ quality of instruction, and the clarity on their career path. Five out of ten participants admitted that they needed to work more than permitted hours, because of the financial hardship; so, affordability of tuition or offering solutions that help them pay was discussed as they felt it would impact on students’ persistence.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the analysis of qualitative data collected from interviews, participant demographics, and processes of answering each research question. The findings regarding the students’ experiences at a college revealed that students felt that their student support services, financial support and use of resources were very influential

on their transitional experience. The participants felt that social interaction and emotional wellbeing helps them develop a sense of belonging at the respective institutions. Also, the study revealed the students' perceptions are that their attitude and job opportunity impact their persistence. Additionally, they felt that the collaboration between international office DSOs (Designated School Official), and the campus advisors are important factors that influence the students' experience. Some of the participants encountered advisors that were helpful and supportive, and on the contrary, some of them had negative experiences with academic advisors who did not show support or display an interest in their wellbeing. In the next chapter, findings will be presented to compare what was found through this study with existing literature. Implications of this study in education and future research will be discussed.

CHAPTER V:

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This qualitative study delved into the transitional experiences of international students and their perception of the factors that impact their sense of belonging and persistence in a two-year community college. This chapter discusses the findings reported in Chapter IV. Additionally, this chapter presents the relationship between the existing literature on the topic, the theoretical framework, the relationship to research questions, considerations for college leaders and international offices, recommendations for policy, practice, and implications for future research.

Summary of the Findings

The findings of this study yielded an analysis of qualitative data collected that addressed three research questions. The purpose of this study was to explore the transitional experiences of international students at community colleges and define the factors that impact sense of belonging and persistence. The data were collected from ten international students who voluntarily participated in the structured interview. The students were studying English as a Second Language (ESL) in their second year. The interview data were analyzed using thematic coding, and themes were created to answer the three research Questions.

Research question one, *What factors impact transitional experiences of the international students at a community college?*, found that the language barrier, financial hardship, student's support system and the college facilities had an impact on international students' experience. The participants felt that proper guidance and advising support could have combated many issues the students faced in their transition. Some of the participants shared commonalities of feeling unheard, ignored, and unsupported because they felt as though their advising teams were not well-trained, well-paid, or they

may be lacking interest in their jobs. Considering that international students are coming to learn English here in the U.S., they will inevitably have issues due to language proficiency inside and outside the campus, but understanding their specific needs and being prepared for this would also enhance students' experience and the college support system.

These findings were in agreement with Ammigan and Jones (2018), Acharya et al. (2018), Banjong, 2015), Bista (2016), Girish (2016), Isabelli-García et al. (2018), Khanal and Gaulee (2019), Mesidor and Sly (2016), Rod Welch (2019), Singh and Jack (2022), Vakkai et al. (2020), Yan (2020). International students may have multiple barriers and challenges at the beginning including financial hardship and language barrier. As found in the literature, the limitations and misguidance for international students were difficulties they may experience during their transition as well. This research also aligns with the investigation by Bista (2016) and Peters and Yu (2019), who suggested viewing international students as regular "students" instead of categorizing, labeling, and creating stereotypes based on their sociocultural characteristics. Normalizing campus resources will decrease the stigma associated with international students and will help them do not feel singled out (Peters & Yu, 2019).

According to the interviews and the literature, it can be concluded that international students' most significant trouble is financial hardship and the language barrier. It could be concluded that providing more affordable tuition or providing varied venues opportunities for them to be able to pay, would positively impact their experience. Also, it was discussed that their specific needs must be well-considered in the support system as it will lead to a positive experience. In this study, all the participants expressed their frustration that knowing little or no information before entering the university had caused lots of issues. The need for international students to be helped both academically

and emotionally was well discussed in my study. Three participants in my study obviously needed emotional support, as they felt lonely and homesick, but they were not considering following up on this to see a counselor who may help them with their problems.

