A New Frontier: The Transformative Essence of F-1 international Students at Suburban Community Colleges in The American Midwest

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ABSTRACT

A NEW FRONTIER: THE TRANSFORMATIVE ESSENCE OF F-1 INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT SUBURBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN THE AMERICAN MIDWEST

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This qualitative study explored the impediments, social adjustment challenges, and classroom experiences of F-1 international students enrolled at community colleges in the Midwest region of the United States with at least one semester completed after their arrival. Through their respective accounts, the participants shared their positive and negative experiences about their respective host environments, struggles and challenges, acculturation, perseverance, and triumphs. The assertions and themes produced from the analysis of participant interviews provided salient insights into the experiences of the selected F-1 international students. Many of the participants while accommodating themselves to their respective community college environments struggled with issues related to language barriers, cultural dissonance, isolation, and alienation.

The participants in this study revealed their initial assumptions and perspectives about their expectations at their colleges and how such experiences transformed their assumptions and perspectives during their course of study. Many participants of color in this study experienced various forms of micro-aggressions that sometimes triggered culture shock. Other participants endured acculturative stresses to mitigate against potential culture shock. In turn, these and other
transformative learning experiences influenced the participants’ commitment to persevere and succeed in their quest to realize their educational and career aspirations.

*Key words: community colleges, F-1 international students, international student recruitment, acculturation, micro-aggressions, and culture shock*
A NEW FRONTIER: THE TRANSFORMATIVE ESSENCE OF F-1 INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT SUBURBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN THE AMERICAN MIDWEST

BY
GREGORY M. GORDON
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Co-Directors:
Carrie Kortegast and Gene Roth
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to extend my deepest gratitude to the members of my dissertation committee: Dr. Carrie Kortegast, Chair; Dr. Eugene Roth, and Dr. Kathryn Jaekel. Your wisdom, guidance and patience allowed me an opportunity to complete my dissertation journey to a successful conclusion. I also want to thank Dr. Terry Borg for helping me in my dissertation topic selection and the tools necessary to commence my journey.

I want to also thank the 11 F-1 international students who took time out of their busy schedules to share some of their most personal and riveting stories in my interviews with them. Their stories are a testament to the hard work and the sacrifices made to leave the comforts of their families, cultures, and countries to realize dreams and opportunities abroad. Their decisions and struggles will not go unnoticed.

A special shout out to my cohort compatriots in their understanding, encouragement, and support for me to finish my dissertation. We will get together and celebrate all of our achievements when we can finally put the COVID-19 pandemic safely behind us.

I am forever grateful to my parents, who made my life possible and are proud of what I have achieved. As the grandson of a sharecropping family and an American descendent of slavery, I stand on the sturdy shoulders of those who preceded me. Likewise, I want to thank my eight brothers and sisters, other relatives, and friends for who they are and what they mean to me. Lastly, I want to thank my beautiful and supportive daughter, Aaliyah. I hope to have been a great father and role model for your future dreams and aspirations. I love you, Yaya!
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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

F-1 international students studying in the United States have increased measurably since the 1990s (Woolf, 2010), especially for community colleges (Cohen et al., 2014). Supporters of international education operate under a set of assumptions that the decision to study overseas is transformative and alters both the ontological and epistemological perspectives of its participants in the areas of intercultural awareness, field of academic study, and career path (I.I.E., 2020; Lad, 2008; Rosenbusch, 2015). Current literature generally suggests altered or transformative perspectives in the aforementioned areas of intercultural awareness, field of academic study, and career paths based on studies conducted with student participants at four-year United States (U.S.) institutions of higher learning (Kumi-Yeboah, 2012; Norris & Gillespie, 2005; Tacey, 2011). A gap exists in the literature related to the transformative experiences of F-1 international student participants in U.S. community college settings. This qualitative study explores the essence of transformative learning experiences for F-1 international student participants at suburban community colleges in the American Midwest. The intent of this study is to examine the transformative experiences of F-1 international students at U.S. community colleges.

Statement of the Problem

Little is known about the transformative experiences of F-1 international students at U.S. community colleges. Current literature links Mezirow’s (2000) theoretical framework of perspective transformation (specifically the disorientating dilemma) to F-1 international students at four-year colleges and universities in the United States. However, Mezirow’s work is rarely
used to examine the experiences of F-1 international students in U.S. community colleges. Although findings in the literature affirm the presence of Mezirow’s *disorientating dilemma* (sometimes culture shock) among F-1 international students at four-year institutions in the United States, a study pertaining to the disorientating dilemma of F-1 international students in U.S. community colleges is worth exploring. A focus on F-1 international students at community colleges in the United States will add to the body of literature in the field of adult and higher education.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the transformational learning of F-1 international students in U.S. community college settings. The conceptual framework for my research intersects three areas of focus: transformative learning, F-1 international students, and U.S. community colleges. Mezirow’s (2000) perspective transformation (mostly the disorientating dilemma) serves as a central construct for this research. This study sought to discover the nature of the experiences of F-1 international students at four community colleges in two states in the Midwest region of the United States. This study explored whether F-1 international students encountered transformative learning experiences in the host environment and if any of these experiences altered their own ways of life, their worldviews, their educational goals, or their career aspirations.

### Research Questions

The research questions explored the theme of transformation and the relevance of Mezirow’s (2000) perspective transformation to the experiences of F-1 international students at
suburban community colleges in the American Midwest. Mezirow’s *disorientating dilemma* of perspective transformation is the key element of this research. The following questions guided this study:

1) How do F-1 international students describe their transitions into a community college in the United States?

2) How do F-1 international students in the United States describe their learning experiences in the community college classroom?

3) How do F-1 international students in the United States describe their co-curricular experiences outside of the community college classroom?

Significance of the Study

The significance of an F-1 international student’s future educational path in a U.S. community college setting is worth exploring. Also, the literature provides examples of how an F-1 international student’s experience can significantly influence that person’s career path (Norris & Gillespie, 2005), and that issue is also worthy of exploration. Studies suggest that the F-1 international student experience can improve one’s intercultural competency (Rosenbusch, 2015) and the cultivation of the *global citizen* ideal type (Wynveen et al., 2012). The significance of my study is to address the gap in the literature pertaining to the role of F-1 international students at community colleges in the United States and their lived transformative experiences. My study intends to build on the existing literature related to perspective transformation, educational path, career path, and intercultural competence experienced by F-1 international students at community colleges in the United States.
Kumi-Yeboah (2012) focused on the transformative experiences of F-1 international students at a university in the United States; however, the study focused on international graduate students at a university in the United States and not a community college in the United States. A study authored by Posey (2003) focused on the transformational impact of American students at a university in the United States who studied abroad, but not the transformational learning experiences of F-1 international students at a community college in the United States. Donahue (2009) examined the transformational impact of American students who studied abroad; however, Donahue did not focus on F-1 international students who studied at community colleges in the United States. The studies underscore much of the gap in the literature. An intention of my study is to inform the practices of community college personnel regarding the transformative learning experiences of F-1 international students at community colleges in the United States.

Definitions

**Community college**: A unit of postsecondary education in the United States that offers job training and retraining programs, community educational services, certificates for career professions, and two-year associate degrees which many students often use for transfer to bachelorette-granting institutions.

**Cultural competency**: The ability for a student to acquire the skills, both theoretical and practical, to quickly adjust to different populations or environments in a seamless and enthusiastic manner.

**Culture shock**: The psychological trauma a person may initially experience when placed in unfamiliar surroundings that appear alien and too complex to navigate.
Disorientating dilemma: A theoretical construct developed by educator Mezirow (2000) which suggests an initial psychological trauma triggered by unexpected or expected events. Examples would include death of a loved one, divorce, or relocating to a foreign country.

Foreign-exchange student: A construct often used in the United States to describe international students who study in a high school or college setting in the United States (uscis.gov, 2020).

F-1 visa: A visa category issued by the U.S. Department of State in which a student must be enrolled in a full-time degree-completion program. The institution must be accredited by an accreditation body and sanctioned by the U.S. Department of Education (uscis.gov, 2020).

J-1 visa: A visa category issued by the U.S. Department of State which is geared for mostly visitor exchanges (faculty, students, or staff training) between foreign institutions and institutions in the United States related to higher learning (Johnson, 2006; Kaplin & Lee, 2007).

International student: A person who meets all of the U.S. Department of State visa qualifications to study at any secondary or post-secondary institution of learning in the United States.

M-1 visa: A visa category issued by the U.S. Department of State which is designed for foreign students who are interested in a study program in the U.S. related to a training institute or a non-academic pursuit.

Perspective transformation: A ten-stage theoretical construct developed by educator Mezirow (2000) in which a person’s first stage begins with the disorientating dilemma (a life-altering experience or occurrence) and proceeds to the last stage of perspective transformation (self-actualization or a new sense of being and existence).
Study abroad program: A formal program for institutions of learning to facilitate structured learning experiences for American students in a foreign environment or for international students who study in the United States.

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, limitations of the study, and definitions. Chapter 2 in this study examines the conceptual framework and literature associated with the intersections of transformative learning, F-1 international students, and community college contexts. Chapter 3 focuses on the issues of methodology, including identification and selection of participants, data collection, coding and data analysis, and establishing trustworthiness of the data. Chapter 4 provides a profile about the backgrounds of participants in this study. Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study. Chapter 6 offers conclusions, discussion, implications for practice, implications for research, and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although literature regarding F-1 international students in the U.S. is expanding, studies that focus on their transformative learning experiences are limited. The literature mostly focuses on the experience of F-1 international students at baccalaureate-granting institutions in the U.S. This has resulted in a dearth of studies on F-1 international students at U.S. community colleges. Therefore, this literature review will focus on the literature about U.S. community colleges, F-1 international students, and transformative learning.

Community Colleges in the United States

Access, equity, and affordability have historically served as the foundation for the existence of community colleges in the United States (Vaughan, 2006). Established in 1901, Joliet Junior College in the state of Illinois was the first established community college in the United States. Conversations about the needs of other types of postsecondary institutions, including community colleges, started long before the establishment of Joliet Junior College. For instance, University of Michigan President Henry Tappan in 1851 argued that universities should focus on research and less on vocational or lower level preparatory courses for undergraduate students (Cohen et al., 2014). Other educational leaders in the nineteenth century advanced similar arguments, including the University of Chicago’s President William Rainey Harper and Stanford University’s President David Starr Jordan. These leaders argued that universities in the United States can better compete against the research universities in Europe by creating a separate system for college freshmen and sophomores (Cohen et al., 2014).
In many parts of the United States, community colleges, junior colleges, technical colleges, city colleges or two-year colleges at the outset became extensions of local public high schools and often received their funding from the same source (Bragg, 2001). Historically, community colleges in the United States or their like were initially adjuncts of local high schools, in which such institutions offered job training, vocational education and teacher training programs in many locations without a nearby university to serve the community (Bragg, 2001). Educational leaders in the United States envisioned a K-14 model offering universal access and affordability for children and young adults in the community (Bragg, 2001). University of Chicago’s President William Rainey Harper envisioned community colleges in the United States serving the function of offering freshmen and sophomore-level college-credit courses so universities could focus more on advanced learning and research endeavors.

**The Purpose of Community Colleges in the United States**

Community or junior colleges in the United States at the outset offered another hierarchical tier in the American education continuum--a bridge between public high schools and four-year universities (Brint & Karabel, 1991). Community or junior colleges in the United States served the purpose of democratizing American higher education by offering access and affordability to previously excluded populations (Brint & Karabel, 1991). Although the initial intent behind the creation of community colleges in the United States by its leaders was not clearly defined, community colleges over time offered a variety of paths for students to pursue. For instance, such paths involved transfer programs (earned course credits for transfer to four-year universities), career programs (degrees or certificates for entry-level lower and middle-class professions) and training programs (skills enhancement for existing workers) to satisfy employer demands in the early twentieth century (Brint & Karabel, 1991). Brint and Karabel (1991)
concluded that, for the remainder of the twentieth century, community colleges diverged away from their initial transfer program model. The diversion was toward a vocational program model to gain greater relevance to employers and to better compete with four-year universities for the attention of employers (Lietzel & Clowes, 1994). Consequently, Brint and Karabel (1991) suggested that the academic integrity of community college transfer credit courses in the United States may not have the same rigor as lower level credit courses offered at four-year universities in the United States (Lietzel & Clowes, 1994). Thus, Brint and Karabell (1991) identified community colleges as a “diverted dream.”

Similarly, Ali-Coleman (2019) also asserted that community colleges continue to divert away from academic rigor and transfer courses. Instead, they have continued to partner with employers emphasizing a stronger vocational program model. Ali-Coleman (2019) stated the following:

Community colleges have contributed to the American system of higher education by championing the doctrines of open access, affordability, and applicability. The state of remedial education, student debt, and corporate partnerships negatively impacts the actual implementation of these ideals. In the coming years, we will notice community colleges broadening their multi-functional platform as the demographic of their student populations change and states continue to require public community colleges to partner with corporations in order to receive state funding. (p. 65)

Community colleges in the United States must remain nimble and adjust to the political and financial pressures from state elected officials. Community college leaders need to compete with four-year state universities for limited state financial resources in the upcoming years.

As of 2020, over 1,000 community colleges were operating in the United States (AACC, 2020), serving approximately 11.8 million students a year (AACC, 2020). Comparatively, more students attend community colleges than four-year universities. Of the 11.8 million community
college students, over 100,000 F-1 international students were enrolled in American community colleges (AACC, 2020). Although a comparatively small student population, F-1 international students enrolled in American community colleges merit support.

Community colleges have faced increased scrutiny because their completion rates are lower than their four-year baccalaureate-granting peers (Topper & Powers, 2013). Mitigating circumstances suggest that community colleges tend to have a much higher percentage of non-traditional students (over 25 years of age, predominantly part-time enrollees, working parents, and so on) who are less likely to complete their associates degrees in three years or less. These non-traditional students may not always transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution after the completion of a two-year associate degree (Topper & Powers, 2013). The U.S. Department of Education, as well as other stakeholders, seek accountability related to success rates and degree completion rates. These pressures have caused community college leaders to alter directions of community colleges to comply with state and federal funding regulations (Topper & Powers, 2013).

The mission of community colleges includes offering a variety of services and courses that are not always related to degree-seeking instruction. For example, English as a Second Language (E.S.L.) is a vital offering of community colleges. E.S.L. is essential for community immigrants who lack fluent English-speaking skills and essential for many F-1 international community college students who seek to enroll in transfer courses for college credit. Crandall and Sheppard (2004) found:

While the majority of adult E.S.L. students in the community college are immigrants, international students seeking English instruction increasingly prefer community college programs because they are less expensive than those offered by either commercial English language schools or universities. Community colleges view these students as a source of additional revenue. (p. 6)
E.S.L. is a critical service for F-1 international students whose English language skills may be lacking in reading, writing, or conversational discourse. This English instruction helps F-1 international students to gain needed language competencies prior to their enrollment in credit courses.

Community colleges gain many benefits by offering E.S. L. programs. Teranishi et al. (2011) addressed the benefits of E.S.L. programs for both immigrant and F-1 international students:

Because they are conveniently located, cost much less than four-year colleges, feature open admissions, and accommodate students who work or have family responsibilities, community colleges are well suited to meet the educational needs of immigrants who want to obtain an affordable postsecondary education, learn English-language skills, and prepare for the labor market. (p. 153)

Teranishi et al. (2011) also suggested that services focused on E.S.L.-enrolled students (such as mentorship programs, tutorial services, and counseling services) can accelerate their success and transition to college-credit courses. However, Garcia et al. (2019) and Mamiseishvili (2012) suggested that F-1 international students at community colleges were less likely to seek out and utilize services offered by student affairs divisions compared to their domestic student counterparts.

Colleges and universities often do not furnish the appropriate instructional or student affairs services that address the concerns and needs of immigrant residents or F-1 international students in their community (Szelenyi & Chang, 2016). Communication gaps, misunderstandings, and oversimplifications plague the quests of immigrant/F-1 international students to seek help (Szelenyi & Chang, 2016). Due to the great diversity of both immigrant and F-1 international students, the needs and concerns of immigrant or F-1 international students may
be vastly different from students who are native to the community, according to Szelenyi and Chang (2016) and Suárez-Orozco et al. (2019). These authors recommended that colleges should refrain from a one-size-fits-all approach to instructional assistance or student affairs services. They emphasized providing the necessary staffing, resources, and student services designed to address the unique needs and concerns of immigrant or F-1 international students.

Community colleges in the United States often serve as a bridge to allow F-1 international students to transfer to four-year universities. This bridge allows students to complete their baccalaureate degrees and potentially continue into graduate school after the completion of their baccalaureate degree. Ghazzawi et al. (2020) found that community college F-1 international students were more likely to transfer to a four-year university compared to domestic students. Also, Ghazzawi et al. (2020) found that F-1 international students had better academic success rates (higher mean grade point average) and much better completion rates (completion of an associate degree within three years or less) compared to domestic students. Differences were also noted between F-1 international students based on country of origin, for example:

Findings demonstrate that while Sub-Saharan African students have a significantly higher probability of transfer than Asian and Latin American students, the majority of bachelor degree recipients were Asian students graduating in STEM fields. Delayed enrollment into college and academic preparedness in math were negatively associated with transfer for Latin American and Caribbean students. (p. 420)

The preceding research recognizes the impediments many F-1 international students face at community colleges. However, the completion and success rates of these students suggest that community colleges are viable beginning alternatives compared to four-year universities for F-1 international students.
F-1 International Students

F-1 international students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States have been perceived as a reliable revenue stream, especially for community colleges and state universities (Cantwell, 2015; Jaeger & Thronton, 2005). Public institutions that have experienced shrinkage in government revues have sought to recruit F-1 international students as a remedy for tight budgets, sometimes without regard to preparing F-1 international students for their experiences in the host environment in the United States (Cantwell, 2015). F-1 international students in the United States often pay tuition costs at rates that are two to three times that of domestic students who reside within state or within district boundaries (Cantwell, 2015; Schmidt, 2020). Public institutions have adopted a neo-liberal model for survival and educational leaders often market their institutions and programs as commodities for F-1 international students in the United States to consume (Cantwell, 2015). Cantwell (2015) found that F-1 international students have added $27 billion dollars to the U.S. economy as over 65 percent of F-1 international students enrolled in U.S. institutions are self-financed. Cantwell found no significant increase in net revenues for non-research institutions of higher learning but projected an increase in F-1 international student recruitment in the United States.

Institutions of higher education in the United States from community colleges to universities place a great emphasis on recruiting students, both domestic students and F-1 international students. The attempt to recruit from the international pool of talent is competitive, and the United States is not alone in attracting international students from the global pool (Onk & Joseph, 2017). High-achieving students from the developing world have many options to study at institutions of higher learning in countries of their choosing (Javed et al., 2019). Thus, the United States must distinguish itself from other countries in the developed world to attract
international students from the global pool of talent (Onk & Joseph, 2017). Institutions of higher learning in the United States must adopt creative methods to remain relevant to better attract potential F-1 international students to the United States, for example, according to Onk and Joseph (2017):

- providing academic support and utilizing campus resources, attending and participating in international recruitment fairs and events, partnering with other organizations in recruitment efforts, using passive marketing such as online web-based advertising or brochures, utilizing alumni in recruitment methods, utilizing recruitment agents, and word-of-mouth. (p. 26)

Adopting proactive measures and robust follow-up in the recruitment process of potential F-1 international students appears to result in more effective outcomes compared to passive recruitment measures.

Traditional approaches to recruit F-1 international students may not be as effective today as compared to the recent past (such as expensive participation in student recruitment fairs overseas; Hsueh, 2018). Students are relying on technology in new ways to learn about different colleges and universities abroad. Hsueh (2018) stated:

- Technology, such as virtual reality tours, social media platforms, and a user-friendly, responsive, and multi-language website, play an increasingly important role in the student decision making process. Many young people have been shaped by the ubiquity of social media like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and WeChat and often choose these as their desired platforms for obtaining school information, allowing recruiting staff to easily reach out to potential students, domestically and internationally. (p. 40)

Thus, international student recruiters in the United States or any other country must be flexible and adaptable to new technology trends (Hsueh, 2018).

As part of internationalizing higher education in the United States, community colleges have sought to internationalize their curricula and have also tried to increase the diversity of the
student body by including F-1 international students. The recruitment of F-1 international students contributes to achieving goals of fostering a multicultural environment, having a more diverse student body composition, and providing a more relevant international curriculum (Shalka 2017). The presence of F-1 international students at community colleges and universities in the United States offers an opportunity for leaders at these institutions to promote the following: cultural exchanges (student-exchange programs with overseas sister institutions); the enrichment of discourses between teachers, domestic students and F-1 international students in the classroom setting; and extra-curricular activities between domestic students and F-1 international students on and off campus (Lee & Rice, 2007; Leong, 2015). The literature suggests a desire for higher education leaders in the United States to internationalize their campus environment, and the expanded recruitment of F-1 international students plays a part in their initiative.

The United States and five other countries receive most of all international students who study overseas (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2011). In the competition to recruit international students outside of the United States, Falcone (2019) stated:

The United States receives the largest share (21%) of these globally mobile students. East Asian nations reported that they seek to increase their share of this education market as this region of the world sends out the greatest number of students. To do so, English language curriculum is being implemented in East Asian universities as well as in universities in other regions of the world. (p. 246)

Institutions of higher learning in the United States must remain competitive internationally by adopting the following: creative recruitment measures (robust web content tailored for interested international students), housing accommodations support services (college personnel who work with landlords in the community), academic support services (tutors who are trained to work
with F-1 international students), and financial assistance (college foundation staff who specialize in generating revenues and funding sources for F-1 international students) to remain relevant in the academic recruitment marketplace.

Despite a notably hostile racial climate in the United States, according to the Institute of International Education’s (2020) Open Doors report, the number of F-1 international students increased approximately five percent each year between the years 2016 to 2019. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data are not available for the nationwide Fall 2020 enrollment, which was expected to decrease (Study International, 2020).

**Experiences of International Students**

College students in the United States face many stressors in general, from financial limitations to a lack of college preparation. Such stressors for full-time students can be compounded by employment responsibilities, childcare or family responsibilities, health challenges, and language barriers. A stressor for many F-1 international students in the United States that many domestic students rarely face is the prolonged sojourn they experience as part of the F-1 visa requirements, which can result in not spending time with family in their native country for months or years (Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

F-1 international students in the United States also face another stressor, which is the vast cultural differences and friction they often experience in the host environment (Brauss et al., 2015; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2019). For some immigrant students or F-1 international students whose English language proficiency is marginal, the stress of these cultural differences can be very daunting. English language proficiency as a precursor to academic success is paramount for F-1 international students whose native language is not English. For F-1 international students
whose English language proficiency is not sufficient for college-level instruction, E.S.L. is for most the appropriate path to ameliorate the lack of English language fluency (Lin et al., 2019).

Community colleges in the United States generally serve as the primary provider of E.S.L. instruction for most communities in the United States (Cohen et al., 2014). Community colleges offer very competitive and far lower costs for E.S.L. programs compared to neighboring four-year universities, and English fluency is often part of the F-1 student visa requirements (Hagedorn & Lee, 2005). The lack of English language proficiency was identified as the primary challenge or stressor for entering F-1 international students in the United States whose native language was not English, particularly students from Asian countries (Leong, 2015). The lack of English language proficiency in the American college classroom often leads to a lack of engagement by some F-1 international students and may also erroneously give teachers and domestic students impressions related to lack of competence or interest in discourse (Lee & Rice, 2007). The lack of discourse in the classroom and lack of interpersonal interactions with domestic students outside of the classroom often manifest into racial stereotyping or racial/ethnic bias domestic students may develop against F-1 international students (Wu et al., 2015). These conditions can lead F-1 international students to self-isolate, experience culture shock, and hinder their willingness to seek help from student affairs services (such as counseling or academic advisement; Wu et al., 2015).

F-1 international students are often unacquainted with the American classroom culture and customs that require extensive discourse between the teacher and students (Lin et al., 2019). For instance, many F-1 international students perceive challenging a teacher or fellow students in the classroom as disrespectful. Students asking teachers nondialectical questions in class would
be considered abnormal in their country of origin and such questions would be reserved for teachers during office hours (Lee & Rice, 2007; Lin et al., 2019). As Lin et al. (2019) explained:

Classroom discussion is a very commonly used teaching method in U.S. colleges and is encouraged by professors. Because international students are afraid of expressing their opinions and avoid confrontation, they are usually considered not actively participating in the class. To bridge this culture gap, international students reported it would be helpful to have professors recognize them and provide more accommodation at the beginning of the class. (p. 1139)

Adjusting to the cultural norms of an American college classroom is daunting for many F-1 international students, but professors who expect robust classroom discourse can be proactive in assisting F-1 international students. Engagements with F-1 international students with informal discussions outside of the classroom can build greater confidence to engage in the classroom.

**Acculturation and Implicit Bias**

The issues of acculturation and discrimination F-1 international students often experience in the United States appear to be a trend in much of the literature. On the one hand, F-1 international students often experience a push-pull effect. The desire can be present to allow one to be pulled into the host culture to ameliorate adjustment issues or maybe culture shock. On the other hand, a negative experience may occur that will push one into isolation, which exacerbates culture shock (Perry, 2016). Acculturative stress can have a push-pull effect on one’s psychological state (Brunsting, 2018; Hansen et al., 2018). Acculturative stress is “impaired physical and psychosocial health in individuals who must adapt to a new culture and operate in an environment lacking the strength of accustomed cultural attachment, status and social support”
(Hansen et al., 2018, p. 217). Acculturation, despite the challenges and difficulties for some, may be a suitable remedy for F-1 international students to ameliorate adjustment issues or potential culture shock at the outset of their experience in the host environment.

Discrimination in its various forms is an enduring issue on college campuses, especially for students of color. Perry’s (2016) findings suggest that F-1 international students of color have reported varying forms of discrimination and culture shock experienced in the host environment, whereas F-1 international students who were not of color did not indicate such. Yeh and Inose (2003) suggested that F-1 international students from Asia, Latin America, and Africa had much higher levels of acculturative stress compared to F-1 international students from Europe. Acculturative stress is not only intensified by vast language differences from English, but also cultural, racial, and class differences (Hansen et al., 2018; Maeda, 2017).

The issues of implicit bias, micro-aggressions, or racial animus some F-1 international students experience appears to be prevalent in much of the literature. Wekullo (2019) found:

Students of color, and in particular Black students, felt significant racial tension on campus, dealt with prejudice or discrimination from their peers and faculty, and experienced more pressure to conform to stereotypes… International students were often stereotyped based on assumptions about their linguistic or cultural backgrounds and other differences. (p. 330)

F-1 international students from African or Caribbean countries have reported more incidents of racism and discrimination than other groups of F-1 international students (Mitchell et al., 2017). Mitchell et al. (2017) indicated that participants were not aware of the amount of attention Americans place on the topics of race and racism in standard discourse. Also, most were also not equipped to engage in such discussions or prepared to experience the ramifications of discriminatory practices. On the other hand, F-1 international students often formulate their
racial biases and stereotypes about people of color from Western or U.S. media influences (Mitchell et al., 2017).

The construct of race and racism in the American experience is not a new phenomenon for people of color in the United States. However, F-1 international students of color who come from countries of color, particularly in Latin America, the Caribbean, or Africa are often not accustomed to racially heterogeneous populations. Likewise, F-1 international students of color are usually accustomed to their ethnic group having predominate power in their countries of origin. The literature underscores the discriminatory experiences F-1 international students of color often encounter in the host environment and the associated culture shock as a manifestation. Acculturation is often more difficult to achieve at the outset for F-1 international students of color.

