Faculty and Student interactions at A Midwestern University in The United States: A Qualitative Study of The Impact on international Graduate Students’ Academic Experiences

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY AND STUDENT INTERACTIONS AT A MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY IN THE UNITED STATES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

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Northern Illinois University, 2019
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This study explored how academic experiences were influenced when international graduate students engaged with faculty at a public, midwestern university in the United States. The study used a phenomenological interpretive approach, incorporating the narratives of fifteen international graduate students from eleven countries. The researcher guided this study based on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of human development (1977, 1979, 1994). The findings provided insight into the interactions that international graduate students have with faculty, how these interactions influenced their experiences, and how classroom practices impacted academic experiences for international graduate students.

Faculty who acknowledged the unique needs and cultural differences of international graduate students supported students in positive ways, resulting in favorable outcomes. Reaching out to offer assistance, friendship, and guidance provided an important foundation for students’ ability to persist. Exhibiting patience and extending time for issues involving the English language in the areas of class participation, reading, and writing were also instrumental in supporting academic progress.

When faculty employed cultural references in class that eluded international graduate students or incorporated curriculum that was outside of their lived experiences, students were
lost, felt excluded, and were unable to learn or make sense of the material. In these cases, international graduate students struggled, suffered, and in some instances failed.

Understanding this engagement process between faculty and international graduate students, and subsequent influences on academic experience and progress, contributes to the literature by calling attention to the impact this engagement may present. Further, detailing the important role faculty and institutions of higher education may impart, as well as consequences for students should the engagement be less than supportive, helps fill gaps in the existing literature regarding interactions between faculty and international graduate students.

I also presented conclusions, recommendations for faculty, international graduate students, and institutions of higher education, and suggestions for future research. Acknowledging that the needs of international graduate students are unique and significant will aid faculty toward this end. Orientation programs for faculty providing strategies to work with and support international graduate students is imperative. Further, institutional programs that effectively support international graduate students during their educational adjustment must be a priority in our universities. Enhancing these support programs for faculty and international graduate students is an important consideration and recommendation for universities to heed.

*Key words: international graduate students, influences on academic experiences, ecological model, faculty and student interactions*
FACULTY AND STUDENT INTERACTIONS AT A MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY IN THE UNITED STATES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

BY
DEBRA A. MILLER

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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 Director:
Carrie Kortegast
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DEDICATION

To the memory of my parents, H. Glen and Betty W. Miller, who supported their children and our educational endeavors. They would be exceedingly proud of the three of us.

To my brothers, Greg and Brad; my children, Laura and Ben; and my grandchildren, Samuel and Eliana.

To Mary, who encouraged me and provided the motivation that I needed to finish!
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Despite the historically increasing number of international graduate students enrolling at institutions of higher education in the United States (see Figure 2 in Appendix A), limited studies are available focusing on faculty-student engagement and how this relationship may affect academic experiences (R. Wang, 2018). Understanding how international graduate students’ perceptions of interactions with faculty contribute to their academic experience may impact their persistence to graduation and overall experiences on college campuses in the United States (Shalka, 2017). Few published studies address international graduate students’ experiences in the classroom, thereby prompting further exploration (Valdez, 2015).

College classroom environments are at the center of college students’ academic and social experience, offering an ideal space for both academic and social integration (Tinto, 1997). Gao, Narui, and Fontaine (2010) found that “several studies suggest that university faculty and advisors play an important role in helping students cope” (p. 3). A study by Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, and Cong (2015) indicated that faculty had significant influence on international graduate students’ academic success and feeling of belonging through exhibiting or excluding social behaviors. Helping student cope and encouraging the feeling of belonging are important areas of support for international graduate students as a result of faculty interactions. More research is needed to better understand the academic experiences of international graduate students and how those manifest as a result of their relationships with faculty.
According to the Institute of International Education’s (IIE, 2016) Open Doors report, 1,043,839 international students were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities during the 2015-2016 academic year. This marked a 7% increase in enrollment over the previous year. According to this report, international students constitute approximately five percent of the more than 21 million students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions.

The number of students coming from the number-one sending country, China, was up 16.5 percent. Related to this, the Council of Graduate Schools reported that during the 2013-2014 academic year, the top five countries sending students were, China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and Canada. Business and management were the most popular fields of study for international students, followed closely by engineering (Redden, 2014b).

International students enroll at institutions of higher education in the United States for many reasons, but they often face a multitude of challenges (Gebhard, 2012). Prevailing research exposes some of the challenges international students face when they come to the United States. Challenges impacting the successful adjustment of international students are framed through their experiences involving finances and social norms (Bista & Foster, 2011; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010); acculturative stress (Bai, 2016); campus climate, loss of social status, minimal computer and technological expertise, limited access to familiar food, and family expectations (Gao et al., 2010); lack of academic preparedness (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010); teaching methodology (Tinto, 2012); American academic integrity standards (Kisch, 2014); and immigration restrictions and regulations and lack of transportation (Bista & Foster, 2011).

Additional challenges delineated in the literature review encompass English language proficiency, discrimination, loneliness, cultural influences, academic success, engaging with
faculty, community involvement, and support programs and resources. These topics will be reviewed more deeply in Chapter 2, as they relate closely to the research questions and need further exploration relevant to the academic experiences of international graduate students.

How best to understand, support and address these challenges has become a salient topic for many universities across the nation. Some argue there is an ethical obligation to support these students and provide the needed support services so they can be successful (Natali, 2005; Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). International graduate students bring culturally diverse perspectives and new ideas that may challenge and widen perceptions for domestic students (Gao et al., 2010; Li et al., 2010; Natali, 2005; Qiang, 2003) and contribute to globalization (Mamiseishvili, 2012; Wang, Li, Noltemeyer, Wang, Zhang & Shaw 2018). Furthermore, economically, international graduate students provide significant financial benefit to institutions of higher education, suggesting relevance for exploring their ability to adapt and persist (Knight, 2003; Leong, 2015; Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner & Nelson, 1999; Shalka, 2017).

Due to these considerations, institutions have additional obligations to provide programming and services ensuring that students persist and meet with success (Li & Kaye, 1998; Mamiseishvili, 2012). To begin this understanding, it will be necessary to explore how international graduate students make sense of these challenges and experiences and to examine their beliefs and cultural perspective (Shalka, 2017; R. Wang, 2018; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008).

Redden (2014a) cautioned that if programming and intended interaction are not active goals, then international graduate student mobility may not contribute to global learning at all. Universities that offer volunteer opportunities for domestic partners (such as businesses and
organizations that organically exist in the community) to extend a welcoming hand to international graduate students improve retention and help international graduate students feel more at home when they have special relationships that are supported (Bista & Foster, 2011).

Additionally, community members who interface with international graduate students through businesses, events, and networking opportunities also play a factor in international graduate students’ feeling of belonging and enhances their overall experiences (Kusek, 2015). Many universities have not leveraged the members within the local community, which limits cross-cultural interactions critical for cultural adaptation. Intentional cross-cultural interactions serve to reduce culture shock, loneliness and other issues related to adjustment for international graduate students (Bai, 2016; Kusek, 2015; Leong, 2015). Without this bridge, many international graduate students simply seek out other international graduate students from their country or other countries, which further isolates them (Shalka, 2017). This isolation may prevent them from forming friendships with domestic students and community members and may be a barrier for meaningful integration into their new environment further inhibiting their own intercultural adjustment process (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

Problem Statement

International graduate students experience various and significant challenges adjusting to their new cultural and academic environment and life on colleges campuses in the United States (Ota, 2013). Difficulties faced by international graduate students often impact their academic performance and overall experience in the United States which may prolong or interrupt their ability to persist toward graduation. Despite the accelerating increase of international graduate
students on American campuses, there is still a lack of in-depth understanding of how international graduate students participate in meaning-making regarding their adjustment journey (Brown, 2009; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Shalka, 2017). In addition to understanding their adjustment journey, Shalka (2017) stated: “There is increased need to understand the experiences of international students and what is uniquely important to their educational experience” (p. 145).

International graduate students report that faculty behavior and attitude can impact their success academically in negative and positives ways (Gao et al., 2010; Glass et al., 2015). From a sense of belonging and feeling included to insensitive faculty as well as access to faculty, all may play a significant part in international graduate students’ motivation, self-worth, academic efficacy and persistence in their program (Bai, 2016; Gao et al., 2010; Glass et al., 2015).

Ku, Pan, Tsai, Tao, and Cornell (2004) stated: “Many American professors know little about the basics involved in coming to the United States as an international graduate student; they also lack specific logistics and in-depth knowledge about the countries from which their international students have arrived” (p. 88). Exploring and better understanding the experiences of international graduate students may assist faculty and institutions of higher education in an effort to support students’ learning experiences and academic progress. Regarding faculty, R. Wang (2018) stated: “The literature has been neglected in the extent to which and how faculty are engaging international students, especially in effective learning strategies, collaborative learning, and student-faculty interaction” (p. 1003).
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to understand international students’ perceptions of how interactions with faculty contributed to their academic experiences. The concept of meaning-making and how international graduate students make sense of engagement with faculty and resulting behavior was explored and guided the study. Fifteen international graduate students from a mid-sized, public midwestern university were recruited to participate in a qualitative study. International graduate students for whom this is their first university experience in the United States and who have completed at least one semester of study were recruited to participate.

Individual interviews using semi-structured questions, classroom observation, and the collection of institutional data were employed. No specific cultural group of international graduate students was intentionally selected, but a preference for a variety of programs of study was desired. The findings will promote a better understanding of the challenges faced by international graduate students when engaging with faculty. Understanding the impact of this engagement will contribute to the scarcity of information on the educational benefits for addressing the needs of international students and identifying approaches that support their academic experiences and persistence in their programs.

Research Questions

For this study, I sought to understand international students’ perceptions of how interactions with faculty contributed to their academic experiences. The study was a qualitative research design through phenomenological inquiry with social and personal significance. This
study emerged from the researcher’s intense interest in understanding the academic experiences of international graduate students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the United States. The researcher examined international graduate students’ experience with faculty at Northern Illinois University in order to understand the impact this may have on academic experiences. The key question was, “How do international graduate students perceive interactions with faculty contribute to their academic experiences?”

Fifteen international graduate students were recruited to participate in the study focusing on the following research questions guiding this study:

1. How do international graduate students describe their interactions with faculty?
2. According to international graduate students, how do these interactions influence their experiences?
3. How do international graduate students describe classroom practices and the impact specific practices have on their academic experiences?

These research questions guided what I wanted to understand and were explored through a qualitative research design using phenomenological inquiry outlined in Chapter 3. Subsequent interview questions were formulated and incorporated into the interviews to gain this understanding (Maxwell, 2013).

Significance

With the proper support, most students, domestic and international, can succeed academically and persist to graduation. Research shows that international students have reported faculty behavior and attitude can impact their academic success in negative and positive ways (Bai, 2016; Cao, Li, Jiang & Bai, 2014; Gao et al., 2010; Glass et al., 2015; Hotta & Ting-
Toomey, 2013; Kuo, 2011; Valdez, 2015). They also reported that their long-term career goals were affected, and they were significantly motivated by professors they admired (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013). Faculty members’ understanding of the process and learning about the culture and experiences of their students would have tremendous impact on their overall success (Peterson et al., 1999).

Some research focused on the issues from the students’ perspective. Another area of importance may be faculty and their understanding of the impact they have on international students and their important role in helping students cope (Gao et al., 2010). Examining the dynamics of interactions between international graduate students and faculty will help institutions of higher education understand the impact on international graduate students’ experiences and persistence toward graduation. Ideally, international graduate students who are supported will meet with success and can remain in their program to attain their degree.

Theoretical Framework:

Ecological Models of Human Development

This study employed Bronfenbrenner’s (1976, 1977, 1979, 1994) ecological models of human development. These models provided a context for understanding how international students experience meaning-making and how they are influenced by multiple-person-environment interactions while attending institutions of higher education in the United States.

Behavioral and cultural influences when engaging with faculty, in combination with other personal attributes, may explain how one’s self-identity can be a contributing factor to other challenges faced by international students. Ting-Toomey (1999) wrote: “Individuals bring their
sense of ‘self-image’ or ‘identity’ to any type of communication encounter. The meaning of ‘self-image’ or our view of ourselves, is profoundly influenced by cultural, personal, situational, and relational factors” (p. 26). Exploring how this impacts international graduate students’ experiences will provide insight into how they navigate their interactions with faculty resulting in potentially positive or negative academic outcomes.

International students bring self-image and identities defined by their culture, cultural assumptions, understanding, and personal meaning systems (Crotty, 1998). Faculty also bring their cultural perspectives into the environment. Lantolf (2000) wrote: “Developmental processes take place through participation in cultural, linguistic, and historically formed settings such as family life and peer group interaction, and in institutional contexts like schooling, organized sports activities, and work places, to name only a few” (p. 197). Exploring these issues more deeply will add to the understanding of how the journey is traversed, how meaning is constructed and how adjustment is attained or not, due to barriers and other issues inhibiting persistence.

In addition to using phenomenology as a methodology to guide my study, concepts within the ecological models of human development based on the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1976, 1977, 1979, and 1994) helped inform my approach to this qualitative study. Bronfenbrenner provides a “useful theoretical framework for understanding the processes and interactions involved in student achievement” (Johnson, 2008, p. 2). That human development happens in concert with ones’ environment as proximal processes fits well in a university context where student development occurs. Understanding international graduate students’ engagement with faculty in this setting and in this context may provide useful insights regarding student achievement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
Ecological models of human development have been applied to relationship development between individuals and their environment. Therefore, I was curious about exploring the development of intercultural relationships between international graduate students and university settings and interactions with faculty. Ecological models of human development may also provide a level of subjective understanding and an added perspective relative to the meaning international graduate students construct at institutions of higher education in their new environment.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) process-person-context model offered insight into this paradigm. Further, this delineation of systems (specifically microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems) added depth to better understanding international graduate students’ experiences engaging with faculty. This is supported by a major assumption underpinning Bronfenbrenner’s model that each system can directly or indirectly contribute to co-shaping the development of a person nested in these systems (Kudo, Volet, & Whitsed, 2016).

The first system, a microsystem, consists of a pattern of activities, roles, or interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting that are specific for that setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, applying imperatives of a microsystem might help in understanding interpersonal relationships, both those that may permit or inhibit engagement, experienced by the international students within the context of the classroom. The immediate environment, such as the classroom, may have a specific developmental impact on students which may alter their behavior with others in that environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem of a classroom or campus could include students, faculty, administrators, and
community members. The student may influence these components and may be influenced by them. Figure 1 in Chapter 5 shows an example of a human ecology model in this context.

When two or more microsystems interact, then a mesosystem, the second system, emerges, creating a dynamic that may directly or indirectly influence the climate of the classroom. If faculty have high expectations regarding active student participation and international students lack confidence with English proficiency or have countercultural perceptions (compared to approaches exhibited by domestic students), tensions may arise impacting the students’ success. This system may hold promise for comparative analysis from class to class. The mesosystem focuses on relationships between settings, and students may share different experiences they are having with their individual professors.

The next system, exosystem, incorporates a larger social system of the university, infusing policies, events, and decisions outside of the developing student’s control that may affect the student. International students are often restricted by visa regulations from holding jobs, particularly off campus. Financial concerns may arise for the student if they need to earn money to stay in this country. The negative outcomes for students who find they need employment but cannot find it can result in them leaving the institution. Other examples of structures or ecological circumstances that may impinge upon the student may include transportation, shopping, law enforcement practices, and technology (Bronfenbrenner, 1976).

The macrosystem expands to include culture, subcultures, customs and belief systems which exert influence on the other systems. For example, a university may respond to or be directed by the cultural, social, and economic climate of the community, state or nation (Johnson, 2008). A relevant example occurred in January 2017. According to Ahmed (2017), “President
Donald Trump issued an executive order temporarily banning entry of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries to the United States” (p. 348). Ahmed explained that the U.S. government created the executive order to protect the United States from foreign terrorists and included Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen (Ahmed, 2017). The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the ban in June of 2018 (Liptak & Shear, 2018). This action impacted international students from these countries studying in the United States, and many feared they would not be allowed re-entry to continue their studies should they travel to their country for a vacation or visit. Some institutions, such as Arizona State University, urged international student advising centers to stay in regular contact with their international students to alleviate concerns about visa status due to the travel ban (Abdul-Alim, 2017).

A more recent addition to the systems includes the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), a time-based construct that can affect the operation of all the systems. This could encompass day-to-day or year-to-year changes that occur in a university setting reflective of student demographics, curriculum, and faculty. The impact that current, developing federal legislation may have on undocumented students if they are not allowed to renew their status within a specified timeframe allowing them to remain in this country to complete their degrees, serves as an example with the chronosystem.
Organization of the Chapters

Chapter 1 introduced the study and challenges experienced by international students, outlined the problem statement and purpose, the significance of the study, and listed the research questions. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature about specific areas of challenge that international students encounter impacting their ability to acclimate to college life in the United States. Topics highlighted include English language proficiency; discrimination; loneliness; cultural influences; community engagement; support programs and resources; academic success; and interactions with faculty.

Chapter 3 describes the qualitative research design through phenomenological inquiry. Individual interviews with 15 international graduate students, utilizing semi-structured questions and classroom observations, were used. A focal group of three students for classroom observations with follow-up interviews was employed. Research site, participant information, data collection methods, research positionality, and researcher profile will be explained in this chapter. Chapter 4 presents the data analysis and findings. Chapter 5 provides a discussion on major findings, conclusions, and suggestions for future research. Appendices consist of documents supporting the research, including letters of recruitment to international graduate students to participate in the study, the survey tool used to gather demographic information, a table depicting participant demographics, and interview questions.

Chapter Summary

The ability to adapt to a new environment, navigate academic settings, negotiate social and cultural norms and expectations, and persist to graduation are significant challenges faced by
international graduate students in the United States. Historically, as the number of international students has continued to rise, institutions are cautioned to better prepare and support these students who contribute substantially to the financial health and internationalization of college campuses. Understanding the experiences of international graduate students and addressing difficulties that may prolong or interrupt their ability to manage academic progress and persist toward graduation, may be further understood through their personal narratives about engagement with faculty, community, and support services.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature related to my study. International students enroll at institutions of higher education in the United States for many reasons and often face a multitude of challenges. This review will highlight several significant areas contributing to these challenges and the impact they have on international graduate students’ experiences. This review will provide context for understanding practices that may be employed to promote a more positive outcome for international graduate students.

Introduction

International students enroll in institutions of higher education in the U.S. to seek a quality education that will benefit them personally and professionally in the global market. They choose universities in America because of particular degree programs, financial incentives, and opportunities post-graduation for employment (Bista & Foster, 2011; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). International students contribute to their host institutions through cultural diversity, financial revenue, and teaching and research assistantships (Lee & Rice, 2007).

According to Shalka (2017), the recruitment of international students contributes to the internationalization of higher education and has been an important priority for colleges and universities. Further, international students on college campuses in the United States provide opportunities to promote cultural and international understanding (Leong, 2015; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). Lee and Rice (2007) added that international students contribute to the diversity
of campus communities and add fresh perspectives to classroom dialogues. Concern arises, however, when American universities focus time and attention on the recruitment of international students but fall short in providing support once they arrive on campus (Shalka, 2017).

When support is minimal or absent, international students will struggle with personal, social, and environmental changes which lead to adjustment problems (Leong, 2015; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). Leong (2015) asserted: “The level and quality of emotional, material, informational, and social support provided by the host institution, as well as by members of the local area and host nation, greatly facilitate, or else impede, international students’ adjustment and outcomes” (p. 471). Most international students will experience some form of culture shock when they arrive in the United States. They may experience issues with language, food, customs, climate, teaching and learning styles, and socialization with American peers which may influence their adjustment (Glass et al., 2015; Leong, 2015; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). These issues influencing their experiences and adjustment will be discussed through challenges faced by international students.

Challenges Faced by International Students

The literature review presents key themes related to challenges faced by international students enrolled at institutions of higher education in the United States. Some of these challenges differ from domestic students. Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping and Todman (2008) explained: “Students attending universities in a culture different from their own have to contend with novel social and educational organizations, behaviors and expectations—as well as dealing
with the problems of adjustment common to students in general” (p. 63). For example, Lin and Scherz (2014) outlined these challenges acknowledging struggles that international students have with academic language and culturally driven writing styles and logical thinking. They stated: “To interact with American peers, instructors, and community members, international graduate students have to personally adjust to American culture and learning expectations” (p. 17). Also unique to international students, Glass et al. (2015) added: “Consequently, international students had to simultaneously negotiate multiple dimensions of their own social identities as they dealt with practical issues of language proficiency and variation in the culture of learning in the U.S.” (p. 359). Other issues unique to international students, compared to their domestic counterparts, included having more financial problems and less agency to deal with emotional or relationship problems (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007). Huang (2012) added: “Learning in a foreign environment is multifold, including learning about the cultural taboos, social expectations, learning approaches, and the subject matter. What a domestic student is assumed to know as an adult learner may be alien to international students” (p. 6).

When challenges are significant for international students, and coping mechanisms are absent or adjustment is not well managed, they may fail to persist. Identifying these challenges is an important backdrop to understanding the compounding impact that interactions with faculty may have for international graduate students. Further, if international graduate students are unable to persist and are not retained, there may be financial consequences for institutions, and certainly personal outcomes for students are not met (Mamiseishvili, 2012).

The areas highlighted in this review include English language proficiency, academic success, faculty interactions, discrimination, loneliness, cultural influences, community
engagement, and support programs and resources. Suggestions to remediate the challenges are discussed with more research needed in the area of faculty engagement and how students perceive these interactions influence their academic experiences.

**English Language Proficiency**

International graduate students wishing to attend institutions of higher education in the United States must provide evidence that they can communicate in English at the university level. Adequate proof of English proficiency is required but varies by institution. However, these standardized scores alone may not ensure that international students are not going to experience some level of language challenge once they begin coursework in the U.S. (Kuo, 2011).

Most universities in the United States accept scores from either the TOEFL or IELTS. The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) contains purely academic content and tasks created by test writers and experts in higher education to simulate university life and coursework and to identify the English-language demands faced by non-native English speakers. Kuo (2011) asserted that TOEFL scores may show how one may perform in the English language, but that is limited in that it cannot predict performance in academic areas. The International English Language Testing System, (IELTS), is an academic test is for people applying for higher education or professional registration in an English-speaking environment. It reflects some of the features of academic language and assesses whether one is ready to begin studying or training.

Research suggests that academic performance, level of comfort participating in classroom and in social settings, making friends and adjusting in the university and community would be greatly improved if language was less of a barrier (Bai, 2016; Banjong, 2015; Gao et al., 2010;
Kuo (2011) stated: “While universities require international students to meet minimum language proficiency, many of them do not have … adequate practice with the verbal use of English” (p. 38). Diminished English language comprehension and insufficient oral proficiency are major challenges faced by many international students (Bai, 2016; Kuo, 2011).

As a result, many international graduate students are less likely to feel comfortable speaking in class discussions, answering questions, and being outgoing in social situations if they are self-conscious about their accent or are fearful of misunderstandings in conversations (Bai, 2016; Lin & Scherz, 2014). When students attempt to contribute in class or participate socially, many feel marginalized and embarrassed. As an example, Kuo (2011) claimed: “Many international graduate students state they feel like children who are powerless and unable to express the thoughts and feelings they have because they are not well-versed using the English language” (p. 40).

Additionally, homework may take longer, understanding the nuances of studying independently in the library, making oral presentations in class, adapting to pop quizzes, and actively participating in classroom discussions are the result of the lack of English language proficiency (Bai, 2016). Li, Chen and Daunmu (2010) wrote: “For those international students whose first language is not English, their proficiency in English plays a crucial role in successfully completing their studies in an English-speaking learning environment” (p. 4). Lin and Scherz (2014) reported in their study that international students struggled with following classroom discussions contextually with understanding, while also preparing to participate in the discussion. When students do not participate in class discussions, professors may interpret their silence as disinterest or confusion and formulate inaccurate perceptions about their ability to
participate and learn course material (Kuo, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). This can lead students to shut down and develop anxiety and diminished self-confidence that can negatively impact their academic outcomes and social adjustment (Kuo, 2011; Lin & Scherz, 2014). Lin and Scherz (2014) determined that at times, international students felt inadequate and stupid when attempting to express themselves.