Similar to the findings in this study, Krsmanovic (2022) concluded that international students have difficulties adjusting to the academic setting on their first year. One of the interviewees mentioned that here in the U.S., they care about education much more, and the classroom environment is different from his native country. He was satisfied with how they teach and learn here and said: “We used to sit and just listen, but here, you are engaged in the discussions and have critical thinking, which is fantastic!” During my interviews, nearly all the participants agreed on the importance of onboarding programming for international students. This is aligned with the studies of Schartner and Young (2020), and Cage et al. (2021) regarding the students’ prior knowledge on their experience. Even one of the participants suggested that the colleges consider a whole first week for classes for orientation and welcoming purposes. It was concluded that the more complete the explanation at the beginning of a student's journey, the more student satisfaction in their transitional experience.

Research question two, *How do international students develop a sense of belonging at their respective institutions?*, found that social interaction, faculty and peer relationships, and cultural acceptance influenced their sense of belonging. Parallel to the study conducted by Ashton et al. (2016), in my study eight out of 10 participants confirmed that more opportunities to communicate with groups of international students and native English speakers, would help them develop a sense of belonging. The participants in this study defined what a sense of belonging personally meant to them and how it influenced their studying when facing obstacles. The participants mentioned that

their studying environment and campus structure impacted their feelings of support and their perceptions of belonging. The participants in my study noted that how the teachers supported them through curricular and extra-curricular activities affected how they felt supported. Also, some mentioned that the teachers' support helped them feel accepted. The participants who had a sense of belonging continued to have a positive outlook on their studies despite having a negative experience of their advising and enrollment team. Participants mentioned teacher and peer relationships as a component that influenced how they perceived their sense of belonging. The students' sense of belonging was related to their degree completion or dropping out. It was concluded that the faculty and peer relationships are dependent factors that increase program satisfaction, reduce stress, and prevent student dropout.

These findings were in agreement with Bista (2016), Haverila et al. (2020), Maria (2020), Perry et al. (2020), Peters & Yu (2019). Per the interviews and the literature, it is concluded that international students may feel belong if they have relationships with friends, classmates, and faculty. Being engaged and involved in the activities, workshops, events, and student organizations helps the students motivate, and by having responsibility, they will feel connected, accepted, and motivated. All of these were factors that impacted the student's sense of belonging. This research aligns with the study by Garcia et al. (2019), and Wecker (2017), that discussed many international students develop lasting social bonds with their international mentees, forming a support network that can become invaluable when homesickness, academic pressure or other challenges might seem otherwise insurmountable.

Research question three, *What factors contribute to international students persisting at community colleges?*, found that students' attitudes and the institution's affordability had an impact on international students' persistence. The participants noted

that their upbeat attitude, motivation, and college competitiveness affected their decision to persist. Working with like-minded people trying to achieve the same goal aided the persistence of the participants in this study. Two participants with highly positive attitudes admitted that they had to take the risk and work illegally to be able to pay for their tuition, and this helped them persist. Restlessness and too much work and study at the same time did not stop them from reaching their goals, and despite all the difficulties, they stayed in the program and continued to pursue even higher degrees. Some participants mentioned that, because of staff inconsideration, a classmate quit studying and could not continue the program because of the lack of support or mal guidance.

The study aligns with Desrochers and Staislof (2019), and Perna and Li (2006), on the importance of college affordability that contributes to promote college access, and positively impacts the students' persistence. Also, the paper aligns with the study conducted by Hunton (2015) that defines that tuition affordability directly impacts the persistence of the students on their pre departure enrolment decision and post departure re-enrollment or withdrawal. This study aligns with the research of Desrochers and Staislof (2019), that suggested the strategic finance, and offered that the ROI (return on investment) approach helps colleges allocate their resources to maintain educational quality and improves student success, that are associated with improved persistence, retention.