**Transformative Learning**

The theoretical foundation for this study is rooted in Mezirow’s transformative learning theory within the field of adult and higher education. Mezirow’s theory emerged from his study of the lived experiences of mothers in the 1970s who decided to pursue their college education later in life (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). Mezirow’s learning theory is largely derived from the areas of humanistic psychology and critical social theory (Elias & Merriam, 2005). He believed that adult learners do not always employ old habits to learning new information. Adult learners often apply new perspectives in understanding changing events (Mezirow, 1991).

Transformational learning is the process of adult learners who reconstruct previous assumptions, knowledge and experiences and reframe those perspectives to make meaning of active interactions in the environment (Rogers & Horrocks, 2010).
Within the conceptualization of transformational learning there are important differences between *informational learning* and *transformational learning*. The former involves acquiring new knowledge in unfamiliar subject areas while the latter involves changing what we already know or believe (Merriam et al., 2007). A central feature of transformational learning involves attempts by adults to make meaning of their lives by evaluating or changing their assumptions or goals (Mezirow, 2000). For instance, the role you assume as a child and assumptions acquired will change in adulthood with a new set of expectations and meaning making of old or new experiences. Adult learners are inclined to apply critical reflection before accepting old or new knowledge compared to child learners (Mezirow, 1991).

Mezirow (2000) also asserted that *perspective transformation* is a central underpinning for transformational learning. Perspective transformation allows adults to frame their life experiences, knowledge, and beliefs through critical self-reflection. In this transformation, one’s worldview, assumptions, or goals are reframed. Perspective transformation usually follows a linear ten-step process:

1) A disorienting dilemma – loss of job, divorce, marriage, back to school, or moving to a new culture.
2) Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame.
3) A critical assessment of assumptions.
4) Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared.
5) Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions.
6) Planning a course of action.
7) Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.
8) Provisional trying of new roles.
9) Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.
10) A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22)
Mezirow’s ten-step process is not rigidly linear, nor is it necessary to experience every component in the ten-step process. Adult learners shift their meaning making in their perspective through critical reflection that can result in any of the steps from 5-10.

Perspective transformation often involves questioning one’s role in society, purpose, and the direction one desires to pursue in life (Mezirow, 1991). For instance, embarking on a study-abroad experience is a significant decision for F-1 international students that requires them to navigate expectations of friends and families at the same time as encountering new people and situations. The decision to become an F-1 international student in the United States may cause individuals to feel fear, anger, and even guilt as part of their desire to pursue higher education in the United States. F-1 international students may ameliorate their feelings of fear, anger, or guilt by progressing to other stages of Mezirow’s perspective transformation linear process in their host environment.

One of the facets of transformational learning is the transition from accepting authoritative information or persons at face value to critically reflecting with autonomous conclusions. Mezirow (1997) suggested this in his theoretical model:

A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience. For some, any uncritically assimilated explanation by an authority figure will suffice. But in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others. Facilitating such understandings is the cardinal goal of adult education. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking. (p. 5)

Autonomous thinking is a cornerstone of transformative learning and the application is realized by ascribing meaning or purpose to decisions rendered in one’s life.
As adult learners encounter new realities based on dilemmas that call into question old perspectives or assumptions, adults begin to re-evaluate the need to continue routine practices or thinking. Mezirow (1991) made mention of this dilemma and desire to change:

Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (p. 167)

Adult learners may on occasion act on old habits out of fear to change. However, as new circumstances or challenges become issues that are difficult to avoid, adults often transition to new realities or actions based on critical reflection of past habits. F-1 international students may encounter such issues in their sojourn when practices in their country of origin are not applicable in the host environment.

Transformational learning theory is also a component of Mezirow’s approach to adult learning and education. F-1 international students may be accustomed to passive learning modes from their country of origin but are expected to adjust to active learning modes which challenge previous assumptions or beliefs in the host environment. Mezirow (1991) expands on the impact of transformational learning, particularly as it applies in the student-teacher discourse:

Transformative learning involves an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one’s beliefs and feelings, a critique of their assumptions and particularly premises, and assessment of alternative perspectives, a decision to negate an old perspective in favor of a new or to make a synthesis of old and new, an ability to take action based upon the new perspective, and a desire to fit the new perspective into the broader context of one’s life. (p. 161)

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory and perspective transformation are critical components of the theoretical model in my analysis of the lived experiences of participants in my study.

Mezirow’s theories of adult learning support the use of my research questions and the research
methods I employed in my study. Perspective transformation served as a tool to help explain adjustment issues in the host environment at the outset and the participants’ experiences outside of the classroom. Transformational learning theory served as a tool to better understand the classroom environment and related discourse among the different participants in my study.

**Critiques of Transformative Learning**

The literature suggests that researchers should be cognizant of caveats regarding Mezirow’s transformational learning theory and the process of perspective transformation. For example, critics of Mezirow have suggested that transformative learning theory is difficult to operationalize (Newman, 2012). Transformative learning theory lacks a functional model to employ and often replete with unpredictable outcomes (Newman, 2012). As part of an insufficient functional model, Collard and Law (1989) offered the following critique:

> Initial inquiries center on an epistemological question: meaning as a construction of the individual in social interaction. He then has to address the methodological problem of how to find ways to understand the process of meaning construction by adult learners without importing the distortions he regards as endemic to the research methodologies of the social sciences. (p. 99)

With meaning making as a critical component of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, the construction or reconstruction of an adult learner’s interactions with others in their environment does not lend itself to outcomes different from social science methodologies.

Additional critics of Mezirow suggested that transformational learning theory or perspective transformation may not always lead to critical reflection, changes in assumptions, or a realignment of perspectives in the classroom setting. Adult learners are also capable of achieving transformative learning experiences outside of the classroom. For example, the disorientating dilemma cannot be reduced to a single event or place (such as a classroom) and a
person does not have to experience each stage in any given order for perspective transformation to take place (Baumgartner, 2001). Transformative learning does not always have to involve the strict roles of teachers and students engaged in a formal classroom discussion (Kilgore, 2004). Hooks (2014) suggested learning can transgress from the traditional classroom boundaries of space, content, and time, by which the phenomenon of the transformational experience can be realized through the freedom with which students learn and reflect. Freire (1998) suggested that the phenomenon of transformative learning involves construction, reconstruction, critical reflection, and the intent to change (praxis) defies traditional classroom boundaries. Therefore, adult learners can realize transformative learning in a variety of environments and not just the classroom.

According to Mezirow (2000), transformational learning can be facilitated by the teacher in a single classroom setting. However, the essence of how students experience the phenomenon of a single transformative classroom setting can vary greatly (Bolf-Beliveau, 2013). For instance, Tennant (1994) asserted that transformational learning may not take place unless there is a conscious effort by student or teacher for it to materialize in the context of adult education. Tennant (1994) stated:

There are many adult educators who are explicitly concerned with providing educational support for normative life changes. Educational programs of various kinds are invaluable as we struggle to adapt as changed expectations and circumstances associated with different life phases, such entry into work, marriage, parenting, career change, retirement and so on. Other adult educators are concerned with effecting more fundamental developmental transformations, the kinds of transformations which result from reflection on the premises defining and constraining how we act in the world. Typically, this type of educational intervention extends beyond the interests of any one individual and therefore has a strong political dimension. Programs which come readily to mind are those with themes such as racism, sexism, poverty, illiteracy, indigenous rights, and unemployment. (p. 233)
Ultimately, Tennant concluded that achieving praxis and transformational learning must be intentional and not passive.

Some of the more strident critiques of Mezirow’s transformational learning have been levied by Kegan (2000) and Newman (2012). Both assert that transformational learning may not be a discernable phenomenon. Kegan (2000) suggested that transformational learning theory has been utilized by many because of its elasticity and that critics of the concept often exclaim that “transformation begins to refer to any kind of change or process at all” (p. 47). Kegan and other critics of transformational learning have also suggested that the use of the theoretical model can produce outcomes that are not easy to replicate among researchers.

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory may not be substantially distinct from other forms of learning. Newman’s (2012) critique of Mezirow’s transformative learning suggested that the construct is difficult to actualize because “transformational learning only exists in the realm of theory” (p. 40). Newman (2012) also asserted that transformational learning or its relevance has to do “with little to no basis in everyday practice” (p. 40) because “all acts of learning share basic characteristics” (p. 41). In Newman’s (2012) summation, the suggestion is that “transformational learning” is essentially “good learning.” Therefore, the practice of learning is not necessarily transformative, and the mere acquisition of knowledge is the standard practice of the student-teacher discourse.

Although not necessarily a critique, Wood (2012) suggested that transformational learning can be shaped based on a person’s background, particularly in the areas of race, ethnicity, country of origin, class, gender, or LGBTQ status. A variety of factors can affect a person’s ability to experience transformational learning, from intrinsic influences to extrinsic influences, and the consequences of such may be unknown to both the teacher and the student in
the realm of adult education. Researchers who decide to employ Mezirow’s transformative learning theory should be aware of both its affordances and limitations.

**Transformative Learning and the International Experience for U.S. College Students**

Literature is sparse as it relates to the role of transformative learning and F-1 international students at colleges and universities in the United States; however, literature exists that pertains to U.S. students who study abroad and their transformative experiences. Although studies suggest that U.S. students who study abroad are less likely to seek degree-completion programs compared to F-1 international students who study in the United States (Cohen et al., 2014; I.I.E., 2020), the lived experiences of those U.S. students and their transformative learning experiences yield valuable insights for my study.

Trooboff et al. (2004) found that American students in the United States who study abroad improve their G.P.A.s and retention for the remainder of their academic career. However, the study did not focus on F-1 international students enrolled in community colleges in the United States. A comparable study by Fry et al. (2009) suggested that U.S. students often change majors or careers because of the transformative nature of their study-abroad experience, which would underscore the impact of perspective transformation. F-1 international students enrolled in U.S. community colleges were not part of the study.

Norris and Gillespie (2005) found that employers take a keen interest in U.S. students with study-abroad experience, and similar findings in a study conducted by Carley et al. (2011) underscored the point that M.B.A. program recruiters greatly prefer U.S. students with study-abroad experiences. However, the aforementioned studies focused on American students at four-
year institutions in the United States, not community colleges in the United States. F-1 international students studying in the United States were not included in the studies.

Donahue (2009) examined the California State University (C.S.U.) system and found that C.S.U. students who studied abroad generally experienced Mezirow’s perspective transformation, especially if their program experience was long in duration. Donahue explicated the distinctions between short-term (three weeks or less), semester-long, and year-long program experiences and the extent to which a disorientating dilemma played a role for each of the participants. In Donahue’s study, the findings suggested that students who lacked familiarity with the host country’s language experienced the disorientating dilemma to a much greater extent, although Donahue’s study did not include F-1 international students in U.S. community colleges (Donahue, 2009).

Fawcett et al. (2010) found that students can experience a disorienting dilemma in a short-term study abroad program and improve in cultural competency. Another quantitative study by Wynveen et al. (2012) demonstrated that perspective transformation can occur with students in a short-term study-abroad experience and their environmental global awareness can improve. Kehl and Morris (2008) also found that cultural competency can be improved in short-term study abroad programs. However, the studies placed most of the focus on U.S. students studying abroad and not F-1 international students in the United States.

Overall, the students in the studies by Fawcett et al. (2010), Wynveen et al. (2012), Kehl and Morris (2008), and Donahue (2009) surmised that the study-abroad experiences greatly changed their students’ worldviews, improved their cultural competency, and enhanced their understanding of global citizenship. Woolf (2010) on the other hand contended that the term
global citizen might be a marketing gimmick by institutions and may lack empirical substance, based on the premise that the construct is difficult to measure and is lacking a universal standard.

Tacey’s (2011) study produced findings very similar to Donahue’s study. Tacey’s study also used Mezirow’s transformative learning theory as the basis to assess the participants’ experience with perspective transformation and their subsequent decisions to alter educational and career goals. In Tacey’s findings, 80% of the 74 respondents surmised that their study-abroad experience influenced their educational and career goals. In follow-up interviews of students by Tacey, seven out of eight respondents indicated that they experienced the different phases of Mezirow’s perspective transformation because of their study-abroad experience.

Orahood et al. (2008) provided findings that deviate from the general literature related to the impact of study-abroad experiences in shaping the career paths of participants. The transformative nature of a study-abroad experience is assumed to improve one’s intercultural competence and influence one’s desire to pursue a career path with an international focus. Orahood et al. (2008) suggested that U.S. multinational corporate executives claim to value employees with ample multicultural capital gained from study-abroad experiences; however, the hiring patterns did not reflect such desires based on their findings (Orahood et al., 2008). The survey of business graduates who were five to ten years into their careers revealed that those with study-abroad experience had less of a desire to work overseas compared to their counterparts with no collegiate study-abroad experience. Orahood et al. (2008) provided useful information regarding the influence of a study-abroad experience on a person’s professional business practice over time. However, except for improved multicultural competence and change in one’s career path, the study is not closely related to the sample and context of this current study.
Quezada et al. (2011) studied six student teachers at a U.S. Catholic university (University of San Diego) who studied and taught abroad. Primary and secondary teacher training programs at multiple universities in the United States offer limited college credit options to study abroad, and consequently, student teachers are less likely to study or engage in service learning compared to their non-student teacher counterparts (Quezada et al., 2011).

Educators at the University of San Diego created a program that allows student teachers to gain transformative learning experiences by earning college credit through teaching abroad and to fulfill the mission as a Catholic university to achieve greater international understanding for their education majors. The findings revealed that participants developed a greater sense of global consciousness, incorporated their teaching-abroad experiences to inform their pedagogy, and developed a personal filter to assess cultural biases in their teaching (Quezada et al., 2011). Quezada’s qualitative study deviates from the norm in the literature by using quantitative instruments to assess study-abroad experiences, particularly on the issue of transformation.

Gesinski et al. (2010) take a somewhat different approach, which is akin to auto-ethnography. The two participants in this study are counselor education majors in the United States who participated in a study-abroad experience in Italy. The theme of the study abroad program focused on intercultural and professional identity. Both participants provided a first-person narrative of their most salient lived experiences while studying abroad in Italy. They described encounters with cultural adjustment issues, cultural and professional comparisons between Americans and Italians of similar counselor professions, and how their study abroad experiences may inform their careers as counselors. Their findings suggested that cultural adjustments occurred in their study abroad experiences. These findings are consistent with the literature and illuminate how counselor educators can learn and apply study-abroad experiences
to professional practice. Although this qualitative study did not focus on F-1 international students studying in the United States, the narratives and reflections of the participants offer a valuable source related to cultural adjustment issues and perhaps forms of culture shock.

Stinson and Richardson (2006) described the importance of international education at the community college level in Virginia, particularly experiential learning. The authors taught courses in Turkey, France, and Belize ranging from international business to tropical ecology. U.S. students participated in numerous predeparture lectures to become better acquainted with the subjects before the experiential-learning experiences abroad. The U.S. students experienced conceptual learning ranging from the flora and fauna via reading materials and lectures to the ecological excursions in the host country. Both authors underscored the importance of U.S. community college students in the United States becoming more interculturally and internationally focused, especially in a competitive global environment. However, the authors did not focus on the cultural adjustment issues students encountered or their transformative experiences. Stinson and Richardson’s (2006) study focused on U.S. students who studied abroad, not F-1 international students who studied in U.S. community colleges.

Martinsen (2010) studied the impact of cultural sensitivity developed by Spanish-speaking learners in the United States on short-term (less than 2 months in duration) study-abroad experiences. The findings deviate from the existing literature related to study-abroad experiences. Students had numerous interactions with native speakers abroad, from home stays with host families to daily interactions with locals (Martinsen, 2010). According to Martinsen (2010), improvements in language proficiency, motivation to learn Spanish, or interactions with the host family did not significantly improve cultural sensitivity. Conversely, Martinsen’s findings suggested that a small but statistically noticeable improvement in cultural sensitivity
occurred in the students’ daily interactions with the local population (Martinsen, 2010). Overall, Martinsen’s study provided helpful information regarding the rarely explored short-term study-abroad experience in the literature.

Graham and Crawford (2012) explored the transformative experiences of U.S. study-abroad students. They assert that study abroad is associated with transformative experiences. Graham and Crawford’s claim is based on their assessment of the existing literature on the subject and their mixed-methods study. Graham and Crawford (2012) created three categories of study-abroad experiences: Instructor-Led Topics/Subject Focus; Instructor-Led Engagement Activity; and Immersion University Semester Enrollment. Participants in all three categories generally cited their disorientation (a form of culture shock) as the experience that altered their worldviews, how they perceived the host culture, and how they viewed their own American culture (Graham & Crawford, 2012). The study also examined the transformative impact of short-term and semester-long study-abroad experiences.

The authors contend that students who had the least amount of international travel experience were most likely to be transformed by a study-abroad experience (Graham & Crawford, 2012). Their findings did not fully clarify the differences or degrees of transformation in short-term versus semester-long programs. Although the data and findings are useful for the subject of transformation in study abroad experiences, the focus was not on the U.S. community college setting or F-1 international students in U.S. community colleges.

Kumi-Yeboah (2012) conducted a quantitative study of international graduate students from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe who were studying in U.S. universities. Almost 80% of the respondents indicated that they had experienced transformative learning from their international experiences (Kumi-Yeboah, 2012). Kumi-Yeboah’s findings also revealed that
among those who experienced transformation, 32.3% of the respondents encountered their transformative experiences in education (the classroom), 29.4% surmised that transformative learning took place in educational and non-educational learning experiences, and 17.9% indicated that their transformative experiences had nothing to do with education (Kumi-Yeboah, 2012). Kumi-Yeboah’s study did not involve F-1 international students in U.S. community colleges.

Although the aforementioned studies do not specifically involve the transformative learning experiences of F-1 international students in U.S. community colleges, these studies do provide valuable insights and guidance for the data analysis of participant responses in my study. Because of the dearth of literature related to the transformative learning experiences of F-1 international students in U.S. community colleges, it is necessary to explore parallel literature for research purposes.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter 2 provides a synthesis of the literature related to the intersection of the role of U.S. community colleges, F-1 international students in the United States, and transformative learning. The review of the literature attempts to highlight the role of perspective transformation among F-1 international students in institutions of higher education in the United States. A portion of this study focuses on the role of perspective transformation, disorientating dilemma, cultural adjustments, and elements of culture shock F-1 international students experience in U.S. community colleges. This study addresses the lack of research on the specific topic of the transformative learning experiences of F-1 international students in U.S. community colleges. This study also addresses the lived experiences of F-1 international students in the U.S.
community college setting and their adjustment issues. To explicate the lived experiences of F-1 international students in U.S. community colleges, Chapter 3 focuses on the research design and methodology for this study.
CHAPTER 3:
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research design used to guide my research questions and theoretical premise is based on an interpretivism that allowed me to serve as the primary research instrument of inquiry (Glesne, 1999; Merriam, 2009). Interpretivism allowed me to use the necessary paradigm to pursue the appropriate methodological approach to explore the rich and evocative ontological and epistemological stories of participants about their status as F-1 international students in U.S. community colleges (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a; Merriam, 2009). Interpretivism, framed by social constructivism, gave me insights into how participants described their ontological and epistemological stories and the meaning making attributed to those experiences by the participants (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a). Interpretivism allowed me as the researcher the ability to describe the naturalistic milieu of the macro-environment (the state and the community, for example), the micro-environment (the community college campuses for example), the participants, and their peers (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b). Interpretivism involves data collection instruments, such as interviews, participant observations, and perhaps artifacts or visual collections (Wall et al., 2013). With interpretivism, an art is associated with the constant reflection and contextualization in which I as a researcher must engage throughout the different research stages, and the science connected to the interpretivism model is associated with the task of coding and data analysis (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b).
Site Selection

The primary research site was a large suburban community college in the Midwest portion of the United States. F-1 international students at community colleges in neighboring suburbs in two states were also interviewed as participants for this study. Well over 33% of the student body at the main research site are members of racial/ethnic minority groups, of which the Latinx population comprise the largest minority segment. This community college has sought recognition from the Department of Education to become a Hispanic-Serving Institution (H.S.I.). At the main site, a disproportionate percentage of the student body comes from the less affluent and heavily ethnic enclaves of the county. Apart from English as a Second Language (E.S.L.) courses, no particular college-level course was available to study the target population. F-1 international students at the main site and other community colleges generally enroll in classes along with domestic students. The student demographics, study body enrollment, and surrounding communities at the other three community colleges outside of the main research site are comparable.

Participants

The main site’s international student program mostly consists of F-1, J-1, and perhaps M-1 category students. However, my study focused on F-1 student visa holders with at least one semester of experience at the main site and the neighboring community colleges in two states. The main site has hosted F-1 international students since the 1970s. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown in March of 2020, the main site had over 100 F-1 category students from over 20 countries. A convenience sample of F-1 student visa holders with at least one semester of experience at the main site and other community colleges in the Midwest region were
targeted. Despite e-mail overtures to at least 40 community college international education staff members in six states in the Midwest region, only ten responded in any meaningful way. Of the ten responses, four community college international education staff members in two states provided qualified F-1 international students who were willing to participate in my study.

Eleven participants were selected for the study. I achieved data saturation with the 11 participants from the convenience sample. By achieving the data saturation with the 11 participants selected, I was able to recruit F-1 international students from different regions around the world (Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Africa). The selection of these F-1 international students provided rich and useful data based on their lived experiences in the United States. Table 1. shows demographic information about the 11 participants. I have used pseudonyms for the names of participants and institutions to protect their privacy as part of Institutional Review Board (I.R.B.) protocols.

Data Collection Procedures

After I obtained Institutional Review Board (I.R.B.) approval, I worked closely with the personnel at the main site’s Center for International Education and the similar centers at neighboring community colleges in two states to identity suitable participants for my study. I was able to generate great interest from the main research site by presenting to the International Student Club. Potential participants were contacted via e-mail and traditional postal letters. In those correspondences, my study was explained, requirements to participate were outlined, and their willingness to participate was sought. The first 11 who agreed and fulfilled the criteria were
<table>
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<th>Pseudonym</th>
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<th>Age</th>
<th>Current Citizenship</th>
<th>Birth Country</th>
<th>Months of US Residency</th>
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asked to complete a consent form giving permission to be interviewed and to have their responses collected with the full understanding of protecting their personal identity. All completed consent forms are stored in a locked file cabinet in my faculty office on campus (Seidman, 2013).

The primary instrument for data collection in my study consisted of semi-structured interviews. According to Josselson (2013), semi-structured interviews are typically 60 minutes in length, unless follow-up interviews are necessary for clarification purposes. The nature of the questions was mostly related to cultural adjustments to the host environment. Additional questions were asked because they were situational, spontaneous, and related to the uniqueness of each person interviewed. Please refer to Appendix A for the interview questions. Each in-depth interview was approximately 60 minutes in length with the expectation of a possible follow-up interview of 30-45 minutes in length based on initial findings (Maxwell, 2012; Seidman, 2013). In total, 14 separate interviews were conducted with the 11 participants.

The interviews took place on the campus of the main site or neighboring community colleges in an office or lounge setting to maximize the quality of electronic audio recordings. Each audio interview was carefully transcribed and is stored (both the audio recording SD card and the SD card for the word-processed transcripts) in a locked file cabinet in my faculty office on campus (Seidman, 2013). I personally transcribed four participant transcripts and employed a transcription service for the remaining interviews. Also, field notes and appropriate artifacts also served as instruments for data collection. The data collection instruments are kept in a locked file cabinet in my faculty office on campus (Seidman, 2013).
Data Analysis

I employed critical reflection after each interview, for which interview observation notes from each interview aided in that endeavor. My reflections allowed me to assess what was successful and what was not successful about each interview and I made the appropriate adjustments for the follow-up interview with the same participant or appropriate adjustments for the next participant. After the completion of all interviews, the transcription that took place allowed for additional reflection necessary to develop the appropriate application of data coding.

I utilized a two-cycle coding for the transcripts (Saldana, 2013). The first-cycle coding involved emotion coding. Emotion coding explicates the “intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions” (Saldana, 2013, p. 105). My second-cycle coding involved axial coding. Axial coding allows a researcher to determine the dominant themes and the less dominant themes from initial or first-cycle coding “and reorganize the data set” (Saldana, 2013, p. 218). After the conclusion of second-cycle coding, I developed an analytic memo to identify emerging themes from the codes. These emerging themes informed my data analysis. My data analysis revealed transformation in the lived experiences of selected participants. Therefore, I had to suspend judgement on such a conclusion until data analysis and reflection had been fully exhausted.

Trustworthiness

All audio interviews were electronically archived and stored on a SD card that was locked in a file cabinet in my faculty office on campus to further assure trustworthiness. The storage methods were similarly used for the digitized transcripts of interviews. After all interviews were transcribed, I allowed participants the ability to review their transcripts via their
selected e-mail accounts to assure greater trustworthiness and accuracy. As a system for member checking, after I produced a written report for each interview, participants were given the ability to assess the credibility and trustworthiness of their report (Creswell, 2014; Seidman, 2013). I gave each participant the ability to edit sections that appeared to be inaccurate and/or edit sections that contained information that placed them in a position of vulnerability (Seidman, 2013). After such issues were ameliorated and appropriately revised, I retained the right to draft the final report based on relevant findings. After the transcripts were vetted by participants, I begin the process of coding all transcripts by using the two-cycle coding method, which added to trustworthiness (Saldana, 2013). I analyzed the codes for emerging themes, and I proceeded with the process of making observations and rendering interpretations about the data to provide trustworthiness related to my findings (Saldana, 2013; Creswell, 2014).

My committee chairperson, Dr. Carrie Kortegast, evaluated samples to help corroborate my system for data coding, analysis, findings, and conclusions. As a result, the oversight of data collection and analysis process buttressed the issue of trustworthiness (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). I also utilized the software package Dedoose to assess the consistency of my manual coding system with the codes produced by the qualitative research software package as a way to also improve trustworthiness (Freitas et al., 2017). Lastly, I triangulated the data to assess consistencies, contradictions, and evidence of bias to improve the trustworthiness of my research (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Triangulation consisted of the transcripts, reflective field notes, and relevant artifacts (such as visual images of the campus locations, student newspapers and school brochures). Due to I.R.B. limitations related to the possible disclosure of the identity of
participants and their institutions, these artifacts are not included here. The artifacts allowed the ability for me to better understand the campus environments for this study.

The findings from my research will yield transferable and useful information for practitioners in the field of adult and higher education. Since the review of the literature offers a small quantity of research on the lived experiences of F-1 international students in U.S. community colleges, especially the issue of culture shock or perspective transformation, the findings from my study will provide insights for future research. Professional practitioners in the field of international education will have useful findings, conclusions, and recommendations to address adjustment issues their F-1 international students may face after arrival to their host campus.

**Researcher Reflexivity**

I embarked on this study as a biased advocate for international education, especially study-abroad experiences. Also, I have enjoyed travelling abroad and taking students on short-term field-study trips abroad. I have also served as a semester-long faculty leader for two large Illinois student groups (one in England and the other in China) and I have served as an organizer and mentor for F-1 international students at the community college where I am employed as a History instructor.

I have always been intrigued by how students adjust to their foreign environments. From my numerous experiences, I was able to learn indirectly or witnessed firsthand how students encountered cultural barriers in a host environment and the adjustments they made to ameliorate the challenges. Students frequently remarked to me that their host environment changed their
perceptions about other cultures. Many of these students conveyed intentions to alter their education and career plans because of their experiences. Based on these interactions with students, I developed a bias pertaining to the notion of transformation and culture shock.