Perry (2016) echoed this assertion and stated: “Language differences led many students to feel anxious when speaking in front of Americans, which may hamper their desire to share their thoughts and opinions in the classroom” (p. 715). In the area of written language, academic writing is critical for success for all students in higher education. For international students there may be an added level of adaptation and transition (Tran, 2009). Lin and Scherz (2014) added: “Differences in writing styles, linguistically and culturally driven logical thinking, and appropriately formulating though into writing structures may vary widely and play a significant role in students’ academic and interpersonal experiences” (p. 17). Tran (2001) asserted: “Students’ struggle to communicate effectively in English can require professors to spend extra time directing them in the laboratory or design studio. It can also affect students’ overall performances in courses, especially during their early months of graduate study” (p. 22).

Faculty may want to consider these factors and extend patience and support when possible; otherwise, international students can feel alienated or marginalized (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Lee & Rice, 2007). Kuo (2011) recommended that international graduate students familiarize themselves with the way people speak in the U.S. and seek training in listening comprehension. This may serve to prepare students in communication in English and assist with adjustment to different accents and word usage before they arrive on campus.
Academic Success

Academic success is clearly an important goal for all students. For international students, it is critical and the consequences of not achieving academic success can be devastating. Kuo (2011) stated: “In addition to the academic stress caused by a lack of conversational English skills, many international students face academic challenges with regard to instructional methods that are used in American college classrooms” (p. 38). This academic challenge, referred to as academic culture shock for international students, impacts the learning environment within institutions of higher education inclusive of course assessment, lecture styles, and the relationship between students and faculty members (Li et al., 2019). Supporting these studies, Huang (2012) stated: “Learning shock refers to experiences of acute frustration, confusion and anxiety experienced by some students, who find themselves exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods, bombarded by unexpected and disorienting cues, and subjected to ambiguous and conflicting expectations” (p. 6). Academic culture shock or learning shock can upset academic performance and demand adjustment for most international students which may impact grades and persistence (Banjong, 2015).

If international students do not maintain a minimum grade point average (generally 2.0 undergraduate; 3.0 graduate, depending on the major), they are forced to leave the institution and return to their country of origin, abandoning their goal of earning a degree. The academic challenges unique to international students may compound their ability to persist. Some argue that the lack of English language proficiency is the most significant barrier to academic success (Andrade, 2006; Kisch, 2014; Sherry et al., 2010). That international students’ writing is bound by culture, ways of seeing the world, and identities, are additional components to consider.
regarding language issues faced by international students influencing academic success. (Andrade, 2006).

This important adjustment to academic life and expectations in the classroom can make or break students’ ability to maintain grades and persist. Li et al. (2010) reported: “Academic culture shock is directly associated with the learning environment of an academic institution, including the education system, lecture style, assessment, relationship between students and lecturers and so on” (p. 5). Additionally, the stress of adapting to foreign university standards, or the ability to construct an American academic identity, may be beyond some international students’ reach, thereby disrupting success (Mamiseishvili, 2012). Banjong (2015) added: “Some of the prominent difficulties of international students include cultural shock, homesickness, loss of social support, discrimination, language barriers, loneliness, depressions, and anxiety, [and these] may upset their academic success” (p. 132).

In addition to the level of English language proficiency, basic study skills and habits, specific learning modalities, and personality contribute to effective learning for international students (Abel, 2002). Related to individual learning modalities, learning time and perseverance may be the most important variables in academic learning for these students. Excellent time management practices and the ability to intensely focus on academic content within the allotted time are additional key factors that impact persistence and success (Carroll, 1963).

Classroom dynamics and course structure also play significant roles in academic adjustment and success. Many international students are not accustomed to frequent or extensive testing, informal relationships with professors, competition with peers, and the expectation that they participate in class rather than more passively listen and learn (Abel, 2002; Kuo, 2011).
Abel (2002) concluded: “Carefully choosing professors and carefully monitoring the time spent on study, recreation, and ‘down time’ are perhaps the most important strategies for advancing academic success” (p. 18). Developing relationships with peers, advisors and faculty can promote meaningful connections needed to foster self-confidence, and feeling welcomed and supported (Bista & Foster, 2011). Hyun et al. (2007) reported: “Advisors play a pivotal role in the academic life of graduate students. International students with better relationships with their advisors are less likely to report having had a stress-related or emotional problem” (p. 8).

Another area of concern regarding academic success relates to technology. Banjong (2015) wrote:

Encountering new advanced technology can be a nightmare and demoralizing when a person is unable to find a way around accommodating themselves to the technology. International students, from developing countries, in particular, frequently encounter new unfamiliar technology when they travel to study in western countries. Some of the students were unable to type well, use Blackboard on school websites to interact with course professors, download course material or do homework. Such challenges often lead to frustration and poor academic performance. (p. 138)

This adjustment to technology for classwork joins the list of challenges involving registering for classes, paying bills online, installing cable television, connecting to the Internet, and sorting out cellular phone plans (Gebhard, 2012).

The individual needs and outcomes for international students, viewed as persistence, can be supported through designated offices and targeted programs on campus (Bista & Foster, 2011). Mamiseishvili (2012) wrote: “Students reported that support from peers, family, faculty, and staff was crucial for them to succeed academically. The belief in the value of education for a better future was another contributing factor” (p. 3). Persistence and retention go hand in hand
and lead to successful academic outcomes for international students (Mamiseishvili, 2012).

Retention, an institutional-driven concept and goal, is essential, and international students who are meeting with success will persist through graduation. According to Berger and Lyon (2005), persistence “refers to the desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education” and retention “refers to the ability of an institution to retain a student” (p. 7).

Educational stability, student satisfaction and student success are the foundation of the retention process (Demaris & Kritsonis, 2008). For international students, engagement with campus culture and in courses, as well as involvement in extracurricular activities, helped with their ability to persist (Mamiseishvili, 2012). Andrade (2006) added: “Other factors that affect the academic success of international students include motivation, academic skills, age, and years of study” (p. 148).

For international students to achieve academic success, it is important for institutions to understand the challenges and barriers that students face along their adjustment journey. Without the proper supports, inclusive of tutoring, mentoring, and specific programming, as well as meaningful interactions with faculty in the classroom, international students are at risk of not meeting academic standards in their program. (Perrucci & Hu, 1995). Promoting academic success and supporting students throughout their program will positively impact persistence and retention. Perrucci and Hu (1995) stated:

Students who express satisfaction with their academic experiences and their social life in the community have probably succeeded in overcoming the stress associated with the new demands of being a student and sojourner. Such students are more likely to complete their programs in a timely manner and to be more effective learners. (p. 492)
The reduction of stress for international graduate students, therefore, may support persistence, retention, and academic success. Mamiseishvili (2012) added: “If international students successfully integrate in the academic system of campus, they will more likely stay enrolled in the institution” (p. 13). Tinto (2012) stressed that this positive outcome needs to come to students early on in their university experience, as one successful class builds upon the next successful class, one course at a time. Banjong (2015) reported: “The academic performance of international students could greatly improve if they seek help from campus resources concerning the challenges they face” (p. 137). Further, if international students sought these resources early on, this would help them adapt, reduce challenges, and better support their academic performance (Banjong, 2015).

Academic success for international graduate students is incumbent upon many factors. These factors may include level of English language proficiency and successfully adapting to teaching methods, grading, course assessment, and lecture styles in American classrooms. Academic culture shock is experienced by many international students and affects the learning environment. This may be a result of homesickness, loss of social support, discrimination, loneliness, depression, and anxiety that upset their academic success. Universities can alleviate some of these concerns by offering support through targeted programing and specific offices of support.
Faculty Interactions

Minimal research has been devoted to international student and engagement with faculty and how effective learning strategies and collaborative learning have been influential because of engagement (R. Wang, 2018). Tinto (2012) offered:

Perhaps the most important attribute of effective classrooms, is involvement in what is now commonly referred to as engagement. Simply put, the more students are academically and socially engaged with academic staff, and peers, especially in classroom activities, the more likely they are to succeed in the classroom. Such engagements lead not only to social affiliations and the social and emotional support they provide, but also to greater involvement in learning activities and the learning they produce. Both lead to success in the classroom. (p. 5)

Tinto (2012) studied the factors that enhanced student success and highlighted the importance of paying attention to students’ experiences in the classroom to better understand these factors (clear expectations, timely support, feedback on assessment, engaging pedagogies, and enhancing teaching skills). In line with these factors, R. Wang (2018) asserted: “Faculty approaches and behaviors in connecting with international students will be beneficial to the engagement of international students and students overall, especially in student-faculty interaction” (p. 1028).

Results from one study showed that a strong relationship with faculty reduces stress and depression experienced by students and contributes to building connections with domestic students (Gao et al., 2010). Students reported that long-term career goals were affected and they were significantly motivated by professors they admired (Glass et al., 2015). Support and validation from professors, peers, and university staff is a critical component of adjustment in college for international students (Andrade, 2006). In other studies, Cole (2010) and O’Meara,
Knudsen and Jones (2013) reported that faculty may be the most influential force impacting international students’ academic path and that engagement with professors significantly affect learning and motivation for international students.

Just as with domestic students, faculty-student relationships may be an important influence for the success and overall well-being of the international student. Able (2002) reported: “Classroom atmosphere and especially the quality and degree of faculty-student interaction in American universities trouble international students” (p. 16). To counter these issues, students need to know that they are accepted, respected, heard, and valued in the classroom to truly feel comfortable and invested in the learning process. This positive shift will help international students in all other areas where there may be challenges or negative impacting factors. The feeling of belonging for international students is enhanced when connections are made with faculty, when classroom environments are inclusive, and when faculty employ multi-culturally competent practices (Cao et al., 2014; Glass et al., 2015). Effective classrooms emerge when students are more engaged socially and academically with faculty, spurring more involvement in the learning process which leads to success in the classroom (Tinto, 2012). Mamiseishvili (2012) added: “Interactions with faculty, staff, and students become even more critical for international students as they try to adjust to foreign university standards and construct an American academic identity” (p. 14).

A better understanding of the impact engagement with faculty has on international students’ academic experiences needs further exploration to address their challenges and articulate solutions. Exploring interactions between faculty and international graduate students is needed to educate faculty and will fill gaps in the literature addressing this important issue.
Filling this gap will support all constituents involved and may provide improved experiences and outcomes.

**Discrimination**

The literature suggests that U.S. institutions of higher education as well as stakeholders at the institution (comprised of faculty, staff, administration, domestic students and the community) should take steps to better prepare for incoming international students and to accept and embrace these students (Abdul-Alim, 2017; Bista & Foster, 2011). Grasgreen (2011) found that: “Despite becoming a larger presence on campuses every year, international students still struggle with discrimination and are unsatisfied by the degree to which student services helped them make transitions to cultural and educational systems of the United States” (p. 1). Further, there is often a lack of openness on the part of domestic students to accept international students, thereby adding to their discomfort. Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) suggested: “While all sojourning international students would like to feel welcomed by the host culture members, unfortunately, they oftentimes feel marginalized” (p. 560). The feeling of not being welcomed by the host culture may be explained in part through cultural intolerance. Lee and Rice (2007) conducted a study with 24 students from 15 countries at a university in the U.S. Southwest. Regarding the students’ experiences, they reported:

Being a part of majority culture and then entering the U.S. as a “minority” brought new reflections of race and status in the U.S. society. Several students commented on feelings of inferiority based on media portrayals or direct insults. Negative remarks of others’ home country or culture, and hostility toward non-fluency in English, and discrimination toward internationals in the U.S. were understood as direct sources of cultural intolerance. (p. 394)
Many international students in this study dealt with discrimination early on upon arriving to the U.S. This was often a debilitating challenge because these students had never experienced discrimination in their country of origin and this caused them to report feeling like uninvited guests.

In describing culture shock, confusion with American culture and limitations by their own cultures, Kusek (2015) added that this is “further fueled by micro aggressions by the host population against the language and race of international students” (p. 1122). This was emphasized by Perry (2016): “Students who reported lower levels of English skills also reported higher levels of discrimination. Discrimination is an issue that still seems to be a problem for many international students” (p. 715). Peterson et al. (1999) recommended: “Programs promoting mutual intercultural learning and respect between international and American students” (p. 68). More direct programming and training for host institutions and all constituents are imperative to ease the transition of international students into the culture (Peterson et al., 1999; Shalka, 2017). Support concerning teaching and working with international students should be a priority for institutions so that administration and faculty can provide a welcoming and safe campus environment for international students (Lee & Rice, 2007). These steps may help to reduce discrimination that international students experience during their stay in the U.S.

Loneliness

Missing home may be a common denominator among all students, domestic and international. Banjong (2015) stated: “Loneliness and homesickness often decrease among international students the longer they stay in their new environment. Building new social
networks is often a challenge to these students, particularly when the language barrier is present” (p. 137). Addressing loneliness, Y. Wang et al. (2018) wrote: “Although many universities have been providing activities and events for international students, the interactions that these students have may still be limited primarily to other international students” (p. 838). These efforts may be beneficial but only to a point. Involving domestic students in these targeted activities may improve the impact of such programming (Y. Wang et al., 2018). Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) wrote: “Overall, in adjusting to living in the U.S., international students who are able to competently practice identity negotiation skills will feel more understood, more supported, and respected by culturally unfamiliar others” (p. 552). Further, international students with stronger social support networks in their new settings reported less academic stress than students with weaker social skills and networking capacity (Gao et al., 2010). Therefore, connection and opportunities to interact with domestic students and community partners reduces problematic issues for international students and supports their well-being and adjustment, leading to successful overall experiences.

Bai (2016) wrote: “Studies have found that developing social networks with American students helps international students in making successful adjustments and students who primarily socialize with American students experience less acculturative stress” (p. 96). Students, domestic and international, must make connections on campus with at least one office, professor, counselor or peer to develop a sense of belonging that can reduce homesickness and isolation (Bai, 2016; Gao et al., 2010; Kusek, 2015).

The lack of social networks combined with English proficiency struggles and diminished connections to domestic students, faculty, and staff will lead to evasive behavior. Lee and Rice
(2007) reported: “Feelings of discomfort were exacerbated in classrooms where international students felt ignored in lessons or excluded by other students. Already feeling like an outsider, insecurities were heightened when they are left out of students’ study groups or social events” (p. 397). Feeling excluded, stressed, and isolated can feed into loneliness and hopelessness. This result negatively impacts adjustment critical for acculturation, academic success, and overall favorable experiences for international students. When feeling vulnerable, international students can fail to leave their comfort zones and miss opportunities to make friends and explore relationships with culturally dissimilar others (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

**Cultural Influences**

Challenges and issues around adjustment to university life are common for all college students. However, students attending college at institutions in a culture different from their own have additional social and educational concerns (Banjong, 2015; Lee & Rice, 2007; Zhou et al., 2008). Y. Wang et al. (2018) stated: “International students in the U.S. often experience adaptation difficulties upon relocating to different cultural and language surroundings. Culture shock, challenges, and miscommunications can occur when they immerse themselves into American social, cultural and academic life” (p. 822). These social and educational concerns can impact international students studying in the United States in various ways. The ability to adapt is often influenced by what the international student knows about the new culture, how long they will remain in the host culture, their level of English proficiency, and their own cultural identity (Zhou et al., 2008). Perrucci and Hu (1995) shared:

The normal problems of coping with a new academic setting are compounded for international students who may find themselves suddenly faced with living in a different
society, culture, and language system. International students must deal not only with academic challenges, but with new customs, languages, food, living arrangements, social life, and much more. The conditions for stress are abundant, and the possibilities of an unsatisfactory experience are great. (p. 492)

For many international students, everything they know how to do and are used to is a challenge. Activities that they successfully navigated in their country of origin are completely different in the new environment. The period of adjustment varies for each student but can be impactful in stressful and potentially harmful ways.

Rivera (2010) wrote: “Acculturation can be viewed as a dynamic process of change that individuals undergo as they interact with and adapt to a new or different cultural environment” (p. 331). International students grapple with holding on to their own culture while immersing themselves in the new culture (Berry, 1997). The distinction between acculturation and ethnic or cultural identity is further delineated through understanding that ethnic identity is related to how individuals feel about membership in their group. Acculturation relates to how one learns to operate in the dominant culture (Phinney, 2003). Ethnic identity and the process of acculturation can influence each other and the successful negotiation between the two will affect one’s overall adjustment outcome. An important factor linked to acculturation is the extent of contact between international students and domestic students and other people from the host culture (Perrucci & Hu, 1995). This interaction between international and domestic students is an additional factor affecting adjustment. Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) stated: “Not only is social support crucial in itself for positive well-being, but social support also provides a powerful coping resource for persons experiencing stressful life changes, including the stress of adjusting to an unfamiliar culture” (p. 71).
However, the process is further complicated by a lack of awareness and respect by domestic students and faculty about the culture, history and geography of international students (Peterson et al., 1999). Small cultural differences often make even the most everyday task daunting for international students because of different social, financial, and academic norms (Gebhard, 2012). Learning transportation systems, navigating social norms, and knowing how to engage with faculty may not have been issues in the country of origin, but may present significant barriers in the new culture. International students are challenged during the process of cultural adjustment which may be remedied through the support of friends, university support services, and the community toward the goal of insuring the full benefits of diversity university-wide (Andrade, 2006).

Guo and Jamal (2007) stated: “Faculty members and students both come to the teaching environment with varied experiences and social and cultural backgrounds and may carry with them unexamined assumptions about the characteristics of various cultural groups with whom they are unfamiliar” (p. 34). International students have diverse ways of knowing influenced by their backgrounds and different ways of seeing the world which are impacted by their cultural assumptions, beliefs, values, and modes of communication (Guo & Jamal, 2007; Tran, 2009).

Additionally, Gau, Narui, and Fontaine (2010) found: “Cultural difference can influence both performance and relationships as well. Students from cultural backgrounds that emphasize collectivism and interdependence may feel confused when interacting with American students who emphasize individualism and independence” (p. 2). International students may experience increased stress during the acculturation process if they encounter instructors who utilize culturally insensitive curricula (Bai, 2016). For example, Fox (1994) reported: “What professors
perceived as the inability of international students to analyze and logically develop a written argument was the result of cultural communication styles, not a lack of English proficiency” (p. 138). A study by Glass et al. (2015) revealed that international students’ personal ways of knowing often incorporated their experiences on a global level that was beyond domestic students’ understanding. Glass et al. (2015) wrote: “International students had to simultaneously negotiate multiple dimensions of their own social identities as they dealt with practical issues of language proficiency and variation in the culture of learning in the U.S.” (p. 359).

In a study by Gebhard (2012), international students shared how emotionally draining it was to adjust to another culture. They expressed that this was due in part to their level of English language proficiency, but also because the rules involving the navigation of these challenges were not known to them. Adapting to a new culture can be a significant challenge for international graduate students in adjusting to academic expectations and the ability to acclimate socially. Gebhard (2012) stated: “The mental anguish that people, including students, feel when they live in a new culture often comes from a barrage of small cultural differences that can have a powerful emotional impact on students” (p. 185). The successful negotiation between ethnic identity and the process of acculturation will impact this adjustment. International graduate students as well as faculty bring cultural assumptions, beliefs, values, and modes of teaching or learning into the classroom. How these variable factors develop and interact may provide for productive outcomes or, conversely, barriers to success. Therefore, being aware of the process of acculturation and incorporating a level of understanding and sensitivity to the classroom, curricula, and interactions with international students may prove helpful and beneficial to all constituents.
Community Engagement

More and more universities are realizing that simply bringing more students from abroad is not enough to successfully impact diversity and globalization on their campuses (Korobova, 2012). More attention should be paid to the experiences of international students than on the actual numbers of international students at campuses as a marker of increasing diversity, internationalization, or globalization (Lee & Rice, 2007). Are institutions preparing the faculty and staff as well as the domestic student with whom the international students will interact greatly? Are there places of interest off campus to attract participation and will shops, restaurants and other businesses welcome the influx of international students? (Redden, 2014a). Lee and Rice (2007) stated: “Social and community factors strongly affect international students’ experiences after arriving and their decision to persist” (p. 385). This is echoed in many studies that specify the importance of connection of international students to their new community at the university and surrounding environment.

The notion of creating a culturally competent and educated community can more naturally allow for the engagement of all participants (Bista & Foster, 2011; Peterson et al., 1999). Redden (2014a) also theorized that if programming and intended interaction are not active goals, then international student mobility may not contribute to global learning at all. The quality of the experience for international students is as important as the quantity (number of international students), if not more so (Miller, 2016). Thus, connection and opportunities to interact with domestic students and community partners may reduce problematic issues for international students and support their well-being and adjustment, leading to successful overall experiences. An example of one such community program related to this study is the
Intercultural Café offered by the Network of Nations. This organization is supported through five DeKalb-area churches located near the campus and partners with staff members at NIU. This weekly, free, drop-in potluck dinner invites international students and community members together to practice English, participate in cultural events, and support international students. Members of the group offer transportation to students, meals in their homes during holidays, shopping, and opportunities to join in trips to Chicago and surrounding venues.

**Support Programs and Resources**

Dedicated offices of support for international students are necessary to ease the transition and adjustment which are critical factors for students to be successful and persist (Glass et al., 2015; Kusek, 2015). Choudaha (2016) stated: “The American Council on Education in its 2012 report identified that, while efforts to recruit international students are on the rise, the data do not show a commensurate increase in support services for these students” (p. II). Andrade (2006) stated: “Institutions cannot simply admit foreign students and expect them to adjust to life in a new country and educational system without appropriate support and programming” (p. 517). Institutions often expect international students to fit in and adjust without finding out what kinds of support services and programming would be of benefit for their transition (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012).

Nguyen’s (2016) study reported the following:

Many campuses expect that international students will take part in programming and activities available to all students on campus; however, administrators, faculty, and student affairs professionals do not realize that such an approach may alienate many students who are already struggling with the new academic system, cultural shock, language barriers, cultural differences, and instances of discrimination. (p. 852).
As with all students new to a university campus, there is a period of adjustment. For some students this adjustment comes more easily than for others. For international students integrating language, cultural, educational, and social nuances, this period may be longer and more challenging than expected.

Many international students don’t know where to go for particular services, and this initial interaction is important for setting a tone and starting off on the right foot. Gao et al. (2010) asserted: “Programs that effectively support international students during their educational and personal sojourns abroad need to have a meaningful role in our universities” (p. 1). Retention of international students is dependent on their successful navigation of all university systems and individual needs must be met through support staff and specific services (Bista & Foster, 2011; Kusek, 2015; Lee & Rice, 2007).

Providing intentional programming for domestic and international students to come together is a great opportunity to develop cross-cultural relationships (Miller, 2016). Creating mentoring programs for academic and social support may also be appealing, as higher academic achievement can be fulfilled when peers are used to help international students learn (Abel, 2002; Banjong, 2015). Gebhard (2012) wrote: “Students found support through international student organizations, at writing and learning centers, and with professors, foreign student advisors, classmates in study groups, home stay families, and other international students” (p. 188). Bai (2016) added: “Practitioners should also educate the host community about the cultures of international students and facilitate intercultural communication. Establishing local social support systems will help international students alleviate acculturative stress” (Liu, 2009, p. 104).
As the numbers of international students continue to rise, universities should prepare to supplement or enhance the foundations of support on campuses to meet the needs of international students (Banjong, 2015; Peterson et al., 1999). Bista and Foster (2011) concluded: “The retention of international students is dependent upon meeting the needs of the individual students that college support staff serves, internationally or locally” (p. 3). Utilizing these offices of support will help with adjustment, reduce challenges, and endeavor to improve social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Banjong, 2015). Gebhard (2015) cautioned: “The university community needs to sincerely welcome all international students, as well as help build a positive, helpful community” (p. 190).

Chapter Summary

Extensive research focuses on certain challenges that international students face when they come to the United States and enroll in institutions of higher education. The list of challenges is significant and for many international students may include finances, acculturative stress, campus climate, family expectations, lack of academic preparedness, teaching methodology, lack of transportation, limited access to familiar food, products and information, minimal computer and technological expertise, loss of social status, social norms, American academic integrity standards, and immigration restrictions and regulations.

Additional challenges highlighted in this review included English language proficiency, academic success, loneliness, cultural influences, discrimination, support programs and services, and meaningful engagement with the community. However, there are gaps in the literature regarding the challenging impact that interactions with faculty may have on international students, particularly as they may influence academic experiences.
International students bring culturally diverse perspectives to institutions of higher education in the United States, benefiting domestic students and directly and indirectly contributing to globalization. Further, international students provide financial importance and security to universities across the nation and thus should be supported in their efforts to persist and meet with success.

International students who are not able to acclimate to the new environment, culture and expectations may experience loneliness. One significant barrier is discrimination faced by international students which often stems from domestic students’ inability or unwillingness to accept and embrace these students in the classroom, in the residence halls or through student organizations. English language proficiency is another salient issue that, if lacking, causes international students to suffer academically and socially. This may contribute to poor interactions with faculty, students and community members.