These findings were also in agreement with Ammigan and Jones (2018), Balin et al. (2016), Bista (2016), Blekic et al. (2020), Bustamante et al. (2019), Glew et al. (2019), Haverila and McLaughlin (2020), Khanal and Gaulee (2019), Kolvoord et al. (2016), O'Connor (2021), Paul et al. (2019), Perry et al. (2016), Rodriguez et al. (2018), Wang and Sun (2022), and Ward et al. (2016), According to the interviews and the literature, it is concluded that some factors that may impact the students' persistence are perseverance,

quality of instruction, and tuition affordability. Half of the student participants stated that they had to take the risk and work more than permitted hours due to financial hardship, so tuition affordability or offering solutions was also discussed. This study aligns with the research by Kolvoord et al. (2016), which emphasized the importance of internships, a way for students to experience hands-on learning while applying the information learned in the classroom in a practical setting.

Implications For Practice

This research aligns with Schlossberg's 4S model as it proves that the transition and adjustments are related to how the students feel, what situation they need to be adjusted, what support they have, and what strategies are being considered to help them with a smoother transition. The findings of this study are in line with those of Juvonen (2006) and Baumeister and Leary (1995) that found that a sense of belonging is associated with well-functioning relationships with teachers whereby students perceive that they are receiving sufficient support and understanding from an educator. The study aligns with Tinto's persistence model regarding the factors that impact students' persistence. Tinto (2017) argues that students' perceptions of their social integration into the institution represent an important factor in their persistence. This means that students who feel connected to their peers and feel satisfied with their educational experience tend to persist (Tinto, 2017).

College leaders are primarily responsible for shaping and leading the college's vision, mission, and values. This research revealed the need for leaders to establish a more specialized and individualized support system for international students to prevent any possible misleading information or confusion. This needs ongoing support from the beginning, during the program, and even after graduation to transition smoothly to a four-year university to pursue a higher degree. The research also highlighted the

importance of ongoing formative assessment practices to help adjust as necessary. The college administrators should ensure student support services and student expectations align with research-based factors suggested to influence students' sense of belonging and their persistence positively.

Policymakers and administrators should consider this factor when looking for ways to influence students' sense of belonging positively. This study revealed the need for international offices to consider establishing procedures that positively influence international students' experiences and increase student sense of belonging. For example, students reported institutional competitiveness, advisors and DSOs more individualized support as factors contributing to their persistence. This may imply that college-wide procedures should be implemented to address positive interactions with students and enforce rules and policies. Research suggests that employing highly qualified directors and hiring more experienced staff who are well-informed of international students' regulations, limitations, and challenges will positively influence students' transitional experiences. This reality may create a clear path for the policy makers to invest college funds in recruiting, training, program evaluations, and college resources in general.

The administrator's role involves engaging teachers and staff in meaningful activities to establish a college culture focused on collaboration, accountability, transparency. By developing professional development, faculty can develop strategies to meet international students' unique needs better. Such training should be provided during certification and pre-training for aspiring teachers and ongoing professional development for tenured teachers. This study revealed the need for faculty professional development training specifically on international students' unique needs. The current study concluded that students' perception of belonging, and persistence was enhanced when specific factors such as faculty advocacy, tutoring extra support with assignments and technology,

and opportunities to have more peer and faculty relationships were consistently implemented in the classroom.

To positively influence students' assessment of the student experience, administrators and teachers should strive daily to create learning opportunities that meaningfully engage students during their studies in the program. Also, considering they all have left their country and may have missed their family support, allowing them to be heard, understood, and supported is critical. It is imperative that higher education foster ways and strategies to increase the students' support and feedback that help build a supportive environment and create a sense of belonging for the students who want to stay in the program. Ensuring international students are supported and continuously growing in their major will have long-term effects on students' persistence, as well as in college and community culture.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study and the similarities to the literature all signify how important it is to focus on improving student support to help international students have a smoother transition and a positive experience. Future research should focus on colleges around the country and compare the findings of how international students' support differs between the states. Another area that needs to be considered includes comparing the support systems of international students at four-year universities and two-year community colleges.

To increase and enhance international student support, it may be advantageous to conduct research that focuses on international student support through the lens of the international office versus the students' perceptions of the services. Research efforts should be used to study support services administrators who are deemed effective and investigate the factors that make a difference in their system and the graduation rate of

their students. The college leaders' perspectives would be valuable in creating policies, practices, and procedures to help their employees, students, advisors, DSOs, and themselves.