**Insider/Outsider Status as a Researcher**

One of the data sources involved interviews with F-1 international students at a large, comprehensive community college – hereafter referred to as the main site. My role at the main site is partially that of a teacher, which is difficult to avoid. Attempting to conceal my role as an outside objective researcher at the main site is futile and perhaps counterproductive (Unluer, 2012). The perception and reality of how participants view me as a researcher due to my position of power as a faculty member at the main site can affect the candor of participant responses (Seidman, 2013). With that in mind, I have sought participants who were never enrolled in any of my classes in the past or at the time in which the interviews took place. I also excluded F-1 international students who had a desire to enroll in any of my classes after the interviews. Consequently, I did not want participants to feel grade-related pressure or confuse their grade in class with their participation in a qualitative study interview. To avoid the issue of grade-related pressure, such participants were excluded from my study. Hopefully, such an approach helped to mitigate potential biases (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

As an insider, trying to avoid probing in areas already familiar to me at the main site was difficult at times. Because of those experiences at the main site, I had to remain as consistent as possible in asking the same questions of participants at alternative campus sites and the main site. According to Unluer (2012), there can be affordances associated with insider status as a researcher. An inside researcher having great familiarity with the host environment, professional
personnel, institutional culture or traditions, policies, and practices can assist one in asking more appropriate questions in interviews and can also influence rapport with participants (Josselson, 2013; Unluer, 2012). Therefore, insider status at the main site is not necessarily a liability.

By the same token, at other community college locations with which I had no affiliation or work in any professional capacity, my role was that of an outsider. I only identified myself as a graduate student at Northern Illinois University to college staff and to participants in my study. At alternative locations, I did not have daily contact with the participants or employees nor functioned in a direct position of authority; thus, the possibility of bias was reduced considerably (Seidman, 2013). Students interviewed at other community colleges outside of my work site significantly reduced power imbalances between researcher and participant since I only presented myself as a graduate student (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2013). I utilized collected artifacts (student newspapers, brochures from the International Education Office and the official college website) to better acquaint myself with these college campuses. Due to I.R.B. limitations to protect the identity of participants, I am unable to include images of these collected artifacts in this manuscript. Lastly, my assumptions going into this study were based on beliefs that students experience culture shock and realignment of their worldviews because of their college experience outside of their country of origin. These assumptions are aligned with literature that suggests students in a host environment routinely experience such phenomena.
My Personal Assumptions and Biases

I operated under a set of assumptions that a study-abroad experience is transformative and alters both the ontological and epistemological perspectives of its participants in the areas of intercultural awareness, field of academic study, and career path. Again, based on personal experiences, my assumptions have been confirmed by informal encounters with past students and previous course projects related to the subject (Unluer, 2012). I believe I did not allow my biases and assumptions to shape the outcomes of answers given by participants related to their lived experiences associated with the host environment. Although subjectivity is a facet of qualitative research, I kept in mind that research may not always confirm or reconfirm previous hypotheses, assumptions, or theories (Unluer, 2012). Although I encountered some findings contrary to my beliefs, others can still derive benefits from my contribution to the body of literature on the subject.

Chapter Summary

This current study that examined the lived experiences of F-1 international students in the U.S. community college setting was worth pursuing. The inquiry involved the proper tools to illuminate such experiences. For Chapter 3, choosing the proper methodology at the outset of my study was imperative. The explication of the lived experiences of F-1 international students in U.S. community colleges was best addressed with qualitative research. In my evaluation of different qualitative research models, the interpretivism research design was most appropriate for my inquiry and aligned with my research questions, problem statement, and purpose of the study. Chapter 4 will provide biographical profiles of the 11 participants in this study.
CHAPTER 4:
PARTICIPANT PROFILES

This chapter highlights the backgrounds of the participants in this study and their prior arrival to their respective community colleges in the Midwest region of the United States. The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize the participants before embarking into the research findings in Chapter 5. The chapter is divided accordingly in alphabetical order by pseudonym for the 11 participants.

Abril

Abril, a former elementary school teacher and Columbian national, left her country to study at a community college in the Midwest region in the United States to further her education and improve her career prospects. Upon arriving in the United States, 28-year-old Abril worked as an *au pair* under the J-1 visa but switched her visa status to F-1 to pursue an American college degree. Abril described her country and the political, social and economic realities on the ground. She stated the following:

Columbia. Well Columbia's such a beautiful country. I know most people think Columbia is related to drugs and war, but it was a long time ago. Right now, it's more safe, people can travel around the country. I think the only thing that is kind of hard right now is the corruption. It stinks, and that affects the financial situation, even for people who are already professional, because as I said I have my degree, my bachelor from there. I used to work at school, but I didn't make enough money, so that's why I had to open other doors and try to find opportunities out of my country. But besides that, people are happy, we are ... I think we are very sociable, people from Columbia we are very social and open-minded, hard workers. Yeah. I think that's it. That's it, I guess.
Abril was very conscious about how her country is perceived by others and would like for people not to be too judgmental about its struggles.

For Abril, the pictures on the community college’s website were a major selling point for her to make the decision to choose the community college where she is enrolled. Abril offered the following statement:

I think the campus. I saw the pictures and thought, “Oh my God that's so beautiful, I want to go there.” In my country going to university, we didn't go to college, we just go once you finish high school you go right away to university, and they are just one building. They didn't have all of the recreational things that they have here, and this place is relaxed, and this huge library and the resources that they have for having fun, and that is one of the reasons I said I want to go to that place, to hang out.

The use of a well-developed school website to promote a school with ample visuals appeared to be an effective tool for Abril and others in this study.

Abril and other participants in this study suggested that their families not only played a major role in their upbringing but often served as influences in their decisions to study in the United States. Abril’s father provided a foundation for her and her siblings to pursue their higher education. She offered her view:

My family. Wow. They are everything for me. The reason, because I wanted to get a university education was because my parents didn't have the opportunity to go to the university, so that affected our financial situation during our lives. So, my dad gave us the opportunity to go to the university, but we learned how to work so I started working once I finished high school, and I was like 16, and then with that money I paid my career.

For Abril and some of the other participants in this study, families appeared to be very supportive of their educational sojourn in the United States. Abril attends Greenleaf Community College and aspires to become a school counselor when she completes her university education in the United States.
For 18-year-old Asagai, his strict and paternalistic Nigerian upbringing did not allow for him to take education for granted. Asagai described his observations about how American children are reared compared to Nigerian children:

I would say the most important part of it was that the fact that hard work was instilled. That was drilled into us, like that was beaten into us. We couldn't complain too much. You just had to do ... Here, in United States, you can talk back, you can say, "I don't want this." In my culture, you weren't given that much of an opportunity as a kid. Most of our education happens, like the formal educational school system, happens when we're kids, so we can't just talk back and say, "I don't want this."

Asagai made it clear that hard work and education were goals instilled in him by his parents that are not to be taken lightly.

Asagai’s parents ingrained in him the importance of pursuing an education that will yield a high income, but Asagai does not desire to fulfill his parents’ dream of their son becoming a physician or scientist. He shared this comment:

I would say I would aspire to be something different, but I can't right now because I have to please my parents, financially and also in the job type. I don't want my parents to see me working as a ... No disrespect to people who do so ... but like working in like museum or something. They want to me like being a doctor but that's not me. I want to be more ... I want to do something that I get happiness. I have to be happy. I can't just go to work, and half of the time spent at work. I'm saying, "Oh I hate this job. Like, I'm dying inside."

Asagai is one who was determined to fulfill an educational path that deviated from his parents’ desires and one that derives career and personal fulfillment.

Asagai provided his insights into the political and economic layout of his country of Nigeria:

Nigeria is divided into two, perfect two, exactly two. The southern part is more Christian, and it's wealthier than the northern, which is more Muslim. The south is ... One of the major things about the south is that it's blessed with oil, so that's ... Yeah. The north is
more ... you have farmers, you have more ... That's where most of the produce, the vegetables, come from in the country.

Asagai was proud to point out the diversity in Nigeria’s population, political systems, and its fast-growing economy among African nations.

For Asagai and many other participants, having relatives near the community college served as a powerful variable in their final decision. Asagai stated, “When I was a kid, I knew I was going to be coming to the United States for school because you have a better educational system, if not the best in the world…The factors that I took into consideration, to picking my education was like, where do I have family? I have family in Illinois.” Asagai attends Gold Star Community College and his goal is to obtain a degree in information technology (I.T.) with a focus on cyber security.

Bilal

Bilal, a 21-year-old Syrian national, departed for the United States to study in the midst of the Syrian civil war which has garnered much international media attention. The war has caused a collapse in community and family ties by which Bilal was very much affected. Bilal stated, “This way, I became more individualistic. Like how, in Syria, we used to have families that visit families by stuff. I don't think they are important anymore.” Bilal had intimated that the Syrian civil war has changed his country in ways that may take years to repair.

Partially because of the Syrian civil war, Bilal decided to study in the United States for a fresh start. Bilal also stated, “And I think also, I became more individualistic. I think I became more isolated. I don't really like it. I started to not like the family setting. I think the individual setting became more comfortable for me. And that's like, I became more adjusted.” Not only did
the Syrian civil war affect his family and community, but the war also left an indelible imprint on
Bilal’s personality, as he suggested.

Bilal’s parents prior to the Syrian civil war fostered an environment for learning and
encouraged their children to seek a university education. He shared:

My family, I have a small family. Just my father, my mother, and two brothers. Both of
them are older than me by 10 or 12 years. We were really kind of an introverted family.
My parents, my mom finished high school, but she does not work. My father works. He
has a really, really small factory. So, he's more like a businessperson. But from the
beginning, they wanted us to become really good at school, so they tried to provide a
really calm environment to study. So even our relatives, they knew when we have exams,
obody can come to our home because we're studying. They tried to give us everything
we need to study.

Although Bilal described his family as small, his parents instilled the importance of education,
which became his refuge away from his country’s deteriorating political state.

Prior to studying in the United States, Bilal considered studying in Germany until his
brother convinced him to study in the United States. Bilal’s brother, a practicing physician in the
United States, served as a major influence for Bilal to study in the United States, which was not
unusual for some of the participants’ in this study who also opted to study in the United States
for the same reason. Bilal stated, “I went to Jordan because there was no embassies in Syria at
that time because of the war. I went to Jordan, but over there, my brother was here. My brother
lives in the United States even before the war. But he told me, why not apply here?” As a result,
Bilal made the decision of enrolling in a community college over a university in the United
States because he surmised that the transition to campus life would be easier in the community
college setting. Bilal attends Excellence Community College and aspires to become a physician
like his older brother.
Gloria

Gloria, a 28-year-old from Columbia, credits her family and their faith in her desire to pursue a university education in the United States. She shared the following:

My family. I am one of four girls. I don't have any brothers; we are four sisters. I'm the second youngest, I have two oldest and one younger, 12-year-old girl is my youngest. My parents, they live together. We've struggled with financial situation and they had done as much as they could in order to raise us and also to give us education. They taught us that the education is important in order to achieving your goals and to getting a better salary, better paid. To grow as a person and to open up your mind to new things. That's something important for my family.

Despite having a career in Columbia, Gloria wanted to pursue higher education in the United States to realize a fulfilling career with an income to provide for her financial security.

Gloria had a career that was pleasing to her father, but she felt her career was not an enriching experience. She stated the following:

When I graduated from high school, I took culinary art degree, was at like a community college in Bogota. I did that, I finished it. I worked for a couple years at the restaurants and hotels. I gained experience. Then I, for some reason, personal reasons, I stopped working in the food industry. I wanted something better for me because sometimes it's hard working behind a kitchen is really hard… I wanted to study philosophy but to be honest, everybody told me, "You're not going to get money out of that. Nobody needs a philosopher."

As a pastry chef, Gloria did not like the long hours, working on holidays, and not having much of a social life. Over time, she felt stifled.

However, Gloria had an epiphany and finally decided not to live in her father’s shadow by pursuing a life-long dream of studying in the United States. She shared:

One day it was something. Sentimental issues. Some things happened and I felt like between a rock and a hard place. I realized that I had to make a decision for my life, because I wanted to come to the States a long time ago, but I hadn't take the decision. I was afraid of that, to quit everything, stop everything and restart… One day I finally, because I was halfway of law school and then I felt like, I don't know if I'm wasting my time.
Because Gloria did not feel that her life was on the path that she preferred due to parental influences, she decided to blaze a path that she desired to pursue by embarking on her quest to study in the United States.

Gloria also remarked that the community college’s pictures on their website were also a major selling point in her final decision to attend. As part of her initial impressions about her community college, Gloria stated, “I just abandoned the idea of attending that college [another institution]. This one, when I saw the pictures I went to the website, college homepage website and I liked the pictures, it seemed to be a big campus, I really liked it. I was, ‘Oh that could be the one.’ Then I found out how much and I talked to the international counselor and made my decision.” Gloria selected her community college largely due to a sister who lived close to the community college location. Gloria attends Greenleaf Community College and aspires to obtain a university degree in business and ultimately a career in corporate management.

Josefina

Josefina, a 42-year-old Venezuela native, is an aspiring pharmaceutical business manager. Josefina described her family as very close despite a lack of perfection, as she indicated. She stated the following about her family:

All my brothers and sisters are married, I am the unique single person in my family. I have a few; I think 11 nieces and nephews. It's a beautiful family, we're very friendly and we love each other and respect each other with normal difference between family happens. It's normal but we love and support each other.

Josefina, despite coming from a close family, had a desire to pursue a different career path by furthering her education in the United States. She studied agronomy in Venezuela and worked for different companies prior to her arrival in the United States.
After recounting her family upbringing, Josefina described the lack of opportunities in her country of Venezuela and its collapsing economy. She stated the following:

It's a lot, yes. Also, we have a problem with our currency because of the inflation. Our currency is losing value. In a way, you convert our currency over the Bolivar. Bolivar is our currency, sorry. You compare with dollar; the dollar is 1,000% more expensive than our currency. Making Venezuela the poor-rich country from my point of view. Beautiful people, wonderful, we're very friendly people. We're resilient people and very nice people.

Josefina’s expression of pride in her country was very apparent in her interview, despite her account of her country’s deteriorating economic conditions.

Josefina described not only the deteriorating economic conditions in her country but also the political instability associated with it. She shared the following:

We are a beautiful country with a population of over 30 million people. Right now, even though my country is a rich country, very, very rich as I told you, it's the first reservoir of petroleum in the world. We have lately been bad economic and political situation right now. My country is suffering for the storage of food and people have to make a big line to get primary food like rice, sugar, and bread. Some spend one day in the big line and they cannot buy because there's not enough food for everybody.

Given the negative media coverage about her native county, Josefina does not let the negative stories about her country go without also elaborating on what is also positive.

Josefina and the participants in this study elaborated about their final decision to enroll at their community colleges in the United States and their initial impressions before and after arrival on campus. For Josefina and many other participants, affordability was a major factor in choosing her community college over different universities in the United States. Josefina stated:

Well, I found out this information on the website, looking for opportunities to search money. To continue living here, study here legally. To keep you a student studies and you see I can't continue to pay a lot of money in this school. I'm trying to find something less expensive and I try to make a few research in the internet and I found this school.

Despite financial limitations in her experience in the United States, Josefina had managed to become a student worker in which the opportunity to cover all her expenses still eludes her.
Josefina attends Moon River Community College and aspires to work for an American pharmaceutical company in the South American market after completing her university education in the United States.

Khadijah

Khadijah, a 31-year-old aspiring nurse, provided a description of the history of her West African country of Liberia:

I'm from Liberia, a country in West Africa, one of the richest countries. One of the two richest countries in West Africa. What I mean, it's rich because this country's rich with diamonds, gold, and ore, timbers, rubbers, and et cetera. It was a country founded in 1847 by ACS, American Colonization Society. The main goal was that they wanted to take African Americans back from here and take them back to Liberia. Liberia's founded at a time when President James Monroe was in power, so the capital city Monrovia was named after James Monroe, so the country Liberia actually means liberty, like freedom.

Khadijah expressed great pride about her background and the diverse cultures in her native country of Liberia.

For years, according to Khadijah, the country of Liberia has experienced civil war and political strife despite recent stability. Khadijah’s family was very much impacted by the civil war from the past, as she stated:

I had no family. My dad was killed during the war since he was in the military. So, my mom died 1992. And since my grandfather actually left my grandmother and went back to Europe to his mom, so my grandmother did not tell us what part of Mali we came from. And Mali is a very big country. So, I'm just like a lot of African Americans that live here that don't know where they came from.

Coming from a country that endured a bloody civil war for many years left an indelible impression on Khadijah due to the disintegration of her family.
Khadijah opined that her precollegiate education in Liberia did not properly prepare her for higher education in the United States. According to Khadijah, the civil war in Liberia had a disruptive impact on the elementary and secondary educational systems. Khadijah stated:

Back in Liberia, because of the war, I had very broken education systems. Like my foundation was not built. Understand, I couldn't really write a proper sentence or write a research paper. And I didn't know how to start it. I couldn't write a paragraph and other things [at a proficient level]. So, I didn't have a perfect high school graduate [graduation]. I was ... When I came to the college, I consider myself like a junior high student instead of college student. Yeah.

The disruptions in Khadijah’s education in Liberia due to the civil war appeared to be upsetting as she recounted her experiences. My field observation notes during the interview suggest discomfort and uncomfortable body language with sensitive topics.

As a result of her broken formal education in Liberia, Khadijah had to take or retake many precredit courses before she was able to enroll in for-credit transfer classes at her community college in the United States. She shared the following:

Most of the time, the only thing in my country they didn't do, it was to teach me how to write [at a college preparatory level]. But everything they taught me in school and everything we think about like; I do. So, I could see everything. Because two things they didn't teach us like math and writing. So, because I see friends like Chemistry in other classes. Maybe we didn't do a lab, but we did actual chemistry and other things. Like here, I can say education is very easy if you match credits or if you don't have too many [things] going on in your life.

Khadijah’s drive despite the educational impediments did not dampen her spirit to persevere in her desire to study in the United States despite challenges. Khadijah made her decision to study at Gold Star Community College because of her aunt who lives in the community.
Ling, an only child and aspiring biologist from China, is very much a product of recent demographic and economic trends taking place in her country. The 20-year-old China native described with great amusement her status as a single child in modern urban China. She shared the following:

I asked my parents thousands of times, I say, "Why I don't have brothers or sisters?" Because I think it's pretty interesting. We can play together, but my parents they are like, "If you have other siblings, they would just play you like a little toy and if you have younger siblings you will play with them, to take them as the small toys." I don't know if it's true but that's what they said. My dad is an engineer, my mom is a doctor, so I just want to follow out my parent's steps to be in the science area.

With Ling’s parents working as white-collar professionals, both were very encouraging in supporting their only child’s efforts to study in the United States for her collegiate education.

Ling, who described how parents in China are heavily involved in their children’s college and career decision making, suggested that she considered studying abroad versus attending university in China because she would be far away from home in either situation. She stated:

I totally believe that. To the community college because I was having final or new term that day. One of my parents went to hear the speech and when my parents got back, the parents always like to analyze things from the economy, from the money, so they was like, "To study abroad is very interesting and to study at the community college can save some money." They asked me for my opinion and I just think after the college test, I have to go to another city, which means I'm too far away from my parents, so it's not too much difference to study in America. I told my parents, "I feel it's okay to study abroad because I need to be independent," because at that I will be an adult.

As one can surmise from the selection of stories, parental influence not only played a role in education but also served as a catalyst for their child to pursue higher education in the United States.

Ling also described her elementary and secondary education experiences in China as being very competitive and stressful. High-stakes testing can affect one’s entire life, such as
secondary school selection, the possibility of going to college, the selection of a college major, and career path. Ling stated:

They have different levels (secondary schools), so if you want to go to the first level you have to have a better grade and if you really don't have better grade, you have pretty bad grade, or you say, "I want to go to the better school," my scores is lower in that, which means you cannot go there and you cannot go to other second level school. You only can go to private school or the third level school, which is kind of cruel. Many of my classmates just go to a third class school because of that… Your senior year, you have to work hard on the national test, so you can go to very good university, which means after you graduated, you can have a good job. Or if your parents can help you to find a good job more easier, so everybody just study really hard.

Ling described the stress of being academically competitive in her precollegiate education to have an opportunity for a better life, which does not come easy for many Chinese.

For Ling, she opted for her community college because the other colleges and universities in the United States were slow and not very helpful regarding her inquiries about their institutions. Ling stated, “Yeah because when I just talk to other community colleges, not apply yet, some of them just reply once a month, when I finished my TOEFL I'm already in my last grade of my senior high, so I really don't have time to waste and I was like, ‘You just reply my emails so late, what if I have some question in your community college that just means I can find no one to help me out?’” Ling attends Gold Star Community college and aspires to become a scientist after completion of her collegiate education.

Luis

Luis, a 20-year-old native of Honduras, discussed the natural environment and political state of his country prior to his arrival in the United States. He stated:

Well uh, Honduras is one of the most beautiful countries...and naturally, mostly, like, we have the second, uh largest coral reef in the world and our islands are beautiful and our landscapes, coffee plantations, and all the activities you can do around with our natural
resources, are awesome. But sometimes, uh, the administration that we give the country is not like, as good as our natural resources, so we also have some corruption and security problems in Honduras.

Luis expressed great pride in his country’s natural beauty, from its flora to its fauna. He indicated that he would prefer more tourists to visit his country and focus on its national treasures and not the political coverage.

In Luis’s country of origin, political corruption and violence have captured international news for some time, but Luis predominantly emphasized his positive experiences growing up in Honduras in a solidly upper middle-class environment in rural Honduras. Luis described elements of his country’s economic exports by stating:

Then like in the coast, they have a lot of shrimp and fish, so they export that too. And so, there is like in the most tropical zones, there are uhm, sugar cane and plantains. So, like some of the Chiquita bananas that you buying here is like from Honduras.

Luis would like to see greater trade partnerships with countries like the United State for political stability to be realized in his country of origin.

Luis, a traditional-age F-1 visa student, started his collegiate studies in the United States immediately after graduating high school in Honduras. Luis had this to share:

I did my kindergarten and primary school in my hometown. So, primary school is six years. And then I transferred to uhm, middle school, I guess you can say? But it’s like seventh grade. In my hometown too. Then for eight grade I asked my parents if I can attend bilingual school, that’s not in my hometown, it’s the town right after, but it’s like an hour from my hometown. So…they agreed and made the effort to like support me with that. And, then that is how I learned English from eighth grade. And then I kept being in that high school ‘till I graduated and then I came here.

Luis expressed his belief that the strong exposure to English language instruction at his school in Honduras gave him the confidence to study in the United States for his collegiate education.
Luis also suggested that the decision for his community college selection was also affordability. As a result, Luis stated, “No [large universities] in the United States. But they were way too expensive, so I just decided to come here since it was way more affordable.” Many of the participants in this study indicated that cost was a factor in their decision to choose a community college in the United States versus a four-year university. Although initially an engineering major, Luis, who attends Gold Star Community College, has decided to change his major to linguistics with a specialty in translation services due to his study experience in the United States.

Padma

Padma, a 63-year-old citizen of India and nontraditional student, decided to pursue the field of nutritional science because of the myriad of health problems people in her family and community in India experienced. Padma recounted her background in India:

Yeah. As I already told you about the family before, seeing this (health issues). I was married to an electrical engineer. We had a good life of nine years. Unfortunately, my husband passed away with a serious heart attack, ending with a kidney failure, in the year 1998. I had two sibling, two children. One is a doctor. The first one is a doctor who works as a gastroenterologist… in Chicago.

Padma’s interest in allied health was greatly influenced by the death of her husband and health issues of other relatives and friends in her community.

After the death of her husband and after a 23-year career in the banking industry, Padma begin to embark on her interest in alternative medicines and remedies in India, almost as a hobby. Padma recounted her experience:

Life has been challenging. I just wanted to see more about our internal life, because no computer can be just compared to the human system. I had all sorts of cancer patients with me. I used to do it as a hobby back in India. All sorts of diseases, including cancer. I
could get very good results for the cancer patients when I'm changing their lifestyle and being with them. Like, I am there, don't worry. This is a kind of thing, don't have fear. Then change the lifestyle. Every week talk, with every day follow up. I could not make my husband survive. At least I can see him through somebody else, his soul. That kind of a thing I started.

Because of Padma’s experience with the death of her husband and her interest in alternative medicines and healing, she decided to pursue a formal education in the allied health profession.

For Padma, having a son working and living in the United States made her decision to study at her community college easy because he was able to visit and survey the college environment before her arrival. Padma stated:

The reviews were very good with this college. Then my son came once and then virtually saw everything. That is how he saw that this will be a better option for us. One of my son's cousin has somebody studying in some community college in downtown Chicago. They said that that place is very less and all that kind of stuff. My son said quality-wise, this is a good community college, so we'll come to this college. Then we start.

In having her sons living in the United States, Padma had a structured support system for her to realize her dream in obtaining a degree in allied health. Padma attends Gold Star Community College.

Paulo

Paulo, a 25-year-old South American from Brazil, aspires to become a software gaming engineer. Because of California’s Silicon Valley and the international reputation of the United States as the center for software engineering education, Paulo described his decision to study in the United States as an easy decision, but money for education was a constant challenge for him and other F-1 international students in this study. Paulo fondly described the medium-size Brazilian city where he was reared. He shared his account and background:
My hometown? It is a medium size. About 700,000. Kind of large. It reminded me a lot of Milwaukee. I went up there just a month ago, it reminded me a lot of Milwaukee. Population size. Yeah. So, it's a large town but it feels like a small town. That's what I love about it. It is a very rich town, there are lots of industries around it. Lots of sugar cane industries, especially. So, sugar and alcohol, or ethanol. Most of the owners of those factories live there, that's why it's a rich town. But it's a nice town, it's extremely warm. They say it's one of the warmest cities.

Paulo spoke very enthusiastically about his country and hometown, particularly the economic industries in which his town is noted for its staples.

Paulo, whose parents are divorced, embarked on his dream to study in the United States due to his mother’s encouragement, but not so much from his father. Paulo stated:

Like I said, I always wanted to study abroad. But definitely my mom was definitely the person who said, "Yeah, you should go," because I always thought it was expensive, my parents would have to pay a lot of money for it. I don't want to have them have to pay that much for me to move here and stay away from them and all that stuff. But my mom always said, "If that's what you want, we always want you to do that. You always practice English, you play video games at home, practicing with your friends. You should go there, it's what you wanted." And she convinced me in that sort of way to come here.

Paulo indicated that his father was very much against his desire to study in the United States due to his limited financial resources and the limited financial resources of Paulo’s mother. Paulo also indicated that since the divorce, he did not have a close relationship with his father and his father resides in a town that is a great distance from him and his mom.

Paulo also made his decision to study at Gold Star Community College because of having a relative living near the community college location. As part of Paulo’s decision, he stated:

Well, I have a cousin that lives here, and they got a newsletter kind of thing from (institution’s name withheld), and they knew I was looking for something else to study. I always had a good relationship with this cousin, my mom was there, what's it called? Godmother, I guess?
Having a relative nearby as a support system gave Paulo’s parents some assurance for him to pursue his sojourn. Paulo, a student at Gold Star Community College, aspires to become a software gaming engineer for a high-tech firm.