Community engagement is critical for international students to develop a sense of belonging and the ability to acclimate. This can be enhanced through support programs and resources specifically designed for international students. The sooner these support services are accessed, the better the adjustment will be for international students. If universities are under-resourced in this area, then it is critical for targeted efforts to be realized for students’ maximum support. Finally, faculty interactions and perceptions may play a pivotal role in the adjustment, comfort level, and academic success of international students in the classroom. Because these interactions may influence numerous other areas in which international students participate, this phenomenon should be explored through further research.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Chapter 3 presents the research design, theoretical underpinnings, research site, participant information, interview and classroom observation processes, methods of data collection and analysis, trustworthiness, research positionality, and researcher’s profile. The research design provides the foundation for exploring the key question, “How do international graduate students perceive interactions with faculty contribute to their academic experiences?”

The study follows a qualitative research design through phenomenological inquiry with theoretical underpinnings in interpretivism, the understanding of meaning-making outcomes. The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to understand how international graduate students perceive and describe interactions with faculty contribute to their academic experience. Through individual interviews and classroom observations (involving a focal group of three students), 15 international graduate students were recruited to participate, focusing on the following research questions:

1. How do international graduate students describe their interactions with faculty?
2. According to international graduate students, how do these interactions influence their experiences?
3. How do international graduate students describe classroom practices and the impact specific practices have on their academic experiences?
Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research is an approach used to explore and understand meaning involving individuals or groups dealing with a problem or social issue (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research generally incorporates five characteristics: the natural setting; descriptive data; concern with the process; the inductive analysis of data; and the meaning of how different people make sense of their lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Collecting information using two or more methods is common in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013).

Qualitative research employs one of the following strategies of inquiry: phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, ethnography, and narrative (Creswell, 2014). My study is a qualitative research design through phenomenological inquiry. This design shaped the title, the problem, research questions, data collection and analysis, and subsequent writing.

A qualitative research design aligned with my goal to interview international graduate students in the university setting and observe some of them in the classroom where interactions with faculty occur. I availed myself to unlocking all possibilities while taking into account what was happening and not rush to make assumptions or assign outcomes. I developed assertions and derived meaning from the international graduate students’ perspectives after the examination of data, codes, categories, and themes (Saldana, 2016).

Epistemology

In concert with the underpinnings of phenomenology, understanding the process of knowledge acquisition and production experienced by international graduate students studying in the United States was helpful. I explored this through constructivism, which embodies our
understanding of how the world is and how it is constructed by each person. Maxwell (2013) asserted: “We recognize that what people perceive and believe is shaped by their assumptions and prior experiences as well as by the reality that they interact with” (p. 43).

All people, all students, embody different ideas about reality. How international graduate students make sense of their experiences will in part depend on what they perceive as shaped by their assumptions and cultural beliefs. Their lived experiences will impact social negotiations and interactions among peers, faculty, and community members. Supporting the qualitative research process, my focus was on learning the meaning that international graduate students derived about their engagement with faculty impacting their academic experiences rather than the meaning that I brought to the research (Creswell, 2014).

Understanding assumptions held by international graduate students who come to study at higher education institutions the United States may inform how they navigate and construct their educational experience as well as how they frame their understanding of learning. An additional component I examined, which was extrapolated from the students’ opinions, will explore what assumptions faculty may hold regarding international students that may influence their academic experiences. Faculty also embody their own culture, beliefs, perceptions, assumptions and lived experiences relative to their students. Former experience with students from other countries may influence faculty behavior, attitudes, and approach. The absence of experience with students from other countries may also influence faculty behaviors.

As international graduate students engage with their new environment and with new people, this interaction will likely add to their understanding of the world. Walt (1998) wrote: “Epistemology through constructivism—our understanding of how the world is—is constructed
by each of us through our own construction. Constructivist approaches emphasize the impact of ideas” (p. 40). Understanding the impact of ideas through the perspective of international graduate students will provide direction to their meaning-making process when engaging with faculty.

Maxwell (2013) stated: “Epistemological constructivism: our understanding of this world is inevitably our construction, rather than a purely objective perception of reality and no such construction can claim absolute truth” (p. 43). Constructivism was applicable to this study, as it allowed me to observe and describe how international graduate students engage with faculty in the classroom and make sense of those interactions (Crotty, 1998; Miller, 2016). Knowledge can be garnered through the meanings attached to the phenomenon as the researcher interacts with the subjects to gather data, and is both context and time dependent (Krauss, 2005). Learning how international graduate students made sense of those interactions further supported the purpose of this study.

Theoretical Perspective

A paradigm that is relevant to qualitative research includes interpretivism, and I used this as an orientating lens for my study. Making meaning of people's experiences, or interpretivism, is relevant to my study, as I was interested in how interactions between faculty and international graduate students impact the (international students’) academic experiences. Gioia and Pitre (1990) wrote: “The interpretive paradigm is based on the view that people socially and symbolically construct and sustain their own organizational realities” (p. 588). As a theory-building process, this perspective supports descriptions, insights, and explanation of meaning-
making outcomes. I chose this route to follow to adequately approach the following research questions:

1. How do international graduate students describe their interactions with faculty?
2. According to international graduate students, how do these interactions influence their experiences?
3. How do international graduate students describe classroom practices and the impact specific practices have on their academic experiences?

Understanding this perspective through the eyes of international graduate students is paramount because they are the only ones who can accurately interpret how they make meaning from their experiences. The focus moves from, or perhaps never begins with what is true, but rather toward the notion of understanding, comprehending and integrating different worldviews (Gioia & Pitre, 1990).

According to Creswell (2014): “This lens or perspective: shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analyzed, and provides a call for action or change” (p. 64). Understanding the university experience through international graduate students’ perspectives may initiate a call for actions or change or it may support practices in place that should be continued, shared and enhanced. I believe that using interpretivism to gather this perspective and essence of experience will in fact inform the central phenomenon garnered from international graduate students’ actions and stories.

Methodology

Phenomenology is a methodology for studying the world of everyday, philosophical attitude, and a research approach. First-person reports of life experiences provide evidence in
phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). This approach to understanding the participants’ lived experiences within phenomenological research is also an outcome of Edmund Husserl’s philosophical work (Chan, Fung & Chien, 2013). In phenomenology, the primary position is that the most basic human truths are accessible only through inner subjectivity and that the person is integral to the environment (Bryman, 1984; Crotty, 1998; Flood, 2010; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Further, the participants in the research have lived the phenomenon in question and are willing and able to share their experiences (Donalek, 2004).

As I was committed to understanding the university and academic experiences through the lived experiences of international graduate students, this was an applicable approach through individual interviews and classroom observations. Goulding (2005) concluded: “Phenomenology therefore is a critical reflection on conscious experience, rather than subconscious motivation, and is designed to uncover the essential invariant features of that experience” (Jopling, 1996, p. 302). Uncovering the essence of international graduate students’ experiences through interviews and classroom observations assisted in exploring the phenomenon.

Phenomenology, emphasizing the importance of personal perspective and interpretation, provides a unique and powerful opportunity for the researcher to dig deeply and understand the subjective experience, gaining insights into people’s motivation and actions, and allows the researcher to put aside assumptions and conventional wisdom (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Lester, 1999). I was not so much interested in facts and causes. In this research study, I sought to go beyond a description of the experiences as reported by international graduate students to pursue what we or they may take for granted (Crotty, 1998).
Creswell (2014) explained, “Phenomenological research uses the analysis of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of what Moustakas (1994) called an essence description” (p. 196). There are multiple ways to gain entry into the world of international graduate students’ experiences including analyzing significant statements through interviews. Moustakas (1994) explained: “Husserl was concerned with the discovery of meanings and essences of knowledge” (p. 27). The analysis of these significant participant statements serves to uncover meanings. Husserl (1931) asserted: “Essence provides on the one side a knowledge of the essential nature of the real, on the on the other, in respect of the domain left over, knowledge of the essential nature of the non-real” (p. 45). Phenomenology allows a subjective approach toward understanding the meaning international graduate students construct and provides various ways to discover and interpret these experiences through interactions with them. Accepting things as they actually appear, recording the narrative of participants and foregoing judgement, will direct one toward the truth (Husserl, 1970). This approach to discovering knowledge in my study was developed through the shared narratives and reported experiences of each participants. In the next section, I will review Moustakas’s (1994) phenomenological methods to explain this process of discovery: Epoche, phenomenological reduction (or reflective description), imaginative variation, and synthesis.

In the Epoche (also framed as bracketing), a Greek word meaning to stay away from, one suspends assumptions or preconceived ideas about a topic (Moustakas, 1994). Engaging in Epoche allows the researcher to become open to new ideas and possibilities and should be ongoing throughout the research. Bednall (2006) wrote: “The challenge for a researcher is to allow the voices of subjectivity to emerge authentically in coming to an understanding of what
essentially the research respondents mean in their personal accounts expressed through the data collection devices” (p. 3). When the researcher is able to attain this level of separation or degree of objectivity, then the researcher can move into reflective description.

Reflective description in the discovery process focuses on all that is going on—in time and space, relationships, thoughts, feelings, places (Moustakas, 1995). There is a sense of moving in and out of the issues, problems, or concerns and the response to all of them. This level of the discovery process mirrors Moustakas’s earlier category of phenomenological reduction, where the researcher is required to look and describe over and over and reference textural qualities (Moustakas, 1994). The idea of paying attention to all the variables and qualities of the experience is a fluid and open-ended endeavor. Moustakas (1995) stated: “Through imaginative variation, alternatives are examined, possibilities are tested, and many different meanings are envisioned and explicated” (p. 52). The full development of the meanings of experiences can be owned (Moustakas, 1995) and different outcomes can be considered.

The final step in the phenomenological research process is synthesis of meanings and essences (Moustakas, 1994). This phase of the process provides an opportunity to bring information together relative to a particular time and place and evaluate all the pieces, feelings, and experiences toward a fuller understanding of the whole (Moustakas, 1994). In this way, meaning evolves as perspectives are evaluated, reevaluated, pulled apart and realigned.

**Research Site**

The research site for this study was a mid-size, public, comprehensive teaching and research institution with a student enrollment of approximately 18,000. In the fall of 2017, the
institution’s International Student and Faculty Office reported an enrollment of 940 international students comprising 74% graduate and 26% undergraduate students. The total international student population therefore comprises slightly over 5% of the overall institutional enrollment.

Situated in DeKalb, Illinois, Northern Illinois University is located 65 miles west of Chicago in the center of a rapidly growing urban area of nearly 44,000 residents, according to the City of DeKalb (2017) website. DeKalb was founded in 1837, growing from a small village into the main hub for manufacturing barbed wire, which brought many people to live and work within the village (City of DeKalb, Community Profile, 2017).

This university attracts many international students seeking a quality education at an affordable price and as such the graduate population continues to surge. The university, chartered in 1895, is comprised of seven degree-granting colleges that combine to offer 57 undergraduate degree majors and 69 graduate degree programs—including 10 Ph.D. programs and doctoral degrees in education and a Juris Doctorate (Institution Fast Facts, 2017).

The International Student and Faculty Office is dedicated to facilitating, advising, and guiding international students, faculty, and staff as they engage with the university in pursuit of their goals. All international undergraduate admissions flow through this office and the department offers a week-long orientation program each semester. Advising, programs, and events support various educational, social, and cultural opportunities throughout the academic year. Admissions for international graduate students, the focus of my study, is facilitated through the Graduate School, and international graduate students are afforded the same support services and programming through the International Student and Faculty Office.
Participant Pool

The study was conducted during the spring semester of 2018, at which time Northern Illinois University had an enrollment of 940 international students comprising 74% graduate and 26% undergraduate students (NIU International Student and Faculty Office, fall 2017). The percentages translate to 696 graduate and 244 undergraduate students. According to the International Student and Faculty Office, a graduate school-eligible international student is a non-U.S. citizen who has completed a four-year undergraduate degree awarded by regionally accredited institutions or foreign institutions that have equivalent recognition and who fulfills the entrance criteria for the graduate school.

Of the 78 countries represented, the top three include India, 46%; China, 15%; and Saudi Arabia, 13%. Major areas of study for undergraduate students comprise business, math and science, computer science, engineering and STEM fields. For graduate students, programs include business, engineering, computer science, math and science.

English Language Proficiency Requirements

According to the International Student and Faculty Office at Northern Illinois University, any one of the following is accepted:

1. Attendance at a U.S. high school for more than two years by the time of graduation.
2. Official TOEFL or IELTS score report with the following results:
   a. TOEFL: Either an Internet-based or paper-based test with required minimum scores of 71 on an Internet-based test or 527 on a paper-based test.
   b. IELTS minimum required overall band score of 6.0.
3. Completion of ELS level 112 for Academic Purpose offered by ELS Language Centers.
4. High school diploma from Canada, the United Kingdom, or Australia.
Students must submit official school records.


Students must submit transcripts showing they have passed two university-level English courses.

A required step for international students to qualify for entrance into Northern Illinois University is meeting at least one criterion from the list above. This criterion is in addition to admission criteria established by the university Graduate School. There are exceptions. The TOEFL or IELTS scores are not required of students who received or will receive a university degree from any of the countries listed in Appendix B.

**Participant Recruitment**

Working closely with the International Student and Faculty Office (ISFO), I employed several methods of recruitment reaching out to the 696 international graduate students. These methods included posting on the group ISFO Facebook page inviting students to contact me if they would be interested in participating; displaying a flyer in the International Student and Faculty Office; and using the snowball or chain sampling technique whereby I asked the first participant to reach out to friends or acquaintances to inquire if they would be willing to participate, and so on (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Additionally, I periodically attended the Intercultural Café in DeKalb sponsored by five area churches. This free, buffet-style dinner is open to all international students and their friends on select Friday evenings during the semester. This communal gathering offers cultural programming, the opportunity to practice English, and networking. This was an appropriate setting in which to invite international graduate students to participate in my study and I was able to offer flyers of information to interested students.
I interviewed only a small percentage of the NIU international graduate student population, approximately 2% of the 696 students (15 in total) and developed criteria for selecting participants. Purposeful selection assisted in managing the typicality of the setting (classroom), individuals (international graduate students), and activities (interaction with faculty) (Maxwell, 2013).

An international graduate student was considered eligible to participate if they were a non-U.S. citizen and registered with the International Student and Faculty Office. Ideally, the international graduate student was taking classes at the DeKalb campus and was able to participate in the interview on or near campus. Both master and doctoral-level students were eligible as well as all ethnic groups, countries of origin, ages, and genders.

Criteria for selecting the participants included international graduate students who had been enrolled in courses for a minimum of one semester at NIU. My goal was to gather information from students who had at least some experience engaging with faculty, so they could offer insight and reflection rather than simply initial reactions based on early interactions from brand-new or first-semester students.

Participants

Following common parameters of phenomenological methods of data collection, once the students agreed to participate and had signed letters of consent, I conducted the individual semi-structured interviews, which encompassed open-ended questions with a goal of at least 60 minutes per interview (Moustakas, 1994).
I interviewed 15 international graduate students but kept in mind that if the information became redundant after a certain number of students, revision was possible as data saturation may have been reached (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Although the idea of saturation generally comes from grounded theory rather than phenomenology, it was helpful to judge when additional data may no longer reveal new properties, relevant themes or ideas (Creswell, 2014). However, initially casting a wider net allowed more opportunity to gather a rich set of stories and experiences to analyze. Further, due to the anticipated diversity of students in the participant pool, planning to interview all 15 students was appropriate.

Participants’ Background

The participants of this study were all international graduate students who had been enrolled for a minimum of one semester at the time of the interviews. General demographics of study participants included age, country of origin, gender, degree level, and college. The number of participants, 15, were relatively evenly distributed by gender with seven men and eight women. The 15 participants represented 11 countries of origin. Four participants were from India and two were from Ethiopia. The remaining participants were from Bangladesh, China, Iran, Nigeria, Tanzania, Canada, Colombia, South Korea, and Turkmenistan. The participant from Canada shared that his parents were born in Sri Lanka, a country and culture with which he strongly identifies.

The participants’ ages ranged from 23 to 43. Six participants were pursuing a master’s degree, six a PhD, two an EdD, and one a JD. Participants were enrolled in programs in the following colleges: College of Education (7); College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (5); College
of Business (1); College of Engineering and Engineering Technology (1); and one in the College of Law. The participant pool was diverse as it was representative of multiple nationalities, cultures and backgrounds, and an age span of 20 years. Additionally, participants were pursuing degrees in a variety of fields. The time period enrolled in classes at NIU ranged from one semester to eight years.

The focal group of three participants was comprised of one female doctoral student in the College of Education, one male student in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences working on his Master of Arts degree, and one male student in the College of Business finishing his Master of Science degree.

The 11 participant countries are highlighted on the map in Figure 3 (see Appendix C). Table 1 depicts the demographics of the 15 research participants.

Methods of Data Collection

Before the face-to-face individual interviews began, and as part of the consent agreement, I asked students if they would be willing to allow me to observe them in a class and then to participate in a follow-up interview. This was a consistent process prior to the interviews. I then selected three students from the pool who were willing to have me observe in a class and whose professors agreed to the classroom observation. The selection of the primary informants was driven by information gathered during the interviews as well as my availability relative to individual class schedules. If a student did not agree to an observation in the classroom and/or a subsequent interview at the time of recruitment, they were not excluded from the initial interview.
Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Degree</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Iran</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>MS</td>
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</table>
Data collection included face-to-face individual interviews and classroom observations conducted between February 2018 and April 2018. The interviews ranged in length from 43 minutes to 150 minutes, averaging 81 minutes per interview. All interviews were conducted in a private staff office on campus. Data collection incorporated digitally audio-recorded, semi-structured, individual interviews about specific events involving engagement with faculty and experiences in the classroom. The interviews provided efficient and valid means to understanding international graduate students’ perspectives. My goal to continue to arrange interviews and/or observations each week during the semester and have each interview transcribed was met. I focused on some of the data and disregarded other parts, as there was an extreme amount of data (Creswell, 2014).

Written field notes during classroom observations with three students (a subset of the 15) provided a direct approach to report about observed behavior in the classroom. The classroom observations occurred in three different buildings on campus and represented students from the College of Business, the College of Education, and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Additionally, follow-up interviews with this focal group of three students, or primary informants, added information regarding the phenomenon, which will be reported in Chapter 4. Using multiple methods, including interviews, observations, and a focal group, helped broaden the range of the phenomenon, support validity, and is common in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013).
Semi-structured, Individual Interviews

The methods, or techniques, I used to gather data began with conducting face-to-face individual interviews with 15 international graduate students. Long interviews are typical and informative in phenomenological inquiry and often begin with a more informal or social introduction or activity before the interview questions begin (Moustakas, 1994). Toward this end, I engaged with each participant through conversation and invited them to share some things of interest about themselves and asked what they would like to know about me. I made every effort to set the stage for a comfortable, trusting and relaxed climate for all students, so they were free to express themselves in a safe and supported environment (Moustakas, 1994).

Using semi-structured, open-ended questions allowed for more comparable data across all international graduate students (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed electronically through Temi.com and/or Rev.com services. All data collection was maintained in multiple formats including computer files, audio files, and hand-written field notes. All hardcopy data has been stored securely in an organizational binder.

An interview guide was used for each interview with a set list of semi-structured questions to be asked of each participant (see Appendix I). To support confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned at the time of the interviews, during transcription, and employed throughout the research process.

Classroom Observations with Focal Group Participants

An additional method I used to gather data was through observations in classrooms involving student engagement with faculty. Ten of the 15 participants were willing to have me
visit their class and I arranged class visits following 14 of the face-to-face interviews. Several students were working on their thesis or dissertation and no longer had classes so that eliminated those opportunities. Due to the timing of participants’ class schedules as well as my own availability, I chose one evening class, one Saturday class, and one weekday, daytime class. I sought a mix of majors and colleges and arranged observations in the College of Education, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and College of Business.

The first observation was in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and I visited a Philosophy class twice, one week apart, during the day that met for 75 minutes each. I visited twice because of the length of the class, only 75 minutes, and wanted to have more opportunity to observe and create additional field notes. The second observation was in the College of Business, a management course, in the evening and lasted for two and a half hours. And the third visit was in the College of Education on a Saturday, a survey course, which lasted three hours.

Observing international graduate students in this natural setting offered the opportunity to gather data about their experience in an academic environment. Upon receiving permission from the professor to observe the class, I attended as a participant observer and took field notes during the entirety of the class. I produced a handwritten account of what I observed, heard, and experienced in the classroom (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Both descriptive and reflective aspects of the observation were detailed in the field notes. Additionally, I typed them into formal field notes on my home computer within 24 hours of the observation.

This approach or type of fieldwork is applicable within qualitative research as a path to better understand these interactions, and the classroom is where these naturally occur (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Course timeframes for graduate students vary by class, but often meet for up to
three hours. This exceeds the suggested length of field observation in qualitative research, which is for one hour or less (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Exceeding one hour may be appropriate, nonetheless, given the small number of classroom observations (3). For consideration, if class instruction runs longer than one hour, an appropriate session closure would have been when the students were afforded a break. However, I was able to stay for the full class meeting for all three students.

My goal and explanation to the three focal group participants, was to sit in the class and observe the instruction and interaction between faculty and students. I did not anticipate participating in any manner during the class period. However, I took the opportunity to introduce myself to the instructor upon arriving to the class and thanking each of them for allowing me to observe. Some researchers negotiate a more active role during the observation, depending on the circumstances, but that was not appropriate for my purposes (Lareau, 1989). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) noted: “Those who do join activities face the dilemma of choosing how to participate” (p. 92). For example, at the beginning of the observation in the College of Education, the professor invited me to join the class during their lunch break as she was going to order pizza. I declined primarily because I was certain that the participant had no knowledge of this invitation and I did not want to create a potentially uncomfortable situation for the participant. Further, the goal for observing the focal group of three students was primarily to add depth to the process of understanding how international graduate students perceive interactions with faculty contribute to their academic experiences and will be discussed in Chapter 4. Therefore, I did not have the need to have an active role in the classroom. After the observations, a follow-up interview was
arranged, and the interviews were digitally audio-recorded and electronically transcribed through transcription services.

Methods of Data Analysis

The interviews were digitally audio-recorded and electronically transcribed through a transcription company and printed on my home computer. I also generated handwritten field notes from classroom observations that were typed by me on my home computer and printed. I maintained a research journal for analytical memoing and informal, reflective narrative throughout the study (Creswell, 2014; Saldana, 2016). I followed the data analysis format encompassing condensation, display and drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). I also employed features of data analysis common in phenomenological studies supported by the work of Clark Moustakas (1994).

I analyzed the data concurrently with data collection from the start, which permitted the production of interim reports and outlines. Miles et al. (2014) strongly recommend this concurrent activity and stated: “It helps the field-worker cycle back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new, often better data. It makes analysis an ongoing, lively enterprise that contributes to the emerging process of fieldwork” (p. 70). Additionally, jotting down preliminary words or phrases for codes on the field notes or transcribed interviews can be used as an analytical memo in a research journal as ideas or consideration for future reference. (Saldana, 2016).

Data condensation refers to an overview of all the data strands allowing for the selection of some data, simplifying and transforming of data. This laid the foundation for writing summaries, coding, developing themes, generating categories, and writing analytical memos
According to Saldana (2016): “A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 4). This first-level coding can utilize single words, phrases or entire paragraphs (Saldana, 2016).

I followed the recommended coding technique suggested by Saldana (2016), which includes laying out double-spaced, printed field notes and double-spaced printed interview transcripts for manual (paper and pencil) coding. I left space in the margins for writing codes and notes. The texts were separated into paragraph-length units while paying attention to specific phrases or quotes that were highlighted or underlined. This information was transferred into column-format separating raw data, preliminary codes and final codes for review (Saldana, 2016). This manual, hand-coding method is where I began and is recommended for novice qualitative researchers.

This codes-to-theory method for qualitative inquiry allows data to be partitioned into codes, sub-codes, and then categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Mason, 2018; Saldana, 2016). Sub-categories often emerge. The categories point to themes or concepts which formulate assertions or theories (Saldana, 2016). I hand-coded emerging patterns by organizing like segments and developing categories. To sort the emerging themes and formulate assertions, analytical memoing was employed and supported through participant quotes and observational field notes (Saldana, 2016). Analytical memoing is the practice of writing down notes as they come to mind or are reflective of what the researcher is learning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Maxwell, 2013). Saldana (2016) described an analytic memo as: “A place to ‘dump your brain’ about the participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation by thinking and thus writing
and thus thinking even more about them” (p. 44). The goal was to categorize specific statements into clusters of meaning that represented the phenomenon that I was studying.