This study focused on international students learning English language, and a future study could explore the transitional experiences of international students studying different majors. Another approach would be to compare the experiences of certificate seeking students versus students of the degree-seeking levels. Additionally, future studies should focus on the age groups and students' prior English level, education, and family support to find out if there is any relation between the international students' background and their satisfaction. Also, studying the specific legal problems that international students may experience during their studies would be helpful in the pre-entry education of the applicants who decide to study abroad. As the last recommendation, a mixed method or a straight quantitative study can better validate the findings. These recommendations for future research will increase the knowledge around administrative support and improve the students' experience. This study would help create more supportive, competent, and benevolent leaders to impact international students' transitional experiences positively.

Conclusion

This study explored the transitional experiences of international students studying at a community college. Hopefully, international offices and the college leaders will focus on the importance of orientation programming for international students, considering staff training based on international students' specific needs, giving them more options for financial support, and providing opportunities for them not to feel limited or separated. These considerations can positively influence the international students' experience, sense of belonging, and persistence.

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APPENDIX A:

INFORMED CONSENT: ADULT RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

You are being asked to participate in the research project described below. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate, or you may decide to stop your participation at any time. Should you refuse to participate in the study, or should you withdraw your consent and stop participation in the study, your decision will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. You are being asked to read the information below carefully and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether to participate.

Title: EXPLORING THE TRANSITIONAL EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Student Investigator(s): Mona Farokhian

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Michelle Peters

Purpose of the Study: To explore the transitional experiences of international students at community colleges.

Procedures: The procedures used for the interview process will be for the participant to meet with the researcher in a virtual private Zoom meeting room. The researcher will take notes during the interview and record the conversation for analysis. A few questions will be asked with possible follow-up questions for clarification.

Expected Duration: The total anticipated time commitment will be approximately 30-45 minutes per participant.

Risks of Participation: There are no anticipated risks associated with participation in this project.

Benefits to the Subject: There is no direct benefit received from your participation in this study, but your participation will help the investigator(s) to better understand the factors that impact transitional experiences of the international students at a community college.

Confidentiality of Records: Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your study records. The data collected from the study will be used for educational and publication purposes, however, you will not be identified by name. For federal audit purposes, the participant's documentation for this research project will be maintained and safeguarded by the Principal Investigator or Faculty Sponsor for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. After that time, the participant's documentation may be destroyed.

Compensation: There is no financial compensation to be offered for participation in the study.

Investigator's Right to Withdraw Participant: The investigator has the right to withdraw you from this study at any time.

Contact Information for Questions or Problems: The investigator has offered to answer all your questions. If you have additional questions while this study about the research or any related problem, you may contact the Student Researcher, Mona Farokhian by telephone at 832-480-8430 or by email at mona_farokhian@yahoo.com. The Faculty Sponsor, Dr. Michelle Peters may be contacted by telephone at 202-3213752 or email at petersm@uhcl.edu.

Identifiable Private Information (*if applicable*)

Identifiers might be removed from identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens and, after such removal, the information or biospecimens could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from the subject or the legally authorized representative, if this might be a possibility.

OR

Information or biospecimen collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used, or distributed for future research studies.

Signatures

Your signature below acknowledges your voluntary participation in this research project. Such participation does not release the investigator(s), institution(s), sponsor(s) or granting agency(ies) from their professional and ethical responsibility to you. By signing the form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

The purpose of this study, procedures to be followed, and explanation of risks or benefits have been explained to you. You have been allowed to ask questions and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You have been told who to contact if you have additional questions. You have read this consent form and voluntarily agree to participate as a subject in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent at any time by contacting the Principal Investigator or Student Researcher/Faculty Sponsor. You will be given a copy of the consent form you have signed.

Subject's printed name: Mona Farokhian

Signature of Subject: Mona Farokhian

Date: 07-12-2023

Using language that is understandable and appropriate, I have discussed this project and the items listed above with the subject.