Stefan

Stefan, a 21-year-old German national, frequently described the similarities between his country and the United States. In comparing the United States and Germany, Stefan stated:

I would say it's very similar to the U.S. in terms of development, since both countries are developed countries. Both countries have democracy basically. We elect ... Germany ... elections every four years, for president. I'm not sure about the president here, but in Germany, we do.

However, Stefan noticed a difference in how Americans and Germans in similarly small communities interact with each other. He shared his perspective:

So, I lived there since forever, basically, and small town, everyone knew each other for the most part, and I also went to elementary school there as well. The community is not as strong as here in the U.S. though. For the most part, you don't really have contact to your neighbors as much as you do here. People usually tend to stay by themselves or in their houses. I was lucky, we had some good contacts to our neighbors, and good contacts, there was no fight going on. It's a very quiet town, not really a lot of traffic, there's one main road. We lived a bit away from the main road, it's been very quiet. Enjoyable at our house, back yard, front yard, so nice.

Stefan explained that the city where his community college is located reminded him of his hometown in Germany.

Despite the divorce of his parents, Stefan credits his mother for being the greatest influence in his quest to study in the United States. Stefan’s father was never fond of the idea of his son studying in the United States. Stefan’s home environment was not hospitable prior to his parents’ divorce. He shared his account:
My dad was working from home usually, so it's been quite difficult growing up sometimes, cause, you know, he can be very angry sometimes, so I didn't want him all the time at home. I was happy when he was also away, traveling somewhere. Which he did very often luckily. I liked having my mom around more than my dad, we always have been the best friends, and you know, having a good time.

Despite Stefan not having a close relationship with his father, he is determined not to live in his father’s shadow or follow his father’s expectations of remaining in Germany to attend university and remain in Germany for his career. Stefan prefers to work in a career outside of his country of Germany.

Stefan had the pleasure of beginning his equivalent of a high school education in Germany at the gymnasium before embarking on his International Baccalaureate (I.B.) diploma. Stefan stated, “The high school systems, we have three different systems in Germany. Like the best one, the most advanced is Gymnasium and the Realschule, which is the middle, and then Hauptschule, which is like the not-so-advanced school of those three.” Stefan suggested that the German system was very influential in how different countries model their systems of education.

Prior to selecting Gold Star Community College, Stefan considered other community colleges in the United States. Receiving constant contacts from Gold Star Community College counselors and an F-1 international student from Germany shaped his initial impressions and solidified his decision to enroll in the community college he attends. Stefan stated:

Just been, I mean to be honest, like I said, I wanted to go to the city, but then they had such a great contact, I decided to come here, which was really a good decision. I don't know how it would have been if I would have gone to any community college in Chicago or New York or Los Angeles, but from now on, I'm perfectly happy and I couldn't imagine anything else right now.

Stefan aspires to obtain a degree in international business.
Chapter Summary

This chapter provides brief biographical profiles of the F-1 visa student participants who desired to begin their higher education in the United States at the community college level before transferring to U.S. universities. The participants in this study came from countries with completely different precollegiate educational systems compared to the United States and some of the participants had previous university education or careers prior to their arrival in the United States. All the participants had formal or informal English language learning prior to their enrollment in English-centered U.S. community college transfer courses. As one can deduce from the participants, their backgrounds and initial impressions provided a synopsis of their lived experiences prior to their immersion into the U.S. community college environment. Chapter 5 presents findings of the study and focuses on adjustment experiences and transformation into the U.S. community college environment.
CHAPTER 5:

FINDINGS

This study provides a synthesis of the lived experiences, adjustment challenges, and triumphs of F-1 international students enrolled in transfer courses at four community colleges in two states located in the Midwest region of the United States. The focus of this qualitative study involved 11 F-1 international students from ten different countries and five continents enrolled fulltime in two different states as part of their quest to earn degrees beyond the community college associate degree in the United States. The following will outline the findings related to three areas: Transitions into a Community College Environment, Learning Experiences in the Community College Classroom, and Co-Curricular Experiences. Each section is organized into themes and subthemes that provide insights into the experiences of F-1 international students.

Transitions to the Community College Environment

Participants in this study embarked on a complicated odyssey after they were able to settle into their residential accommodations in the host environment. In their quest to pursue their collegiate education, participants were not always aware of the potential impediments or obstacles they would encounter in transitioning to the United States. This section focuses on the lived experiences of participants in their transformation to the American collegiate experience focusing on adjustments, obstacles, and supports they experienced.
Adjustments: The Onboarding Experience

Most of the participants in this study partook in the school onboarding experience or orientation for F-1 international students. These experiences were supposed to help students in their transition and adjustment into the community college. The community college orientation sessions provided useful information for F-1 international students ranging from visa compliance to housing. Nine out of 11 participants discussed their orientation experiences.

Participants who partook in the international student orientation prior to the start of their first semester had many of their initial impressions shaped by that experience. Luis, a Honduran native, remarked about the value of his orientation experience, sharing:

Uh, there was an orientation… I got to like learn about a lot of stuff such as how to maintain my legal status. But also, like how college works. I even asked permission to go to the bathroom that day because I did not know the rules. Yeah (light laughter). And…that was fun. So I like took a moment off for breakfast and we got our name tags with our flag and I got to meet my first friend too. So, I really liked orientation. So, the next day, we went shopping and bowling. So that was fun too. I mean uh, only half of the people in the orientation went but it was like uh, fun.

For Luis, the onboarding experience provided a useful experiential primer in gaining practical information about visa compliance, acclimation to the physical layout of the campus, and cultivating friendships. Luis did mention that since his community college onboarding experience is the only one in his collegiate career, without having comparative experiences, he indicated being very pleased with what was provided. For Luis, he especially found the assistance from the student ambassadors to be very useful. The onboarding experience for Luis maybe pre-empted and perhaps mitigated some possible confusion at the start of his collegiate experience in the United States.

Similarly, Abril’s experience during orientation provided her with some useful information, especially being paired with a counselor. She shared:
Hmm. Let me think about it. I don't know. I think they cover what I was expecting. They cover all my ... yeah, I think they met all my expectations for that orientation, because they provide all the information you need depending on what is going to be your major. Then when you get out of the orientation meeting you will find all of those stages with people giving information about who's your counselor, who's going to be which is good. I think it's pretty-well organized.

Abril’s overall satisfaction of what she was able to learn during onboarding set the initial path for her to undertake more complicated tasks associated with her early collegiate experience in the United States. As an extension of Abril’s onboarding experience, she also stated:

I was excited, I was excited about getting ready to start a brand-new chapter in my life and start improving my English especially, and I just saw walking through all the halls and the big classes like wow this is great. I don't know, it was summer, so people were all happy and all the music in here, and I remember it was in this office back there, it was really good.

Abril’s recounting of her onboarding experience set the path to pursue her goals with great excitement and enthusiasm. Her onboarding experience allowed for a potentially seamless transition into the start of her odyssey as an F-1 international student.

Abril’s experience with onboarding appeared to be comparable with Luis’s in which both were pleased to get useful information about the campus environment and becoming acquainted with key campus personnel. In addition, Abril’s experience with onboarding also appeared to help in mitigating some potential transition issues at the start of her community college experience.

Khadijah likewise found the orientation experience to be very helpful, particularly in her accidental discovery of a button-driven water fountain that most Westerners take for granted. In her orientation experience, Liberian-native Khadijah stated:

My first day experience, it was so wonderful. Because we went upstairs, and I was the best geography student in high school. So, we went to the geography department, and
Susan (last name withheld) walked me through everywhere. And one of the beautiful things I saw was the water fountain. You just have to push it and the water come up. And then the computer lab. Everybody have access to computer. You can go and sit there and talk. We have a [inaudible]... She'll take her to a lot of places. And then we have some American student coming around. It was a lot of motivation. It was really fun.

Khadijah’s exposure to the campus environment and its resources allowed for a stress-free opportunity to understand what her community college offers and thus eased her concerns at the outset. The experiences expressed by Luis, Abril, and Khadijah appeared to be optimistic, hopeful, and very receptive to the onboarding facilitators and campus resources.

Khadijah found the community college staff to be very helpful in her navigation through the college bureaucracy. One setback Khadijah mentioned during her onboarding experience was the inability for certain courses to transfer to her community college. Khadijah shared:

I came to (name of institution withheld) as a transfer student. To transfer actually if I get everything to transfer. And I get my credit I was supposed to transfer, but when I came, those international student advisor by the name of (name of person withheld). So, she was a very wonderful lady. And when she was here, student you have to go stand in line. So, student in line trying to see (name of person withheld). When she paused, and I was like, "You know, I can't transfer. I have to stay here too and get a degree so I can say (name of institution withheld) at least, I will remember (name of person withheld) through the college. So that was one of the things that influenced me to stay.

Despite Khadijah’s disappointment with not having all courses transfer from a previous school, she still found the onboarding experience to be beneficial and transfer information to be helpful in setting future course selections.

German-native Stefan not only had a previous one-year experience studying in the United States for his International Baccalaureate (I.B.) diploma at a Midwest high school, but Stefan also had prior experience visiting different communities in the Midwest. Stefan’s travel experience in the Midwest guided him in his community college selection. After Stefan completed his I.B. diploma and returned to Germany for the summer, he corresponded with two
F-1 international students from Germany prior to arrival. Because Stefan had the benefit of communicating with one of the German F-1 international students at the community college months prior to his arrival, after arrival, Stefan shared:

Oh, danke, danke schoen. Because it was still new, everything was new, I was just looking at certain areas where we could go to. And I think the most helpful information was that I actually know where everything was, and I knew where I could go if I wanted to have some certain information. It was very overwhelming, especially it's a new area. I've been to (name of location withheld) before. I had no reason to before, now I live here. And it was nice to actually see the college by itself and having also ... Angie's also my friend, so basically a friend gave me the tour, which was very nice to have.

In addition to the formal onboarding, Stefan had the added benefit of frequent correspondences with German F-1 international students at the community college that allowed for perhaps a more seamless transition to the host environment compared to others. From my field observation notes, Stefan appeared to be approximately six feet in height; very poised, robotic body language; but very comfortable.

During orientation, Padma found the staff at the suburban community college to be very helpful, especially in her need to still care for relatives in India. She shared:

When I came first day, I was clearly taken with all on one campus. (name withheld) the international student coordinator, he was there. (name withheld) she was also there. They were explaining me how to go. Then he processed my form immediately. He made me feel very good because after enrolling here I was to go to my country, for some reason. Probably my mother had hypoglycemia, something like that. So, I was to leave. He said, "No, madam. You go and then come. Everything is done." He was reassuring, which was a great thing. Here and there are so many things it's possible for me to come, not possible for me to come, but as far as that, he kept me informed through emails, through other thing. Awesome guy. Wonderful. It was very good.

The assurances given to Padma from the onboarding personnel for her to temporarily return to her home country to tend to the health needs of a relative provided great psychological comfort. Padma’s positive onboarding experience established a supportive college environment and ease
of transition at the outset of her sojourn. Padma, based on my field observation notes, appeared very polished and regal in dress and mannerisms and engaged with great eye contact.

China-native Ling desired pertinent information about visa compliance during her orientation. Ling indicated that coming to the United States well before orientation proved to be very helpful in her transition. Ling stated:

Then just I think it's just, talk to my international advisor and talk to the counselor to talk about the class that I need to choose because I got here pretty early, earlier than the new international student orientation, so that is not my first day to be here. I have plenty of time to just talk about class changing, class selection.

Ling received key information and course requirements well before the onboarding experience. Her early arrival gave her an advantage over most participants in the study who arrived at their campuses just a week or less prior to onboarding.

Overall, Ling found the facilitators at the orientation to be most helpful in explaining the necessities of visa compliance. She shared:

In the orientation, because here I'm not like 18 years old American when I got here, I had to totally depend on my parents. I feel when the international organizer told us how to find a job like who we can go to and help us to do resume and cover letter that's really helpful. They also told us how to maintain our visa status so that's also really helpful because even though the visa is already expired, the I-20 is still valid so you can stay here. That's still very risky but have to pay more attention. Well, if my passport will expire when my visa expire, will my I-20 expire? That's really helpful. Now is kind of strict of who can come to America this time. It became important than anything for me is the job one of the big issue and my status is the big issue. That's the thing they talked over and over again so those two are really helpful.

Visa compliance appeared to be an issue of much concern by participants in this study, and the onboarding experience for Ling and others at least provided a destressor for visa clarification and easier transition into the start of the participants’ community college experience.
Brazil-native Paulo had mixed feelings about his orientation experience, for which he expressed the need for improvement. Paulo stated:

I didn't attend one in quite a while, but as far as I know, it looks more fleshed-out now. Yeah, I guess the PowerPoints were pretty... you could see they were just put together in a rush or something like that. That's something I remember I thought. Oh, there was also a panel I forgot to mention during the orientation, there was a panel of students just going through their experience here. That was really cool and I think they kept that, they still have that to this day. That was really cool as well.

Although Paulo did not find the onboarding experience to be as impactful as some of the other participants, Paulo did find some information to be relevant, even in the PowerPoints. Based on my field observation notes, Paulo appeared to be six feet four inches in height, somewhat animated in body language, but very much at ease.

Paulo mentioned that information related to gaining employment on campus was critical for him and a major destressor. Paulo stated:

About getting jobs on campus, definitely that helped. That only after a semester, I could get a job here. After a year, maybe work outside the campus. And all the process that would go with that, like getting a social security number for that and all that stuff as well, that helped. I got the job here after a semester as well, so that was pretty cool.

Having limited financial resources was a major concern for Paulo after arrival. Paulo’s ability to possibly gain employment on campus due to onboarding information again allowed for a potential transition complication to be mitigated at the outset of his collegiate experience.

Venezuela-native Josefina also had mixed feelings about the utility of her orientation experience. Josefina’s evolving conversational English skills upon arrival was not sufficient to her satisfaction. Consequently, key information presented at the onboarding experience was lost in translation. Despite her disappointing experience at the formal onboarding, her international advisor proved to be a much greater help compared to the onboarding orientation. She shared:
Asking question when I didn't understand something. Having a close relationship with international student department. If I cannot understand something immediately or coaching or e-mail him. Try to keep the contact with him to maintain the contact with him in order to improve my understanding. Maybe I have a question, but I never asked, and he never explained to me because maybe it’s one orientation they cannot cover. They tried to cover the majority things but maybe you have a question that you don't understand about one point you have, you're not sure. For me, the best way was try to maintain the contact, close contact with (advisor’s name withheld).

Despite Josefina’s anxiety in missing key points and critical information covered during the onboarding, the international student counselor over time mitigated some of her concerns due to language challenges.

Neither Bilal nor Gloria participated in their onboarding experiences due to different reasons. Syrian-native Bilal missed his onboarding due to travel complications. Columbia-native Gloria missed her onboarding due to religious reasons. Both had to work closely with their international advisors to obtain key information that was missed. Bilal and Gloria admitted that attending the orientation would have made their respective transitions into their community colleges much easier. However, both now feel comfortable in their initial adjustments to their community college environments.

Most participants found their orientation experiences to be effective in mitigating the daunting task of adjustment to the host environment. The two participants who were not able to take part in the onboarding orientation remarked that the experience would have been beneficial in better navigating the host environment at the outset. Although some of the participants opined that their orientation was routine, such an experience proved to be more beneficial than not in their respective transitions.
The Mobility Conundrum: Transportation

The issue of transportation became an issue for most of the participants in this study. Unlike most four-year universities in the United States with student residence halls on campus, community colleges in the United States rarely have student residence halls on campus. Affordable housing near a community college campus is not always an option, especially for F-1 international students or out-of-district students. Therefore, participants needed to secure adequate transportation to and from campus.

Luis expressed a sentiment often shared by participants related to the distance needed to travel to and from campus. Luis stated, “Oh. Well, yeah, everything is pretty far. And like I have to walk like 15 minutes to the bus stop. But it’s better than in the Honduras, I don’t know, it’s not as effective.” Despite the inconvenience of the nearest bus to his place of residence in the United States, Luis mentioned the reliance on public transportation was a cultural adjustment.

Luis had a culturally challenging encounter in his attempt to take a public bus to campus. He stated the following:

I was with my brother so, we were like, I remember we had to ride the bus to come here and it was the first time, and I did not realize that it was a flat fee. And like, I was thinking that a quarter was 50 cents. So, I like put the amount of quarters that would make $1.75 and she was like, “that’s not $1.75.” So, I said, “sorry.” So, I put [in] the rest. And that I came here to the College by bus…. yeah, my brother liked it here too. Because everything is like different. So, when you get to experience something different, it is really nice.

Using public transportation also required Luis to practice using U.S. currency and learn how to do a familiar activity (riding the bus) in a very different cultural context. This experience was disorienting for Luis, even if it was a brief encounter.
Some of the participants struggled with the decision to purchase a car or just endure the inconveniences of public transportation. Luis stated:

Yeah it is true. Like, uhm, one of the students from (name of institution withheld) was from Honduras last year, and she helped me get in here, like, and she gave me information on what should I do now or what should I do next. And she told that you have to have a car to like live there. But I was like, well I don’t want to have one because it’s like too much expenses. So sometimes, I like keep myself from doing stuff that I can do with a car like sometimes if I want to go to...to the mall or something, I just don’t do it.

The inconvenience of public transportation appeared to hinder what participants wanted to do when not attending class or campus activities. As a result, the lack of mobility often compounded their isolation and added to the cultural stressors of participants.

Abril likewise indicated that isolation was a common experience due to the lack of personal transportation. Participants living a considerable distance from campus spent a significant amount of time traveling to and from school. This travel was compounded by the challenges and limited public transportation available to them in the area. Most of the participants believed that in the United States one should own a car if money is not an issue. However, Abril found public transportation much easier to navigate after a few weeks with digital mobile technology, sharing:

I think the first issue, mobility, moving around by myself. I don't know how I'm going to get there, I was so afraid of that, like going to the city. I'm going to learn how to take this metro, how am I going to know if I am going to the right place? Great that technology exists, so GPS are great and then I have funny stories, because I was trying to go one place and it would be like 30 minutes away and I would go so far away but that was the way that I learned how to use the public transportation here. That one ... I think I have learned to be more independent, definitely. Not living with my family and every time I would seek transportation myself; I was used to my mom was going to be there providing me all the attention, but here people are like are you okay? They're not going to be following the whole process of your sickness, if it's a long time.
Over time, some participants became more resourceful in finding ways to travel to places of interest via public transportation. The use of digital mobile technology helped some participants to explore places of interest beyond the route of home to school to help mitigate isolation and maybe culture shock.

Nigeria-native Asagai and Liberia-native Khadijah remarked about the inconvenience of public transportation in the suburban Midwest compared to large cities in the Midwest. As part of the experiences of many participants in the study, Asagai stated:

Oh, yeah. The transport system is more defined out in the suburbs than it is in the city. In the city, it's more spontaneous, it just keeps happening. If you miss this bus, you can just get up on the five-minute bus that comes after. Here, it's more of ... you have a huge time constraint between buses. You have like a 30 minute, you can have to an hour, you had to wait, and in different weather conditions. It gets bad.

The lack of timely and frequent bus arrivals and departures appeared to be a difficult adjustment issue for Asagai, Khadijah, and other participants, especially during the cold winter months in the Midwest region of the United States.

Ling also shared viewpoints about the poor availability of public transportation in the suburban Midwest region of the United States. Comparing public transportation in her country and the United States, Ling stated:

The bus is also different. The bus here is not that convenient here but in China there's a lot of public transportation. Here I got lost several times, not in here but in somewhere else and I try to find a bus or someone that I can ask.

Some of the participants who had to rely on public transportation intimated that having the information regarding limited or inconvenient transportation in the suburbs could have influenced their final decision in choosing their specific community college. Some of the participants in this study suggested that public transportation is more convenient in their countries of origin.
Paulo, on the other hand, was one of the few students in this study who had a car, which addressed his mobility issues despite the expense. Prior to buying a car, Paulo shared how his lack of mobility affected his transition:

Yeah. Oh, one thing that ... But that's because of the region that we live in, I guess, everything is far away. So, I actually go the bus to come here. To go to the Walmart that's close to my house, to the grocery store that's close to my house, it's almost one mile, so it's pretty far. And like I said, I didn't have a car, so I had to buy in small increments 'cause I couldn't carry all of that back home of course. So that was kind of weird for me as well. So, I stayed a lot more at home than I used to back in Brazil, the city I used to live in there, because I could just go out and have dinner at the corner or hamburger house or something like that. Here, I didn't have that at all.

Again, the issue of isolation and perhaps elements of culture shock due to lack of mobility was a common thread with participants in this study, which Paulo was able to solve by purchasing a car.

Overall, the issue of transportation proved to be a major obstacle in the mobility of participants. This obstacle exacerbated their anxieties and frustrations, and the resultant alienation hindered their acclimation to and immersion into the campus environment. The lack of convenient transportation and lack of housing near the community college campuses proved to be an impediment to a seamless transition to the host environment. The winter weather in the Midwest region in the United States also did not enrich the public transportation experience for participants.

Lost in Translation: Language Barriers

For some of the participants in this study, English language fluency was one of the greatest challenges in their navigation of the host environment. Language adjustments varied from the speed of English language conversations and formal English words to U.S. idiomatic
expressions. Participants in this study had varied experiences understanding their professors and peers in the classroom, which led to language barriers and frustration.

Gloria was challenged by the nuances and subtleties of the English language, which could engender misunderstandings to native English speakers. She shared:

I think watching videos of some things or having my dictionary in hand, like when the professor was talking about something and I didn't understand a word, I still do that. I write down the expression or the word and I check it out in the dictionary and I'm like, "Oh." Keep learning things, words and expressions. Asking and talking to native people, ask them, "Hey why do you guys do this or do that?" Some people, they corrected me. "Hey, don't say it that way because it's rude." The proper way to approach a person, things like that. I think I've learned a lot. As far as the way we speak, we speak, "I need you to do that." We don't even say please. It's not that important. Here you cannot speak like that. "Can you please do that?" Can you, could you, may you? Et cetera. You can't translate literally word-by-word because the meaning is not the same and the way we speak is different. The political correctness, I learned that. Things like that, small things like that.

Gloria expressed that learning the nuance of a language was a stressful experience, particularly when communicating with native speakers. The language barriers participants often experienced were compounded by not having a full mastery of the English language. Gloria’s trial-and-error in learning U.S. English was a cultural adjustment that eluded her since arrival to the United States.

Because of Gloria’s experiences with language barriers in the classroom, she had one experience that shook her confidence of participating in classroom discourse. Gloria stated:

I was very frustrated because she (her teacher) made me repeat and she called more people, "Hey do you understand what she’s saying?" That made me feel bad. I was like, "Oh no." I couldn't resist that, and I called my sister crying. She was like, “Don't worry, that has happened to me a lot of time.”

Gloria expressed that teachers did not respect nor take the time to truly understand her earnest attempt to engage in classroom discourse. The experience left her feeling marginalized and dismissed by her teacher.
Some of the participants noticed that native English speakers will often intuitively assume what one is asking without fully understanding or answering a question effectively. The participants’ classroom discourse did not allow for a full understanding of class content when their queries were not taken seriously. Syria-native Bilal recounted an experience in a classroom with such an occurrence. He shared:

This semester, I was taking organic chemistry, and the teacher ... It was a small class, and the teacher was really funny, so I used to ... Whenever he asked me question, I just say, oh, I can't answer, it's a language barrier. So, yeah. Language barriers. I don't know, I don't think I had problems. Everyone, when I first came, when I had a problem with something ... sometimes I didn't know how to ask specifically to cover this question that I had. I didn't know how to format the question exactly to ... I used to have a problem expressing what I really want to say. That's the only problem, sometimes I ask a question and the teacher understands it in another way. And when he answers, he does not really answer my question. I think that's the only problem I had, but the more I spent time speaking English, the more I started ... I began knowing how to ask the question exactly how I want it.

Bilal often found the classroom discourse to be frustrating because of his inability to be understood by teachers and classroom peers. For Bilal, he often felt that teachers did not take the time to really understand his questions and just provided superficial answers to questions he did not really ask just to move the classroom discourse to the next segment. These experiences left him confused and added to his classroom disengagement in those occasions.

Again, language barriers appeared to be a consistent theme with regards to many of the participants’ adjustment issues in the host environment. Participants had varying degrees of accents when communicating with native English language speakers, which produced different negative experiences in their confidence to communicate. For instance, Josefina stated:

It's different when you're studying with other people that aren't in the same level than you with the same skill maybe and with the same background than you. It's totally different when you have to incorporate that in a school where you will find native people. People that speak the language of the country and you feel you got a little afraid.
For Josefina and other participants, the classroom discourse and associated language barriers with native English language speakers in the classroom created feelings of anxiety and diminished perseverance. These experiences often left them intimidated and bewildered and eroded their confidence to engage in classroom discourse.

Paulo, on the other hand, mentioned that his Portuguese accent was far more prevalent on Monday in class compared to later in the week. Over time, Paulo realized that his language barriers increased in class when not engaged with native English speakers after the weekends. Paulo stated:

Sometimes I speak a little fast and the accent gets in the way, and sometimes I'll ... Especially after weekends, because during the weekends, I spend most of the weekends speaking Portuguese. Friends and family and all. When it comes, Monday, my accent's terrible. I actually have to warm up again. In the morning classes, and I wasn't a morning person, so I had to have morning classes, and speaking a little bit fast, I'll have to repeat myself, slow down, things like that. But nothing that I couldn't communicate or actually problems saying what it is that I meant.

Paulo mentioned that his ability to mitigate language barriers in the classroom can be ameliorated by maintaining communication with native English language speakers on a consistent basis, not just on campus when it is necessary.

On a different issue related to language barriers, nonverbal communications, particularly gesturing, can lead to great cultural misunderstandings between some F-1 international students and native English speakers. Khadijah for instance was reared in a conservative West African Islamic culture where women are very protective of their personal space, especially when one’s space was invaded by a nonrelative male. In one experience, Khadijah stated:

People look into other people’s accents and think it's kind of different and other thing. In class, teachers want to lean forward to me, and that's a disrespect to me. You don't lean forward to me. So, in Africa, if someone try to lean forward to me, I'm going to hit on [rebuff in a physically defensive manner] them. Because I'm trying to protect myself.
When trying to better understand others due to language barriers, it is natural for one to lean in to get a better understanding of another communicator. However, in certain cultures such as Khadijah’s, getting too close to another can give one the impression of intimidation or threat of bodily harm.

Language barriers can often lead to simple misunderstandings between communicators of different language backgrounds. Ling for instance mentioned that context is very important when communicating, especially if one has a heavy accent when speaking English. In a particular experience, Ling mentioned how a simple mispronunciation can easily get lost in translation in a story she shared about a close fellow F-1 international student in the classroom:

But I think from the language, the misunderstanding is pretty good. It's not the bad situation because you still can communicate to clarify. But the worse thing is some word you use to make it into the misunderstanding about your personality. One of my friend, she is doing a paper. She also just got here at that time, her meaning is, "Can I turn this paper [in] to you?" But she was like, "Can I turn this sheet to you?" Her pronunciation is not that good, so the professor just think she is saying a bad word, like a curse word or something so, I don't remember, he or she became really mad at the time. Then my friend just like, "What's going on?" That is really weird, so I feel as long as you can clarify what you mean it will be okay. Through the communication it will be okay.

Pronunciations of words and clarity to native English language speakers are a constant learning experience for many F-1 international students, and sometimes a language barrier. Such experiences create confusion and sometimes frustration with shared communicators.