Moustakas (1994) directed: “The clustered themes and meanings are used to develop the textural descriptions of the experience. From the textural descriptions, structural descriptions and an integration of textures and structures into meanings and essences of the phenomenon are constructed” (pp. 118-119). This analysis of significant statements and revealing meaning units supports the essence description suggested by Moustakas (1994; Creswell, 2013). This analysis allowed for the interpretation of the meaning embedded in the themes and descriptions.

Data display is the second layer of analysis that may be helpful in portraying organized and compressed information that can be reviewed for interpretation and drawing conclusions. This may take the form of matrices, graphs, charts, or networks (Miles et al., 2014). This step is recommended as a visual enhancement of the data, to assist with organization, and may help future readers better understand the evolution of the research. Further, the display may support noting patterns, themes, making contrasts, comparisons, clustering and counting (Miles et al., 2014). Data display can also be helpful as part of triangulating the data, which supports validity. I utilized data display to visually outline participant demographic information, research questions and findings, and key findings.

The third component in data analysis is drawing and verifying conclusions. Once patterns and themes have emerged from the coded data, conclusions can be drawn and assertions made. Final conclusions should not appear until all data collection has been completed. Once conclusions are drafted, they must be verified by reviewing field notes and interview notes and then tested for plausibility (Miles et al., 2014).
Related to my data, I searched for significant statements and themes. This was applied to and extracted from interviews gathered from international graduate students and the narratives shared. Much of this analysis related students’ lived experiences through their stories. Levering (2006) cautioned: “The phenomenologist must make sure that the data he or she analyzes are lived interpretations and not interpretations of interpretations” (p. 1). This is further understood through the concept of value resonance, where the international graduate students’ constructions are extracted from rather than applied to the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

Interpreting the results led to the development of findings, results, or assertions which are discussed in Chapter 4. Questions addressed included: What lessons were learned? How do the results impact the research questions? How do the findings compare to theory and past literature? Will the findings align with existing literature and fill in what is missing? Will the results suggest new questions to ask or point to solutions to be explored or action to be taken?

Trustworthiness

The concepts of validity, trustworthiness, and goodness of fit are found throughout the literature regarding qualitative research. I utilized Carcary’s (2009) depiction of validity as applied to qualitative research: “From an interpretivist’s perspective, validity refers to how well the research method investigates what it intends to and the extent to which the researcher gained full access to informants’ knowledge and meaning” (p. 14). I think this is an important perspective and grasps the full robustness of the outcome related to rigor and ethics (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). I focused on the attributes of trustworthiness rather than validity. For me, the term “trustworthy” connotes credibility and the idea that something is believable. Conversely, if
something is not trustworthy, value and meaning are diminished. Therefore, the credibility of the study, from start to finish, is what evolves to meet the criteria of trustworthiness (Guba, 1981).

Trustworthiness for achieving rigor is outlined well through Guba's (1981) constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Ensuring that I am addressing a true picture of the phenomenon, and how I go about that, will satisfy credibility as stated above. To allow transferability, I will provide sufficient detail about the context of the fieldwork to decide whether the prevailing environment is similar to another situation with which I am familiar and whether the findings can justifiably be applied to the other setting. This references fieldwork as a participant observer in the classroom or non-classroom setting and how this may overlap with face-to-face interviews with international graduate students through semi-structured questions.

The meeting of the dependability criterion assures the ability to repeat the study. In some studies, this is also referred to as reliability (Carcary, 2009). Can this method and process be duplicated with relatively comparable findings and conclusions? If so, the study format is dependable and reliable. Finally, to achieve confirmability, findings must be culled from the data and personal supposition (Shenton, 2004). Elo et al. (2014) argued that “the aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is to support the argument that the inquiry’s findings are ‘worth paying attention to’” (Lincoln & Guba, 1982, p. 2). Findings and conclusions need to be based on the data with the understanding that personal bias has been addressed and positionality outlined. Further, what may be worth paying attention to may include what has been discovered through the study—how does it inform practice and has it provided a new perspective through which more can be learned?
Researcher Positionality

Positionality is important in data analysis and may impact the credibility of the study. Keeping in mind questions to consider as I coded was helpful as well as revisiting my research purpose, theoretical framework, and research questions (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 2011; Saldana, 2016). Questions included “What is going on?; What strikes me?; What surprised me?; What intrigued me?; What is the broader significance of the incident?; What disturbed me?” (Saldana, 2016). It was also important to keep in mind that I was interviewing and observing participants who were different from my own culture. Different rules about communication and sharing information were considerations to keep in mind. Interactions may reflect a different view of how things are done and that others may have a different way of relating and knowing (Saldana, 2016). This approach informed the bracketing employed and is explored in the next section.

Bracketing

Carpenter defined bracketing as “a methodological device of phenomenological inquiry that requires deliberate putting aside one’s own belief about the phenomenon under investigation or what one already knows about the subject prior to and throughout the phenomenological investigation” (as cited in Chan et al., 2013, p. 1). I sought to impose full levels of objectivity from the beginning of the study and throughout the research, which is highly recommended (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). I didn’t want my experiences and previous knowledge about these topics to influence my understanding of the phenomenon or the participants’ understanding.

I could control the impact that my perception had on the data collection and analysis process and kept it as close to neutral as possible. I didn’t want preconceptions to influence how
data were gathered, analyzed, or presented. This will stand to increase the rigor of the study.

Finlay (2012) best described my position when she outlined to what extent, and how, researcher subjectivity should be marshalled in phenomenological research when she stated: “They [researchers] stay close to what is given to them in all its richness and complexity, and restrict themselves to ‘making assertions which are supported by appropriate intuitive validations’ (Mohanty, 1983, cited in Giorgi, 1986, p. 9)” (p. 11).

Researcher Profile

As a U.S.-born researcher, my role was as a fluid outsider as well as an insider due to my role at the university. In this context, I identify as a Caucasian female doctoral candidate. I am employed as the director of an office in the Division of Student Affairs and as adjunct faculty in one of the colleges. I use the word fluid outsider because I do not believe, even upon deep reflection, that I could completely remove myself from the process, nor could I completely vacate my experiences and beliefs from the process. However, I could mitigate assumptions, interests, emotions, and theories by acknowledging preconceptions and reviewing issues throughout the study. The insider-outsider researcher perspective is often debated (Chavez, 2008; Cousin, 2010; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Milner, 2007; Mullings, 1999). It is recommended that one should reflect on biases and acknowledge that it is almost impossible to remain completely objective despite removing your opinions, perspectives, and lived experiences from the study at any point along the path. Mullings (1999) confirmed: “No individual can consistently remain an insider and few ever remain complete outsiders” (p. 340). Having had the advantage of both perspectives over time, I hoped to infuse only that which would position me to better understand
the phenomenon but not direct or predict outcomes. Toward that end, being employed in higher education for over ten years, taking courses at the graduate level during this time (and in a few cases, alongside my participants), at this university, and serving as a director at the university, widened my scope while interacting with participants in this setting allowing both insider and outsider perspectives.

The lens I brought to researching the challenges impacting success for international graduate students at institutions of higher education in the United States began in my youth. When I was in fourth grade, I attended what was considered a progressive elementary school in that foreign language was introduced earlier than what was traditional practice. The specific school I attended offered a dynamic French curriculum. Neighboring schools offered other languages such as German, Spanish, and Latin. That early exposure to a language and culture set me up not only for a lifelong appreciation for the French language and French culture, but also for a longing to travel internationally and explore worlds and people beyond the United States.

I so enjoyed the language that I continued to take French and related courses into high school and throughout my undergraduate studies in college. As a junior, I was fortunate enough to spend a semester abroad in Strasbourg, France. I took advantage of my proximity to several other countries and traveled as often as possible throughout Europe during that semester. These experiences impacted my learning and knowledge acquisition about countries in Europe, specifically France. They also afforded me a more critical eye for understanding the complexities of being born and raised in the United States in ways I had never before considered.

Many years later, married and raising my own children, we welcomed several French exchange students into our home, which was wonderful for them as well as our family. My own
children started taking Hebrew in third grade at our synagogue, and their elementary school offered Japanese. When my daughter started high school, she moved from Japanese to Spanish, and my son switched to Latin. They both remain fluent in Hebrew. My daughter traveled to Israel for a semester of study in her junior year of high school and then again for year as a graduate student. She later lived in South Africa for three years upon meeting her future husband (who was born and raised in Johannesburg to a father from Turkey and a mother from Israel). I visited my daughter in both Israel and South Africa in addition to returning to Europe many times.

These real-life experiences have shaped my understanding of the world in ways that I believe are unparalleled by other means. International students embody different ideas about reality, as do domestic students. How they make sense of their experiences throughout their university journey will in part depend on what they perceive and believe as shaped by their assumptions and prior experiences as well as their lived experiences. This is true of faculty as well, in terms of their perceptions and assumptions about international students relative to prior or subsequent interactions. According to Altman (2003), anthropologist Wade Davis wrote, “The world in which you were born is just one model of reality. Other cultures are not failed attempts at being you; they are unique manifestations of the human spirit” (Syracuse Cultural Workers poster print). I fully embrace this notion and it has motivated me to want to understand people and cultures different than my own and has inspired me to pursue this research.
Study Constraints

My study was intentionally limited to one university that was the site for gathering data. The richness of face-to-face individual interviews and classroom observations provided an in-depth view into the world of international graduate students’ lived experiences that lends itself well to phenomenological inquiry. However, this provided only a microcosm of the issues encountered by international students in institutions of higher education in the United States. As Simon and Goes (2013) noted: “When you select certain methodologies and design, for example, phenomenology, they come with limitations over which you may have little control” (p. 1).

Enticing specific students to participate was something I was unable to control. Deciding to interview and observe 15 students for my study was a constraint but was in my control and resulted from a specific choice I made about the design of my study (Simon, 2011; Simon & Goes, 2013).

I think study constraints are inevitable because a study needs a defined scope and timeline. In terms of a dissertation, the research process cannot go on indefinitely, and when the limitations are delineated, they may offer prospects for future research not possible for various reasons within the current study. The parameters of the study naturally produce limitations, but as the parameters develop, this process in turn impacts the outcomes which inform the decisions and choices of one’s study.

The next chapter discusses the findings from the semi-structured, individual interviews and classroom observations conducted February 2018 to April of 2018. Through this exploration, I identified various themes related to each research question. Summarized generalizations and
direct quotes from participant interviews are delineated which supported the development of themes.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand how international graduate students perceive interactions with faculty contribute to their academic experiences. Using three guiding research questions, in this study I explored: (1) How international graduate students describe their interactions with faculty, (2) How these interactions influenced their experiences, according to international graduate students, and (3) How international graduate students describe classroom practices and the impact that specific practices have on their academic experiences.

The five primary findings that emerged from this study are organized by these guiding research questions related to: (a) Interactions with faculty, (b) Challenges adjusting to the American educational system, (c) Language barriers, (d) Perceived lack of cultural competence, and (e) Practices that support or hinder persistence. In this chapter I will explore these findings supported through participant narratives.

Varying Interactions with Faculty

Participants discussed three primary types of interactions they had with faculty members. These included faculty interactions involving recruitment, faculty interactions related to academics, and faculty interactions outside of the classroom. The following will further discuss these interactions.
Faculty Engagement through Recruitment

Often, the first interaction that international graduate students had with faculty occurred during the recruitment process. NIU has sent faculty to numerous countries over the years in an effort to solicit interest and increase international student enrollment. For example, NIU staff and faculty from the College of Education visited several universities in China in an effort to establish memoranda of understanding and encourage students to apply to NIU. The NIU Office of International Student and Faculty Office (ISFO) also organized recruitment trips to countries around the world. In 2017, the ISFO director traveled to Malaysia, her country of origin, to recruit future students. The following examples will describe two participants’ experiences when NIU faculty traveled to their countries.

Isabella was impressed with her first encounter with two NIU faculty members who traveled to Colombia to meet with her. She stated:

I make some interviews with two different professors. They saw that I could make a good fit in the program and, actually, I really like the program that I found. This program really make a fit on my research interest because there are a lot of persons here, like two or three professors, that are working on the analysis of how to make public administration focusing on resources or in land use on environmental issues. And this guy was the one that he was working in energy and land issues, in water consumption. So this professor was really the top one and he was the perfect to work with me. Actually, I came because I make the interview with him.

Isabella was very comfortable making the commitment to attend NIU because of this initial encounter with faculty with whom she would be working directly.

Dae-Hee also had an important interaction with an NIU professor he met in his country eight years ago. He shared: “I met a professor from … literacy education. In Korea we made a
good communication. We talked a lot and he recommended me to apply NIU and I got accepted.” That first encounter had a lasting and important impact on him. Dae-Hee explained:

When I started a program at first time, I was thinking about going back to Korea after the graduation and try to become a professor or staff members of the Korean institution, but I changed my mind during the program. I started to participate into the Korean students recruiting program like holding international affairs and also establishing the memorandum of understanding each other. Yes, but if I need to go somewhere else, I’m really confident to reach any other countries because making a connection with South Korea became a great experience for me to how to move on with other institution around the country.

Dae-Hee was grateful for this early interaction with NIU faculty in his country during the recruitment process. Subsequent opportunities to interact with faculty have influenced his career trajectory and opened up new career opportunities for him upon the completion of his degree.

The recruitment of international students often begins in the students’ country of origin. For two participants, Isabella and Dae-Hee, the experience of meeting with faculty in their home country was their initial interaction and proved instrumental in their decision to attend Northern Illinois University. This initial interaction with faculty may prove significant for future recruitment efforts and provides a foundation for engagement early on between international students and faculty.

**Interactions with Faculty Influenced Academics**

According to participants, direct and prominent engagement with faculty influenced their academic experiences and occurred in the classroom, during research experiences, in advising meetings, or with faculty who served as dissertation or program chairs for students. This engagement included positive and negative experiences, was formal or sometimes informal, and
in some cases was either confusing or extremely supportive. Examples will be shared in the following section.

**Classroom Interactions with Professor/Instructor**

The majority of participants shared that their interactions with faculty and experiences in the classroom were, for the most part, very positive. However, several participants had mixed experiences with faculty and two participants avoided engaging with faculty unless absolutely necessary. For example, regarding positive experiences, Nilay discussed a particular professor. He said:

He made the class really very interesting. His class is the best class in terms of academics and he relates very well all the things. He’s not an instructor who just reads slides or just recites the slides. He goes beyond the topic and covers everything. He keeps each and every student in his loop. Everybody’s well connected and interested in his class. All the instructors are really amazing!

Nilay enjoyed this professor because he was engaging, covered the topics well, and kept students in the loop. This made the class interesting and he felt connected with his peers and to the material. This was evident during the class I observed. Nilay appeared to be engaged in the lecture as he was taking notes and at one point volunteered to answer a question. On the evening of the observation, during the follow-up interview, Nilay noted about this class:

It was amazing. It happens once a week and it’s a long class, three hours and that’s nice. He explained all the concepts and gave us opportunity to do the labs in the class so that we can ask our doubts of him.

Nilay explained that this professor gives more than 100% and is very dynamic, which keeps him interested and engaged even though it is a lengthy class and in the evening. Throughout the
evening, the professor encouraged students to find him during office hours and to ask questions throughout the lecture.

Lanying and Liya shared their positive experiences. Lanying said: “They [faculty] just try to help you do what you really want and also help you kind of solve the questions you ask about. That’s what I really appreciate.” Liya said: “Starting with my first course, my professor was interested in my writing: ‘Your writing is great!’ Faculty members who participants indicated were good, often shared an interest in them and were supportive of their efforts and academic abilities.

Rihaa also expressed a favorable experience engaging with an instructor who was supportive of students’ efforts. She shared that the professor in her survey course involved each student directly in conversation. The professor was patient and positive. She was quick to both clarify information and praise students. It was during this classroom observation in Rihaa’s class in the College of Education that a remarkable statement was offered by one of her peers named Arthur. This was a survey course comprised of a small group of six graduate students, two of whom were referenced, but absent during the classroom observation. They were discussing the implications of their individual surveys (a project for the course), when Arthur stated:

It is very important, the interactions between students and students, as well as students and teachers. Every interaction in the classroom is important and fragile. Some interactions go to the wrong place. This impacts how students feel, their ability to learn, and if they will succeed academically.

This international graduate student (not a participant in my study), shared his belief about faculty and student interactions in the classroom. According to Arthur, interactions within classrooms are important and fragile. Interactions between faculty and participants impact how students feel.
How students feel and respond impacts their ability to learn. This in turn may determine if they will succeed academically. In response to this statement, the professor asked specifically: “What can be done to better support international students and to ensure their academic success as an institution, as a professor?” The students were asked to share responses privately with the professor should they have suggestions and comments.

Participants who reported more difficult experiences with faculty often expressed confusion about the course content or challenges communicating with the instructor. For instance, Editha shared:

I can say only one (professor) I think I didn’t feel good. I don’t have positive attitude upon her because of her judgement. We never met. It was an online, per se. I don’t know now I was really upset because I was given a B, but I really worked very hard to the extent that I didn’t expect to get that one. I don’t know what happened, what perception she has to me. Just because of telling her I am from Tanzania, I was thinking like because she wanted just at least one of her students to get a B. I don’t know, but to me it’s really still questionable. It’s like this is an unforgetable person to my life because I really ended in tears. I didn’t know what to do. What did I lack?

Because the instructor did not share why Editha received a “B,” Editha was left to speculate on the reasons for the lower grade. Understandably, Editha was upset about the experience and it left her feeling diminished and unsure of what she should have done differently to earn a higher grade. Editha was unclear about expectations regarding grading. It was her impression that if she worked hard and completed the assignments, she would have a good outcome and for her, that meant earning an A. She said the confusion and disappointment she felt would be lasting, and that was upsetting.

Participants’ responses regarding their classroom interactions with faculty ranged from formal and professional relationships to congenial and highly personal. Valda shared that her
professors “were very formal; treating very formally to students.” Valda felt that this set a tone of fairness and equity which she appreciated. This formal approach imposed a level of equity that Valda expressed was personally important so as not to disadvantage her as an international student, an experience she had in other courses when she perceived the treatment was dissimilar between domestic and international students.

Sai also described his interactions with faculty as more formal and more professional. Sai explained:

I would say it’s a very professional relationship, professional as in interaction related to academics. I don’t have a hard time, but sometimes when I bring out stuff, let’s say in conversation, I talked with him. He finds it fascinating because I bring out a discussion from a different perspective. He looks at me as an exotic or non-conventional, um, because he interacts with similar people on an everyday basis, but when a person comes who can bring in outside perspectives, they’re like, wow, he perks up, he perks up and it’s not the case only for him.

Sai found this more formal interaction to be inclusive and interesting and he speculated that it was equally interesting for the faculty member because he perked up. Having the opportunity to offer a non-conventional perspective afforded Sai the feeling that the conversation was elevated and important and his input was important to his professor.

Several students shared that there is a hierarchy that dictates classroom expectations regarding the level of interaction that is permitted, although self-imposed, due to the cultural background and norms of the students. For example, Liya explained:

Because of my previous experience, sometimes I may be behind to interact with my professors especially in my first year. Second year because my culture, in my culture, my experience with professors are very respectful. We need to respect our professors: there is a hierarchy level so we are not talking to our professors equally. That was my culture shock when I see students here confronting their professor, talking equally with their professors and interacting and laughing. Oh, no, that’s not my culture. Even it’s hard for
me to call my professors with their first name. No, it’s not my way to call my professor by first name!

Liya was very uncomfortable with the level of familiarity and comfort that her peers exhibited with professors. Liya believed her cultural background may have inhibited her progress because she was not used to interacting with instructors on this level. It was a shock to her to observe this behavior between her peers and professors and it took her some time to make adjustments.

Other participants discussed more informal interactions with faculty members. Ahmed had a more informal interaction with one professor. He described this experience more as entertainment because of the nature of the course delivery and the professor’s approach. Ahmed shared:

This semester one of our professors always gives, he inspires me the way he teaches, the way he approaches, totally different from other professors I saw here or back home. He is not a professor in terms of interactions with us, it is better to call him our friend. He is very much closer to us. He is very open to engage with the course that he deliver for us and the communication via email, via personal communication. It is very intensive communication and you feel like the classroom is this kind of entertainment, not kind of a course. When such kinds of courses coincide with such kinds of professor, it is a very pleasant situation. That is one extraordinary thing that happen.

Ahmed described this interaction in class with this professor as extraordinary. The professor was more of a friend and an excellent communicator. He explained that the experience was unique, transformative and inspiring, which was not the case in most of his other courses. For these reasons, this interaction with this faculty member for Ahmed was enjoyable and intense and he looked forward to this experience.

Similarly, Valda also had a professor with whom she had a more informal relationship. She said of one of her professors: “He was very informal, very friendly. We, a couple of times,
went to the restaurant. He was coming even to my house for lunch with one of the other faculty members. Very informal and very friendly.” She enjoyed getting to know faculty on a more informal level because they showed interest in her as a person, not just as a student.

For participants who had more informal interactions with faculty, this allowed a comfortable and congenial relationship to develop which participants appreciated and enjoyed. This enhanced their engagement with the course and helped them feel included and appreciated by their instructors.

Aarav was one participant who shared that he specifically avoided interactions with faculty whenever possible. He stated, “I only interacted when my grades were going down or something.” He explained that he would rather ask friends for help or work at home. His confidence level was low and at one point he failed a class. Regarding one class, Aarav shared:

He is a very bad teacher. It’s an online course though. I would rather read off the textbook and do the homework and assignments based on that rather than listening to him because he would just read off the slides. He wouldn’t explain it.

Aarav felt that the delivery of the course, online and reading off the slides rather than providing an explanation, was not helpful, interesting or engaging in any way. He didn’t do well in this format. This forced him to seek out peers for assistance and rely heavily on his textbook to make sense of the material. Aarav felt it would have been to his benefit to engage with the professor for clarity and understanding, but for this course it wasn’t possible, primarily because of the online nature and delivery of the course.

Participants reported varying levels of interactions where some were formal and others more informal. Participants depended on faculty to support, guide and be available to them as
they navigated through their programs and difficult times, in and out of the classroom. In many cases, classroom professors also served as academic advisors to participants.

**Importance of Advising Relationships with Faculty**

Seven participants attributed their interactions with faculty, who were also their academic advisors, as transformative and therefore turning points during their programs of study. They depended on their academic advisors to help them with program requirements and—on a deeper level—to provide direction. This engagement was important and had meaning for several students. For example, Liya specifically highlighted her advisor as helping with her adjustment. She stated:

> With my advisor it is very close interaction. She is very emotionally supportive. I don’t know—without her, I would not be here. She is very supportive. I even call her anytime that I want to talk. It might be weekend. It might be so she is just offering me space. She share with me not only academic-wise, maybe my feelings and my personal wellbeing. So, she is really nice woman. My interaction with her is very strong.

The openness and ongoing availability of Liya’s advisor was of significant support and comfort to her. It boosted her confidence and gave her the opportunity to have a sounding board. The personal closeness of the relationship supported her wellbeing. Liya attributed this strong connection with her advisor to her ability to persist in her program.

Another participant, Dae-Hee, also explained that his relationship with his faculty advisor was imperative when he was going through a difficult time. Dae-Hee explained:

> In that semester, I had to talk with my advisor, my friends, my family a lot. I shared how I felt with all the people around. That helped me a lot, especially my advisor. I think that was kind of the first time I made a serious interaction with faculty member. He gave me great disciplines that it’s not you. It’s the same for every grad student who’s starting a writing. It’s kind of challenging. I got a confidence from that communication and
conversation. So, right, that was kind of hard part moment. That was kind of encouraging for me.

Dae-Hee shared that this first serious encounter with his advisor provided the guidance needed to remain in the program and better understand what was needed to be successful, specifically with writing.

Upon arriving in the United States, another participant shared her first encounter with her faculty advisor. Valda described the initial interaction upon her arrival. She said:

I will say my advisor was very helpful. He came and picked me up at the airport and he and his wife actually hosted me for a few days. Before coming to DeKalb I rented a room because someone was living in a sublease. He was very friendly. Also his wife, too. It was good. Very good experience.

This initial encounter provided a welcoming atmosphere for Valda and gave her confidence. This foundation was helpful when, a few years into her studies, she decided to change departments. Regarding her next advisor, Valda commented: “Because of the advisor I had, she was very nice. She actually changed everything about me, and she was inspiring me a lot. One of the role models that I had.” Valda explained that she saw in her second advisor what might be possible for her. Her second advisor was from her country and had become successful in the United States. They became very close and her advisor was of substantial support to Valda.