Printed name and title: Mona Farokhian, Student Researcher

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: Mona Farokhian

Date: 7-12-2023

{THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-CLEAR LAKE (UHCL) COMMITTEE FOR PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS HAS REVIEWED AND APPROVED THIS PROJECT. ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT MAY BE ADDRESSED TO THE UHCL COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS (281.283.3015). ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT BY INVESTIGATORS AT UHCL ARE GOVERNED BY REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.}

(FEDERALWIDE ASSURANCE #FWA00004068

APPENDIX B:
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS

Consent forms will be completed at the student interview and collected by the researcher. The interviews will be audio recorded and students will state their name during the introduction before starting the interview. Participating in this study is completely voluntary and will provide invaluable data to the researcher.

Disclaimer: Please note this is research in progress. Please feel free to express your opinions, feelings, and concerns at any time during the process. During this interview, I will ask questions about student success and your interpretation of it. Further, I will ask you questions about the programs and services offered by your college for international students and how or to what degree those programs and services assisted you in meeting your educational goals. Your answers may prompt further questions all centered on your experience transitioning into college life.

The purpose of this study is to understand the transitional experience of international students at a large-sized, two-year public college located in southeast Texas regarding the challenges they face, and their perception of the factors that impact their sense of belonging, and persistence.

Note: This interview will be recorded and transcribed for the data analysis process of this research. Do you give permission to record this interview? (No identifiable information will be used).

Date: _____ Time: _____
Participant: _____ Enrollment Status: Full-time / Part-time

1. Please tell me about your background, educational experience, and the highest degree you earned in your country prior to attending this college?
2. Please tell me about your positive or negative college experience here in the U.S?
 - a. Explain your transition, and adjustment.
 - b. Explain your instructional resources and assignments.
 - c. Explain, if you have experienced any problems, barriers, or difficulties?
3. Please tell me how you and others feel about the language barrier? Being bilingual, is it a capability or a strength trying to learn a new language or skill in a new country? Or is this

- a difficulty that prevents you accomplishing your goals and following your dreams? 4. Do you feel comfortable identifying yourself as an international student or someone who is a non-native American? Please explain?
5. Why did you decide to pursue a college degree? What do you think the college certificate or degree will do for you? What is the usage?
 6. Why did you select a public community college opposed to a private college?
 - a. Why this specific college? Please explain location, structures, facilities, lab and if there are available options attending classes?
 7. What goals did you set for yourself?
 - a. What steps did you take or are planning to take to accomplish this?
 - b. How do you perceive and track your progression?
 8. What does “sense of belonging” mean to you?
 - a. Did you feel accepted, supported, and respected? Please explain?
 - b. So far, have you ever felt lonely, down, and depressed? Please explain?
 9. What are some of the college support systems or student services for international students at the community college? Did you utilize any of the services?
 - a. Any experiences you’ve had with financial support, sport teams, cultural events, workshops?
 - b. Any lack of specific position, department, facility, or policy?
 10. Please tell me about any experience with the staff, faculties, advisors, DSOs, tutors, counselors, librarians, coaches, or any other employees at the college. Did you feel supported in your transition? Were they well-trained and helped you meet your educational goals? Please explain?
 11. What factors may significantly impact students’ experience with their transition?
 - a. What factors impact students’ sense of belonging or help them feel welcome?
 - b. What factors help students persist or help them stay and continue the program?
 12. What type of characteristics, personality and or individual qualities would help international students succeed? What negative factors may prevent them from succeeding?
 13. Is there any additional information you would like to add that may better guide future international students seeking higher education attainment? Any advice that may facilitate the utilization and use of student services or facilities?
 14. Is there any additional information you would like to add that may help improve international students’ services? Any suggestions that may improve their support with their unique needs? What type of administrative or college support may ensure the quality of service?
 15. Anything else that you’d like to share?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME. YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS IN THIS STUDY ARE
COMMENDABLE AND INVALUABLE. I TRULY APPRECIATE YOUR
PARTICIPATION IN MY RESEARCH.