Another word or phrase lost in translation was an experience recounted by Paulo not long after arrival. Idiomatic expressions in the English language can often lead to misunderstandings for English language learners and often compounds anxiety and classroom challenges. Paulo shared a particular story about not understanding an idiomatic phrase often used in the English language:
Yes, especially with slang, I guess, or things like that. I remember the first week of classes here, in my English class. The first day, the teacher went through the syllabus, talked about her and everything like that. The second day, she would have a quiz about the syllabus and everything that she spoke about in the first day, and one of the questions was, what is her pet peeve? I had no idea what pet peeve was. And I remember the first day she talked about the animals that she liked. I thought that's what she wanted to know, so I just listed the order of animals that she liked.

Some participants mentioned the difficulties of understanding commonly used American idioms to which they had no previous exposure. In addition, some of the participants in this study observed regional and ethnic variations in the communication of native English speakers, which further added to language barriers. For instance, Josefina stated:

The way they talk the same language, African-American and White people. They talk the same language, but I don't know if it's their rhythm or a few pronunciations or the slang, sometimes you can perceive even though they are talking the same language, they'll talk the same language in different ways, and you feel the difference.

Participants learned that native English speakers in the United States have different styles of usage, which was another language barrier to master. The diversity of English language usage added another layer of complexity in mastering conversational English for participants in the study.

Many of the participants in this study mentioned that watching American television or movies after school aided in the improvement of their conversational English. Some participants in this study suggested that consuming American media content mitigated some of their language barriers over time. Bilal for instance made watching American film and television a regular habit, sharing:

Yeah. I do all this; I do the homework the day before. I don't do ... I make sure I understand the stuff, but I don't really do the homework the day, 'cause to me when I ... My first semester, I found it more important to watch a movie than do a homework two days after, because it's like, movies really helped me to listen, to learn how to listen, and also influenced the speaking. So, I used to go school, and then eat, and then come home, sleep a little, and then do the homework that I have exactly after, like exactly tomorrow. I
don't do homework if I have more time. And I watch a movie. I think I remember the first three semesters, I used to watch a movie every day.

For Bilal, watching American media content from movies to television aided in his understanding of how Americans use conversational English and lessened English language barriers consequently over time.

Padma, Asagai, and Stefan had extensive English language experience prior to arrival at their community colleges; therefore, their language barriers with American English speakers were not as pronounced as the other participants in this study. Bilal, who was originally enrolled in E.S.L., decided to unenroll due to his desire to function without it. The other seven participants in this study enrolled in E.S.L. courses to improve their English language fluency before enrolling in college-credit transfer courses. In the case of both Padma and Asagai, both mentioned that their respective countries were former British colonies and English is the official language for government and commercial purposes in their countries. Padma mentioned that despite her Indian-Hindi accent, English is the official language in India due to British colonization. Therefore, Padma had high confidence in her English-speaking skills prior to arrival in the United States, and language barriers with American English speakers were not overwhelming. She shared:

This language barrier is still there. The pronunciation of words, we are more like Brits because India was ruled by the empire 150 years. English is not a barrier to us because we speak fluently English. The problem is with the articulation. Sometimes I need to request them, "Please come back." [please restate your question/answer] That's the only thing. Cultural misunderstandings so far, I have not. Nothing as of now.

For Padma, language barriers did not appear to be a concern that caused anguish or frustration of cultural alienation with speakers in the host environment. Padma as a nontraditional student
projected great pride and confidence in her ability to communicate and interact with those in the host environment.

Likewise, Asagai mentioned that he was confident in his English language skills due to Nigeria being a former British colony. Asagai stated:

Yeah, Nigeria is pretty ... Most people think we are ... People get confused. Like we have a general African language, but Africa is pretty diverse. In Nigeria alone ... Nigeria's just one country in Africa ... over 500 languages are spoken and some are extinct. You have some branching up between 1,000 speakers. You have languages going to a million. The official language of the country is English because we were colonized by the Brits.

Despite Asagai’s soft-spoken delivery, he did not identity language barriers as being a concern of great tumult or frustration.

For Stefan, he mentioned that for his country of Germany, English is widely spoken not only because of American military service people stationed in Germany, but English is widely preferred as one of the required languages needed for graduating high school. Stefan strongly believed that it is important for F-1 international students to regularly interact with American students to better improve English language proficiency, which will make one’s transition into the host environment less of a cultural challenge. He shared:

I think, I mean, some people might say the language barrier. For me it wasn't too much the language barrier just handling ... that's a good question. I guess an international student, I mean I'm sure some might have a language barrier that they need to overcome and just getting out, meeting new people. I've heard from some students, and at the beginning of my year here I have experienced, if you want to talk to American students, you have to get used that before ... We had a strong international community, and a lot of international friends. And then you also want to go meet some American students as well. Was more challenging too, at first, you're trying to get out there and meeting some people you have never seen before who's language you have still master and that was somewhat challenging. But for now, I mean I overcame this challenge, and the majority of people I hang out with right now are ... they either lived here since they were born, or they were born here as well. But right now, I have basically the normal problems that regular students have as well.
For Stefan, his years of English language learning in Germany and American high school experience in Missouri for completion of his International Baccalaureate (I.B.) diploma equipped him with less language barrier issues in the host environment.

As one might imagine, lacking total fluency in the English language resulted in language barriers for most participants in this study. Issues included communicating certain ideas or desires to native speakers, misunderstanding native English speakers due to the speed of their communication, and the use of many idioms by native speakers. Acquiring English language fluency proved to be a slow transition and a cultural stressor for most of the participants in the study. These difficulties resulted in much frustration, anxiety, and alienation at the outset of their duration in the United States.

**Transitioning from Home Country to Host Environment**

The experiences of transitioning into the host environment and campus life provided a myriad of stories given by students in this study. Participants made transitions from one classroom culture to another, new cuisines, visa compliance requirements, and to becoming independent adults. Some participants found their new independence and freedom to be liberating while others experienced separation anxieties from their families and home country.

Ling explained how she acclimated to her new academic environment, which was very different from her experiences in China. In her explanation, Ling shared the following:

It's for me I think the hardest thing is kind of know the culture, but you don't really know the culture. Also, when you go into the class you have to adapt a different way to learning things. You have to leave everything behind just to learn the new things and to get their new selves. In China, we always use Blackboard, I mean not the software but just the blackboard and chalk and get all the points you need to know for the exam. In America, teachers normally use PowerPoint. In the math class they may use the board, but they won't tell you what's exactly on the test and what you need to memorize all the time. So that's the different things. I think that's maybe the biggest because you not only need to
learn other kinds of languages, but you also need to learn their teaching styles and to get good grades from that.

Ling’s adjustment to American classroom culture not only involved greater use of instructional technology but also less reliance on memorization, which is a standard way of mastering content in China, according to Ling.

Foreign nationals living in the United States must adjust to American cuisine. Locating familiar foods from one’s country of origin is never an easy transition venture. Paulo described his experiences with cuisine choices: “Food was definitely different here, not something I'm used to. I feel like I prefer Brazilian food. It tastes much better.” Participants in this study often referenced the difference in culinary options in the host environment and how the lack of cuisines from their home countries appeared to be an issue of concern and need for necessary adjustments.

Student employment on campus assisted some of the participants in this study to accelerate their successful transition into the host environment. Work experience on campus caused Luis to transition to a different field of study from his original major. He shared the following:

Oohh. Well, when I came here, uhm, I really liked science and math back in high school, and I like won science fairs. I mean, they were not as advanced as American science fairs. But I still like, I really like this. So, I was going for engineering. And if you see my I-20, it still says engineer. But, uhm, I found a scholarship to study at another place. And they have a translation major. And I’m like, well, that’s what after my whole life I translated for people and I really like it. And like, when I was writing the essay for my personal statement, it felt like, yeah, I feel so much more comfortable, because I have so much more experience with this. And then I got a job at the Center for International Education and interacting with so many people, and becoming a global citizen, you know (chuckle). I felt like, uhm, this is what I feel like I want to do. So now, I am applying to another school to transfer and study to become like uh…there’s a big university in Honduras. And, I would like to be [employed at] the Center for International Education
there. So like Hondurans go to places everywhere, but like it’s not so encouraged that people come to Honduras.

Paulo, Stefan, and Luis mentioned that having the ability to work on campus gave them the opportunity to immerse themselves in the host environment. Over time, it proved to lesson cultural adjustment issues and was transformative enough for Luis to switch his college major.

Khadijah, coming from a conservative West African Muslim culture, had to make the transition from men making decisions for her in Liberia to making decisions on her own while adjusting to the host environment in the United States. She shared the following:

Okay. I think I'm more independent. If I was going to stay in Africa, I was never going to live for my own, because women cannot live on their own. Yeah, I can take care of myself now. And I was never going to be able to live on my own. And I was living my first time there at home, I have to go live with my sister. And then I was scared to death when my auntie kicked me out of the house. I was scared to death. How am I going to do this? How am I going to live on my own?

Khadijah’s experience of living with her relative and being told to leave was a mortifying experience and resulted in great psychological distress for her. In my field observation notes, Khadijah’s eye contact became less engaging and she had a greater tendency to place her hands in her sweater when discussing very stressful topics.

Family ties, traditions, and the legal inability to visit her home country because of stringent student visa rules were emotionally painful for Abril. When Abril was able to regain her composure after tearing up for some time, she explained the difficulties of not seeing family members in years:

Thank you (for the tissue). And after two years of being with the program my whole family wanted to give me the opportunity to stay in the states, and go back to school, so I changed my status from J-1 to F-1. I then go back to Columbia, I did it from here, which it doesn't allow me to go back and forth to my country. I decided to do that because I didn't want to take the risk of not getting my visa or my status, and while I did it right
now I am just going to my human services, my associates, not sure if I want to stay for my Bachelors, because it has been five years since I have seen my family and they haven't been able to come and visit. So yeah, it's kind of hard stuff, and still trying to make that decisions because they want ... they really want me to keep studying. They say that I have skills to work with people, but it's hard. It is hard when you don't have your family.

Being homesick and having limited family visitations back to the home country proved to be stressful issues for Abril and other participants.

For Stefan, feeling included and treated in a manner equal to domestic students on campus was a transition issue that he had not fully comprehended at the outset of his experience on campus. Stefan explained the following:

Yeah, that's probably very related. Just being an international student is one of the disadvantages sometimes. You have certain disadvantages that some students don't have. I mean I understand we don't have the same ... international students shouldn't have the same ... excuse me ... the same rights as someone who was born here or who has citizenship, because it's still like we are just studying here for now. We're not here for "working". I work, too, in the college. And still I think one of the biggest challenges is just being an international student, feeling like there's some parts sometimes where you feel excluded because you feel like hey, I've been living here for a while. Why is being an international student still such a huge deal. Why do people ask me about it? Am I not included or why do I feel excluded? And I think that's one of the hardest parts, especially if you lived here for a long time already. Just feeling this ... I mean it's still special, you have so much to talk about, so much interesting stuff you can say to other students and people you just meet. But still, sometimes there are those wishes that hey, just take me as a normal, regular person. But, yeah, there and I want to accept it.

The feeling of inclusion in the fabric in the campus environment appeared to be a concern with some of the participants. The lack of feeling included had the net effect of feeling alienated and in some cases slowed adjustments to the host environment.

After completing a year as a student in his community college, Stefan felt more included and engaged due to his ability to acquire employment on campus. Stefan stated:

I love it here, it's such a great opportunity. I found a job as a student ambassador here now. I worked my way up to lead ambassador. I work off campus. I help the local community. I'm a social media intern at the small business and development center right
across the street. I help small businesses in Illinois to succeed. It's just amazing, just being connected to Illinois is just amazing.

After obtaining employment, Stefan indicated a greater sense of inclusion in the host environment, which as a result accelerated his transition into the host environment.

Asagai was perplexed by the informality of the community college environment in the United States compared to colleges in Nigeria. He described initial experiences from his first semester on campus and his transitions:

The first week was kind of rushed. I was like, "What's going on?" I had problems adapting to the system. The general stuff was okay, but how casual it was, I was like, "Wow." That was surprising to me, because usually ... most of the colleges back home were more formal. You had the way you had to dress. You had the way you had to act. Here, it's more that you can do whatever you want to, but not anything illegal. Back home, you could do [il] legal [punishable if caught] stuff, but they don't want it on their campus. It was more orderly, I'd say.

Despite Asagai’s initial adjustment difficulties to the host environment, he gradually accepted the informal norms of dress on his campus environment.

On the other hand, Josefina found her transition into the host environment to be much more seamless compared to Asagai. Josefina stated:

The first day was nice and the first week was very nice because you start to connect with people, you know the people. I saw these people yesterday or Monday. I'm like I was going to see these people; you feel more familiarized with the people. You feel that you can find and manage resources. The people helped me to find different resources; they give a lot of information with the different departments. Many things I have, I had to do every day for this time. I feel very comfortable.

Josefina’s initial adjustment issues were less problematic due to her willingness to connect with multiple classmates and others from the outset.

Most of the participants in this study had varying degrees of adjustment and transition issues in their host environments soon after arrival. Some of the participants remarked about transportation and weather adjustment issues while others believed that some student affairs
personnel in their host environment initially could have been more responsive to their concerns. Most of the participants experienced adjustment challenges in their first semester after arrival, but such challenges were eventually mitigated. Language barriers appeared to be an impediment and a source of great transitional stress.

Summary

Participants in this study described complications related to living arrangements, inadequate or inconvenient public transportation from their residential quarters to the campus, and language barriers. The challenges served as sources of frustration, anxiety, alienation, and some cultural dissonance. However, most participants believed that the onboarding program (orientation) provided useful information that aided their acclimation. The next section focuses on the participants’ experiences in the college classroom.

Learning and Classroom Environment

The pursuit of higher education is assumed to be the primary reason why F-1 international students choose to study in the United States. Based on this assumption, the classroom environment should provide insights regarding how participants of this study transitioned into the host environment. The participants in this study had varied transition experiences, from seamless to difficult, adjustments in the precredit and credit classroom environments.

Swimming into the Mainstream: From E.S.L. to Credit Courses

E.S.L./E.L.L. (English as a Second Language/English Language Learning) and comparable precredit courses are an integral part of services offered at community colleges in the United States. English language training programs provide community education to vulnerable or
underserved populations in the community who often have no desire to pursue higher education, including those lacking in formal secondary education. E.S.L./E.L.L. is a critical bridge for F-1 international students to better transition into credit or transfer courses for the purpose of achieving academic success.

Khadijah explained that her transition into the host environment, particularly the community college classroom focused on college credit, was not as seamless as she had anticipated. Khadijah was one of the several participants in this study who began their first semester enrolled only in E.S.L./E.L.L. courses. Khadijah recounted her experience in the classroom:

Because when I come here, the four-year goal start with actually planning to receive certification. Spend two semesters in ELL classes, which turn into a three semester. And I have to drop one semester because of medical reasons.

Khadijah’s transition issues were complicated because she needed to successfully complete required E.S.L. classes, a time commitment greater than originally anticipated. For Khadijah, the delay appeared to set her on a path of frequent disappointments and alienation in the host environment.

As previously stated, many of the participants in this study enrolled in courses designed for students who are not native English speakers, particularly E.S.L. courses. The first-semester E.S.L. courses proved to be vital for Abril as she transitioned to degree-seeking courses her second semester. Abril recalled her first day in E.S.L.:

And then for my first day of class I went for my ESL and I remember my first class was grammar. I was really nervous, but I was ready. I was ready and I was like, as I said, I might not get everything what the professor is going to say but I'll try to do my best, and I knew I was not going to be the only who does not speak the language, so that's going to give me more strength. It was really good actually the first day of class I met another Latin girl from Mexico, so yeah, it was really good. It was really good. I enjoyed it. And then after that I was so excited.
Unlike Khadijah who had to complete at least three semesters of E.S.L. before enrolling in college-level courses, Abril was able to transition after her first semester, which made for a less frustrating transition for her.

Since English language proficiency was an issue for most of the participants in this study, Bilal was no exception. Prior to his arrival at the community college where he was enrolled, Bilal explained the English language education he received in Syria prior to arrival. Bilal stated:

In Syria, they teach us English from the beginning, but as a second language, but because I was in the French school, it was my third language. So, I was terrible at listening and speaking. And when I was first here, it was really hard for me to understand what people are talking about, because they were talking fast, and it was really difficult.

Despite Bilal’s confidence in his English language writing and grammar prior to arrival in the United States, conversational English was a challenge for him during his first semester on campus.

Bilal’s counselor suggested that he should spend his first semester taking E.S.L. courses before moving into for-credit courses. Instead, Bilal opted to take mostly for-credit courses his first semester, despite potential English language impediments. Bilal explained his experience in an English composition course:

(My counselor) made me ... I thought it was going to be a hard semester, especially because my English was terrible, I didn't ... yeah. The English class, first day, was really good. The teacher, as I told you about, the Chinese teacher. It was in the summer, so the classes were a little bit smaller, and he made us introduce ourselves and, yeah. The first day was like, we had conversations between students, a lot of stuff, and it was really interesting.

Unlike most participants in this study, Bilal decided to bypass E.S.L. and to instead begin taking college-credit courses his first semester after arrival. Bilal’s difficulties with conversational English appeared to make his transition somewhat difficult in the host environment at the outset.
However, Bilal managed to persevere and struggled in his college-level courses but was able to succeed academically after completing his first semester.

Although participants in this study had varied levels of English language fluency upon arrival in the United States, E.S.L./E.L.L. proved to be beneficial for the participants who enrolled. Those respective participants gained insights into their host environment and also improved their conversational English prior to enrollment in credit courses. Mastering the pronunciation of English words or better understanding American idioms are just some of the many linguistic tools necessary for F-1 international students to succeed in degree-seeking programs. However, many participants in this study indicated that their improved English-language skills still did not adequately prepare them for full engagement in the college-level courses.

**How Do I Fit In? The Community College Classroom**

The culture and habits within American classrooms were striking for many of the participants in this study. Some of the participants described their American classroom experience as less formal compared to the classroom experiences in their countries of origin. Some participants emulated others in the American classroom while others found some classroom habits from their native country to be of greater comfort.

Abril enrolled in taking degree-seeking courses in her second semester. In these classes, she found a wide range of ages of fellow students, and she noted the casual nature of traditional-age students. Abril stated the following about her experience:

I have had the opportunity to study with really young freshman students, and with people who are in their 30s, 40s, more mature people, and the environment is totally different, as I said. So, when I take those classes in the morning that's why I said kids come to class in their PJs, and you can tell that they are not even in the mood for learning, but then is the opposite. When I take my classes at nighttime people are coming from their jobs, still
they have a long day you can see their ... how is this word. They are ... you can see that they are enjoying the class, and they're eager to learn.

Similar to other participants, Abril found the American classroom environment to be very casual compared to her country of origin in Columbia. Abril noticed a difference between morning students and evening students regarding dress. Thus, she indicated that she preferred evening courses with more mature (older) students whom she perceived as more “eager to learn.”

Abril was disappointed by traditional-age American students’ lack of appreciation regarding the opportunities afforded to them, from their privileged backgrounds to their cultural capital. Such opportunities are limited in her South American country due to limited financial resources. Abril stated:

It is kind of weird because most of those kids have great opportunities and they don't take advantage of that. Where I was, I had to work so hard for going to college, they never had the money for doing that, but most of these kids they do. But they just come in and just have fun, they are just going around doing nothing, they just come to class and don't pay attention, they are always so high [her perception of possible narcotic use] and they're like whoa, wow. Okay, but it is what it is, you know?

Abril interpreted the behavior of many of the traditional-age students not only as disrespectful but also as wasting opportunities others, including herself, worked hard achieve. Overall, several participants in this study remarked about how culturally disturbing it was that American students appeared to have little respect for their teachers and do not appreciate the opportunities afforded them.

Gloria concurred that traditional-age American students in the community college classroom setting have a casual attitude about their education. She also believed that some of their behavior was disrespectful to the professor based on her South American classroom traditions and experiences. She stated the following:
I was trying to understand why they do that [arrive late to class]. Or when the class was done, everybody run away. I'm always the last one to get out of the classroom. Always. I take my time, I talk to professors, I always thank the professor. Here, nobody cares. Oh, that's something rude for us if you don't say hello, if you don't say goodbye, if you don't give thanks, it's rude for us. Here, nobody cares. You're done. I always do that. I like to talk to the professor. Actually, we build a better relationship, a closer relationship with professors and teachers because we see them as the authority and the person who knows and who wants to teach us. Here it's something more automatic, I don't know how they view the professors. It's like there's more, I mean for instance we are not allowed to eat in the classroom. We are not allowed to text or talk, it's more strict in that way. Even sleep, taking a nap during the class, we don't feel comfortable because everybody is going to make fun of us. Here, when I see people, for instance I'm taking chemistry. A lot of people fall asleep because it's quite boring. The tone of the professor is the same.

Gloria also experienced the same classroom behavior as Abril as it relates to the informality of American classroom etiquette. Like Abril, Gloria also suggested that professors were affected by the lack of enthusiasm displayed by domestic students from her observation.

In comparing the American community college classroom culture and the classroom culture in Venezuela, Josefina suggested that the classroom culture was much more formal in Venezuela. Gloria remarked:

My typical classroom day is normal. The teacher arrive to classes, they don't say good morning, just start to explain the classes. The students if they have a question, they just ask the question. They're totally different in my country. When the teacher arrives to the classroom, the teachers say good morning, the students answer good morning. Do you have any question? You raise your hand and you can ask your question when the teacher give you the permission to talk. If they have any question, they ask the question and the teacher explains the classes. If they have any question, they can understand the response from the teacher to explain again.

Most participants in this study indicated that they were surprised by the lack of formality or lack of warmth in the American college classroom. However, they adjusted accordingly over time. Participants offered their similarities and differences between the American college classroom environment and the classroom environment in their home countries, and the differences appeared to be emphasized more than the similarities.
Participants in this study indubitably experienced adjustments to the casual nature of American college classrooms compared to classrooms of their home country. They described disturbing aspects of students sleeping or eating in class and noted the perceived lack of respect for the professors. The participants gradually accepted the experience as part of the etiquette of the American college classroom.

**Finding My Voice: Engagement in the American College Classroom**

Engagement in the classroom can be a daunting and stressful experience for all students. However, the stress and anxiety seemed particularly acute for those whose native language is not English and were expected to engage in the standard discourse of the classroom setting. Making the transformation from a passive learner to active learner in the classroom did not come easy for many participants in this study.

Initially, Gloria indicated that she lacked the confidence to engage in the classroom. This hesitancy changed over time because of her English language fluency and her personality. Gloria was very self-conscious about not asking questions and sometimes she was embarrassed by her lack of confidence. In her culturally stressful desire to participate, Gloria shared:

> We start and the professor starts explaining something, the topic. If I have questions, I actually sometimes in some classes I hesitate to ask because I don't know if this is going to be a silly question. I do that everywhere. It's not here in the States, I've done that in Bogota. I like to be very energetic and participate in class and speak and do this and do that. Some days I like more quiet. Most of the times I wait until the end and I approach the professor and I ask him in person, "What do you mean?" I write down my questions and I'm like, "Could you tell me this?"

Gloria’s reluctance to engage was a common experience for many participants in this study, mostly because of their perceived lack of conversational English language fluency. Gloria suggested that her lack of consistent classroom engagement may also be partially
due to her reserved personality. However, she developed coping strategies such as asking her questions after class and writing them down. Overall, most participants indicated that engaging in the classroom discourse was very intimidating.

Josefina’s transition to the American community college classroom was a mixed experience. In one class, Josefina’s speech professor assured her that her accent and lack of total fluency in the English language would be factored without penalty into grading her. However, students in the classroom were not very patient with her accent. Due to the lack of patience by fellow students, Josefina stated:

Basically, in my classroom when we have to participate in group projects to make any assignment, to complete an assignment sometime was a little difficult in the first time. The students, they don't know you're international student. They know but they don't have like an open mind to understand the language barriers. They don't try to understand you. How can I explain this? Sometimes you feel intimidated because they are American, they speak the native language and you're not American. My accent is totally different and they feel my gosh. It's a challenge for me; it makes me feel like I don't want to participate.

Josefina’s anxiety about how domestic students perceived her due to her accent was a constant point of concern, which marginalized her ability to engage to her satisfaction.

For participants in this study, engaging native students in the classroom, from discussions to group projects, was a definite stressor and a source of classroom dissonance.

While experiences with other domestic students were challenging for Josefina, she found her speech class professor to be very supportive. She stated:

He gave me guidance in the campus, and I feel comfortable because even though I met with different student, native students, I didn't feel like I am a different person. I felt a part of the group. The teacher, my first teacher was in the Speech Department. His name is (name withheld). He taught me my first day in class. It was speech classes. It was so difficult. He told me I will evaluate you not for your language; I will evaluate you for the content of your speech. He made me calm probably; he made me feel comfortable.
Josefina’s speech professor’s willingness to be sensitive and accommodating about her conversational English language challenges were major destressors for her. Participants in this study often remarked that their professors were not always accommodating to them regarding their perceived lack of conversational English language fluency, which was an alienating experience for many of the participants.

Luis decided to do some advance exploration online to get a better sense of American collegiate classroom culture. Also, Luis had prior experience with the American classroom environment since he had many American teachers at his high school in Honduras. Luis shared his experience:

When uhm, I also came to (name of institution withheld) Center for International Education web page, and it said like, go to this website to see what an American classroom is like. It said like, here in America, students can actually participate. And I said, “Well that’s no different because in Honduras I participate too.” But in other countries, maybe students are supposed to take notes and be respectful and not like being engaged and stuff. But I think that, it might be because Honduras is so close to the U.S. and we got some cultural similar already.

Because of American teachers at his high school in Honduras, Luis anticipated a seamless transition into the American college classroom.

When Luis had his first American collegiate classroom experience, his experience was not as seamless as anticipated. Luis shared his earliest American classroom experience:

Like last time I was taking Calculus, I was lost in class, like most of the time I didn’t know what was going on. Like, just stare at the board and, I like, “I really don’t understand this.” And my host parents asked me, “is it because he had an accent?”, like my professor? And I’m like, “I don’t think so.” I can understand what he’s saying, but then I like had to go to my house and read the book again and try to understand and watch the YouTube videos that explain the material again, do homework and then repeat the cycle. So, I felt like I’m just coming to his class just to see if he leaves homework, because I’m not understanding.
Luis’s classroom experience with his calculus class engendered great stress and confusion, which did not result in the outcome he desired. Luis’s struggle was probably a combination of a lack of English language confidence and a challenging content area.

Several of the participants asserted that their lack of English language confidence in the classroom served as a major source of classroom dissonance and a source of stress. Some participants were alienated from classroom content while others felt disconnected from teachers and domestic students. Engagement in classroom discourse for participants was intimidating and stress inducing because they lacked English language fluency compared to domestic English speakers. Participants realized that academic success required transitioning from passive learning to active learning as quickly as possible. However, the transition did not come easy.

How Can I Succeed in this Class? Meeting Professors’ Expectations

Academic success is a mystery for students at the beginning of every class, even for domestic students studying in their own country. If you are not a domestic student and you have language challenges, the ability to demystify teacher expectations is a complicated puzzle to solve. The following paragraphs provide examples of the disconnections experienced by participants.

After Khadijah completed E.S.L./E.L.L. courses, her classroom transition challenges continued at the outset of enrolling in the for-credit nursing courses at her community college.