Both of Valda’s advisors provided support and influenced her in positive and significant ways. Her first advisor welcomed her into his home and helped her settle into the university community. Her second advisor was a role model and inspired her to consider the possibilities for her future.
Adaku, Editha, Inara, and Reyansh also had positive and important relationships with their academic advisors. For example, Adaku felt that her advisor was of tremendous influence. Adaku said:

So, I have an advisor that, you know, I talked to her around the clock. I sent her emails. She’s always emailing me back, you know, on all courses you pick and what will be useful and … just suggesting what electives I might be interested in. It’s so great that I get to have advice from her.

Adaku was grateful for her advisor’s ongoing availability. She helped her with course selection, electives of interest, and provided needed advice.

Another participant, Editha, was also appreciative of her advising experience and very much needed the guidance and suggestions that were offered. She explained:

So, I have the advisor who is really employed by the university there for graduate students in our department. He has been helping me, advising like you’re not, it’s not good to take this course before this one. You should learn this one before taking this one because it has connections. Or this one, its ideas and knowledge depend from the knowledge from this or the concept from this course, kind of like that. It has been more than helpful.

Editha’s advisor helped with the organizational and sequential aspects of her program requirements, which she found to be very challenging initially. With her advisor’s assistance, she was able to successfully understand this process.

Similar to Editha’s experiences, Inara’s relationship with her advisor was important as she navigated the courses and prerequisites of her program. She shared:

I meet with him on a regular basis. He always provides me support, what kinds of courses to take and with which professors. He is very specific about that. So, that’s what I like. He provides really good support in what kinds of courses to take the first semester, the second semester. So far, he has been very helpful.
The opportunity to meet on a regular basis afforded Inara the support needed to select courses on a timeline and in sequence as well as consider which professors would be a good fit for her.

Acknowledging the unknowns that many international students face, Reyansh was very happy with his advising experience. He stated of his advisor:

He will give all the support which the international students are looking for. Like if we don’t have any other courses, he will suggest us like this course is having some future like that. He will tell us about the coursework importance. So all the way, he was very good in advising and telling the things, which we don’t know. So, I like his approach and sharing his time, when even he is working like professor.

Reyansh summed up his advising experience by stating, “He is very good like, actually, he was my professor database. I appreciated his work because he was my dean and he was teaching some of my courses and at the same time, he was my advisor.” For Reyansh, a Computer Science major, the concept of a “database professor” was an intuitive descriptor. The multiple roles held by this faculty member facilitated all the information needed to support him. This engagement was experienced through course work and in advising sessions on an elevated level, according to Reyansh, because the faculty member was also the dean of the college.

As noted above, participants depended on faculty to support, guide and be available to them as they navigated through their programs and difficult times, in and out of the classroom, and in an advisory capacity. In addition to serving as classroom instructors and academic advisors, some faculty also served as program or dissertation chairs to participants.

Program or Dissertation Chair Relationships Influenced Persistence

Beyond the classroom and advising, some participants engaged with faculty as chairs of their program or dissertation committee. For example, Isabella had a difficult time upon arriving
at the university when she learned that her dissertation chair would be leaving the institution. She stated: “You know what is happening? That I feel like an orphan because the professor that I wanted to talk and be my chair and my advisor, he’s going to leave next fall.” She explained that because of her specific major, she needed to take courses in one department and then after year two, she would need direction to fulfill requirements in another department that was not currently offering the PhD degree she was working toward. The news of her potential chair leaving was concerning and disruptive to her understanding of the next steps. She soon would have neither an advisor nor a dissertation chair. For these reasons, she stated that she felt like an orphan, which was very upsetting to her.

Conversely, Liya’s dissertation chair was with her from the beginning. She stated: “Yeah, she is mentoring my dissertation, my courses, my grants, my cover letter, everything. She is my support system. I had no word just even to explain how she is supporting me in my academic progress.” Liya believed that her dissertation chair provided everything she needed to meet with success in her program.

Rihaa also had a positive experience with her program chair, commenting, “My relationship with my chair is always great. She is great whenever I ask for advice. She is very understanding. She supervised my master’s portfolio and now she is chairing my candidacy exam committee.” For Rihaa, the consistency of having the same faculty member supervising her portfolio and her candidacy exam provided the foundation needed to support her persistence.

Participants benefited academically and personally when faculty supported them in pivotal roles as professors, academic advisors, and dissertation chairs. Academic interactions with faculty included very positive and supportive engagement through formal, informal or
personal exchanges. International graduate students reported various academic-related interactions with faculty. For some, the first interaction was during a recruitment event. For others, the first encounter was upon arrival to campus, during an advising appointment, or in the classroom when they met their professors. However, a few participants shared that their experiences were challenging, some to the point of avoidance behavior toward faculty. Although the majority of faculty interaction occurred in academic settings, some significant encounters developed outside of the classroom.

**Significant Relationships Outside of the Classroom**

Several participants developed relationships with faculty beyond academics, outside of the classroom. In these instances, faculty fulfilled the role of mentor, friend, or as a conduit for professional development opportunities.

**Faculty as Mentors**

Faculty members served as mentors to international graduate students by providing them support and encouragement. For example, Liya shared that her faculty advisor was mentoring her in all aspects of her journey: her dissertation, courses, grants, cover letter, etc. Although academically related, these supports happened outside of the classroom. Because of this special relationship, Liya was also directly supported financially by one faculty member for some of her tuition.

Editha also felt that she had the kind of relationship with faculty that enabled her to stay in contact with them. She stated: “After finishing their classes, I’ve been communicating with them, asking them questions, asking them for help, understanding these things.” The relationship
that evolved beyond her course was of comfort and benefit to Editha as she continued in her program. This support gave her a contact with whom she could ask questions, seek help, and understand what she didn’t know. This type of connection was imperative for international students to feel supported, cared for and provided encouragement as they progressed.

Another example of a special relationship with faculty was Sai’s experience. Sai had a close mentoring relationship with his academic advisor, affording him a variety of opportunities. In addition to learning how to write grants with him and working on the advisor’s YouTube projects, Sai shared that the advisor took a special interest in him. Sai explained:

I’m going to be working with him for some paper which I would hope to submit as a writing sample for doctoral programs. So, my interactions with him would be more cohesive rather than other faculty. He is, … he classifies himself as American as well as British. So, he’s also, you can call him an international faculty and I get along with him and he will help me excel in the academy.

In addition to serving as an academic advisor, this faculty member was also a mentor to Sai in that he supported his interests and invited him to work on a research paper. Sai felt this working relationship allowed him to be closer to the faculty member and would be advantageous when it came time to apply to graduate school, knowing he would have this support because his mentor knew him well. Sai expressed that this mentoring relationship helped him be more successful academically as he was more invested in doing well in and out of the classroom.

When international graduate students engaged with faculty members outside of the classroom, opportunities presented themselves that benefitted the students. Several students excelled in leadership roles, one received financial assistance, and others developed feelings of acceptance and explored co-curricular or avocational experiences through these interactions.
Developing Friendships with Faculty

Having the opportunity for human and sincere connection with faculty, above and beyond academic expectations, was a significant theme shared by many international students. Therefore, developing friendships with faculty members outside of the classroom had tremendous impact on international students. For example, Nilay said of his faculty advisor, “He is very welcoming and really very helpful.” Nilay explained that his faculty advisor was a guitar player and that he performed in various events. Nilay shared that he also played the guitar. His advisor invited him to one of his concerts to record the event. He said, “I used to meet him quite often and he used to give me some more expert advice in terms of music and other stuff.”

Playing the guitar was an activity shared by Nilay and his faculty advisor. When his faculty advisor invited him numerous times to events to record the concerts, this made Nilay happy and he felt valued. Meeting with his faculty advisor to talk about music had nothing to do with his major or academics in any way. However, these interactions were highlights cited by Nilay about his overall university experience.

Another participant, Rihaa, shared that one semester she had car trouble and her program chair drove to DeKalb from Naperville to help her out. This was an exceptional act of kindness she said she will never forget. Rihaa further explained that it was common for some professors to go above and beyond outside of the classroom in an effort to build connections. She said, “After the class, I think we had a get together like food from our culture. Everyone was bringing a dish to pass. It was so great!” Another faculty member she was close to also went above and beyond. Rihaa explained:
He was always reachable and always ready to give advice. I reach out for 10 minutes, but those valuable 10 minutes was like, guide me through whatever I need. It was awesome. He went above and beyond his guiding through the professional organization involvements. Without the guiding, the stars, they are like the stars. You can see them and their activities and you can just follow them. Even if they are not around or available to advise you. I contact in email and in two or three sentences, they guide. We just need the guidance.

The need for connection and guidance was important to Rihaa. She developed this connection through the relationships built with two faculty members who became mentors. Having this support and interaction on a human level was empowering and necessary for Rihaa to persist.

Liya and Editha were thrilled when their professor invited them and other international students to his home for Thanksgiving and other holidays. Editha offered: “One of my professors she really asked me, ‘Where will you go for Thanksgiving? Will you just come to visit my house?’ I was like, ‘Wow’!” Another faculty member at another time also offered for her to spend time with her family. Editha said:

Yeah, they came to pick me [up] and then I went. So I spent the whole day together in their family. We were talking and having fun. Something like that. It makes them to feel like human beings, to feel like they’re really valued apart from their differences. This is a Tanzanian. This is an American. This is what they feel. Still all of us, we’re human beings.

This extension of friendship and caring was impactful for these international graduate students. For Editha, this kindness helped her feel valued and included. The acknowledgement that “We’re all human beings” was simple yet significant and she so appreciated this opportunity to spend time with the family.

Participants who experienced some difficult encounters with academics also turned to faculty who had become friends to seek support. For instance, Inara shared that during a
particularly difficult encounter with one faculty member, she turned to another professor with whom she felt close. She explained: “I am very comfortable with my advisor talking about my problems. He presents himself as a father figure.” Having a “father figure” to confide in was important to Inara as she struggled to resolve an issue with another faculty member.

Isabella had a similar relationship with one of her professors. She checked in with him when she was having doubts about her performance and some related issues with a different professor. She shared his response: “Really, you are doing a good job. The professor has no complaint with you. You can come talk to me all the time. If you don’t figure it out [with this other professor], we will solve it!” Because of this relationship, Isabella felt secure in knowing she had support in working out a potential problem. This allowed her to move forward with renewed confidence and direction.

Developing friendships with faculty members outside of the classroom had significant impact on international graduate students. Faculty offered friendship through inclusion for holidays, personal support when students needed someone to talk to, and offered what one student referred to as a “guiding star.” The importance of developing friendships with faculty was a significant theme shared by many international graduate students which provided encouragement, direction, and human connection.

Providing Professional Development Opportunities

Several international graduate students took advantage of interactions with faculty that resulted in leadership and professional development opportunities. By interacting with faculty outside of the classroom, students found the support to initiate important relationships between
NIU and institutions in their country of origin. Another student was invited to a professor’s business on more than one occasion to understand and apply the concepts within the class curriculum. And one participant capitalized on interactions that he hoped would lead to letters of recommendations in the future. These are illustrated through the following examples.

Liya’s faculty advisor supported her efforts in establishing a memorandum of understanding with her country. She said of her advisor: “She … was very understanding. She promoted me with my leadership skills. She trusted me to … connect the department, the college, with a university from my country. She is the reason I grew as a leader.” This opportunity afforded Liya was unexpected. She explained that her advisor was responsible for supporting her efforts to develop this relationship. The outcome for Liya was that she felt empowered to seek additional opportunities for leadership skill building.

With encouragement from a faculty member from his dissertation committee, Dae-Hee had a similar opportunity developing a memorandum of understanding. He explained:

I started to participate into the Korean students’ recruiting program; like holding international fairs, and also establishing the memorandum of understanding with each other. I’m really confident to reach any other countries because making a connection with South Korea became a great experience for me how to move on with other institution around the country.

Both Liya and Dae-Hee gained valuable leadership skills and developed confidence in their abilities to represent both their departments and their countries of origin in an important collaboration process.

Another participant, Nilay, was extended an opportunity to see classroom concepts put into action in the real world. He said of his academic advisor, “In our Internet computing
application class, he’s the project manager at a business outside of NIU, so I met him a couple of times in the office. He’s really very cool in terms of instructions he gives to the class because of this.” Because of these opportunities outside of the classroom, Nilay was able to better understand the connection between classroom curriculum and business practices in the real world.

Another participant explained the advantages of engaging with faculty outside of the classroom. Regarding his relationship with one faculty member, Sai expressed:

The more you know faculty, the more they get to know you besides doing well in their class, if you can, if they know you as a person outside the classroom and you speak with them, that would, might, contribute to a good letter of recommendation in the future.

Sai understood the power of connection beyond the classroom and getting to know faculty and being open to faculty getting to know him. Communication and relationship building may benefit international graduate students as they progress through their programs as well as consider next steps in their educational pursuits.

These international graduate students took advantage of interactions with faculty outside of the classroom that resulted in leadership and professional development opportunities. By interacting with faculty outside of the classroom, students found support to develop leadership skills. Another student had the opportunity to understand and apply the concepts learned in class to business operations. And Sai was thinking ahead when he interacted with faculty with the knowledge that such engagement may benefit him through a letter of recommendation for future needs.
Challenges Adjusting to the American Educational System

International graduate students shared challenges they encountered adjusting to the American educational system. Participants discussed two primary areas of challenge, which included classroom practices and faculty expectations. Practices employed in the classroom in some cases were of benefit to students and in other cases proved challenging. Academic experiences were influenced because of these practices. Subthemes contributing to adjustment challenges in the classroom included teaching methodology, grading, and technology. Learning modalities and contacting and addressing faculty members were subthemes under challenges with faculty expectations. The following will further discuss these adjustment challenges.

Classroom Practices

For many participants, teaching methodology, online courses, the grading system, and the use of technology were new and different from experiences in their country of origin. Because these were new and different, some participants had difficulty adjusting, which had a negative impact on their self-esteem, confidence, and understanding of the curriculum.

Teaching Methodology and Delivery

Several international graduate students had difficulty because of teaching methods used by professors and practices that were employed in the classroom. Specific methods that participants struggled with included course delivery styles, group work, and online formats. For example, Reyansh struggled with understanding his professors due to their method of delivering a lecture. He explained:
Coming to DeKalb, like into the university, I’ve faced some difficulty with my professors like some database professors. His language is too perfect. The international students can’t understand the language. It’s like he was teaching continuously with a flow. He was not bothering about the international students. We’ve faced some kind of situation for 2 to 3 weeks. We find some difficulty of listening the classes.

Reyansh explained that he and several other students struggled to understand the course content. He was unable to comprehend the material due to the nature of the lectures. He felt there was no allowance for non-domestic students and differences that may exist. His inability to follow the continuous nature—flow—of the lecture left him feeling left out, confused, and not cared for.

Another area that was unfamiliar to one participant was group work. This presented the added challenge of working with other students who were part-time students. Editha explained her difficulty with group work. She shared:

Mostly in my experience at the university level some of the professor[s] they can just put you in groups. They can form those groups and say these are the groups I’ve formed with some of the characteristics maybe according to the level of students. Mostly they lecture, but here mostly they put us into groups in the classroom but just students themselves to work on their own in groups. It’s where it is really very difficult and very hard but in my country it’s easy. Though I can understand because most of the university students in my country we don’t have culture of just working as a part-timer.

She explained that the work was divided up in her group and students went their separate ways to complete their part as agreed. In her country, group work was completed collectively and truly as a group. But because most of her classmates were part-time students in this course and had other commitments outside of academics, there was no opportunity for her to work directly with other students. This left her confused and uncertain how to proceed with the assignments.

Complicating the situation further, she did not know how to express her concerns to her professor or peers because this was so different than her past educational experiences.
Another participant, Inara, struggled to understand a professor she felt lacked experience in the course content, and this impacted her negatively. Additionally, she felt the instructor made assumptions about what students already knew about the process. She explained:

There was one class that was a challenging one because it was online. And I didn’t like that, being online, because if you take online class usually don’t have time to talk to the professor. You have to schedule certain office hours which is not good. And the challenging part was maybe her lack of experience because she didn’t provide good example of how to submit this and that paper. She assumed that we know already how to prepare a research notebook, for example.

Inara was upset that she had limited access to the professor for support due to the online nature of the course. She felt that the professor didn’t provide adequate examples of what was expected, and she lacked the opportunity to clarify things with the professor, which caused her confusion and upset.

International graduate students experienced challenges adjusting to American educational practices. In some cases, specific lecture delivery, group work, or online instruction were beyond the students’ familiarity, comfort level, or experience. As a result, some students had negative outcomes based on practices used by faculty in the classroom.

The Grading System was a Challenge

Participants reported difficulty adjusting to classroom practices involving timelines to submit work and expectations about homework. These classroom practices and expectations affected grades. For example, Isabella explained that she had successfully graduated from law school and was a practicing lawyer in her country before coming to the United States. When she started classes, she felt a lot of pressure and it was a stressful adjustment. Isabella explained:
I don’t think in any educative process that grades are the maximum gold. I don’t think that they help us as humans. I think that this competition, this idea to fulfill the expectation, can really trigger mental issues because people can be really obsessed about that and don’t enjoy the process. And I have been really critical about myself because all the time, all my life. I became a lawyer. I have been growing individualistic and being competitive.

Isabella felt that the pressure to achieve high grades was detrimental to the process of learning. She found herself becoming more isolated from others and competitive, which in turn caused her anxiety. She felt this was counterproductive to learning and growing as a student. Further, this individualist, competitive approach to education was counter to her experiences in Colombia, where she studied to become a lawyer. Her former experience was influenced from a more collectivist culture value that focused on the group. This shift to an independent and individualist teaching/learning environment proved a difficult transition for her and one that she resisted.

Like Isabella, Ahmed was a working professional in his country before starting his graduate program here. In several courses he felt that he was unable to understand what was wanted or needed from the professor. This negatively impacted his success academically and caused him great concern. He shared one example:

I approach the professor and, “What is the most important problem you identify from my homework or my test or from my mid-exam?” One reason that I got from him is, “The way you write is a very advanced one, but most of the time that is not the question that I am asking. Because of that, you lost a lot of marks. My question is direct and to the point and to the level which is appropriate for your level. But the way you are describing is a lot which is not related to the point that I want to read.” Then for that I couldn’t do anything. I thought that is the right way of answering the question but for the professor, but that is not the right way. Even that problem still not solved. I always get a point which is by far lesser than what I expect, but I have already decided that I have to adjust myself to the situation, the environment, which is already here. That is a necessary evil that I should pass.
Ahmed was bewildered as to what his professor needed or wanted from him. He didn’t fully understand what the problem was or how to adjust, and that left him confused and earning much lower grades than anticipated. He was used to being a good performer academically. He shared that this caused him episodes of depression.

Valda had some challenges managing her time and turning work in when it was due. This expectation from her professor, that work be turned in on time, was a difficult adjustment and sometimes affected the quality of her work and grades. She shared:

It should be some delays for processing the information but some professors don’t understand that everyone is different and they need more time. But I had this challenge a lot and it put me in pressure because here in the U.S., maybe around the world, time is very important. You have to actually follow the rules for submitting everything on time. That’s why I had to write something. I didn’t have time to go and review.

Valda struggled with writing and submitting papers when they were due. She felt that there was too much pressure to follow the timeline rather than taking the extra time to review and fine-tune her work. She felt that professors did not take into account her difficulties with processing information. This affected her grades and negatively impacted her emotionally.

Aarav was one of two participants who avoided interacting with his professors unless absolutely necessary. He shared two experiences where one outcome was positive regarding classroom practices and grades, and one was negative. Regarding the one interaction that was negative, Aarav explained:

I don’t feel easier talking to him, actually. I don’t know why, because I feel like he’s judging me or something based on my grades which are not that great compared to others. You know, you see his face, and something like that. It’s kind of a bit condescending, that’s what I think. That’s what many other Indian students think, too. He kind of favors students who perform well in class. I’m just like near the bottom or
something like that. I think he favors students. He talks well with them based on their grades.

Aarav’s perception of his professor was that he judged him harshly due to his lower grades and favored other students who performed better academically. This left Aarav feeling marginalized and discriminated against. Because of this interaction, he avoided engaging with this professor. Had his experience been different, he may have been able to receive the support and assistance needed to improve his grade.

Conversely, Aarav had a very different experience with another professor. He shared:

Okay, there was this one course in my first semester in the fall of 2015. I think I did really bad on my midterms and stuff like that. So I went and asked the professor. He was a visiting professor. I asked him, “What can I do about my grades because they are really low?” He had a good impression of me, the professor. I was always in his class. It’s math based, all this calculation stuff. Yeah. In the class, it was okay, but in the test, I couldn’t perform well. I don’t know why. I went and asked him and he was like, “Don’t worry. Just do your final exam well and your final report well. I’ll take care of it.” I think I don’t deserve an A- in that course. I got an A-. I think maximum B or in worse-case scenario, a B- or something. But I got an A- and I can say that is a good experience, right?

In this example, Aarav benefitted from interacting with the professor. His effort in reaching out paid off. Aarav felt he had a good relationship with the professor since the professor had a good impression of him as a student. During the interaction, the professor offered encouragement and support. Ultimately, Aarav said it was a good experience despite receiving a grade he may not have truly earned.

When practices employed in the classroom were challenging for international graduate students, performance was affected. Time management, time lines, and the emphasis on grades in particular left students feeling pressured, excluded, and sometimes discriminated against.
Technology was New and Difficult to Navigate

On some level, all courses required some familiarity with technology. Dependence on technology was not common or comfortable for many participants. Because of the nature of online courses, participants interacted indirectly with faculty and that was also not common.

Several participants expressed challenges using Blackboard (an online, email-accessed platform for posting course information, lectures, discussion groups, and grades, etc.); purchasing a cell phone; setting up the Internet; and connecting to Wi-Fi. Until these systems were in place, this impacted their ability to gather information, connect with services, and participate in class, especially online courses. For example, Adaku almost dropped her first online course because she was unfamiliar with the format and expectations. She did not understand how to access the course or use Blackboard which was required for participation.

This was similar for another student who was particularly challenged immediately upon arriving to campus. Ahmed shared:

Since the individual involvement is very tiny, until we get into it, into the system, things are very difficult. Even getting a line for your phone is a very difficult thing. To have Wi-Fi is a very difficult thing. Imagine somebody from Ethiopia who never used personal Wi-Fi for himself. There is no such two hour or three hour of waiting for calling to have a line. That was very, very challenging.

Ahmed did not have any guidance initially on how to access these services. He had little experience with personal technology in his country. Setting up accounts, purchasing hardware, and installing software were new to him. This delayed his access to information and course material.
Liya also had a very difficult adjustment to using technology because she had not needed it before nor depended on the Internet or Blackboard in the past. Everything related to technology took her longer to complete. She explained: “Learning systems in the classroom culture really plays a great role for the student. I am not good at technology. Technology issue might be sometimes an interference.”

Liya explained that learning to use computers and related systems took her longer than expected because she was learning much of it for the first time. She felt at a disadvantage compared to her peers. She felt her peers were comfortable using all forms of technology.

Rihaa struggled with online courses, as they were new to her. She needed some guidance that wasn’t available. Eventually, through trial and error, she was able to adapt. She shared:

In the beginning it was challenging. Everything was challenging! The new system, like Blackboard. This system is not back home so I never used that. Everything was posted online. I was never using online education. It was like, “Where are the homework? How will I know?” In the beginning, I started to miss. I didn’t know when is the deadline or what is going on? Then I gradually adapted with the system. It became easier. In the beginning, it was like, “Where am I?”

Rihaa had never taken an online course or used a platform such as Blackboard. She spent the first two weeks trying to figure out how to utilize all the features to access the course. She got behind and was confused until she was able to understand where things were posted and how to upload homework.

Interacting indirectly with faculty caused some participants to struggle with access to course materials and understanding how to interface with the necessary technology. Online courses and setting up Internet and Wi-Fi access were issues that several participants struggled with. Challenges with technology impacted their academic experiences as they learned about and
adapted to unfamiliar systems. Fortunately, with time, students were able to successfully navigate the necessary systems and move forward.

Meeting Faculty Academic Expectations

Falling short of fulfilling faculty expectations was a blow to students’ confidence and self-worth. Negative or confusing feedback from faculty and not knowing how to address or contact faculty were also challenges that affected international graduate students’ adjustment. The following will further discuss these expectations.

Confusion about Faculty Expectations

Participants reported that faculty did not always understand that they felt overwhelmed with the amount of work expected, especially reading and writing. Other participants struggled with their personal learning preferences and approaches to assignments that did not align with the professor’s approaches. Additionally, students did not understand the nuances of how to address faculty members or contact them for assistance.

The feeling of being overwhelmed was expressed by Lanying. She said: “Sometimes I feel like I really want to finish all that my professors assign to us, but there is no way I can finish all of them.” She went on to explain: “I just feel like I can never really make my professor satisfied no matter how hard I try. Okay, yeah, I have no way to make her happy.” She felt that she did not have enough time to complete all of the assigned reading and that no matter how hard she tried, she felt defeated and unable to please her professor.

Adaku was struggling with participation in her Special Education course. She explained that Special Education was somewhat new in her country and she had no experience or
background with some of the disabilities being discussed in class. However, there was an expectation that students bring examples of their experiences to the class discussions and projects. Adaku explained:

   So, finding this causes challenges again because I have no background and I have nothing that I’m coming with. This is an exception for what my colleagues are saying in class. Most of this, you know, I can’t relate to because I never taught a kid with autism or a kid with, you know, a hearing impairment because (in my country) they keep them separate. So, I come to class and I expect to hear and see and hear me the same, you know?

Because Adaku had no experience with the course content, she was unable to participate in class discussions or contribute to group projects. Given the nature of the course, the faculty member’s expectation was that students would share experiences from which they all could learn. This was impossible for Adaku as she could not relate.

Valda believed her faculty members were comparing her to other students and felt this was very unfair. She said:

   One of the challenges that I had in the matter was actually that they [faculty] were comparing me with two other international students who had their Bachelor’s degree in English in their home countries. They were very good in English. People’s experiences are different. They were comparing me with those in the previous program and it was pushing me in a pressure a lot because it was not a good experience. In classes, they [faculty] were expecting me to have the same quality of participation or even quality papers.

One of Valda’s most challenging and difficult issues in all courses was her level of English language proficiency. She was eager to participate and contribute, but this was often frustrating for her. Valda was further marginalized when she reported that her professor compared her to other international graduate students, anticipating that she would be as fluent and articulate as they were, but this was not the case.
Editha had an overwhelming experience adjusting to everything in graduate school and facing many unknowns. She explained:

Everything they’re talking is new to you. The language they’re speaking all the time, it’s not much new to you, but the third language, you must not be very interesting to talk, but it’s kind of a shock. All of those things really shock. Coming into the academic aspect, that is now another shock like, will I pass? Will I do well? We have the culture shock and academic shock. What is the expectation of the professors? How do they mark?

Editha was very concerned about all the unknowns when she first arrived on campus. She worried about her ability to do well, pass her courses, and fulfill the expectations of her professors. This was a culture shock for her because so many aspects of the university were unfamiliar to her. Her educational experience in her country was far different. She explained:

In Tanzania, there are days that I will sit at the back of the class. I don’t really hear anything because … it’s a tight classroom of 100, almost 200 students. No air conditioning and it’s hot and humid where I come from. Students find themselves with having electricity for only two hours. Sitting in the back you couldn’t hear. If you came late you would stand in the back or listen through the window for two hours. That’s how it was for four years.

Editha marveled at the facilities in the United States. She wondered why everyone wasn’t enrolled in school. She was amazed that some of her courses only had 30 students and there were enough chairs not only for all the students, but for her backpack, too. She was always able to hear her professor without any barriers. Although these were positive aspects of attending her program, the adjustment was real and her concerns valid.

**Adjusting to Negative or Difficult Feedback**

Students are individuals who have strengths and weaknesses and may require more or less support from faculty. When the feedback is negative or seemingly unhelpful from the
participants’ perspective, students may encounter challenges that negatively impact them academically.

Isabella had a hard time adjusting to faculty expectations for several reasons. Not only was her program a new and intense experience for her, but she was often upset with the feedback she received. Isabella shared her experience interacting with one professor. She said:

There are things that I don’t get. It’s really hard for me because all my life, I have been able to understand things easily and quickly and I just do the things and they are correct. No one criticize me. So, it’s a really big hit, like a punch for my ego, when a professor tell me, “You do the wrong paper. The paper doesn’t has the puzzle. The paper is not really a good argument. You don’t have an argument.” I go to the Writing Center and that’s really helped me. But it’s not only because of the language. I don’t understand the thinking process. Because I was used to build arguments in a different way. And that’s…yeah, it’s to understand the way to think here and what they want. The logic.

Everything was different from her previous experiences. She struggled to understand what the professor wanted. She was used to one approach and style of writing, but this did not fit her professor’s expectations. Isabella had a conversation with another professor about how she was feeling. She sought validation for her concern about the pressure she was experiencing. She explained:

There is something in the academy, this pressure that put into the people that put in academy. That is not healthy. And when I have tried to talk with my professor about this, they say, “Yeah, grad school is hard. But I made it. And you can make it.”

Isabella was overwhelmed with the expectations in her program, but in her opinion, these feelings were not acknowledged. She felt brushed off and was told to simply work harder and she would be fine.
Ahmed had a similar experience with a professor; it caused him some temporary depression which forced him to re-evaluate his situation and the best way to move forward. He commented:

In this semester, one of the course, my experience, my previous experience and the needs of my professor in one of the courses are completely different. I was struggling to fit what he want us to and what I have to deliver. I remember in the beginning of the semester, I had a very depressive two or three days. Even my first semester is very nice. I was outstanding of my courses and I told myself that I was a good performer. But in the beginning of this semester, something is contradictory to what I consider myself and what actually happened in that course. It gave me a very depressive situation for two or three days and I discuss with myself and I plan again and discuss with myself and say that is not the end of the story. It is kind of a drop of water in the ocean.

Ahmed struggled to match his writing output with that of his professor’s expectations. Even after meeting with the professor, he could not understand what needed to be changed. This was conflicting for Ahmed because he had done well in the prior semester and felt he performed well. He experienced depression and worked on moving forward on his own.

Addressing and Contacting Faculty

Not knowing how to properly address faculty was troubling for many international graduate students. When they made mistakes, this upset and embarrassed them. Protocols from different cultures varied and some participants were uncertain how to refer to their professors. When and how to contact faculty was also worrisome for some participants. Navigating how to address professors, Aarav shared:

We have this practice in India that we don’t call them “professor.” We call them “sir” or “ma’am.” That’s how we call them. We don’t call them “teacher” or something like that. That’s a cultural thing because sometimes they get a bit offended if they call them “sir,” or sometimes by their first names, like, “Dr. First Name.” We didn’t know what to call the professor.
Aarav attempted to impart his custom of addressing faculty as he did in India. This did not always match the preferred title for his professors in the United States. He shared that it was further confusing because different faculty members had different preferences and he was initially uncertain how to address them.

Liya had a very hard time when asked to address her professor by her first name. She stated:

That was my cultural shock when I see the students here confronting their professors, talking equally with their professors and interacting and laughing; oh no, that’s not my culture. It’s professors so that impacted my interaction with my professors the first time. Even it’s hard for me to call my professors with their first name. No, it’s no way to call my professor by first name!

Liya shared her dismay when she encountered her peers speaking informally with and directly to faculty. This was not allowed in her country and students did not interact or laugh with their instructors. This adjustment was very difficult for her and she remains uncomfortable regarding this accepted practice here.

Because Rihaa did not understand the protocol about addressing faculty, she had a very embarrassing experience involving one of her professors. She shared:

Sometimes to make distinction, which name is first or last name. Like introducing their name, which to use, because we are from different culture. Naming is first name or last name. I didn’t know about that, that professors should not be addressed with first name. I didn’t know that. I was addressing one of my faculty with his first name always and he never said anything. He was so nice. But then I was volunteering in DeKalb County and I addressed someone by his first name. He mentioned that you shouldn’t do this like that. I was so embarrassed that I had been addressing that faculty with his first name all this time. He never mentioned so I never knew this is not right or appropriate. Just because I am an international student, I think I should learn this. I don’t know that was something.
Although Rihaa was grateful to have learned the nuances when addressing faculty, she found out the hard way and was embarrassed that she had been in error for so long. She would have appreciated it if this particular faculty member had corrected her early on to avoid this mistake again, or if someone had brought this to her attention when it happened, had that been possible.

Editha’s understanding about addressing professors stemmed from her cultural belief that elders are to be respected at all times. She recounted:

In my country we really respect the older people. Sometimes it doesn’t matter how stupid they are or they’re not stupid but because they’re old people. We grew up just being hearing that the older people, they’re just with wisdoms. Whatever they are saying, it’s kind of right. Here, it’s kind of like I really need to respect. I cannot just talk and just talk to them.

For Editha, her cultural background guided how she would address faculty. She followed the customs she learned growing up, which stemmed from respecting her elders. She applied this approach to all of her faculty members regardless of their age as they were in the role of authority.

Similar to Editha’s cultural background, Inara brought her cultural understanding of communicating with professors out of respect. She said:

In my country, the teacher holds the power and you basically believe that she is right in everything. You cannot argue against her. That’s not good. Yeah, listening and he or she provided examples, like certain sentences, and you have to repeat them. Just traditional methods of teaching. No interaction whatsoever, which makes it bad, especially if you are learning English, right?

Inara felt that her prior experience of only receiving information and not interacting with instructors was different from many of her encounters in her program here. It took some adjustment, but she preferred the new and more permissive interactions and reciprocal
conversations that she had with faculty. Inara felt more engaged and included in the learning process because of this approach.

Participants navigated how to address their professors in several ways. The cultural perspectives of participants were applied and, in some cases, worked well for the interaction. In other cases, participants learned a difficult lesson after making a mistake. Several participants had to adapt to American norms, which was uncomfortable but necessary in order to engage and participate.

Students who are unable to contact faculty, or don’t know how to reach faculty, will struggle and feel confused and frustrated. Several participants struggled with knowing when it was appropriate to reach out to instructors. For example, Reyansh had difficulty reaching professors during office hours and knowing when it was appropriate to seek them out. He shared:

In my home country, professors in my home country are very friendly with the cultural activities like if you have festivals. They used to interact with us. The professors over here will have certain time to work over here in the office. For my professors in my country, they used to work with us for a whole week. They don’t have certain kind of time to work like that. So we can approach professor at any time. And so professors are really good at cultural events in at that time in my country.

Reyansh had a very different experience in his country interacting with faculty. Professors in his country were fully engaged with cultural activities and more available to students at any time. Adjusting to office hours in his program here was frustrating, as he felt the opportunity was limited and related only to academics. He would have preferred a more open channel of communication and better access to his professors on an ongoing basis.

During one semester, Nilay struggled to get the support he needed. He shared:
I felt like…it’s like some kind of difficulty like if I’m having some kind of doubt regarding the coursework at some time. At that time the professors don’t have their working hours. Like I don’t know what to do with my problems, like how to solve my problems because the professor was not available at that time.

Nilay would have benefited from some guidance from his professor to help him with coursework. However, he did not know how to get help because the professor was not available, and he was at a loss. Students need access to guidance to meet with success.

Participants expressed concern about deciphering and fulfilling faculty expectations. Many felt unable to complete all the work or to complete it to the satisfaction of their professors. Depression was a common theme when students felt they could not perform to the level expected by their professors. Lacking background in a specific area caused frustration when the expectation remained that they would fully participate or participate at the same level as other students. Some of these challenges of adjustment may also have been influenced by language barriers.

Language Barriers

For most of the participants, English language proficiency mediated experiences when interacting with faculty and influenced academic performance. Many students said that they were nervous conversing with faculty due to their English language proficiency or presumed diminished level of proficiency. Participating in class comfortably, reading, and completing writing assignments all required adjustments and extra effort. Seven participants regularly utilized the services of the university Writing Center. Fortunately, for most students, with practice, support, and time they were able to build confidence and reduce the barriers that
interfered with these deficits. The following will further discuss challenges with English, class participation, writing, and understanding faculty accents.

**English Language Proficiency**

For most participants, the level of English language proficiency greatly impacted experiences interacting with faculty. English was the second or third language for 14 of the participants in this study. Students were fluent in three languages, on average. The level of English language proficiency was significant in students’ ability to communicate and be understood. For example, Dae-Hee struggled to be understood upon arriving in the United States, as his English proficiency was weak. As his English improved and he gained more confidence, he felt better about himself and his abilities. He shared his experiences communicating in class and how he was inspired when things went well. Dae-Hee stated: “As everybody knows, English ability is really important to get friends and to make a communication with faculty, not just the faculty, but also with the staff members or classmates, to make a quality discussion.” He shared a classroom experience about his approach acclimating with classmates and faculty. He said:

> There were really good stories because I have been here a long time. If there is a great interaction between classmates, that’s one of the great stories I can make. I could make interactions and communication helps me to get more inspired. Also, I get more knowledge and different other perspectives. So, I think the communication is the key to make good stories. Also, how to icebreaking, not just with classmates, but with a faculty member in a class was really, really important. I guess, because as an international student, always, I always feel some nervousness. For the first class, for me, was always so important to me to how to start the communication, how to break the ice, is really important. There’s an atmosphere for each different class. So there were some of the classes that I did not talk for a semester.

Dae-Hee was not comfortable participating in class until he was able to “break the ice.” He knew the importance of communication. Being able to communicate inspired his interest in the class
and facilitated interaction with faculty and classmates. He was nervous until he felt more competent with his English and this allowed him to share his perspectives with others.

Rihaa thought her English was sufficient when she arrived to begin her program. However, she shared that it was a big adjustment for her in classes. She said:

Yeah, actually language, I thought my English was pretty good back home but coming here, it was a British colony, so it was British English there. In the beginning, I was not getting anything. I didn’t understand any article that I read. Everything was different. But gradually I...what my way of adjusting was, I used to open a YouTube video and listen over and over again to understand what’s going on or what does it mean? Now I got used to all the jargons and special terms used.

Rihaa’s challenge was comprehending spoken and written English. She felt prepared coming to the United States because she grew up learning English. However, the differences between British and American English were greater than she had anticipated. Rihaa accessed YouTube videos to make sense of the vernacular and nuances with English in this country, and this helped her adjust.

Valda also grew up learning English in her country but found that others had a difficult time with her spoken English. An initial adjustment for Valda was getting faculty to understand her accent and word usage. Valda shared:

The professor couldn’t actually understand me. He was expecting me to get involved in discussion because it wasn’t a big classroom. It was just, for example, ten people and also it was a long table and everyone should participate in discussion. When it was time to talk, actually get involved in the discussion, his reaction was not good because he couldn’t understand. He was saying, “What, what, what, what?” “What did you say?” “Can you repeat that?”

Valda had been here several years and stated: “I had actually concerns about that in terms of my English proficiency. English was a big challenge for me, a barrier, but gradually everything is
better because you get involved with people.” Valda was intentional about persisting and worked on spoken English at every opportunity. The more encounters she could foster to practice her English was of benefit to her in the long run.

Liya also struggled to feel accepted and understood because of her level of English language proficiency and accent. She stated, “I don’t feel that I was treated differently because of my international status, but because of my, I don’t know, because of my accent.” She shared that in addition to having an accent, she was soft-spoken and not easily heard or understood. She worked on her spoken English with peers, as a teaching assistant, and through participation at the weekly community Intercultural Café. With practice, she became more comfortable and confident interacting with peers, students, and faculty.

Lanying struggled with both spoken and written English. She stated: “I remember the first time I just went to their [faculty] office. I just felt nervous a little bit about talking over things with him. Basically, that’s my English. It kind of sucks.” Lanying explained that she did not have enough opportunity to use her English in her country and certainly not on a level required for success in higher education. She was nervous speaking in class and meeting with faculty. Reading and writing in English also took her much longer than expected. This added to her nervousness and diminished her self-confidence.

Isabella was a native Spanish speaker and fluent in several other languages. Her struggle was constantly thinking in Spanish and translating into English. She said it left her behind during class participation because the discussion moved too quickly for this process. She explained:

Language cannot translate everything that you feel or think or are. So, language itself is a bit tricky thing for me. But now I am more able to be more confident and to be more able to talk. That’s because I really need to speak in English to interact with people.
Isabella lacked confidence initially because she felt behind during class discussions. The process of thinking in Spanish, translating into English and then speaking did not work because the discussion had moved on by the time she was ready to contribute. She quickly learned to surround herself with English speakers to bolster her skills and therefore level of comfort.

For the majority of participants, speaking English was a concern and a barrier. The level of proficiency mediated interactions with faculty. If participants were more comfortable with their ability, then class participation, conversing, and communication in general was easier. For students who struggled with understanding accents, or for others who couldn’t understand participants’ accents, discomfort and diminished sense of self were evident for participants when engaging with faculty and peers.

Challenges Writing in English

Writing is a critical component and necessary skill in higher education. Being proficient and accurate is essential for success. Many international graduate students lack the level of expertise needed to produce acceptable and accurate written work. This lack of writing proficiency can impact grades, confidence, and persistence. Seven of the participants regularly used the university Writing Center for assistance. Dae-Hee was one of the students who used the Writing Center. For instance, Dae-Hee described his challenge with writing and how the Writing Center was helpful. He stated:

It was challenging. When I turn in assignments, what I got from the professor as a feedback is always like, “I cannot understand what you are saying.” Then I had to make them understand about my writing. I had to go to the Writing Center a couple of times to fix my writing. I need some grammatical corrections still, but I correct it by myself or from friends or something. It’s not that bad, like before.
Early on, Dae-Hee’s writing was not acceptable, and he struggled. Once he was directed to the Writing Center for support, he was able to adjust, self-correct, and proceed with assistance from friends.

Lanying also used the Writing Center after her professor indicated that she needed support and improvement. Her professor felt that her English writing proficiency, in particular, was a barrier for her. She said:

Yeah, and also my professor, she just feels that my language is a big barrier for me because I’ve already tried my best just to go to the Writing Center. I do not think the writing center…they just don’t help me that much about the organization of the whole paper. They do help you about your grammar things, but maybe they lack the background as well. They did not really give you any ideas or opinions or suggestions about how should you organize your paper.

Lanying used the Writing Center but felt she needed more direction for organization and ideas in addition to grammar. Providing ideas and opinions is not the focus of support at the Writing Center and Lanying found this frustrating, as she needed this guidance.

Editha also used the Writing Center to help with her English. She commented: “I know for a writing, like when you write papers and reflections, the advice is always use the Writing Center and make sure you have them edit your work.” For a specific class she shared:

Yeah, some of my papers and assignments I do prefer to go there to the Writing Center. I’ve learned it’s not only the grammar but how to write these academic papers. I learned more, you know, so I’ve been taking some of my papers there because some of the professors, they’re really emphasizing you should take your paper there. For me it’s a good thing. I can just go there willingly, not because the professor said, but because it helped me to learn more about how the academic papers should look like.

Editha benefited from using the university Writing Center to better understand the basics of writing as well as the overall expectations for academic writing. She utilized the services for her
papers and assignments first upon referral from her professors and then went willingly and independently, as she knew it would be helpful.

English language proficiency influenced progress toward academic success for many international graduate students. For those students whose proficiency was higher, the language barriers were less prominent. For those whose proficiency was lower, participating in class comfortably, reading, and completing writing assignments all required adjustments and increased time and effort. Intentional practice with English speakers and utilizing the services of the university Writing Center for assistance were key strategies to overcome language barriers.

Perceived Lack of Cultural Competence

Participants expressed a perceived lack of cultural competence on the part of professors when engaging with faculty. Further, participants experienced consequences when cultural perspectives were not understood. Participants reported being negatively impacted when faculty did not acknowledge that international graduate students brought unique cultural practices and perspectives to various university settings.

Consequences for Not Understanding Cultural Perspectives

Feeling disconnected, left out, and excluded were consequences cited by participants. For example, Liya explained that it took her almost two years to feel comfortable interacting with faculty because it was not her practice to address them unless called on. Once she was comfortable, she was able to persist and know what to expect. But the learning curve was steep for a long time before she felt confident and successful. She stated:

The learning system in the classroom really plays a great role for the student. The methodology is very disconnected from my previous experience. I was disconnected all
the time. Here there is a very interactive process. The professors here only just provide
the environment for the students to discuss and every student should contribute for the
classroom where I am not expecting for the professor. That was really challenging for
me. It is a disconnect. My lack of participation may be negatively impacting for two
years. That’s very challenging that you will be left out. I feel sometimes outside, left out
just sitting somewhere.

The consequence for Liya was that she got behind in her classes. Her inability to participate in
class and understand the teaching methods diminished her self-confidence. She felt disconnected
and left “outside.”

Rihaa faced some challenges based on her culture that were ongoing issues for her. She
explained:

Some etiquettes are different so that maybe sometimes, in the beginning, not very
understood by the faculties or other students. For example, we hang out and talk which is
encouraged, girls with girls. If you are watched that you are very closely interacting with
men, that is not appreciated in our culture. Sometimes you may feel bad like, for
example, I don’t shake hands with men. For men faculty sometimes I feel like I am, I
don’t want to disrespect, but this is something I don’t do. In the beginning it may be a
challenge like someone felt very bad.

The consequence for Rihaa when faculty did not understand her cultural customs was that she
felt bad not shaking male professors’ hands. She did not want to disrespect faculty, yet she
wanted to honor her cultural practices.

Sai explained that he often asked questions of professors to learn about their perspectives.
He felt that they never saw things through his lens. He felt this excluded him on some level and
limited the exchange of knowledge that could be possible. He shared:

So, there’s very little acknowledgement of our inclusion of other cultures, philosophy,
seminars, philosophy of China, India, Japan, let’s say Eastern and Western. So there’s
very little inclusion on that end and when you bring these points up during discussions in
this course, other people look at me and say, “wow.” If you were brought up in such a
background, you would also look at it in a similar way. So cultural differences does really
impact how you view the world and how you understand it. The point of these classes is to broaden your perspective.

Sai wished that there were more opportunities to talk about other cultures and make comparisons and acknowledge differences simply out of curiosity. He knew this would broaden perspectives for all students and faculty. As a philosophy major, this was of special interest to him.

International graduate students acknowledged that they learned a great deal about themselves and others when they came to the United States to study. Finding one’s place and feeling included were important aspects of their adjustment. Understanding that culture contributes in significant ways, for faculty and students, needs further exploration. Ultimately, understanding that cultural differences impact how we all view the world serves to broaden everyone’s perspective in more positive ways. That this could be reflected in courses and through instruction would favorably impact academic experiences for international graduate students, domestic students, and faculty.

Participants’ Understanding of Faculty Perceptions

Trice conducted a study in 2001 that explored the attitudes of faculty members toward international students. Faculty acknowledged that international students helped establish international ties and they brought diverse perspectives to the university. The results also indicated that the unique academic needs of international students challenged faculty who were interviewed for the study. Further, the areas of greatest concern were difficulties with English and cultural adjustment (Trice, 2001). What mediated these challenges and concerns on behalf of faculty? Asking participants to share their understanding of how faculty members perceived them was an approach to further understand how engaging with faculty influenced their
experiences. The participants in the current study offered their opinions about their understanding of how faculty perceived them.

In general and for most participants, they expressed that faculty interacted with them respectfully, with patience, and showed interest in their success. Participants’ impression of how they were perceived by faculty was that international students were hard workers and at the same time, experienced a lot of challenges in college.

The literature reports that the process is further complicated by a lack of awareness and respect by domestic students and faculty about the culture, history and geography of international students (Peterson et al., 1999). This was also the case for participants in the current study in terms of stereotypes and misconceptions that were raised and encountered.

Participants had concerns that faculty knew little about their cultures or countries and therefore held assumptions about them. For example, Valda shared that faculty made assumptions about her abilities when comparisons were made with other students from her country. She also stated that faculty compared her to other international graduate students and expected her English ability to be similar. Inara said that faculty assumed her culture and language were the same as neighboring Russia. David said that most faculty thought he was Middle Eastern. Although he was born in Canada, his parents were from Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is not in the Middle East but rather in south Asia.

Isabella’s greatest fear was that faculty would connect her with drugs. She said:

The thing that they know for sure is about the war and the peace process. They are really decent to not talk about drugs because for us, the Colombians, we are not involved in the drugs. The issue is really painful. So they have been really polite with me and they know, for me, that’s a subject that is difficult. We have this stigma as Colombians.
Isabella was aware that the stereotype existed in American about Colombians and drugs. This concerned her and she felt anxiety about even being approached about the topic. She didn’t want faculty or peers to think less of her because of this common yet false association supported in the literature (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Adaku always wore a head covering. She shared that she thought she was assumed to be less educated, not very responsible, or unreliable. She worked hard to try to dispel that perception by being an excellent student and active in student organizations. Aarav said that he thought faculty assumed all Asians were good at math. He was good at math but he also worried about interacting with women because he said there was a reputation that there was a lot of rape in India. For this reason, he rarely interacted with peers who were women and female faculty only when necessary.