Khadijah shared:

One of the challenges was like ... I took a CNA class one time, and I was going through a really bad financial crisis at the time, and I really want to be a nurse. So that was the beginning of me being a nurse. And that was the first nursing class that's not a basic nursing class. It's just like, "I'm going to deal with people." I had to drop the class. And I have to take the class again, so I think if I was going to get my CNA certificate. I took the
test, and it said I passed one place. I got a 65 on two of the portions of the test, so it considered fail. So, I feel like I never achieved what I really wanted. So, I feel like I never get what I really want from (name of institution withheld). What I really want to achieve.

Khadijah experienced great anguish in her first college-credit classroom experience. She believed the nursing teacher adhered to the strict standards set for the nursing program, and the teacher did not have empathy for Khadijah’s personal issues. These personal issues were also compounded by Khadijah becoming homeless and lacking the financial resources to secure housing. The stress of the experience caused her to seek mental health counseling. In Khadijah’s assessment of her classroom challenges and adjustment issues, she exclaimed that her education in Liberia did not properly prepare her for a seamless transition into the American community college classroom environment.

Abril was the only participant who mentioned having experience taking an online course. She found the expectations to be rigid and not very conducive for F-1 international students. In her experience, Abril explained:

I think that some professors aren’t aware that we are international, and our language is not 100% perfect, and that we still struggle following instructions, especially with online classes because we as international students have the opportunity to take one online class, and those are the classes that I hate but I always try to take one. But they are so strict. They are so strict, and I think they should understand that they are working for most of the students are internationally in this college, from what I heard, and should be able to be more conscious about that, you know?

Although Abril was the only participant who mentioned taking an online course, the course expectations and lack of understanding by her teacher left her confused and frustrated. Abril exclaimed that her experience with classroom challenges in an online class was difficult partially due to the lack of robust feedback.
Bilal enrolled in a speech class in his first semester at the community college. He explained that he had no previous experience with public speaking in the classroom or outside of the classroom. He described how the adjustment to the course expectations were daunting for him:

Just, here, they tell you, ’Give us a speech about ...’ When I took speech class here, they wanted us to talk about stuff that, just to make a speech about stuff that we don't know, just to show that we can give a speech. In Syria, we didn't have any speech classes. We didn't know how to give presentations. We didn't have this experience, and that was really bad.

Some of Bilal’s classroom struggles were due to lack of experience with public speaking. These struggles were compounded by unclear directions from his faculty member.

Asagai’s experience in the American community college classroom was somewhat perplexing to him due to the lack of classroom engagement by domestic students. Asagai shared his observations when he stated:

Okay. My typical day would be on this campus, come to class, go to class, learn. I'm supposed to learn, but sometimes I just don't feel like talking in class because it's unresponsive. Students don't want to talk, and that makes me not want to talk, because when I feel the mood is so down, most of the time ... It's like people don't want to be here. People just want, "I want to go to work. I'm just stepping in from work. I'm tired." And that's, for me, it's like a setback. I can't complain, but that's what my typical day is like. After class, go to the tutoring center, or I'm at the gym. I'm usually at the gym or at the library doing something and that's it.

Asagai indicated that the attitudes of his classmates influenced his attitude and participation in class. He wanted and expected a more engaged and active learning environment, but this was not the case. Whereas most participants remarked that the active learning format was a difficult transition for them, Asagai was surprised by the lack of engagement displayed by domestic students in the host environment. Despite the lack of classroom engagement Asagai experienced, he persevered academically due to his frequent use of tutorial services and library services.
Asagai believed that his professors in the community college classroom had not embraced social media to the same degree as their students. Asagai exclaimed that the inclusion of social media in the classroom discourse can lead to greater classroom engagement and academic success. Asagai stated:

Typical classroom is professor and students, and the students are more ... We have feedbacks here and there. The classroom setting is more informal. I feel like the professors who actually get to relate to ... because these are different ages. Most times, the professors are older than the average age of the students, in most cases. Sometimes, professors don't want to look into the ways of the way people learn now, like through the use of social media and all that stuff. Some professors do, some don't. I would say professors should be more open to new ways.

Asagai suggested that the incorporation of social media could enhance the motivation and engagement of him and other students in the host environment. Asagai had expected dynamic, active learning when he arrived in the United States.

Participants in this study suggested that American professors tend to be less accountable about a student’s success or failure compared to their home country. Some participants remarked that there was less of a formal student cohort experience, which made it more difficult for participants to engage in collaborative learning. Emphasis on individual responsibility to comply with course expectations required some adjustments for certain participants in this study. Overall, adjusting to the expectations of American classrooms was one of many transitions the participants needed to make to achieve academic success.

The Road to Academic Success: Navigating to the Pathways for Success

Some participants stated that professors described initial expectations of their classes in cryptic terms. Eventually participants began to overcome these and other barriers by availing themselves of resources necessary for academic success. Tutoring, help from academic advisors,
and other campus services allowed participants to ultimately thrive in their goal of achieving academic success. Some participants remarked that choosing courses and teachers to their liking is not much of an option in their native countries. Participants noted that the American collegiate system allows students to choose professors who can cater to their learning styles. Participants learned to appreciate the freedom and options of course offerings and myriad fields of study in the American collegiate environment.

Josefina indicated that by her second semester her classroom transition issues improved, especially as she became acclimated to resources available for group projects. Josefina stated:

If you have to work in a group, you make an agreement to meet after classes in the library because the campus offers many facilities. They give you an opportunity to work in your project on the class assignment in the campus without going out of the campus to another place. The campus institution offers many spaces, many rooms in the library, in the student learning center where the student can meet to finish any assignment that they have.

Josefina over time recognized the benefits of physical resources that students could use for collaborative learning activities. The availability of these resources eased her transition into the American classroom culture.

Padma shared that she left India to continue her education in the United States in the field of allied health. She indicated that opportunities for continuing education in the allied health field were not available to her in India. For Padma, a nontraditional student in her 60s, she indicated that she has little in common with most of her classroom peers. However, she was able to establish a great rapport with her professors. She stated:

My classroom experiences have been very good. I always interact with the faculty or the instructor. Asking questions, or when they ask question, to put my answer. Probably sometimes, some people find it difficult to follow my accents. They may ask me to come back [repeat questions or answers], but for that nothing else. My classroom experiences are awesome. I don't usually miss a single class. Usually, unless until it is warranted, are out of town.
Padma’s focus on her instructors and not her peers seemed to be of no concern to her in making the transition to the host environment. Due to Padma’s age and maturity, “fitting in” was not her goal as an F-1 international student.

Padma’s experiences in the host environment and the opinions people had about her did not have a negative impact in keeping her focus on her degree ambitions. She discussed:

Sometimes I don't mix with the kind of people probably, I don't know. Probably whatever these people think as joke or whatever it is, it may not be to me. It makes me a little bit reserved. Not mixing from the heart. Whatever is necessary. Like in the college, whenever we are together, we had to have a group assignment, we will have meetings. Beyond that I'm not exposed [to overt negative perceptions from peers].

Again, Padma’s desire to cultivate friendships with fellow classmates was never a priority, and Padma had a very seamless transition into the host environment because of her singular interest in studying allied health.

Bilal accelerated his transition and adjustment into the American classroom environment by becoming more engaged than many of the domestic students. By asking pertinent questions in class and taking the time to master the content, Bilal began to realize the success of his perseverance. Bilal stated:

It's helpful to see where the students don't know where they make mistakes in front of the whole class. So, it kind of made me more confident in a class setting, whereas here, I came here ... The first semester when I came here, it was ... I took statistics and English 101. It's just, statistics class, the teacher just explains the stuff, and I noticed many students, a lot of stuff they don't understand, and they never asked about it, although the teacher was like, do you have questions? And whenever I had a question, I just raised my hand and ask it, because that's how I'm used to. I have to go home knowing every single thing in the lecture.

Bilal decided to be very engaging in classroom discourse as a deliberate decision to embrace acculturative norms in the host environment. This decision and resultant actions accelerated his adjustments and quickly mitigated his potential classroom challenges.
Because Bilal was able to distinguish himself academically after a successful first semester, he was able to enroll in Honors courses. Bilal explained the courses most critical for his major as a pre-medicine student, in which he stated the following:

So, I took Chemistry 121 as an honor [Honors course]. In this college, they have an honor program and they have special classes for honors. And I loved these classes because it was a small class, it was 10 or 15 students. It was a really small class, it was a challenging class, that they make you ... The whole purpose of the class, to make you think. And because it was a small class, I found that students were more comfortable to ask and engage in the class.

The opportunity to enroll in Honors courses gave Bilal greater confidence and motivation to succeed in the host environment. As a result, his adjustments to the host environment after the first semester became more evident from his account.

Ling mentioned that she had to quickly adjust to different teaching styles and approaches to mastering content in the host environment. In China, Ling mentioned that much of subject mastery involves lectures with little discourse, rather memorizing content and testing a student’s mastery of that subject. According to Ling, in the American college classroom a greater emphasis is placed on critical analysis, classroom discourse, and critical reflection. Ling shared:

Over here, it's more like to make you think more and read more and to write what you feel, which is more hard and it's kind of hard for me to constantly reading and understand the meanings, because if there's a very long page and they finish on the page and I know what he’s talking about. When I finish the second page, I was like “What is the first page talk about?” That took me a really long time to get used to it.

Although Ling needed to initially adjust to the American classroom, the adjustment was lessoned as she eventually became more accustomed to active learning in the classroom.

Unlike Ling’s initial struggles described above, Paulo quickly embraced and thrived in the constant discourse in the American community college classroom. Paulo shared the following:
The professor will say, “we are going to do research about this, and then we're going to discuss in class next class.” And that, I loved that format. So, everyone was talking all the time, so there was always discussion and if someone thought that someone was wrong, say, "I disagree with them because of this, this and this." And definitely, I like about that, doing that thing.

Most of the participants were not used to active learning; however, Paulo, like Bilal, also decided to fully embrace active learning at the outset and consequently made the adjustment beyond classroom dissonance in a more productive manner.

Paulo described his transition into the American community college classroom as easy. The positive experiences inspired him to be very engaging with professors outside of the classroom, especially during office hours. Paulo stated:

A group of students that are very excited about what they're studying, and I'd say almost all, if not all, of the professors here are always really helpful. Always open to questions and if you need any help or assistance, stop by the office hours, they can help out. After my first semester, I've been more active in class, talking a lot more, answering questions. One thing I learned here that I didn't know back in Brazil is professors love when someone actually answers the questions that they ask in class, instead of everyone just quiet and staring at them. So, I've been trying to do that, I guess, creating a more active environment in class and discuss more, which is cool. I always like that.

Paulo’s discovery of engaging professors outside of the classroom allowed him to build a rapport and connection that enabled him to transition to active learning in ways not realized, even in his native Brazil.

Prior to Paulo’s arrival to the United States, he had developed impressions of the American classroom based on movies and discussions with friends in Brazil. He believed that American college classrooms often have 200 students or more. However, Paulo was pleasantly surprised that American community college classrooms do not have large class sizes. Paulo stated:

My class sizes have been small, typically 20, 25, which is cool… I didn't think it would be ... I thought the classes would be a lot bigger, like 200 students per class or something.
Not small classes. I like small classes better, so that’s something I thought would be different. And, just college life here is different and having movies and TV shows and everything showing college life, it’s all different than here, I guess.

Paulo’s preconceived impressions about the American college classroom based on popular media did not comport with what he experienced after arrival. Because of smaller class sizes at community colleges, Paulo was able to comfortably adjust, probably more rapidly than what he might have experienced in large classrooms of major universities.

Over time, especially after completing one semester at their community colleges, most participants in this study began to feel more comfortable in their ability to thrive academically in the classroom despite occasional setbacks. Participants in this study were able to ameliorate some of their classroom challenges by embracing the flexibility of choosing courses and experiencing teachers who catered to their style of learning and/or content interest. Participants in this study over time became confident in their ability to navigate the host environment and direct themselves to resources critical for their academic adjustment and success.

Summary

Most of the participants in this study experienced challenges, anxiety, and transition issues to the American classroom environment and American college classroom culture. Some of the students remarked about adjusting to the informal (if not sometimes casual) nature of the American college classroom. Some participants found American student behavior in the American college classroom to be rude and disrespectful while other participants were annoyed by the lack of patience American students had with the international students’ accents. Also, many of the participants initially felt lost and isolated regarding the course content and the speed of the classroom discourse. Over time, most of the participants overcame their classroom
dissonance and isolation due to their respective classroom experiences. The next section will focus on experiences outside of the college classroom on and off campus, with involvement in structured activities as an example.

**Social Supports, Adjustments, and Challenges: Co-Curricular Experiences Outside of the Classroom**

Participants in this study participated in extra-curricular experiences both on campus and off campus. These extra-curricular experiences by the participants underscored different levels of challenges and adjustments to the host environment. Many of the participants in this study experienced numerous informal cultural challenges and triumphs outside of the classroom.

**What Do I Do After Class? Social/Student Life**

Student life outside of the classroom can be a challenge for some but a haven for others. Isolation can be an issue for students trying to adjust to a host environment. However, involvement in structured activities and organizations proved to be beneficial for most of the participants in this study.

Luis found his formal extra-curricular experiences on campus to be very meaningful in his transition into the host environment. Many of the participants in this study found the international club on campus to be a great environment for F-1 international students to bond and exchange stories about their lived experiences in the host environment. Luis stated:

Yeah, um, I went to International Club last semester. And, this semester can’t because I have class, but I really liked it because I go to talk to my friends with all the international students who were going through the same thing. So, that was nice. And um, this semester, I joined the Environmental Club, but I haven’t starting attending yet.
Luis and other participants cited their international clubs as a vehicle to relieve stress from the pressures of the classroom environment and an opportunity to have a proverbial safe space to share their common experiences of adjustment challenges and new coping skills.

For Ling, becoming engaged on campus outside of the classroom accelerated her ability to adjust to the host environment, from the International Club to other campus activities. Ling stated:

> Outside the classroom, for the club, they have a lot of events. I will need to say bake sale because every clubs have bake sales a lot…Yeah and they have talent show and different dramas. I remember in the Spring, they have a Chinese drama show.

For Ling, her international club not only provided outlets for club activities but also structured activities related to her culture as a Chinese national. These outlets allowed Ling and others to better transition to the host environment by having activities with strong cultural ties.

Additionally, Ling mentioned the variety of extra-curricular activities available for F-1 international students and other students on her community college campus, which were far more compared to the activities available for her college peers back in China, according to Ling. Ling stated:

> There's a lot of events. In my high school, there's hardly have events. They even have sports meeting and performance, but like (name of institution withheld) they have different clubs. They have karaoke nights from the Latino Alliance, and they have some club like they can sing together, and some club that is International Club where you can meet students from all over the world so you don't feel that lonely. Also, it's just a lot of events going on like International Street and I think it's just like different kinds of society that have a lot of volunteer jobs or works. They have feed starving children, 5k run, and some Girl Wise or something.

The international clubs for Ling and other participants in this study provided many activities for members to learn about each other’s country and associated cultures. The shared experience of
the international clubs offered an outlet to bond with other F-1 international students, immigrant students, and domestic students on campus.

Paulo’s extra-curricular experiences involved the International Club and also his job on campus. These activities accelerated his transition into the host environment. Paulo shared his experience in the following:

I like meeting a lot of people here at (name of institution withheld). There's International Club, so you get to meet people from all around the world, which is really cool. Getting to know other cultures and differences they have there, I thought that was really cool. But also working here, meeting students that are coming here to (name of institution withheld) from just around the region here, but you get to know everyone around here that is really cool, the diversity of thoughts and everything else here at (name of institution withheld) is amazing, it's pretty cool. And it's something that I, like I said, I didn't have there at the high school that I went to. It was mostly local people studying at the same place. Here it's very diverse.

Paulo’s experience as a student worker allowed him to gain better insights into the host environment. He interacted mostly with staff and domestic students in the host environment and he gained insights that other participants did not have the pleasure to experience. Therefore, Paulo was able to adapt to the host environment in ways many participants were not able to experience.

Paulo also prioritized his time away from the classroom by including activities on the weekends that did not always involve academics. Paulo stated:

Yeah. Sundays I usually spend studying at home. Maybe I'll have lunch with my cousins, but I'll usually spend studying at home, doing essays or all the projects that have to be done, usually done during the weekends. Saturday is more of a relax day. Talk to my friends back in Brazil, play video games, go to my cousin's house. Movies, watch movies. I love watching movies. Friday nights or Saturdays. I have other friends here from Brazil as well, so usually Friday nights, we go out to the pub or something around here.

The less structured activities off campus allowed Paulo to also adjust to the host environment by spending time with cousins and fellow Brazilians in the community at pubs and other
establishments. These outlets off campus did not result in the feelings of alienation outside of the campus environment for Paulo.

Abril’s experience on campus was very much enriched because of her involvement with the International Club. Due to her experiences in the club, Abril stated:

At this college. That I have met too many people from different countries, and I have learned about too many cultures, and I think that is a great opportunity. Yeah. I think that's the most valuable thing of being in this campus, in this college, that you have the opportunity to meet people from all over the world, it's great. It's just great. You have the opportunity to ask about their culture, see the differences, and it's great. I like that.

For Abril, her international club provided a sense of identity and connectedness to the host environment through the diverse nationalities of people with whom she was able to exchange common experiences. For Abril, it is an opportunity to bond, which lessens adjustment issues over time.

Khadijah similarly spoke in a gratifying way about her experiences in the International Club on campus as one her highlights outside of the classroom. She shared:

At the meetings, (the club advisor’s name withheld) will make you speak in your language and somebody else will interpret what you are saying for fun. So, it was fun. It was just like a home…American students started putting in [attending meetings] and started helping, and they started falling in love. Because the guys international, they're cute guys. So, they started falling in love with the cute guys. And some of the girls started falling in love with the American students. So, it was fun. They was having vacation. So, a student that was not even international student, they came here as a resident, they was almost international student too. They started considering themselves international student.

Khadijah intimated that her interactions with American students in her international club gave her a better sense of the host environment compared to the college classroom setting. The interactions with American students in the club allowed Khadijah opportunities to better adjust to the host environment over time.
For Stefan, he exclaimed that only associating with F-1 international students in the International Club does not help one to overcome cultural challenges or language barriers. Interacting with domestic students was an experience he also sought in the host environment almost at the beginning of his collegiate experience. Although the International Club was emphasized at the student onboarding orientation, Stefan was determined to go beyond the silo of only associating with F-1 international students. Stefan also suggested that other F-1 international students should do the same. Stefan stated:

I have a pretty good knowledge about the college itself. I can explain to you a lot about it. And I know it's a very ... the information is a lot that students will get the first orientation, especially probably for international students. And they might have some questions. I think their biggest concern is always meeting new people, not being by themselves. And I think putting the main focus and actually trying to get them to meet other students would be a great help. I mean sure they helped us getting into clubs and everything, but just getting connected to other international students and also American students. Basically, students in general: meeting new people, making friends, very important.

For Stefan, he strongly felt that F-1 international students need to feel uncomfortable and step out of their proverbial cultural safe spaces to fully immerse themselves in the host environment. By doing so, Stefan believed that true transformation can be achieved.

Despite Asagai’s involvement in the International Club on campus, he suggested that his institution did not do enough to help F-1 international students in their transition into the host environment. Asagai shared:

Its people are left alone, like you have people who are alone too much. You don't have that support. You have cultural differences, you have language differences, and most times you're going to talk to the people that share those culture and the language. There's no way, like we have with mix. You know, they had these events. No one wants to go to that event. We have Chinese, this day. Like, "Come on, now." Like, the way (name of institution withheld) works is just horrible. Like keeping honest with you, the internationals, it's horrible. It is. It's nothing to write home about but they make it seem like it's all great.
Asagai strongly felt that the Office of International Education on his campus should have placed more of the focus on addressing individual student needs, not relying on promoting student clubs to achieve it. Asagai indicated that more direct intervention to address student needs would be a more productive focus for transition purposes, which should address such issues as alienation.

Asagai felt isolated on campus because too many students and college employees on campus were not as helpful or as hospitable as he would have preferred. He shared:

The social level, I find people tend to keep to themselves more. I'm like, "I know you, but you're giving me the looks like I don't know you." Sometimes you feel like, "I don't want to bug you," so you just back off. Back home it was more open. People talk to everyone. Like it was ... Everyone is together. You didn't have no people like in groups and stuff. People were never grouped, we were all one.

For Asagai, his feelings of alienation and a less seamless transition in the host environment had to do with students too clustered in their silos and an unwillingness to truly immerse themselves in the host environment. Asagai also felt that college staff were too unfriendly or not very helpful in their outreach to F-1 international students.

Josefina’s experiences outside of the classroom were much more nuanced compared to Asagai. In general, Josefina believed that those on campus may be curious about one’s background but are usually willing to be helpful. In her experience, Josefina shared:

Yeah. First, I think the people notice you are not American. Many people say, hello, hi, how are you? Where are you from? How long have you been studying here? People try to be friendly. Not everybody but many people try to be friendly. People in the bookstore, in the library and the learning center or student services. They are very patient with international student. They try support you and they try to help you. You're not clear about where you have to go or when or how they explain to you very carefully about how to do that. Our classes, my experience is really nice. It's really, really nice. Maybe because I'm friendly.
Josefina’s encounters with college staff proved them to be much more helpful and approachable compared to Asagai. As a result, college staff played a greater instrumental role in helping Josefina adjust to the host environment.

For Bilal, many of his cultural adjustment impediments on campus involved American gender roles’ to which he was not accustomed growing up in Syria. Bilal stated:

Culture ... I didn't like the ... I found how the relationship between men and women here, it's so different from in Syria. How the society is built is way different. It's really, how to explain it is really hard, because here ... they try to give you the expression that in the Middle East, I don't know about the Middle East but in Syria, for example, how women are oppressed and stuff. Women are not oppressed, just ... I feel like women have less responsibility. They're not oppressed, but they have less responsibility. For example, women here have to get a degree to work to be able to survive. But in Syria, the women study, go to college, get a degree, then they get married and then they have the options.

Bilal discovered in his host environment that American attitudes regarding gender roles on campus took time for him to understand. Bilal’s classroom experiences were much more transformative for him, despite his issues of alienation away from campus.

Also, Bilal encountered additional cultural differences with students on campus as it relates to social outlets, many of which involved the consumption of alcohol. Bilal remarked:

I think it's really hard to be friends with people here if you are, for example, religious or something. When I, many times, if I wanted to be friends with people, people after school wants to go, for example, drink or something. But I don't drink. And it's really silly to go with them and I'm not drinking. So, I think that's one of the challenges, because it made me ... It just made it hard for me to be friends with people, because if you're only friends at school, then that's not really friendship. So, it's kind of really made it hard for me to become sociable if I wanted to with people. Just, how here, it's just like, the culture is just like people always drink. But if you don’t drink, you don’t really have a social life. I think that’s one of the major challenges living here.

Bilal’s desire to understand and better adjust to the host environment did not meet with great success. However, Bilal’s frequent experiences of isolation did not become a high priority for him to ameliorate.
In general, the participants in this study found structured activities outside of the classroom to be most helpful in their transitions and adjustments to the host environment. Overall, the International Club appeared to be instrumental in providing a space for F-1 international students to share experiences, lend support to each other, and plan additional activities with fellow members.

**Where Can I Find Help After Class? Support Systems**

For participants in this study, formal and informal systems for support served as a vital instrument in their transition to the host environment. These support systems mitigated cultural adjustment issues and potential impediments for many of the participants. The International Education Office on campus often served as the initial place to solve problems for participants in this study.

Josefina depended greatly on the Multicultural/International Student Office on campus with her needs. Josefina stated:

Yes. They have a special department to manage international student. (Person’s name withheld) is the person responsible for this department. He gave me all the necessary orientation to be here, what things I could do and what things I couldn't do here. How I have to manage in the campus with every resource I have, what opportunities I have. They gave me all the orientation. What kind of programs the school offers for international student because this is multicultural center.

In the case for Josefina, the International Education Office on her campus served as the first point of contact for any needs that might arise regarding impediments in the host environment, especially if the impediment exacerbated any forms of cultural dissonance.
Khadijah found the language lab and some of her professors to be great support systems, although she still encountered many impediments in her adjustment in the host environment. Of her experiences, Khadijah shared:

I didn't understand anything. And then I started using a dictionary. They have a language lab, and that was also fun, too. I would go to the language lab. And I started using like iPhone, you know? And say the word. So, if it come and go, I say, "Oh, yes I know how to say it the American way.” But I have super good teacher. I'm an international student. I register really late, and all my classes on the same day.

Although Khadijah found the language lab and certain teachers to be very helpful, her desire to achieve academic success in the college classroom had mixed results, which often compounded her adjustment issues.

Stefan exclaimed that outside of his mother, he did not have a strong informal support system. On the issue of support systems, Stefan shared:

I feel that I do way better here than in Germany. Still, I have friends and family in Germany. Do I deserve a good job to later on provide for my own family and for my family as well? And I think the answer should be yes. For me personally, that's what keeps me going here. See that I have success, see that I work a lot, see that I can do something here, and make something here as well. Sure, it's not been easy so far, and can't see my mom all week, and more than a week.

Since Stefan is very close to his mother in Germany, he described her as his main support system, since they communicate with each other as often as possible. Although Stefan may feel alienated from the campus environment at times, the adjustment issues do not seem to be as much of a priority for him to ameliorate in an urgent fashion.

Josefina viewed the ability to work on campus as a major part of her support system both financially and in the convenience of location. Josefina shared the following:

In general, I like everything because first, I'm studying and I'm learning subject in other language that's not my native language. This school gave me the opportunity to work into the campus. For me, this is wonderful. In addition, the way the amount of money that they pay per hour is in comparison with other work out of campus that when I talk with
people, it is competitive salary. Even though, you're working part-time. I think not anywhere you can find this kind of opportunity. I feel really thankful for this great opportunity to work into the campus. In my study, I finish my class immediately; I don't have to go to take my car to go to drive 200 miles to go to another place to work. For me, it's wonderful.

Campus employment helped Josefina acclimate to the host environment. Her campus job offered convenience and income, both of which can lessen the stressors that may lead to alienation and anxiety.

Ling’s experience suggested that the International Education Office played a key role in her adjustment, and faculty support was also an important factor in her transition in the host environment. Ling stated:

Also, in the new cohort, one you can eat together with the group. You will have faculty mentor who if you feel upset about your life you can go and talk to them. I don't really do that, but that's what a faculty mentor do. That's really helpful, especially you go to a foreign country and you continue you study, it's not what you study before, you have someone that you can talk to. Even though you don't know if that person you can trust, but from their responsibilities you can trust them.

Ling surmised that the cohort model with faculty and staff mentorship is a support system that helped to accelerate her transition into the host environment in a less stressful fashion.

Overall, participants in this study believed that the International/Multicultural Office on their respective campuses was vital in navigating the complexities of the host environment. The employees at these offices proved to be helpful to the participants. In addition, most of the participants believed that establishing rapport with faculty and other employees on campus also proved to be helpful in mitigating transition issues.
Why Do These Americans Think This Way About Me? Cultural Differences

Outside of the classroom environment and mostly in informal settings, participants in this study had a variety of cultural experiences. Some of those experiences resulted in a form of culture shock while others in this study viewed it as a way of better adjusting to the host environment. Issues involving micro-aggressions (class, race, and gender) were among some of the cultural differences that engendered confusion.