Liya said, “My accent may have caused generalizations or beliefs of someone who doesn’t know anything. Very hard find people who are open to learn about your culture. Person of color—that’s the problem, they may have prior belief.” She felt marginalized at times in classes when faculty and students were not patient with her. She struggled to be understood because of her accent and that only made her more anxious about speaking.

Rihaa’s cultural practices allowed “girls to be with girls, and boys with boys.” And she is not permitted to shake hands with men. This limited her interaction with male faculty and peers. It wasn’t so much a problem but rather a discomfort that she sometimes felt judged for.

In addition to pursuing her graduate program of study, Editha taught Swahili in the Department of World Languages and Cultures as part of her teaching assistant duties. She was shocked when students asked her if there was electricity, running water and actual homes in
Tanzania. This interaction was student-based, but she did wonder about all ages of Americans and why they didn’t have accurate information about the numerous countries in Africa.

Inara felt that the faculty member who hired her to be a teaching assistant did not have a good or fair perception of her. Inara struggled for months to find a TA position and when she was hired, the faculty member took advantage of her and expected her to work far more hours than were in her contract. She was overwhelmed with this situation and felt she was not treated well because of her international status.

Lanying had great difficulty with spoken and written English in her Ph.D. program. Several professors told her that her English was a barrier and that she needed to improve. She felt that they did not believe she could perform well because of this language deficit. She wondered if they had a bad impression of her because she struggled so much and did not do well on written work.

Sai shared that he thought he was perceived as an exotic person by faculty. He said: “When a person comes who can bring in outside perspectives, they [faculty] are like, wow, he perks up!” Sai was speaking with one of his professors about his religion, Hinduism, and the professor thought it was fascinating. Sai also felt that he needed to set a higher bar on behalf of all Indian students so that they would be perceived and accepted well.

Cultural assumptions on the part of faculty mediated some inaccurate perceptions about international graduate students viewed through the lens of participants. Positive and long-term interactions between international graduate students and faculty dispelled some of these inaccurate perceptions. However, in many cases, the lack of perceived cultural understanding, or
even interest on the part of faculty, left international graduate students feeling confused and excluded when they interacted with their professors.

Practices That Influence Academic Experiences

Interactions with faculty and practices in and out of the classroom influence international graduate students’ academic experiences. These interactions and practices may support or hinder persistence and academic experiences. Participants who believed that faculty went “above and beyond,” positively impacted their experiences. Participants who believed faculty ignored or dismissed their needs, perceived their academic outcomes to be negative. The following will further discuss these practices.

Faculty Who Go Above and Beyond

Many participants had supportive and affirming experiences with faculty who utilized specific practices in and out of the classroom and sometimes went above and beyond to support students. Participants shared practices that included engaging classroom atmospheres, using humor, providing access and giving feedback, speaking clearly, giving examples of what is needed, being fair, sharing materials, allowing extra time for papers and presentations, attending to their comfort during winter months, and offering encouragement. One participant said that faculty allowed her to bring her two children from time to time when she lacked childcare. These were acts of kindness for which participants were grateful. For example, Ahmed shared his experience in one class where a professor was particularly engaging. He explained:

Well, one of the professors that I told you before, the fascinating professor, doing such kinds of activity is one way to make everybody happy. When everybody become happy and interested to that course, again, the productivity is increase. I perceive it that way. If I
am very much interested the ways he is expressing the course and if I am very much interested to read that course, definitely I will have a better knowledge for that course and the way the professors are delivering, so they can, I think. They can. But what they are currently doing is not bad. It is ordinary, good ordinary. But it is not comparable to the professor that I have told you about!

For Ahmed, the combination of engaging pedagogy and happy students increased productivity and knowledge in this course. Due to the course delivery and types of activities employed by their professors, students remained excited and interested.

To a greater extent than most of the participants, Valda expressed extreme challenges with being understood because of her accent. For this reason, she appreciated the patience and humor that one professor extended. She shared:

That was one challenge [the faculty member not understanding her accent], but at the same time, he was open to what I’m saying. So even if I was not saying something related, he was trying to connect it to the topic anyway and it was very funny. The problem was that it was the English barrier, but I was feeling good with American native professors because I think they had more understanding.

Even when the faculty member could not understand her, Valda felt included, encouraged, and willing to participate because the professor used humor and understood her struggle.

Adaku had a very good experience in an online course because her professor was accessible and provided valuable feedback. She said:

So, you know, you don’t really need so much guidance from someone else. She just brings her modules in such a way that you know, you feel like she’s sitting right next to you as you read and then she’ll take the time to explain terms that might not show up in the textbook or in whatever article that’s just put up. So, she’s making it really easy to access the content and the assessments are practical. So, it’s easy. And I have so far done very well in every assessment she was put on that. She gives good feedback on why she [has] given the grade she’s given and what she could do differently in that course.
Adaku had never taken an online course prior to this one. She was initially nervous. But because of the instruction and relevant feedback, Adaku felt as if the instructor was sitting next to her and this gave her the confidence and information needed to be successful. Adaku, also benefited from extra time afforded her. She shared:

So, he gave me time to write my paper. He knew I understood the content. What else? Just not using it the right way. So, he did give me an extension on that day. Sometimes I think and given more time, probably like on a presentation just because it probably takes me a bit longer to get to a point than an American student. And sometimes I probably have to explain a word I just used because I found out that some of the words they use are actually slang. Wait. I was trying to say…So yes, I’ve been given like more time probably on presentations.

Adaku was able to better process her thoughts and explain her ideas because her faculty members recognized that she needed extra time to be clear and organized. Because of this allowance, her written work and oral presentations improved, and she was successful.

Isabella was appreciative of the efforts faculty made to support her as well as other international graduate students. She stated:

But inside the classrooms, the professors are aware that we are international students in the department. And they really try to speak clear. They really try to make other persons speak louder. We are really noisy, and I am really noisy. So when people doesn’t speak loud, I hear people speak really, really low, low really. I don’t know. Kind of a silence. So sometimes I am the one in the classroom that is making more to debate, like, “I am not agree because…” But it’s nice. I really enjoy it to talk, so it’s good.

Isabella appreciated faculty who acknowledged that international graduate students had some challenges in their courses. They were intentional to speak clearly and loudly enough to be heard and understood. This made Isabella feel good and she was more encouraged to participate.

Liya felt that giving examples and checking in with her about the discussion was a practice that helped her ability to follow along and understand. She said:
They will just bring examples as you said, a movie, or they may call someone an actor. “Liya, do you know?” Sometimes they may ask me, “No, you don’t know what we are talking about?” No, I am not understanding what you are talking about.

After making a reference in class, this professor would check in with Liya to clarify if she understood. When she didn’t an explanation would follow. This kept her engaged and she was able to follow and participate fully.

Sai felt that his faculty’s goal was to treat all students fairly and he experienced this positive approach first-hand in one course. He shared:

So when I take classes while under their supervision, they don’t make difference. So they treat everybody equally so they don’t make a distinction. “Oh, you’re Caucasian. You’re Indian or you’re Chinese.” They don’t make that distinction because they treat or engage with students equally. So even when, let’s say pairing people in groups, they don’t make a conscious decision to pair a non-native student with a domestic student with international students. Everybody is considered equal and you know the fair equal playing field.

This display of equity was important to Sai. He believed that it was a good practice for faculty to treat all students equally and provide equal opportunities. An example, and important to Sai, was the availability of his Philosophy of Language professor to meet with him to guide his writing. During the class that I observed, the professor, on more than one occasion, checked in with Sai during the lecture to ask him if this related to their meeting earlier during office hours. It was his practice to meet with the professor prior to each lecture and discuss Sai’s ideas. Sai stated: “Usually when I go with ideas, he doesn’t discourage me. He encourages me, but usually I understand his perspective of my ideas are more dissertation-type of ideas. He is very helpful!” This ongoing opportunity for Sai was very important and positioned him well prior to each class
and weekly as he interacted with the course material and benefitted from the face-to-face clarification offered by the professor.

Reyansh also had a good experience with the practices used in two of his courses by faculty. He said: “I took another two subjects which I find like the professors are very good. They are teaching very slowly. They are taking care of the international students’ language. So, they taught us very easily like every student understood the language.” Reyansh explained that faculty respected the needs of international graduate students and they were careful with their speech so that comprehension was enhanced.

Faculty members supported students through individual assistance and attention. These practices had significant impact on the needs of international graduate students. For example, Editha had a lot of support from individual faculty and her experience exemplifies this support. One example she shared involved support and materials for the course. She said: “Mostly good ways. They were supporting me even to give me some of the materials like this is the book we will use in this class. So, in case take this book and you can start reading.” This faculty member loaned her the textbook so she could get started before the course even began.

Dae-Hee was afforded classroom accommodations from faculty that greatly helped with his adjustment. He explained:

When I got here first time in the literacy education program, I had to get an accommodation because my English and my catching up process was not good enough. Also, mostly the students in the program had a teaching experience, but I do not have one. I did not have one at the time. That was a good accommodation that faculty gave me. And also my English grammar correction stuff, like they had more extension time, such like that. That was really helpful for me. And extra time. Mostly extra time for me but sometimes I request like more resources.
Dae-Hee required extra time and assistance with spoken English and writing. The extra time allowed him to get the assistance needed to boost his skills and be successful.

Liya was assisted by several professors in numerous areas and this individual attention helped her greatly. She said:

Some professors try to accommodate especially time-wise. Maybe in writing I might be slow. Writing in English I have to go to the Writing Center and I ask my professors to extend me to an hour late or two hours late. They accommodated that.

Liya appreciated the time extension for writing. She also shared that another professor was very kind. She shared: “During the winter he left and brought me a heater to class. He was very sensitive to my needs.” And regarding another professor, she confided: “She supported me financially for three, four semesters with extra finance because the college pays less, very small money.” These acts of kindness were above and beyond expectations and without this assistance, Liya would have felt less cared for and financially more compromised.

Rihaa also experienced kindness and understanding from faculty. She said: “My kids are pretty much always with me and department and all the faculties were very, very supportive in that respect. That was separate support.” Rihaa also explained general understanding from faculty. She stated: “Yes, of course they accommodate very well. They pay attention and they actually explain this naming or the cultural difference. They respect it. They know we are not born here.” Rihaa would have missed out on several classes, meetings, and student organization meetings had she not been allowed to bring her young children with her.

Lanying felt encouragement from faculty, specifically as an international student. She commented:
I just feel like I have no good method to assign my time in a balance way which makes me feel guilty because all of my professor, they’re really friendly. They just try to help me and try to encourage me. They kind of encourage me much more than maybe American students. Maybe because they feel like, “Oh, those American students, they’ve already talked a lot or they already know what they want or share or express. But for me, it’s just like they just always try to encourage way like, “Oh, you do a great job. Try to say more or try to speak more is fine. We can understand you.

Sometimes international graduate students felt at a disadvantage due to their English language proficiency and because most academic activities simply take longer. Lanying operated on a deficit model upon starting her program. However, because faculty offered her encouragement, this had a positive and impactful influence that supported her success.

Faculty who went above and beyond in and out of the classroom positively impacted participants. Practices that addressed the needs of international graduate students supported students-by creating an engaging classroom environment, using humor, providing access to material, and giving feedback. Participants also benefited when faculty spoke clearly, gave examples, were fair, shared materials, and allowed extra time on assignments and for presentations. In other cases, participants expressed appreciation when professors shared course materials, offered encouragement, extended patience, and allowed participants’ children to accompany them to class or during meetings.

**Faculty Who Ignore or Dismiss Students’ Needs**

International graduate students had difficulty because of teaching methods used by professors and practices that were employed in the classroom. These issues included language that could not be understood by participants, lack of experience with group work, or lack of experience with course content. Some participants experienced interruptions in persistence due to
issues outside of the classroom. Regarding teaching methods used by professors, Aarav struggled with understanding his professors’ mode of communicating and their method of delivering a lecture.

He explained:

I met a few of my good friends who are now working outside. One is in Ohio and one is in Minnesota. I met them during one of my classes. We all spoke the same language, Hindi. My interaction with them was due to the same course because I had difficulty understanding the basic concepts of the course because I could not follow the professor’s lecture and how he taught. So, I went to their place and we studied together. We broke down the assignment. We were not supposed to do that combined, but we kind of did that. We didn’t copy but we would discuss how to do it.

Aarav believed that the faculty member did not care about the international graduate students who could not understand him, and he was fearful to approach the professor because of this. Aarav’s perceived disregard for his needs caused difficulty listening, participating, and understanding the course material.

Editha explained her difficulty with group work:

Mostly in my experience at the university level some of the professor[s] they can just put you in groups. They can form those groups and say these are the groups I’ve formed with some of the characteristics maybe according to the level of students. Mostly they lecture, but here mostly they put us into groups in the classroom but just students themselves to work on their own in groups. It’s where it is really very difficult and very hard but in my country it’s easy. Though I can understand because most of the university students in my country we don’t have culture of just working as a part-timer.

Editha struggled with group work. This teaching approach did not work for her, as she felt could not fully participate with her group members. She had difficulty meeting with members of her group because they were not available. Parts were divided up and worked on individually. The benefits of group work were lost on her and she felt isolated.
Inara struggled to understand a professor she felt lacked experience in the course content and this impacted her negatively. Additionally, she felt the instructor made assumptions about what students already knew about the process. She explained:

There was one class that was a challenging one because it was online. And I didn’t like that, being online, because if you take online class usually don’t have time to talk to the professor. You have to schedule certain office hours, which is not good. And the challenging part was maybe her lack of experience because she didn’t provide good example of how to submit this and that paper. She assumed that we know already how to prepare a research notebook, for example.

When instructors make assumptions about what students know or don’t know, this may have a negative impact on them. Students who are new to online coursework have a more difficult time, as they feel they are missing important aspects of the curriculum. Inara experienced both these issues, and she struggled to be successful in the course.

Liya and Inara shared examples of experiences engaging with faculty outside of the classroom that resulted in negative outcomes during their programs. For example, Liya’s graduation was delayed an entire year due to circumstances out of her control. One professor was willing to work with her, but another was not. She explained:

My visa was delayed a week. My one professor was okay for that but then another said, “You are late.” I had to move the whole semester. My plan was to finish in the fall of 2017, but it pushed my dissertation, so now I am very intense.

A further consequence resulted in her graduate assistantship being interrupted and then ending. She scrambled to find a new graduate assistantship on campus so that she could complete her final year. Without that position, she would not have been able to complete coursework and graduate. The pressure was difficult and negatively impacted her in numerous ways.
Inara’s experiences involved a graduate assistantship as well. She was struggling to find a position and after 15 interviews was hired. However, it was short-lived. She explained:

I found finally, from my department assistantship, and I worked there for three or four months. The faculty member was international faculty member and I expected that they would support me, and would appreciate the work I did, but they never did. Even so, I ended up doing their work all the time instead of preparing to my classes. They weren’t understanding at all and they would ask me to do this. They were adding more work every week. I tried to catch up and I couldn’t have time to prepare for my classes, so I said, “No.” That’s why I quit that assistantship. It was too much because I came here to study, not to work.

Inara’s faculty member did not understand or respect her need to attend to her family. Additionally, she felt that the faculty member took advantage of her by assigning her more work than was feasible or fair. She needed to quit this assistantship to attend to her family and her own studies.

International graduate students had positive experiences interacting with faculty who went above and beyond to support them toward persistence. However, some students experienced negative outcomes based on practices used by faculty in the classroom through specific lecture delivery, group work, and online instruction when these practices were beyond the students’ familiarity, comfort level or experience. Outside of the classroom, international graduate students sometimes found that interactions with faculty did not go well. In one case, a student’s entire program completion was jeopardized because of a visa issue that resulted in her professor adhering to expectations that negatively impacted her progress. Another student felt taken advantage of as she attempted to maintain a needed graduate assistantship while balancing her own coursework and family obligations.
Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 examined how academic experiences were influenced when international graduate students engaged with faculty. Themes related to the interactions that international graduate students had with faculty, how these interactions influenced their experiences, how students described classroom practices and the impact that specific practices had on their academic experiences. The research questions guided the interview process from which the concepts were developed. Each of the headings outlined the themes and subthemes based on the findings from the data analysis.

Interactions that international graduate students had with faculty included engagement through the recruitment process and those related to academics in the classroom, advising, and through program or dissertation chair relationships. There were significant relationships outside of academics and the classroom that focused on faculty as mentors, friends, or as a conduit for professional development opportunities. A few participants also shared instances that were difficult for them outside of academics.

Participants experienced challenges adjusting to the American educational system which included classroom practices encompassing teaching methodology, online courses, grading, and technology. Faculty expectations involving academic work and feedback, contacting faculty and how to address professors were also challenges faced by participants which inhibited persistence and success. Not knowing how to appropriately address professors or how to contact them left students conflicted and frustrated.

In the view of participants, communication and progress toward academic success was negatively influenced due to language barriers. Level of English language proficiency was a
significant indicator of success for students. Students who were more proficient experienced less stress and more academic success. For students who were less proficient, persistence was negatively influenced, and challenges were greater. Many students said that they were nervous conversing with faculty due to their English language proficiency or presumed diminished level of proficiency. Participating in class comfortably, reading, and completing writing assignments all required adjustments and extra effort. Various American English accents and international faculty with accents presented receptive and expressive language barriers for international graduate students. 

A perceived lack of cultural understanding influenced participants, as they reported an absence of cultural competence on the part of faculty. Participants felt that classrooms were overly American-centric, which diminished their lived experiences. As a result, implicit bias discouraged progress. Cultural nuances also influenced participants’ experiences in that references to American culture in the classroom left students confused and unable to participate fully because of lack of knowledge or experience. Consequences for not understanding cultural perspectives left students feeling disconnected, left out, disrespected, embarrassed, and excluded.

Practices in and out of the classroom that supported or hindered persistence were discussed. Faculty who went above and beyond employed practices that supported students. These practices included fostering engaging classrooms, using humor, offering access and feedback, speaking clearly, giving examples, being fair, and sharing materials. Additionally, practices that addressed the needs of international graduate students supported students through the accommodation of extra time on assignments and presentations; sharing of course materials;
financial assistance; allowing their children to accompany them; and encouragement and general patience, which greatly impacted students in positive ways.

Faculty who ignored or dismissed the needs of international graduate students caused students to extend their program, quit assistantships, or feel excluded in courses where they lacked experience, had no familiarity with group work, or could not follow the teaching methodology of an instructor.

In Chapter 4 the themes that emerged for participants were discussed in depth. Understanding how academic experiences were influenced when international graduate students engaged with faculty through challenges adjusting to the American educational system, navigating language barriers and perceived lack of cultural competence, and classroom practices that influence academic experiences inform the recommendations provided in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

In this study, I explored how international graduate students perceived interactions with faculty contributed to their academic experiences at a public, midwestern university in the United States. Through qualitative interviews and classroom observations, this phenomenological study addressed three main research questions:

1. How do international graduate students describe their interactions with faculty?
2. According to international graduate students, how do these interactions influence their experiences?
3. How do international graduate students describe classroom practices and the impact specific practices have on their academic experiences?

This led to understanding how participants described their interactions with faculty, how these interactions influenced their experiences, and how classroom practices impacted their academic experiences. In this chapter, I discuss the findings in relation to existing literature and the study’s theoretical framework. Additionally, I present conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for future research.

Participants discussed both individual and classroom interactions with faculty members during their graduate school experiences. These interactions were often mediated by participants’ English language proficiency and different cultural understandings related to education and interpersonal communication. Participants perceived their interactions with faculty contributed to their sense of belonging and inclusion in the classroom, at the university and within the community. Specific classroom practices and faculty expectations influenced participants’
academic experiences. Figure 1 outlines these processes as they related to the Human Ecology Model. The following will discuss these conclusions further.

**Figure 1. Context of human ecology model. (Adapted from Renn & Arnold, 2003)**

**Interactions with Faculty**

The first research question explored the specific interactions that international graduate students had with faculty. Participants engaged with faculty through the recruitment process, academics, and activities outside the classroom. During the recruitment process, participant engagement with faculty from the United States who traveled to international graduate students’
home countries resulted in acceptance into doctoral programs for two participants. Participants stressed that this engagement during recruitment favorably impacted their decision to attend Northern Illinois University.

Supportive and intentional engagement with faculty mattered to participants and they perceived this support as contributing to persistence in their programs of study. As evidenced through participants’ statements, as well as reflected in the literature, developing relationships with peers, advisors, and faculty promoted meaningful connections needed to foster self-confidence and feeling welcomed and supported (Bista and Foster, 2011). The majority of participants in this study reported that faculty were supportive, were understanding of their circumstances, and that engagement with them was beneficial for their adjustment. The provision of support and understanding that developed between participants and their faculty advisors mediated meaningful connections needed to gain self-confidence resulting in perceived success for participants.

Situated in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) microsystem, this pattern of engagement with faculty, and the resulting interpersonal relationship experienced by international graduate students, positioned participants to be impacted in several ways. The microsystem allows space for individual interactions and provides an opportunity for development and learning for students. As a result, participants successfully navigated academic requirements and activities in their programs when engagement with faculty was supportive and positive. Participants perceived these individual interactions as influencing their ability to manage day to day and become familiar and comfortable with the university environment.
Within this microsystem sphere, relationships developed between individual international graduate students and individual faculty members. As relationships developed, participants received financial assistance, help with grant writing, and leadership development through memorandum of understanding guidance, for example. These developments moved into the exosystem sphere and participants reported positive outcomes. Participants in these cases expressed a sense of empowerment and inclusion when faculty took special interest in them. This finding is in alignment with previous research (Leong, 2015; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). When students are cared for and supported, adjustment problems are reduced, and student development and learning are positively impacted.

The opportunity for meaningful connections with faculty, above and beyond academic expectations and outside of the classroom, was a significant theme shared by many international graduate students. When friendships developed with faculty members outside of the classroom, participants reported that they felt welcomed, included and more confident about themselves. Faculty offered friendship through inclusion for holidays, personal support when students needed someone to talk to, and offered what one participant referred to as a “guiding star.” Several participants struggled with episodes of depression and often felt stressed when trying to meet deadlines. Developing a strong relationship with faculty and constructing connections is important to reduce stress and depression (Gao, et al., 2010). For participants, this meaningful connection mediated their well-being and feelings of self-worth and positioned them to meet with success knowing they had this external means of support.

Participants who interacted and constructed meaningful relationships with faculty reported that they developed self-confidence and felt welcomed and supported. In their view, this
benefitted their ability to persist and move forward in their academic programs and afforded them opportunities outside of the classroom. According to participants, those who did not construct meaningful relationships with faculty, experienced less favorable outcomes both personally and academically.

Participants who perceived a lack of connection and engagement with particular faculty members, reported poorer academic outcomes and in some cases, impacted negatively on their mental health. Due to students’ reported diminished confidence or disinterest in soliciting assistance because of previous difficult encounters with faculty, two participants intentionally avoided interacting with faculty. One participant preferred not to engage, as he was not a strong student academically, and this left him feeling at risk for further disappointment from faculty. Another participant did not have positive interactions throughout his program because he believed he could not meet his professors’ expectations. He was unhappy and reported experiencing episodes of depression. Difficulties with faculty and the marginalization of sojourning international students are common problems when they are not accepted by the host culture and noted throughout the literature (Bai, 2016; Gao, et al., 2010; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; and Kusek, 2015). This was the case for several participants where the quality and degree of faculty-student interaction, according to participants, was less supportive.

Because of diminished or failed relationships with faculty, participants reported that grades were impacted, isolation was an issue, and stress levels increased from the pressure to keep up and perform well. Several participants perceived strained relationships with faculty members as having a negative impact on their academic performance and in some cases, their mental health.
Interactions with Faculty and the Influence on Experiences

The second research question was: “According to international graduate students, how do these interactions influence their experiences?” This discussion will incorporate English language proficiency and cultural understanding related to education and interpersonal communication. The following will discuss these conclusions further.