Luis opined that Americans in general have a different perception about punctuality compared to people in his native country of Honduras. Luis stated:

Yeah, I guess it is a stereotype (chuckle). So... yeah...I felt really bad because it was like part of my culture. That, uh, I didn’t like, uh, I was not so punctual, so I made him (an American acquaintance) wait so much. So, I didn’t feel homesick or anything like, “oh, I want to be in again in Honduras where I can go late everywhere.” But like, that made me think about, like cultural differences.

Luis compared cultural practices between his country of Honduras and the United States and the adjustments to American norms such as punctuality. He learned that these comparisons can create confusion or mistrust if adjustments are not made.

For Abril, a native Columbian, her interactions with the Latinx population in the surrounding community outside of campus became very revealing for her. Those interactions gave her a perspective about her plight being comparable to their plight when it comes to adjustments to American culture. Abril stated:

I now feel that I am at the same level with the Hispanics here, like let's say Mexicans, kind of still struggling with the same things, that for other cultures like let's say girls from Germany, they have no trouble with the language at all even though they speak Deutsch there. And there are other things, they know more about this world, they have conversations that I cannot be part of because I don't have the knowledge of that, but besides that I think I just enjoy learning and listening, how they also have the fortunate to move into the states and prove their education.
Abril’s involvement with the greater Latinx community off campus exposed her to a different point of view to which she would not be privy on campus. Her interactions off campus proved to be a transformative experience and more of a desire to be politically proactive.

Gloria was still adjusting to the constructs of race and class in the United States and how the intersection of the two often serve as impediments for some Americans, particularly race. In Gloria’s commentary about her cultural adjustments in the United States, she stated:

The other thing I think is the discrimination issue is huge here. That, for us, is more than the economy. There's a social status so you can be discriminated because of your social status but not because of your race. It doesn't matter to us.

Gloria’s critical reflection of race and class in the United States and what she experienced in her daily interactions in the host environment reflected elements of culture shock. As a result, she had more of a desire to understand a phenomenon she rarely experienced prior to her arrival in the United States.

In Gloria’s experience growing up in Columbia, she opined that race was rarely an issue. Her Columbian experiences were different than her experience in the U.S. where people were treated differently because of race. Gloria stated:

Here it's the opposite (from Columbia). That's something that is new because we, I mean I'm not used to that, how people are treated because of the color of your skin. That was something new for me. It was, "Oh, I'm not used to that." We don't even care about races. We have a lot of colors and cultures and influences in Columbia. Arabic, in the north, African, Columbian, in the west we have European descendants, in the middle we have indigenous and the south and by the Amazon River, we have a lot of diversity. As I said, if you look at my family, we have a lot of diversity. Yeah, that was something that I was concerned and that I think is part of the culture. The food, as I said. Everything fast, instant. What else? Sometimes indifferent, nobody cares about the other.
Gloria’s prism of race was very much shaped by her experiences being reared in Columbia. However, the history of race in the United States was something Gloria had to deconstruct and better understand as part of her adjustment to American racial norms.

Additionally, Gloria’s adjustment to race relations in the United States was one of the most difficult cultural transitions she had encountered. Gloria shared the following:

I think sometimes the language barrier is hard. I've learned to overcome that. At the beginning I felt, I was very frustrated. I mean, I've learned how to deal with that. Also, I don't know the discrimination issues. I don't care if somebody, I'm not that sensitive to that because I didn't grow up like that, that issue. I'm not frustrated about it. But here is like something that I'm like, when I hear and I see that happen to other people, I'm like, "That's so bad. Why people have to treat other people because of their color or their race or something like that." It doesn't make sense to me. Since I'm not used to that, I'm like, "That's something silly." That's something that shouldn't be happening. Here's a huge issue. You know better than I do. That's why I like to treat people fairly and as equal as we are. That angers me. That's something that I'd love to change that. I think the way I can is showing a better example sometimes.

Gloria’s critical reflection of race was a very difficult adjustment for her in the host environment. Through her critical reflection on race, the construct appeared to have a transformative impact on her. She addressed the issue in a way that reflected her desire to be politically proactive in her host environment.

Khadijah’s adjustment often involved the issue of race for her. In her country of Liberia, one does not think in racial terms because it is a Black African country. However, in a diverse country such as the United States, the construct of race is a major social issue. In defining her racial identity in the United States, Khadijah stated:

I consider myself African. Of course, if I'm putting on papers, because like here they have something called minority in which I really don't consider myself as a minority. I consider that I say Other. Because the word minority and majority doesn't exist for human race. So that's why I consider myself to be Other. But if it's not minority and majority, I'm African and I'm so proud to be one.
Because of Khadijah’s background as a West African, the idea of thinking in racial terms was elusive and too nebulous for her to critically understand about the host environment. Therefore, in the racial discourse and the dynamics of race in the United States, Khadijah’s cultural dissonance of being forced to frequently engage the topic on a near daily basis resulted in viewing her identity as Other.

Likewise, Asagai was just as perplexed about the construct of race in the United States because of being raised in the Black African country of Nigeria. Asagai also does not identify with the African American population in the United States and he also considered himself Other when it comes to classifying himself on U.S. government documents. As it pertains to race relations in the United States, Asagai exclaimed that he had experienced more racial invective or micro-aggressions from African Americans compared to White Americans, which is an ongoing adjustment for him. Asagai stated:

I'm like ... It's more ... Most of like ... It's crazy because people ... Most of the racism in this country is preached about Black people being racist towards ... I mean White people being racist towards minorities. But in my case, when I got to America, most of the racism actually came from people of the same color than me, of the same color. It was more of Black Americans being racist towards me, making all the jokes, and all that stuff... I never got a White guy make jokes about me. It was all Black people. It was always Black people. But the moment you make a joke about a Black person, everyone wants to get offended, and everyone wants to hashtag something. It's like two wrongs don't make it right.

Like Khadijah who experienced micro-aggressions from African Americans on occasion, Asagai intimated that it was a constant experience for him due to having a different point of view about race. The African Americans with whom Asagai interacted found his point of view to be perplexing and problematic, which engendered micro-aggressions against Asagai in their response.
Many of the participants in this study struggled with what constitutes American culture, or if there is such a construct. Adjustments to the host environment proved to be both a challenge and opportunity for some in this study due to the diversity of American culture. Khadijah in her ongoing struggles in the host environment stated:

So, this, and then I never learn no culture. All the cultures I learn, it's not like American culture. Maybe a Serbian culture, or maybe a Mexican culture, or Italian culture. But I never see an American culture. And I ask people, what is an American culture. And nobody have ever told me. So, I don't know if they [Americans] have culture.

Through critical reflection, Khadijah deduced that there is no central American culture but only a multiplicity of cultures sharing the same space.

Likewise, Asagai’s opinion about American culture is comparable to Khadijah’s, as he stated:

What is American culture? Do you consider it White culture? Do you consider it Black culture? You can say Mexican culture. It's all this stuff combined together. It's a huge ball of cultures. But most times, people try to take all of these cultures and try to give credit to like, "Oh, it's White people, it's White people." America is mostly run on entertainment. Most of the entertainment comes from Black people, but most of the credit goes to White people.

Like Khadijah, Asagai in his critical reflection of the culture in the host environment surmised that the United States is a fusion of different racial/ethnic groups packaged as a unified culture.

The employment of critical reflection and discourse for many participants in this study had the net effect of changing assumptions and perspectives about the host environment, which is transformative well beyond the classroom boundaries.

Most of the participants expressed compelling opinions about the comparisons of their countries of origin to the United States. Race, ethnicity, class, and gender were among the most striking observations among the participants in this study and the basis of much cultural stresses.
American cuisines and customs also appeared to be vastly different for participants in this study and such differences that were culturally perplexing at the outset mitigated over time.

I Cannot Believe This Is Happening to Me: Culture Shock

The construct of culture shock is one which some participants experienced at different stages and settings in the host environment, mostly the participants of color. Racism, sexism, micro-aggressions, and xenophobia were among the greatest stressors for participants of color. For some participants, it accelerated their anxieties of being away from home while others addressed culture shock as a necessary transition to adjust in the host environment.

For Luis, his homesickness was accelerated by bigoted commentary rendered by members from his host family. He stated the following:

Uhm, we were like at my host parents’ family’s house. Like, we don’t even celebrate Thanksgiving in Honduras, so it was the only time I got homesick. But they were talking about this incident that happened in the Ms. Universe Contest, and a girl who got killed by her boyfriend in Honduras… Yeah, so, someone made this comment, saying that: “it sounds like Honduran men.” So, I felt like, (nervous laugh), I was little offended because I am a Honduran man, and I don’t plan to kill my girlfriend. So…that got me a little homesick. For like people like when people say bad stuff about Honduras your health system does not work. Even though it is true, and we would try to change it, but like to hear all those nasty comments is not so nice. Even though it’s the truth… Yeah, but in Honduras, it’s like, pretty bad. It’s really bad. So, I guess like here, all those, sad or harsh truths, it’s good too. So that way, you know what to change about your country too. Yeah, uh, she’s right. Because we don’t have a good health care system. So, we should stop pretending that we do, and like actually start working about it. So, even though, um, I did get homesick because I feel like, in that moment, I felt like, no one can understand me because I was the only Honduran in the room. So, after that, I was fine (nervous chuckle).

Racial invective proved to be one of the most shocking events experienced by Luis in the host environment, which caused great psychological harm and homesickness for him. For many
participants in this study, particularly those from Latin America and Africa, it was a lived experience that was difficult to escape and resulted in their culture shock.

Despite the experience of micro-aggressions with racial overtones, Luis rationalized his experience with culture shock in a reflective way. He shared:

I think that the problem with culture shock is that you are expecting people to do something. Like, when I do this in my country, they do that. So, when do it here why do people don’t do that here? Then you are like, uh, then you start getting like, you starting missing home because you like the ways that were there. But I’m like, well things are done, like this way here, then I am going try to do it that way too. Like, instead of trying to make everybody else do the things I want to. But that way, I try to adapt to the culture… Well, I don’t know what to say about that, but I like to think (light laughter) …So, so, I like saw that things were different here, but I liked it, because I’m like, “this is the way things are here.” I feel what people think culture shock is that things are done differently here, and the people start missing home. And then you feel sad. And that’s my concept of culture shock.

The construct of culture shock rendered by Luis was a poignant and well-thought-out critical reflection of what one’s thinking process might involve in the experience. Luis was able to resign himself to the idea that culture shock is impossible to avoid and must be resolved for survival in the host environment.

Gloria also had a comprehensive understanding of why culture shock exists and why it is necessary for one to experience culture shock to persevere in a new environment. On the issue of culture shock, Gloria shared her thoughts:

Oh, that I've realized that I have more, that I've gone farther than I've expected and that I have more qualities and virtues than I thought that I had and how fast I adapted to the culture and in general to the States. That surprises myself, how fast I adapted to the culture because it wasn't easy at the beginning. I cried a lot. To be honest with you, I missed everything. It was like, you're rooted to a place and then you are uprooted and then you're planting to a new soil. It hurts at the beginning but it's going to be worth it because it's something you were wishing, and you were working for. Because living abroad was one of my dreams. I'm living that experience and I like it. When people ask, "Oh would you like to stay here?" I say, "Yeah." I like it here. Maybe not this city but I like it here because, even though there's a lot of bad things, pros and cons about the
culture, all that, I like it because it's like there are a lot of opportunities. You can do as many things as you want if you have confidence, if you have the attitude. Whatever you want to do, you can do it. There's no limitation. Money is not even a limitation. You're an example of that to me. You can do whatever you, the desires of your heart are. That's something that I like, the opportunities. You could be the best in something but if the Government or if the system by itself doesn't help you or provide you the means, you cannot go farther.

The perspective offered by Gloria about culture shock and adjustments was very cogent and applicable. Despite the impediments, Gloria recognized the opportunities afforded to achieve academically and professionally in the host environment or country of origin are attainable.

For Khadijah, part of her culture shock emanated from different gender roles in the United States compared to vastly different gender roles in her home country. In Liberia, she grew up in a conservative Muslim enclave. Khadijah stated:

And then trying to fit in, find friends. Which, of course didn't happen. Adjusting to how women are treated. Because, in Liberia, if I'm a woman, if I do anything, a guy wouldn't react because I'm a woman. So, here, a couple of times, I was talking about there was a space and I go in. And a guy came out and shout at me. And, in Liberia, nobody shout at women. Even if there was a little girl, nobody shout out [at] women. So, if I get on the bus, if a man is there, he's going to get up from his chair and give his chair to me, because I'm a woman. So, coming here, I feel like, women was not really treated really well. So, what gives him the right to preach to us in Africa? What is that?

As part of Khadijah’s critical reflection, her observations about comparative gender roles in the United States and her home country were constructs difficult for her to avoid since it was part of her lived experiences in the host environment. The reality of such was an issue of constant contemplation for her.

Being independent from home and away from family in Nigeria, Asagai did not expect to experience difficulties or culture shock. Asagai stated:

I would say it gives me a whole different world view. If I was still in Nigeria, I wouldn't think this way. I would be more of a selfless thinker. I would be more waiting for people to make that decision for me. Here, in the United States, I've been learning to make
decisions on my own, regardless of who else. I just take that decision and go for it. That's what I've learned, that's what I've gained… I would just describe these challenges like whatever culture you go to. You can't just go into a culture and just expect that you're not going to face problems. You are going to face problems, like these differences. You just got to understand. That's it. You just need understanding. Don't just be close minded.

Asagai’s critical reflection on cultural adjustments in his host environment was one he fully expected and did not avoid. For Asagai, his assumptions and perspective were not radically altered, but his lived experiences in the United States certainly informed him on how to better navigate the host environment on a multiplicity of issues.

Josefina arrived in the United States with the reality that culture shock was inevitable. With that in mind, she decided to embrace potential culture shock very early to mitigate the difficult transition into the host environment. She shared her observations:

I think the first things when I decided to leave my country; I decided to open my mind first. Not because I am watching, I am seeing the world in this way; it's me and the goal scoring in this way. I had to leave a few paradigms to open my mind. To accept this is a different culture and I have to adapt, and I have to apply this culture this new culture and I have to simulate the new culture. I think this was my experience, trying to understand the multicultural experience. To be aware that there are many countries with different cultures and it's amazing when you can share your culture in another culture by trying to keep the culture or to assimilate this new culture. Not trying to change this culture for my culture, no. Try to be a part of this culture. When I return to my country, I will bring culture with me. Obviously, I'm trying to continue, maintain my main values about what you're saying, about the life, about respect, about honesty, about many things. I try all times; I'm trying to assimilate the new culture and to understand why this society is going and why.

Josefina entered her American collegiate experience with the expectations that there would be some internal struggles of blending her cultural sensibilities with the culture in the host environment. Adopting acculturative adjustment measures proved to be the best way to succeed as far as Josefina was concerned.

Bilal’s adjustment to culture shock was seamless for him because of his self-described introverted personality. Because of Bilal’s personality, he stated:
Yeah. So yeah, I'm not really an extrovert person, I'm not really a sociable person, so even in Syria, I spent most of my time by myself on the internet studying or just reading stuff, watching stuff. So, when I came here, it did not really affect me, because some people, there's cultural shock. People are not the same, you have to adapt. I didn't really have this experience. I didn't mind. I came here, nothing really changed as long as there's internet connection.

For Bilal, the expectation that immediate acculturation is one of the best strategies to survive and flourish in the host environment was one he fully embraced from the beginning of his arrival in the United States. Therefore, he suggested that his experience with culture shock in the host environment was relatively benign.

Culture shock was an experience for many participants in this study, although the participants expected to encounter this phenomenon prior to arrival in the United States. Missing the environment in the country of origin, from family and friends to cuisines and customs was a common observation over the course of a semester for most participants in this study. Although participants had managed to adjust to major problems in the host environment, occasional cultural impediments have surfaced from time-to-time and will continue to present challenges for many of the participants in this study.

Summary

One cannot underestimate the importance of F-1 international students having the ability to cultivate not only a social life outside of class but also student life through student clubs, organizations and structured campus activities to ameliorate isolation, difficult transitions, and perhaps culture shock. Also, structured support systems on campus such as the International Education Office proved to be a positive anchor for F-1 international students. Many participants in this study were perplexed by strong intersections of race, class, and gender in the host
environment that may be different in their respective countries of origin. Lastly, one cannot undervalue the role of culture shock many participants experienced.

**Chapter Summary**

The findings in the chapter addressed questions of 1) how F-1 international students in this study described their transitions into a community college in the United States, 2) how F-1 international students in the United States described their learning experiences in the community college classroom in this study, and 3) how F-1 international students in the United States described their co-curricular experiences outside of the community college classroom in this study. The three research questions in were divided accordingly and highlighted the lived experiences of the participants through their respective interviews. These three question components in this chapter highlighted the transformative challenges and triumphs of the participants. Chapter 6 will further illuminate the discussion, connect research findings to the literature review, offer implications for future practice, examine implications for research, provide recommendations and research questions for impending studies, and furnish closing commentary.
CHAPTER 6:
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the lived experiences of F-1 international students at four community colleges in two states in the Midwest region of the United States. The participants in this study came from diverse regions around the world, and their experiences revealed their aspirations, barriers encountered prior and after arrival, acclimations to the host environment, and classroom cultural challenges and triumphs in mitigating obstacles outside of the classroom. The stressors associated with the participants’ experiences at their respective community colleges appeared to be daunting for some while others managed to persevere through cultural obstacles by acculturative adaptations. The study was guided by the following questions:

1) How do F-1 international students describe their transitions into a community college in the United States?

2) How do F-1 international students in the United States describe their learning experiences in the community college classroom?

3) How do F-1 international students in the United States describe their co-curricular experiences outside of the community college classroom?

With the use of qualitative interviews, field notes, and analysis of artifacts (the use of those artifacts in this manuscript may disclose the identity of institutions in this study), my analysis of the data revealed the following: 1) Some of the participants in this study experienced
transition challenges shortly after arrival to the host environment. Participants who were challenged the most included those who did not attend structured onboarding orientations and those who were not prepared for college-credit classes; 2) most participants experienced a variety of classroom disorientating dilemmas from linguistic challenges to U.S. classroom norms; and 3) most participants experienced varying forms of challenges outside of the classroom from obstacles navigating the host environment to experiencing micro-aggressions.

Overall, my findings revealed that participants experienced varying degrees of disorientating dilemmas, transition issues, and triumphs in their respective adjustments in the host environment at their respective community colleges. This chapter examines my findings in relation to existing literature, in particular, the alignment of the findings to the theoretical framework, Mezirow’s perspective transformation. To complete this research, this chapter I offer conclusions, recommendations, and ideas for future research.

Initial Challenges and Transitions in the Host Environment

My first research question addressed the transition issues into a community college environment. Participants in my study all made it clear that studying abroad, particularly in the United States, was a dream entertained since their secondary educational experiences in their countries of origin. For many in this study it was a dream immediately realized after their secondary education completion. For other participants, study abroad proved to be a dream deferred well after completion of a collegiate education or former careers in their respective home countries. Participants in this study attested to how they were able to cement their final decisions to study in the United States, particularly community colleges in the Midwest region of
the United States. How they learned about the community college varied across participants. For some of the participants in this study, having a relative or family friend in the community near the community college proved to be a major variable in the final decision. Other participants chose the community college because it was close to work; for example, Abril was in the U.S. on a work visa as an *au pair*. Another participant met a representative from a community college at a college fair in her native country of China prior to arrival. The remaining participants found the websites of their community colleges to be compelling and their International Education Offices were assertive in answering their inquiries prior to final decision and arrival. These recruitment tactics were consistent with approaches outlined by Onk and Joseph (2017) and Hsueh (2018).

Additionally, participants in this study had to adjust to their new environments shortly after arrival. Some participants had the advantage of arriving days or months prior to the formal onboarding orientation at their community college. Three participants had exposure to the United States for over a year before enrolling in their community college. The remaining participants had just a few short days after arriving to the United States before attending their onboarding orientation experience. Most participants found the onboarding experience to be very helpful while two found the experience to be marginally helpful. One participant from Brazil (Paulo) who partook remarked that outside of the PowerPoints used in the presentations, the remaining portions of the onboarding experience were uneventful. Another participant (Josefina) from Venezuela who attended the onboarding orientation stated that due to her conversational English language deficiencies, she felt lost and could not keep up with most of the information presented. Brauss et al. (2015) and Lin et al. (2019) suggested that English language limitations can involve numerous stressors at the beginning of an F-1 international student’s collegiate experience.
Participants described helpful resources in this study. Counselors and advisors from the school’s International Education Office served as catalysts and as resources to help participants navigate the complexities of the campus environment. They helped to mediate participants’ anxieties in navigating the bureaucracy and red tape on and off campus, a finding which is consistent with Ballo et al. (2019). Participants remarked about the stressors associated with F-1 visa compliance, financial resources, class registration, housing, and transportation. Many of the participants in this study did not find counselors and other student affairs staff to be very helpful or understanding outside of the International Education Office. This finding is also consistent with Wu et al. (2015). The participants in my study remarked or suggested that their college should hire staff who are better equipped in assisting F-1 international students and to hire staff who are more understanding of their cultural backgrounds and needs. These perspectives are also aligned with findings from Wu et al. (2015). Participants in this study often relied on international education personnel to advocate on their behalf to other student affairs departments. Many of the participants viewed the International Education Office as a safe space to destress and to enjoy the fellowship of other F-1 international students. All 11 participants in this study consistently stated that their international education offices proved to be critical in their collegiate experience and cultural transition to the host environment on and off campus.

For participants in this study, F-1 visa compliance with the United States Department of Homeland Security’s Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (S.E.V.I.S.) appeared to be an issue of ongoing stress, a finding suggested by Hegarty (2014). Participants in this study attested to the voluminous paperwork required to be completed prior to arrival and ongoing compliance paperwork after arrival. Many of the participants in this study mentioned that the
International Education Office at their institution was very helpful in assisting them in completing the necessary paperwork before and after arrival. One participant mentioned that her community college International Education Office facilitated the change in her visa status from J-1 to F-1. The laws, rules, and regulations for F-1 visa compliance are daunting and ever changing, particularly after the year 2001 due to terrorism concerns. Because of strict guidelines in the F-1 visa, students may not always have the luxury of returning to the United States after visiting their home countries if it is too frequent for the duration of the issued visa (Hegarty, 2014; Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Some of the participants have not had a chance to visit with family for years, and the related emotional stress caused one participant to break out in tears and was briefly inconsolable before she was able to regain her composure to resume the interview.

Some of the participants mentioned the stress of financial resources or the lack of in their sojourn, a finding highlighted by Khanal and Gaulee (2019). Although F-1 visa compliance suggests that aspiring students must provide proof of adequate financial resources to cover all education expenses prior to arrival based on the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2020) website, the challenges of stretching limited financial resources after arrival appeared to be an issue for most participants. Participants from developing countries, except for two participants from developing Asian countries, commented about the need to be resourceful with limited financial resources.

Participants selected community colleges because of their competitive cost compared to four-year baccalaureate institutions. However, participants in this study often commented about the higher expense of everyday items from rent to food compared to their home countries, a finding which aligns with research by Khanal and Gaulee (2019). Participants who resided with
host families stated that without that option, their dream of acquiring a college education in the United States would not be realized. F-1 visa rules prohibit students from acquiring employment off campus. Two participants mentioned in confidence that they were employed off campus so they can at least have enough money to eat and cover some of the costs of housing and transportation. Three participants mentioned that over time they were able to legally acquire employment on campus to help defray the cost of their collegiate experience. Some of the participants mentioned that their college offered forms of financial aid allowed for F-1 visa students.

Class registration for participants in this study did not appear to be as much of a stressor as I initially imagined. Some of the participants described the issue of complications with transcripts from their home country and how certain courses may or may not articulate and transfer to their community college. Some participants expressed frustration regarding prerequisite courses that were required to enter college-credit courses. However, participants in this study attested to the tenacious advocacy and assistance provided by the personnel at their International Education Office. These personnel worked with different student affairs departments on behalf of the participants of this study, a finding which is consistent with Martirosyan et al. (2019). Participants in this study were often reluctant at the outset to deal with student affairs services. Also, in this study, participants often found it easier for international education personnel to navigate red tape or bureaucracy for them instead of self-advocacy.

Housing and transportation were also identified as major sources of stress and daunting challenges for participants in this study. The community colleges in this study did not have residence halls for students on campus, which is not uncommon for community colleges in
general, according to Cohen et al. (2014). Therefore, participants in this study had to secure housing in places that were often miles/kilometers from campus or in towns far away from campus. Some of the participants commented about the expense and inconvenience of living away from campus, particularly in apartments. Participants living in apartments away from campus often felt disconnected and isolated from campus, which engendered great anxiety and marginal culture shock. Madden-Dent et al. (2019) suggested that institutions need to better prepare F-1 international students for critical issues such as transportation and housing to mitigate unnecessary stressors. The participants living in apartments mentioned that the locations of their homes were relatively close to commercial retailers, which provided some conveniences for their needs. One participant (Abril) who worked as an au pair resided with her employer. The remaining participants in this study lived with host families, some of which were relatives or friends of parents and teachers from their home country. One participant (Khadijah) had to sleep in her car for a period after she was kicked out of her aunt’s house, which exacerbated great stress, psychological anxiety, and the need to seek mental health counseling.

Participants in this study found transportation to and from campus to be very daunting and stressful. One participant remarked that taking public transportation to and from campus was a major inconvenience, especially with inclement weather. Within a year after arrival, that participant (Paulo) purchased an automobile, which solved his transportation challenges. Participants who were not accustomed to cold weather climates like the Midwest region in the United States often had to walk a considerable distance to get to the bus stop or wait a lengthy amount of time for the next bus at the bus stop. Those participants stated that they were not always properly dressed for the cold weather season. Navigating the inadequate public
transportation system in suburban areas in the Midwest region of the United States proved to be a major source of annoyance for participants in this study. The issues of transportation complications or weather adjustments did not appear to be an issue in the literature. However, an explanation for this omission might be the dearth of literature associated with the lived experiences of F-1 international students in U.S. community colleges, particularly housing and transportation concerns due to an absence of residence halls.

The Classroom Space— Teachers and Classmates

My second research question addressed F-1 international students’ learning experiences in the community college classroom. Although most participants in this study had mostly positive experiences with their teachers, such interactions did not preclude numerous cultural challenges in the classroom environment. These findings are consistent with Martirosyan et al. (2019). All participants who enrolled in E.S.L. courses prior to or in tandem with college-level credit classes reported a very positive rapport with their E.S.L. teachers. Participants enrolled in college-level credit classes had mixed but mostly positive experiences with their professors. Despite having more than sufficient T.O.E.F.L. (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores, participants who did not have extensive prior conversational English experience often encountered the greatest amount of cultural challenges and transition issues. This finding is consistent with Lin et al. (2019). Two participants, one from India (Padma) and the other from Germany (Stefan), had extensive conversational English language experience prior to arrival and reported to have the least amount of cultural challenges or transition issues. The remaining
participants reported to have very different levels of conversational fluency in English and most enrolled in E.S.L. courses to improve their conversational English-speaking skills.

Participants who enrolled in E.S.L. reported difficulties in understanding native English speakers in the United States due to their speed of delivery in conversations, occasional use of advanced academic vocabulary in the classroom, regional or ethnic accents, traditional American idiomatic expressions, and nonformal English usage outside of the classroom. These difficulties are noted in findings from Leong (2015). Participants in E.S.L. courses found the teachers and classroom to be a safe space and destressor away from native English speakers and a place to cultivate friendships with fellow F-1 international students or immigrants similarly enrolled. My findings revealed a great deal of dissonance experienced by participants in their attempts to initially balance their evolving conversational English language acquisition skills with the multiplicity of other stressors associated with being an F-1 international student.

The participants in this study who enrolled in E.S.L. often came to the realization that the English language learning acquired in their countries of origin did not properly prepare them for a collegiate education in the United States. In this study, participants fulfilled the T.O.E.F.L. requirements and minimum score for admissions. However, some participants mentioned that the T.O.E.F.L. exam does not effectively measure conversational English-speaking skills or factor in different styles of use in the Anglophone world (Mustafa & Anwar, 2018). Participants often expressed disappointment, frustration, inadequacy, and lower self-esteem because of their perceived inability to converse in English at a native level, read college-level textbooks at a native level, or write in English at a native level. The participants found the E.S.L. classroom exercises to be extremely helpful, from listening comprehension, vocabulary building, and
pronunciations to American English writing standards. Participants commented that group activities with fellow E.S.L. students were most rewarding and inspired greater confidence over time. These interactions with E.S.L. classmates often resulted in lasting and enduring friendships even after participants transitioned to college-level courses, which is consistent with findings from Lin (2019).

Many participants enrolled in E.S.L. or after completion of E.S.L. continued with informal ways to improve their English language skills. Participants often immersed themselves in English-language entertainment media as a vehicle to informally improve their linguistic skills. For instance, Bilal, a Syrian national, made it a regular ritual to watch Hollywood movies or U.S. television to improve his English-speaking skills, a finding which is also consistent with Tu (2018). Despite Bilal feeling embarrassed by the number of movies he watched in his apartment when assignments were due, he managed to make the Honor Roll and was able to transition to Honors classes. Paulo, a Brazilian national, not only watched numerous Hollywood movies at home, but he made it a regular ritual to go to the local cinema with friends to take in the latest Hollywood movie releases at least once a week.

Participants in this study shared an array of experiences with their professors in their college-credit courses. Some of the participants discussed experiencing anxiety with their courses for a variety of reasons. For example, the speed of the classroom dialogue caused several participants to feel lost and confused. Some professors in the classroom were helpful in assisting participants by restating elements not comprehended. Conversely, other professors lacked the patience to slow down or make sure some of the participants were fully engaged and understood the course content. Due to either personality or cultural learning styles from their home
countries, some participants indicated that they did not feel comfortable engaging in classroom discussions or asking pertinent questions to their professors during lectures. This finding is consistent with Khanal and Gaulee (2019). In such situations, some of the participants indicated that they frequently visited their professors during office hours to seek clarity about unfamiliar content often lost in the classroom setting.

Some participants reported condescending behavior directed at them by their professors or from domestic students who displayed annoyance with their classroom questions or lack of engagement. These issues are noted in research conducted by Lee and Rice (2007). Participants of color generally reported micro-aggressions from either professors or fellow students in the classroom, which engendered much anxiety for those participants, which is also noted in Wu et al. (2015). For instance, a professor in a condescending tone demanded that Gloria (a Columbian native) repeat certain words or phrases multiple times, in which she felt great humiliation and embarrassment. The same professor also asked Gloria’s classmates in an exhausted tone if her classmates could understand her and to restate her responses in class. Khadijah, a Liberian native, also encountered a similar experience. Many of the participants in my study suggested that some professors lack empathy or understanding about the unique issues F-1 international students encounter compared to students who are native residents in the host environment, which is suggested in research conducted by Khanal and Gaulee (2019).

Most of the participants enrolled in college-level credit courses attested to varying forms of classroom cultural challenges or adjustment issues to the American classroom subject content, which is suggested in findings by Lin et al. (2019). One participant (Ling) indicated that in China students are less likely to be required to complete courses unrelated to one’s major, whereas in
the United States, students are required to complete multiple credit hours of general education courses before one can pursue courses in their major field of study. Over time, this participant from China began to appreciate taking a variety of courses unrelated to her field of study. She also enjoyed the flexibility of choosing courses of greater interest to her compared to her peers back in China.

Classroom etiquette, norms and protocols appeared perplexing and elusive for most of the participants in this study. Most participants in this study testified about the lack of formality in the American college classroom, which was a cultural adjustment for many. This lack of formality is suggested by findings from Wu et al. (2015). However, participants were often aghast and sometimes annoyed by the perceived lack of respect domestic students displayed in the classroom and to their professors. Participants were puzzled by domestic students arriving late to class, the frequent absence of some students, domestic students more attentive to their digital mobile devices instead to their professors, conversations with friends or fellow classmates during lectures, and lack of formal dress (sometimes wearing pajamas) in class. Participants were often uncomfortable in how domestic students addressed their professors (sometimes addressing some teachers by their given names or not prefacing a question with doctor/professor/sir/mister/miss/ma’am/madame and so on) or entering the classroom before the professor arrived.

Likewise, participants also indicated that they needed time to adjust to classroom discourse for numerous reasons. Many participants indicated that in their countries of origin, asking a professor a question in the middle of a lecture is considered highly impolite and/or disrespectful. Many of the participants in this study came from countries where the classroom
protocol is based on passive learning, a finding about international students which is consistent with Martirosyan et al. (2019) and Wu et al. (2015). Ling explained that in her native country of China, asking questions in a lecture is not only perceived as rude, but also aggressive, challenging, and may cause a professor to lose face. Queries are often allowed before or after a lecture in the classroom or during office hours, according to Ling.

In my analysis of the data, the U.S. college classroom experience heightened the cultural dissonance for most of the participants in my study. For participants who partook in E.S.L. courses, the teachers offered a general atmosphere of concern, sensitivity, patience, and support. Many participants remarked that E.S.L. proved to be their favorite group of educators and classroom experiences, which appears to be consistent with findings from Ewert (2011). The literature suggests that E.S.L. educators possess the cultural capital and multicultural competency that appears to be lacking with some college-level professors. Some of the participants rendered the same observations about some of their college-level professors. Many participants in my study attested to the lack of understanding or sensitivity their professors displayed and, in some cases, resulted in dismissive behavior or micro-aggressions. Participants in my study also indicated that E.S.L. classmates were very supportive and extremely helpful, which created a proverbial sanctuary or safe space for participants to thrive in this study. Many participants in this study did not get a similar proverbial vibe from domestic students in college-level courses, which appears to also be a pattern according to Khanal and Gaulee (2019). Lastly, according to many participants in this study, E.S.L. and the International Education Office were often the rare spaces for participants to destress on campus.
The Co-Curricular Experiences Outside of the Community College Classroom

My third research question addressed how international students in the United States describe their co-curricular experiences outside of the community college classroom. In this study, the participants described their experiences outside of the classroom from initial arrival to the time of the interview at their respective community colleges in the United States. The formal and informal interactions with domestic students outside of the classroom, residents in the community, and structured activities on and off campus are highlighted in this section.

Most participants in this study mentioned the relevance of certain student clubs, such as international clubs. Tsevi (2018) suggests that involvement in campus activities can lead to a less difficult transition in the host environment. Internationally or culturally themed student organizations provided forums and safe spaces for participants in this study to share their experiences with fellow club members, lend support to each other, and plan additional activities with fellow members. Some of the participants cited international clubs as a major highlight of their after-class experiences on campus. Participants mentioned how members were able to showcase elements of their countries, sample cuisines and examine artifacts associated with their countries, experience group excursions for members to local cultural sites or structured activities off campus, and participation in cultural fairs on campus.

One participant mentioned some of the members of the International Club were domestic students. The presence of domestic students belonging to international clubs and F-1 international students belonging to non-international student clubs certainly is aligned with the mission of community colleges becoming a more multicultural campus environment, as noted in
findings by Shalka (2017). However, two participants gave assertions about the irrelevance of the international club on their campus. Stefan from Germany mentioned that belonging to such clubs does not afford opportunities to have immersive experiences in the host environment and diminished acculturative transitions. Asagai from Nigeria did not find the International Club to have much relevance for his collegiate experience after attending a few club meetings. Overall, international clubs appear to be essential for the lives of F-1 international students and their respective experiences at their schools. Student club involvement creates relevant connectedness to the campus environment and allows F-1 international students to build social capital, which is consistent with findings from Glass and Gesing (2018).

Many of the participants mentioned how international students are treated in a manner that is different from domestic students on campus. A consistent assertion mentioned by participants is the different cost of tuition F-1 international students must pay compared to domestic students, a finding which is consistent with Hegarty (2014) and Cantwell (2015). Many of the participants mentioned that it is unfair to have higher tuition costs for F-1 international students, given the baseline financial difficulties of many F-1 international students in the United States. Stefan remarked that international students are treated in a manner different from domestic students. He believed that they often felt excluded as F-1 international students from various opportunities that domestic students take for granted. Asagai and other participants noted a general atmosphere at their colleges where they were often ignored or not taken seriously by employees and domestic students at their college. Another commentary mentioned by participants in this study relates to the lack of economic opportunities afforded to F-1 international students compared to domestic students, from financial aid opportunities to the
ability to work off campus. Despite these concerns, Stefan mentioned that it might not be fair but understandable that domestic students have more opportunities due to their U.S. citizenship status.

Some participants in this study mentioned that building a rapport with college employees or cultivating friendships with domestic students was not as seamless as they thought, which is also noted by Amos and Rehorst (2018) and Ritter (2016). For example, Asagai, Bilal, and Padma mentioned how developing friendships with domestic students did not come easy for a variety of reasons. Asagai mentioned that cultivating friendships is much easier with people in his native Nigeria because of the warmth and openness in that country compared to the United States. He suggested that Americans tend to be less open to people who are from vastly different backgrounds. Bilal, despite his self-described introverted personality, made overtures to befriend domestic students. As a faithful Muslim, Bilal found it difficult because the domestic students he befriended focused on going to bars, drinking, and other habits not to his liking. Padma, being of a nontraditional age, did not see the need to befriend classmates who were young enough to be her children.

Micro-aggressions were experienced by half of the participants, specifically, participants from African and Latin American countries. This finding is consistent with research by Wekullo (2019) and Mitchell et al. (2017). Luis, a Honduran national, mentioned that his host family made a racist and hurtful comment about Honduran men being very violent. Abril, a Columbian native, described the United States as a racially charged atmosphere in which she indicated that race is almost not an issue in her home country. Because of Abril’s interactions and close friendships with Latinx residents in the community, she viewed herself as having a similar plight
with the undocumented community. She empathized with the off-campus undocumented population and the racial prejudice they experience daily. Abril also mentioned that she has participated in structured student club activities off campus, which afforded her greater ties to community residents off campus.

Gloria, also a Columbian national, mentioned the amount of racial discrimination she has witnessed and experienced in the United States, which is suggested in findings by Perry (2016). Gloria exclaimed that she has never encountered racism in her home country. Like Abril, Gloria noted that race and racism are rarely issues in Columbia. She described Columbia as being just as racially diverse as the United States. Gloria also mentioned that class appears to be as much of an issue as racism in the United States from her experience. Likewise, Abril and Gloria do not like Americans perceiving their country as mostly violent. Bilal, a Syrian native, mentioned that he was often put on the defensive by domestic students and residents in the community to justify issues in the Middle East and the treatment of women. Bilal considered the constant comparisons between the treatment of women in the Middle East and the West to be condescending and prejudicial. Asagai, a Nigerian national, mentioned that most of the cultural stereotyping and prejudice he experienced came from African Americans. Khadijah from Liberia also mentioned similar encounters with African Americans. Both Asagai and Khadijah mentioned that they do not identity with African Americans and proudly declare “Other” as a racial/ethnic classification on U.S. government forms. The issue of micro-aggressions on college campuses appears to be a trend in the literature (Edwards, 2017; Von Bergen et al., 2020).

Overall, participants in this study described their experiences with college employees, domestic students, and residents in the community as generally positive. Organized activities on
and off campus, from student clubs to religious services, appeared to be great outlets and de-
stressors for most participants in this study. Participants identified ongoing challenges in locating
retailers who sell food items from their countries of origin, difficulties and challenges with
customer service encounters off campus, and occasional conversations with residents in the
community whose dialects and vernacular idioms were bewildering to all of the participants in
this study. Lastly, despite the challenges and triumphs in the host environment, the participants
in this study believed that the sojourn at their respective community colleges was the correct
decision as a gateway to realize their educational dreams and career aspirations.

Recommendations

The following will outline recommendations for F-1 international students. These
recommendations include tuition cost, financial assistance, housing, transportation, weather
conditions, and E.S.L. classes.

Recommendations for F-1 International Students

Students from countries outside of the United States are constantly assessing benefits
and liabilities of which country to select for collegiate studies or the type of institution to
attend (Hegarty, 2014; Madden-Dent et al. 2019). As colleges and universities in the United
States attract more students from the international pool of talent, those who decide on their
collegiate experience in the United States may consider some factors based on my findings.
Several participants of my study decided to start their educational experience in the United
States at community colleges based on lower cost compared to four-year baccalaureate
institutions, proximity to relatives or family friends, and the existence of affordable E.S.L.
classes.
The participants in this study made their final decisions based on their backgrounds, interests, and what they wanted to achieve in the United States. For most participants, adequate financing was a consistent concern. Financial assistance is limited for F-1 international student visa holders compared to domestic students at community colleges in the United States. Given this limitation, prospective international students may need to probe broadly and deeply among various representatives of community colleges regarding scholarship opportunities or campus employment opportunities. This information seeking should be conducted prior to making a final decision on which community college to select.

Another concern expressed by participants was the issue of housing. Although community colleges generally do not offer housing, if F-1 international students are not staying with a relative or family friend then they need to consider several factors related to housing. They need to inquire about the cost of available housing, distance from campus, and public transportation options available to and from campus. Based on my findings, prospective F-1 international students may also consider inclement weather conditions, especially during the winter seasons.

F-1 international students unfamiliar with a cold-weather climate will face a daunting experience in the Midwest winters. For example, public transportation options in the suburban Midwest region of the United States are less than ideal. If prospective F-1 international students are concerned about the lack of available and convenient public transportation in the suburban Midwest region in the United States, particularly during cold winter periods, they may want to consider a suburban community college in a warm regional climate in the United States. Also, a community college in an urban location with
better public transportation in the Midwest region in the United States might also be suitable.

Participants in this study arrived at their community colleges with different levels of conversational English-speaking skills. Prospective F-1 international students who intend to study in the United States cannot fully rely on a qualifying T.O.E.F.L. score as an indicator regarding readiness for immediate entry into college-level credit courses. These students would be wise to contact counselors at the potential community college. Additional viewpoints could be sought from a currently enrolled student from the same country of origin at the same community college or nearby community college for opinions about college-credit course readiness.

Lastly, international students have multiple factors to consider when deciding whether to attend a community college prior to their quest to ultimately obtain a baccalaureate degree or graduate degree. Based on my findings, student decisions should weigh the financial benefits and liabilities among community colleges, private four-year universities, and public four-year public universities in the United States. If housing and transportation are concerns, four-year schools normally have residence halls available, which should be factored into a final decision to study in the United States. Overall, despite some initial obstacles, participants in this study surmised that their choice to enter the community college to begin their sojourn proved to be most logical for their situation.

**Recommendations for Faculty and Staff**

Faculty and staff at colleges and universities in the United States play a pivotal role in serving the needs of their students in ways that will lead to their growth and success in the
classroom and outside of the classroom. Both faculty and staff often receive information and training on how to address students’ abilities to navigate the difficulties and challenges at their campus environment on a variety of issues. Since faculty and student affairs support staff are on the forefront of ameliorating student needs and concerns, being sensitive and informed about unique student populations allow for successful resolutions to the satisfaction of different student populations. Based on the findings in my study, participants mostly agreed that staff at their offices of international education were most helpful at the beginning of their collegiate experience, and several of the participants continued to seek guidance from these personnel semesters after arrival on campus.

My findings also revealed that participants found their E.S.L. teachers to be the most influential and most helpful in addressing adjustments issues. They were valuable resources and advocates. As previously noted, my findings suggest that many participants who were enrolled in college-credit transfer courses often experienced classroom cultural challenges for multiple reasons. Some participants suggested that due to their English language challenges they would prefer professors to be patient with their initial lack of engagement, which should not be construed as lack of interest. For many participants in this study, active learning was viewed as an adjustment that would benefit from increased patience by professors. Because of this needed adjustment, they advised that grades should not be dependent or heavily dependent on class participation. Based on the comments of the participants, professors should refrain from using unique American idioms or vernacular parallelisms that international students might find vague or ambiguous.

Some participants did not like being put in a position to serve as a spokesperson for their country or having to explain negative facets about their country or culture. Professors
should also be sensitive to how they treat F-1 international students who would like to contribute to classroom discourse but whose accents may inhibit understanding. Many participants also made it clear that student affairs support staff were often not very concerned or helpful in addressing their issues. Participants recommended that student affairs support staff should be better educated about the unique needs of F-1 international students, and institutions should attempt to hire more support staff who share similar cultural backgrounds with F-1 international students.

Lastly, the personnel at the Office of International Education or outside speakers/consultants should take more of an instrumental lead in facilitating workshops and training student affairs staff about the unique issues F-1 international students encounter daily and, on occasion, or according to Ballo et al. (2019), refrain from a “one size fits all” approach to international student development. Cultural sensitivity training related to F-1 international students would be beneficial to offer. Faculty can likewise benefit from additional training related to diverse student populations, particularly F-1 international students, and the unique dynamics they bring to the classroom.

**Recommendations for College Administrators**

Community college administrators play a major role in providing leadership, policy developments, and directives to faculty and staff. Community college administrators along with stakeholders on and off campus shape the mission of their institutions. Colleges and universities in the United States often cite diversity as a goal in strategic planning or include such language in mission statements. Some community colleges have struggled with decreased revenue streams from their state and local governments; thus, tuition increases and/or the recruitment of additional domestic students have served as some of many ways to
address shrinking revenue streams. The increased focus on recruiting F-1 international students for some community colleges plays a role in buttressing revenue streams, since F-1 international students pay tuition rates that are much higher compared to domestic students (Cantwell, 2015).

For community college administrators in the United States who make the recruitment of F-1 international students a priority, this study may have some benefit in providing key services for the recruitment, settlement, adjustments, and full immersion of F-1 international students into the campus environment. For institutions that operate without or with a limited office of international education, providing robust outreach, counseling and advocacy to potential F-1 international students must be a substantive priority to assure a meaningful experience prior to their transfer to four-year degree-granting universities.

Most participants in this study mentioned having limited financial resources. Such conditions are stressful for any student, but particularly for F-1 international students because they have less options to earn income in the host environment compared to domestic students. Administrators should prioritize expanding funding sources for F-1 international students who need greater financial support, for example, increasing work study opportunities and expanding and prioritizing scholarship opportunities for F-1 international students. Although community colleges in the United States generally do not have residence halls on campus, administrators might be advised to explore possibilities of constructing residence halls on campus or leasing nearby apartments that can be set aside for F-1 international students in need of affordable and conveniently located living quarters. Administrators can fiscally support external professionals and experts to facilitate workshops to better educate faculty and staff on the unique issues and stressors F-1
international students experience in their sojourn. Even cuisine options of an international origin at student cafeterias can be a simple remedy to help F-1 international students feel a greater connection to the college and may lessen cultural adjustment issues at the outset.

Lastly, college administrators must think comprehensively about providing basic needs to assure a seamless and successful experience for F-1 international students in their experiences on their campus. Administrators may benefit from a focus group comprised of their existing F-1 international students. This forum might provide useful insights into the needs and experiences of F-1 international students.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The exploration of the lived experiences of F-1 international students enrolled at community colleges in the Midwest region of the United States presented opportunities for me to gauge transition issues in their collegiate experience after the completion of at least one semester. The 11 participants in this qualitative study provided insights into their cultural backgrounds, aspirations, assumptions, beliefs, and how their perspectives changed over time in the host environment. Their insights were generally consistent with the various studies cited in the literature review chapter. Upon completion of this study, I believe the following topics are worthy of further research.

All participants in my study are multilingual, although English was not the proverbial mother tongue of participants in their countries of origin. A comparable study involving participants from Anglophone countries with monolingual English speakers might provide different findings and conclusions. Another comparable study using my research questions and approach would be a focus on F-1 international students who did not complete or dropped out of their community college institutions and returned to their countries of
origin. Such a study may provide valuable insights for practitioners in the field of adult and higher education, especially in designing early intervention strategies, more robust counseling services, academic coaching, peer mentorship programs, and targeted financial resources dedicated to retention and success rates.

Also, a striking testimony from many participants in my study suggested that the stressors of housing, transportation, lack of cultural outlets, or few cuisine options in their suburban environment were unnerving. A similar study with a targeted F-1 international student population set in multiple culturally diverse urban community college environments might provide different findings. The transition issues of F-1 international students could be examined as they move from a community college environment in the United States to a four-year university environment in the United States. This examination could feature comparable methods, research questions, and theoretical models as my study, or it could be conducted using quantitative methods.

The two participants from West African countries in my study indicated that they have experienced varying forms of micro-aggressions from African Americans in the host environment. A qualitative phenomenology inquiry into the relations between F-1 international students from African and African American students in the context of culture shock, alienation, and isolation might yield compelling findings. As an African American, I would find such a study to be informative and productive for my professional practice.

Some participants in this study mentioned the lack of faculty and student affairs support staff who understood their unique sojourn. Comments were made that these personnel did not share the same background or countries of origin as the participants. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are topics often included in mission statements of
institutions; however, the participants of this study did not believe that these concepts were satisfactorily applied in the professional practice of personnel at their community colleges. Implications for future research might explore the phenomenon of former F-1 international students who are now faculty and staff and the roles they play in mentoring and guiding current F-1 international students from the same countries of origin in their sojourn. The findings from a study about mentorship partnerships between college employees and F-1 international students might yield findings to better inform college administration in recruitment and hiring practices.

My study did not focus on the political environment in the United States since the year 2016. A qualitative study of changes in the political perceptions and experiences of F-1 international students since the 2016 U.S. presidential election year could render relevant findings. With the global COVID-19 pandemic, a study focused on the impact on F-1 international student recruitment efforts by American colleges and universities may yield relevant findings for professional practice. A qualitative study focused on the potential stressors the COVID-19 pandemic might be having on existing F-1 international students currently enrolled at colleges and universities in the United States might reveal valuable findings for future research. As an extension, the associated limits on the mobility of F-1 international students’ ability to travel internationally due to the pandemic might be an unknown stressor. Other stressors might be limited or non-existent in-class learning experiences, the stressors of digital home learning platforms ranging from virtual teleconferencing modalities such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Meet to learning management systems such as Blackboard or Canvas as substitutes for traditional campus experiences might provide research-relevant insights and implications for future practice.
Lastly, the participants in my study not only provided valuable testimonies to my research inquiry but also valuable insights to improve my professional practice as an educator at a community college in the Midwest region of the United States. My assumptions in my professional practice have changed over time because of my study. I will furnish my final thoughts in the next section.

Conclusions

My qualitative study about the lived experiences of 11 F-1 international students enrolled at four suburban community colleges in two midwestern states of the United States proved to be a fruitful endeavor for me. I am hopeful that this study will inform the professional practice of those who serve adult and higher education. My literature review highlighted some of the aspirations, barriers, adjustments, and triumphs F-1 international students experienced in general, but specifically F-1 international students enrolled at colleges and universities in the United States. The obstacles and adjustments participants in this qualitative study experienced were not unique based on existing literature, but chronicling the unique experiences participants encountered in their sojourn will hopefully add to the existing body of literature.

The participants in my study can hopefully provide readers valuable insights regarding the experiences of F-1 international students at colleges and universities in the United States. Transition experiences overlap between domestic students and F-1 international students at colleges and universities in the United States; however, F-1 international students have additional stressors domestic student are less likely to experience. These stressors include but at not limited to leaving families, friends, and home
cultures for years before returning in some cases; financial stressors since F-1 international students have less income earning opportunities due to visa restrictions; stressors related to non-native conversational English-speaking skills and related challenges; the stress of cultural isolation; and in some cases, the stress of micro-aggressions. Faculty, student affairs staff, and college administrators who are not sensitive to the unique challenges F-1 international students experience may unconsciously add to the isolation and culture shock of these students through implicit and maybe even explicit bias.

An intent of my study was not only to reveal the experiences of participants in their sojourn, but to inform the practice of faculty, student affairs staff and administrators in the goals of better serving diverse student populations. One of the outcomes for me in this study has led to changing many of my practices in the classroom and outside so I can better facilitate the needs of F-1 international students and even domestics students. I have made it a recent practice not to speak as fast as usual in the classroom; repeat more complicated points before moving on to the next point; incorporate more visual media, especially the use of closed caption capabilities; use less colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions; and avoid irrelevant American sports analogies which may elude more than just F-1 international students in class. Even seemingly innocuous expressions from “the whole nine yards” or “slam dunk” to “home run” can get lost in translation.

Another outcome from this study is my greater appreciation of complying with F-1 visa requirements, cultural barriers, isolation, and the transformation that is often necessary for F-1 international students to not only succeed academically but also emotionally and psychologically. Empathy is a very important quality for educators to possess. Because of empathy, I regularly donate to my college foundation to support F-1 international students in
their financial needs. From my research inquiry, I was given a glimpse into how F-1 international students view their realities. My interviews and corresponding data analysis evoked reflective discourse for me and caused me to shift some of my assumptions and perspectives in my professional practice.

As both an inside researcher (employed at the same college as some of the participants) and outside researcher (a visiting graduate student at the other community colleges) for my study, I am humbled by the heartfelt stories the participants shared with me. Although many of the stories shared by participants were difficult and painful at times to disclose (often beyond what I asked or what I was seeking), participants at all interview sites appeared to be candid, trusting, and wanted others to learn from their lived experiences. I will forever be grateful to the participants for their willingness to share their experiences and poignant aspects of their life transitions with me.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) Tell me something about your background?
   A. Describe your country?
   B. Describe your town?
   C. Tell me about your family?
   D. Describe your educational experiences prior to coming to this community college?
   E. What was positive about your education prior to coming to this community college?
   F. What was negative about your education prior to the coming to this community college?

2) How did you find out about the study abroad program prior to coming to this community college?
   A. What were your initial thoughts prior to coming to this community college?
   B. Who or what influenced your decision to come to this community college?
   C. Why did you ultimately choose to enroll as a student in this community college?

3) Tell me about your first day experience when you arrived?

4) What was the first week like in the host environment?
5) Describe a typical day for you as a student at this community college? Please be as specific as possible.

6) Can you describe any language barriers or cultural misunderstandings you have encountered in the host environment?

7) What were your experiences like in adjusting to the host environment? What were your challenges and triumphs in the host environment?

8) Can you tell me about your understanding of American culture?

9) Would you describe some of your challenges as a form of adjusting to American culture or something else?

10) Please describe your typical classroom experiences?

11) Please describe your experiences outside of the classroom?

12) What is the hardest thing about being an international student at this community college?

   A. What do you like about your experiences?
   B. What do you not like about your experiences?

13) Please describe your student orientation upon arrival?

   A. What information was helpful?
   B. What would you do to improve orientation?

14) Please describe your understanding of multicultural competency.

15) Please define your understanding of global citizenship.

16) What influence is your international student experience having on your chosen college major?

17) How will this international student experience influence your career aspirations?
18) If you were to describe your community college experience to your peers back home, how would you describe it?

19) Where do you see yourself in 2 years? 5 years? 10 years?

A. Personal development?

B. Educational development?

C. Career development?