English Language Proficiency

Perceptions of English language proficiency mediated participants’ interactions with faculty. Except for the one international graduate student who grew up in Canada, participants shared concerns about their ability to communicate in English. Participants’ comfort level speaking English mediated interactions with faculty within the mesosystem level as depicted through synergy across microsystem and exosystem levels. At the microsystem level, many participants actively avoided interacting with faculty in one-on-one situations due to perceived diminished English language proficiency. At the exosystem level, 14 participants were less likely to feel comfortable speaking in class discussions, answering questions, and being outgoing in social situations when they were self-conscious about their accent or fearful of misunderstandings in conversations. This aligns with other studies in which international graduate students were self-conscious about their accent or fearful of misunderstandings in conversations (Bai, 2016). For the majority of participants in the study, English was a second, third or in some cases, a fourth language. In their view, this disadvantaged them compared to domestic English-speaking students. As a result, they struggled to feel comfortable during class discussions and when conversing with faculty and domestic students.
Participants perceived that their professors often interpreted their silence during class discussions as disinterest or confusion. They were concerned that faculty would form an inaccurate perception of them. This aligns with other studies that indicated that faculty misperceptions of international students impacted their ability to participate in class and learn course material (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Some indicated that this perception of disinterest or confusion led participants to shut down and develop anxiety, and dampened self-confidence that negatively impacted their academic outcomes and social adjustment. Several participants developed anxiety and low self-esteem when they perceived that professors had interpreted their silence as disinterest. For example, several participants were left out of class discussions because they could not follow language associated with nuanced cultural references that were not within their experiences. Another participant struggled to participate because she was thinking in Spanish and translating into English. By the time she was ready to offer an opinion, the conversation had moved on. She was chronically frustrated and anxious during class. Adding to issues of language comprehension, when classroom discussions are American-centric, participants report being on the “outside” with nothing to contribute.

Higher education institutions often rely upon English proficiency exam such as the TOEFL to ensure that international students meet minimum language proficiency to be successful. At the exosystem level, institutions and academic programs set minimum scores needed to be admitted to the university. While students do not have control over these polices, they impact faculty-student interactions and academic expectations. One potential influence is over faculty members’ expectations of international students’ level and comfort with the English
language. Participants perceived that their faculty expected them to participate fully in class discussions and on a similar level to domestic students. As indicated by previous research, international students often report homework taking longer, having difficulty understanding the nuances of studying independently in the library, making oral presentations in class, adapting to pop quizzes, and actively participating in classroom discussions were the result of the lack of English language proficiency (Bai, 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007). Similarly, participants in this study reported sharing all of these experiences.

In the area of written language, academic writing is critical for success for all students in higher education. For international graduate students there may be an added level of adaptation and transition (Tran, 2009). It would benefit international students if faculty considered these factors and extended patience and support when possible; otherwise, international graduate students can feel alienated or marginalized which is supported in the literature (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Lee & Rice, 2007). As mentioned, many of the participants utilized the Writing Center for assistance with grammar and academic writing in general. Without this service, students likely would not have passed their classes where writing was a key aspect of the course. The Writing Center, as well as tutoring and assistance from graduate teaching assistance, proved invaluable to participants in this study.

Cultural Understanding Related to Education and Interpersonal Communication

International graduate students’ experiences were often mediated by their cultural background when interacting with faculty and systems within the university. At this level, the macrosystem incorporates culture, subcultures, customs and belief systems (which includes the
host culture and the participants’ cultures, customs, and belief systems) which in turn may exert influence on the other systems. The university is an example of a macrosystem which is guided by social forces, cultural practices and expectations, and historical trends.

Facing many unknowns was overwhelming for participants. Participants expressed difficulty adjusting to their new university environment with elements of culture shock because they experienced everything as different from their previous educational experiences. For example, approaching faculty directly ran counter to culturally accepted norms for several participants within the macrosystem level. As a result of this culturally held belief about not approaching faculty, communication and self-advocacy were often absent. As indicated in other studies, international graduate students were impacted by cultural assumptions, beliefs and ways of knowing that influenced their interactions and modes of communication (Gao & Jamal, 2007; Tran, 2009). Culturally based, this was the case for the majority of participants as some international graduate students took a very long time to participate in class, approach a professor, or develop any level of comfort speaking English.

Challenges and issues around adjustment to university life are common for all college students. But students attending college at institutions in a culture different from their own had additional social and educational concerns (Banjong, 2015; Zhou et al., 2008). Similarly, participants struggled with adjusting to the new and different educational expectations and demands. These social and educational concerns impacted all participants studying in the United States in various ways. For example, the academic demands were different than their previous educational experiences and therefore very challenging. Many participants shared previous experiences of participating only as a passive learner in classes. The expectation of actively
participating in classroom discussions, writing long academic papers, and working in groups were new for many participants. Additionally, learning where to access specific offices on campus, obtaining information, and seeking assistance was a hurdle at the beginning of their journeys. These initial barriers put a burden and strain on their ability to adjust, adapt, and persist.

Evidence in the literature indicates that the ability to adapt is often influenced by what the international graduate student knows about the new culture, how long they remain in the host culture, their level of English proficiency, and their own cultural identity (Zhou et al., 2008). For example, participants who were at the beginning of their educational journey and who had less proficient English language skills, experienced more challenges adjusting and feeling competent. The ability to engage with faculty, therefore, played a significant role for international graduate students. Participants reported that engagement with faculty mediated their ability to adapt, adjust, and overcome challenges. From a sense of belonging and feeling included to insensitive faculty as well as access to faculty, all played a significant part in international graduate students’ motivation, self-worth, academic efficacy and persistence in their program as supported in previous studies (Bai, 2016; Gao et al., 2010; Glass et al., 2015).

When participants chose not to communicate with faculty, this impacted their willingness to seek help. In their opinion, as a result, grades suffered, confidence decreased, and feelings of self-worth plummeted. For three participants, persistence was negatively influenced. For example, one participant’s graduation was delayed a year because a faculty member would not work with her due to a complication with her visa and her subsequent late return to campus. She was unable to self-advocate or identify another faculty member to assist her in this difficult
situation out of respect for the faculty member’s decision. In other cases, participants struggled academically and did not reach out to faculty for support. They were not comfortable confronting faculty. This was due to their cultural expectation that faculty should be respected and a strong belief that faculty should not be confronted. However, because participants did not engage and ask for guidance, they were academically dismissed. Fortunately for them, after successfully navigating the appeal process, they were re-admitted. It’s likely that they could have avoided the dismissal if they had been comfortable reaching out for assistance and guidance, which may have provided the academic support they needed.

According to participants, the lack of perceived cultural understanding, or even interest on the part of faculty, left international graduate students confused and feeling excluded when they interacted with their professors. There was a sense that the interactions were sometimes one-sided and negated the lived experiences of participants. Guo and Jamal (2007) stated, “Faculty members and students both come to the teaching environment with varied experiences and social and cultural backgrounds, and may carry with them unexamined assumptions about the characteristics of various cultural groups with whom they are unfamiliar” (p. 34). The process is further complicated by a lack of awareness and respect by domestic students and faculty about the culture, history and geography of international students (Peterson et al., 1999).

Some students were often left not knowing how to best articulate their specific cultural practices or expectations to assist faculty in understanding their cultural background. For example, several participants were not aware of protocol regarding properly addressing professors. When asked to be called by their first name, one participant had a very difficult time fulfilling this request from faculty. Another participant shared that in her culture women did not
shake hands with men. These cultural nuances were navigated through trial and error by most participants. When mistakes were made, participants experienced embarrassment and frustration because they just did not know otherwise. This process is often complicated by a lack of awareness and respect by domestic students and faculty about specific cultural practices, history, and geography of international students (Peterson, et al., 1999). In these cases, faculty and international graduate students brought unexamined or preconceived assumptions into these situations which influenced experiences.

Classroom Practices That Influenced Academic Experiences

Addressing classroom practices in the third research questions, classroom dynamics and course structure play a significant role in academic adjustment and success for international graduate students. As in this study and supported through the larger literature, many international graduate students were not accustomed to frequent or extensive testing, informal relationships with professors, competition with peers, and the expectation that they participate in class rather than more passively listen and learn (Abel, 2002). For example, several participants were uncomfortable with the informal interactions that their peers had with faculty. Speaking freely and informally with one’s instructors was not permitted in some countries. Additionally, some participants would not initiate participation in class, as that was not their cultural practice. Rather it was their custom to wait until called upon by the professor. However, when participants learned that participation in class discussions was expected and required, and students would be graded on these interactions, adjustments were made to adapt. Adapting to these American classroom practices was culturally difficult and participants felt there was an absence of any
allowance made for their lived experiences, as supported in the literature addressing adjustment issues (Andrade, 2006).

Just as with domestic students, faculty-student relationships may be an important influence for the academic success and overall well-being of the international student. Able (2002) reported, “Classroom atmosphere and especially the quality and degree of faculty-student interaction in American universities trouble international students” (p. 16). Participants were less troubled when they knew that they were accepted, respected, heard, and valued in the classroom. This positioned them to truly feel comfortable and invested in the learning process. This positive shift helped international graduate students in other areas where there may be challenges or negative impacting factors inside and outside of the classroom.

The feeling of belonging for international graduate students was enhanced when connections were made with faculty, when classroom environments were inclusive, and when faculty employed multi-culturally competent practices as found in previous studies (Cao et al., 2014; Glass et al., 2015). For several participants, it was helpful when professors stopped the lecture or conversation to check in with them. Inquiring if they understood the concepts or content or even a word was appreciated. Effective classrooms emerged when students were more engaged socially and academically with faculty, spurring more involvement in the learning process, which led to success in the classroom (Tinto, 2012). This inclusive approach helped participants in this study understand curricular concepts, participate more fully, and attain learning outcomes.

Other common classroom practices that were new or different for participants included expectations to participate in class as well as in large and small working groups, and in making
oral presentations. Perry (2016) wrote, “Language differences led many students to feel anxious when speaking in front of Americans, which may hamper their desire to share their thoughts and opinions in the classroom” (p. 715). This was accurate for several participants, who often froze in the presence of native speakers. And for other participants, difficulty with others understanding their accent left the participants feeling upset and defeated during these classroom experiences. This caused some embarrassment in class situations when professors or domestic students would ask numerous times for international students to repeat themselves, often to no avail.

For several other participants, this inability to be understood by faculty impacted their comfort participating in class, giving presentations, and feeling adequate in general compared to their domestic peers. Supported through previous studies, several participants noted the appreciation they felt when faculty gave them extra time, were patient with their attempts when speaking, and when they provided an environment of inclusion and respect for differences (Seyeneh, 2018; Trice, 2001). Participants also mentioned that there were times that faculty were intentional about speaking more slowly and clearly for the benefit of international graduate students.

Other standard classroom practices that were challenging for participants included the use of technology for online courses and the university grading system. The level to which these challenges were experienced by students impacted academic success. For example, several participants had little or no previous experience with technology and online courses. This was a difficult adjustment because participants had little experience with computer technology in their countries. In a related study, students from developing countries, in particular, who used new
technology found the experience to be demoralizing as they were unable to type well or navigate the systems. They characterized encountering new, advanced technology as a “nightmare” (Banjong, 2015). Several participants struggled to get support from faculty that was necessary to access Blackboard, upload work, and navigate the system to find assignments. There appeared to be no guidance for participants to solicit assistance and several participants debated about dropping courses because it took extensive time to figure out the system.

Adapting to foreign university academic standards is stressful for most international graduate students. For example, the grading system was new and challenging for participants. Many participants were accustomed to lectures only and participating in a more receptive and passive mode. Submitting work at the end of the course was also common. Some participants were unfamiliar with the sequencing of due dates, scaffolding of assignments, actively participating in class, and working in groups. That these practices were expectations proved frustrating for participants and took some adjustment.

Because ecological models of human development can be applied to relationship development between individuals and their environment, Bronfenbrenner’s process-person-context model aided in the exploration of the development of academic and intercultural relationships between participants and faculty in this university setting. Bronfenbrenner’s model also afforded a level of subjective understanding for the researcher and added perspective relative to the meaning international graduate students construct in a new environment at the university. Maxwell (2013) asserted, “We recognize that what people perceive and believe is shaped by their assumptions and prior experiences as well as by the reality that they interact with” (p. 43). Understanding these models adds perspective to shaping recommendations and
Recommendations

Understanding the engagement process between faculty and international graduate students, and subsequent influences on academic experiences, contributes to the literature by detailing the important role incumbent on faculty as well as consequences for students, when the engagement is less than positive. The following section offers recommendations for international graduate students, faculty, institutions of higher education, and suggestions for future research.

Recommendations for International Graduate Students

Synergy within the mesosystem depicts interactions between microsystems involving students-faculty interactions and classroom practices. Supported in the exosystem, locating offices of support early on upon arriving to campus may provide guidance and resources for new international graduate students. Offices of support may be tutoring, a writing center, student organizations, international student and faculty center, financial and scholarship offices, students’ legal and advocacy, student employment, and ESL offices. Also, determining the location of specific faculty offices on campus and when they have office hours might be crucial especially when information, clarification, or assistance is needed. What can international graduate students do to enhance their interactions with faculty?

1. Utilize office hours and have regular advising appointments. This would allow for more opportunities to become comfortable speaking with faculty and asking for help.
2. Capitalize on opportunities to practice English skills for speaking, reading, and writing. This was of particular importance to all participants in this study.

3. Seek peer support to get advice and support in understanding the U.S. educational system and interacting with faculty.

Participants also joined student organizations and interacted with domestic and other international students during meals, social events, and campus activities. Connections through these opportunities fueled the feeling of belonging and reduced loneliness, according to participants. When participants were open to new experiences, they were able to seek out research and professional development opportunities. In some cases, having applied for internships, graduate teaching assistantships, or part-time work, led to employment and other academic and career-related experiences.

Making regular appointments to meet with an academic advisor, thesis or dissertation chair or faculty advisor assisted participants in staying on track in their programs. Exploring academic, cultural, and university requirements, codes of conduct, visa requirements, and sociocultural expectations ahead of time or early on in the program was also of benefit to participants and reduced problems. Several participants also benefitted from connecting with cultural diversity offices, counseling services and registering with disability services on campus.

Recommendations for Faculty

Participants said, first and foremost, international students would benefit if faculty acknowledged and embraced the notion that nearly everything is new for them. One participant commented, “All the things here culture-wise are very different from the country from which we
come.” Different for domestic students, navigating the exosystem and macrosystem of the university is compounded for international students because everything is new and different. The teaching methodology, grading system, use of technology, working in groups, actively participating in class discussions, submitting assignments relative to due dates, and working independently are all new and different. Again, synergy across student-faculty-educational environments works in concert to help the developing student learn, adapt, and adjust. Because of this evolution, participants expressed that everything takes longer to accomplish. Speaking, and especially reading and writing, take a lot of time, effort and energy. Level of English language proficiency impacts participation, giving presentations, reading speed, fluency, comprehension, and writing. Extending patience and offering extensions on assignments (if appropriate) and assistance with academic endeavors are helpful and ease the stress and pressure international graduate students experience in their new academic environment.

There is a need for intercultural competence so that curriculum is designed to be inclusive and understanding of international students. Additionally, there is a need for inclusive pedagogy and curriculum that informs how faculty engage with students individually and in the classroom. Developing multi-culturally competent classrooms and curricula that incorporate the perspectives and lived experiences of international students can make a significant impact on international students (and be of benefit to all students). Other studies are supportive of this and the notion that creating a culturally competent and educated community benefits all participants (Bista & Foster, 2011; Peterson et al., 1999).

Comparing international students with other international students is often neither fair nor accurate. And as with domestic students, faculty should refrain from assuming that all
international students on are the same level with other students. Participants reported that American cultural references and nuances in the classroom often eluded them. Therefore, providing context and references that are relevant, timely, and helpful will improve comprehension, participation, and the overall well-being of international students. Unique cultural beliefs and practices will vary among and between international students, domestic students, and faculty. Learning about, incorporating, and respecting those beliefs and practices will hold importance for international students and may foster more understanding and respect.

International graduate students lack content in certain fields and bring a different set of lived experiences to every classroom. Checking in with international graduate students during lectures or heavy content classes was a practice that participants expressed was essential for their learning. Participants expressed that when their confidence increased, their success was dramatically impacted. This increase in confidence was primarily inspired through interactions with faculty and positive experiences over time. Through helpful advice and feedback from faculty, these students experienced improved outcomes. By engaging with faculty, a deeper understanding of course content was achieved, and students felt successful academically. The learning curve diminished. Some of this meaning making was aided by an increased sense of confidence for some participants.

Students described faculty interactions almost as risk-taking behavior until they realized the positive outcomes that could come from such interactions. Until students were able to figure out what was going on or what the expectations were, they were often lost and felt at a loss. They were not able to move forward. But once they understood and made sense of what they needed to do to persist, then the light went on and they excelled.
Participants were elated when faculty offered to pick them up at the airport or when they invited them over for holidays. This is not an expectation but was very welcomed by international students. Conversely, participants were very discouraged when faculty did not attend to their needs or when they actively disregarded their concerns. There should be some level of obligation from faculty to support, encourage, and assist international students who need attention. One participant shared that the people at the university were very friendly. She felt that was really helpful. She said, “That was really important because you know, when you’re a long way from home you always need someone to stop, listen, and smile. It goes a long way.”

**Recommendations for Institutions of Higher Education**

Participants expressed a strong desire to feel welcomed, accepted, and included. Small cultural differences often make even the most everyday task daunting for international students because of different social, financial, and academic norms (Gebhard, 2012). Learning transportation systems, navigating social norms, and knowing how to engage with faculty may not have been issues in the country of origin, but may present significant barriers in the new culture. The macrosystem encompasses the university standards, institutional culture, and is the educational core of the community. Assisting international graduate students through the maze of ‘new and different’ is critical for adjustment and success. Tasking targeted offices of support for international students need to be properly resourced on campuses to fully support, enhance, and provide programming to help with retention and persistence. Found in earlier studies, the individual needs and outcomes for international students, viewed as persistence, can be supported through designated offices and targeted programs on campus. More direct
Programming and training for host institutions and all constituents are imperative to ease the transition of international students into the culture (Peterson et al., 1999; Shalka, 2017).

Some examples of direct programming for students may include developing a mentoring program pairing domestic and international students together. Direct programming through the Faculty Development office offering workshops about working with and supporting international students would benefit faculty. Professional development opportunities to explore diverse pedagogical approaches may also be helpful. Further, to encourage faculty to engage in these efforts, incentivizing the commitment through monetary stipends and credit toward the promotion process may be critical.

For international students to achieve academic success, it is important for institutions to understand the challenges and barriers that students face along their adjustment journey. Without the proper supports, inclusive of tutoring, mentoring, and specific programming, as well as meaningful interactions with faculty in the classroom, international students are at risk of not meeting academic standards in their program.

Participants would benefit from direct support: getting help from the university accessing technology, ethnic restaurants and grocery stores. Public transportation needs to be readily available as most international students do not have access to vehicles. Participants said there was need for scholarship money, teaching assistantships, and part-time jobs. If these needs are not fulfilled international students may not persist and will be forced to withdraw from the university.

Finally, institutions should develop and implement orientation programs for staff and instructors of all levels so that interactions with international students are informed, sensitive,
meaningful, and supportive in the areas of English language proficiency, adjustment to American educational systems, cultural competency, academic support services, and effective teaching methodology.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on international graduate student-faculty interactions from the perspective of the student. Data were gathered from student narratives and through observation of students in the classroom interacting with faculty. Faculty perspectives about these interactions may play a pivotal role in the adjustment, comfort level, and academic success of international graduate students in the classroom. Understanding this engagement through the lens of faculty would be an important step to enhance the understanding of faculty-student engagement and the impact on persistence and academic experiences. Faculty perspectives regarding interactions may influence other areas in which international graduate students participate. Therefore, research in this area is needed.

Participants in this study included 15 international graduate students. The high level of course content, heavy emphasis on reading and writing, as well as independence required to meet with success may be vastly different for undergraduate international students. Conducting a similar study with undergraduate international students and their engagement with faculty as it impacts academic experiences might provide similar or different understandings regarding student-faculty interactions. The results may better position international undergraduate students to more easily transition into graduate programs at universities in the United States as well as provide input for faculty addressing adjustment concerns for these students.
Researching the best practices and effectiveness of such offices across the country should be explored. Are opportunities generated benefiting both domestic and international students? What additional services are needed for international students to persist and meet with success? These are questions and concerns that are important. Working with international student offices to develop robust programming and services should be an institutional goal for the benefit of faculty and students, international and domestic.

Conclusions

The overall goal of the study was to understand how international graduate students perceived interactions with faculty contributed to their academic experiences. This was explored through participant narratives as they described their interactions with faculty; how those interactions influenced experiences; and how classroom practices impacted their academic experiences. Existing literature outlines the numerous challenges that international graduate students encounter when they attend universities in the United States. These challenges and how they are navigated were shared by the international graduate students in this study. This study can help faculty, offices of support, and institutions of higher education foster a better understanding of the impact engaging with faculty has on international graduate students’ academic experiences, ways to address their challenges, and steps to articulate solutions.

Participants in this study experienced feelings of frustration, disappointment and being misunderstood and unsupported. These outcomes were the consequences, as perceived by participants, when faculty did not understand or address the unique needs of international graduate students. Culture and the lived experiences of international graduate students mediated
interactions with faculty through customs, beliefs, and practices held by participants, making adjustment to the American educational system challenging.

Learning how to approach professors, how to address them, knowing when and how to contact them can be initiated by faculty sharing this information upfront with students. Lack of cultural competence can be remediated by including international graduate students’ lived experiences in the classroom. It would be of great benefit for faculty to involve international graduate students in classroom discussions and create safe spaces for students to be heard and feel supported. Teaching methodology, group work, online courses, the use of technology, and the grading system challenged participants in this study. Direct assistance and patience learning new systems should be considered. Classrooms and curricula that are American-centric confuse international graduate students and they feel left out. Providing context, explanations, and references may foster a more inclusive environment and allow better access for international graduate students.

Level of English language proficiency impacted class participation as well as efficiencies in speaking, reading, and writing. Students who struggled with language proficiency experienced low self-esteem, frustration and diminished academic progress. Participants who had better language proficiency and those who sought assistance or requested time extensions experienced better outcomes.

Faculty who went above and beyond to assist participants were seen as “guiding stars.” In some cases, these faculty members provided personal, financial, and academic support to participants. Faculty included participants in family gatherings, invited them to social events,
helped with tuition, and provided materials for class. When participants were supported at this level, their experiences were transformative, and they excelled in multiple areas.
REFERENCES


In 2017/18 there was an increase of 1.5% over the prior year in the number of international students enrolled in academic programs.

*Figure 2.* Open Doors 2016 infographics on international students in the U.S.

(source: Institute of International Education [IIE], 2016)
APPENDIX B

DEGREES FROM COUNTRIES NOT REQUIRING TOEFL OR IELTS SCORES

TOEFL or IELTS scores not required of students who received or will receive a university degree in one of the following countries:

American Samoa, Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, Bahamas, The, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Botswana, British Virgin Islands, Cameroon, Canada, Cayman Islands, Christmas Islands, Cook Islands, Dominica, Falkland Islands, Fiji, Gambia, The, Ghana, Gibraltar, Grenada, Guam, Guernsey, Guyana, Hong Kong, Ireland, Jamaica, Jersey, Kenya, Kiribati, Liberia, Malawi, Malta, Marshall Islands, Mauritius, Micronesia, Federated States of, Montserrat, Namibia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Maarten, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Solomon Islands, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands, Uganda, United Kingdom, Vanuatu, Virgin Islands, Zambia, Zimbabwe.
Figure 3. Map depicting participants' countries of origin.
APPENDIX D

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Recruitment Letter to Research Participants

Title of Study: Faculty and Student Interactions at a Midwestern University in the United States: A Qualitative Study of the Impact on International Students’ Academic Experiences

Dear ____________________________

My name is Debra Miller. I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Counseling, Adult and Higher Education at Northern Illinois University under the direction of Dr. Carrie Kortegast.

As part of the requirements of my doctoral degree in Adult and Higher Education, I am conducting a research study and would like to invite you to participate if: as an undergraduate student you have completed at least one semester of classes; or as a graduate student you have completed at least the first year of your program.

The purpose of this study is to understand how international students perceive interactions with faculty contribute to their academic experience. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of Northern Illinois University.

You are being invited to participate in the research project because you are an international student at Northern Illinois University. I obtained your name and contact information from the NIU Office of International Student and Faculty Office.

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview about your experiences in and out of the classroom, specifically regarding your experiences engaging with faculty members. The interview will take place in person at a mutually agreeable time and place (i.e., your workplace, public/community building such as the library or Holmes Student Union, etc.) and should last between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed for the purpose of accurately reviewing the information discussed. Upon completion of the research, all audio recording will be erased.

You may be asked for a second interview, either in person or by telephone, to further discuss/expand on topics covered during the initial interview.

Your participation in the interview may help you gain insights related to the impact that interacting with faculty has on your persistence and overall experience at NIU. If you choose to participate in the research, I would be happy to provide you with the study results upon completion of my dissertation.
Your participation is confidential. Two methods are being employed in order to ensure
c confidentially: all data will be stored in password-protected electronic format and pseudonyms
will be used. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but
your identity will not be revealed.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have about this study. You may
contact me at [REDACTED]. If you have any questions or concerns
related to this study, please contact Dr. Kortegast at [REDACTED]

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact
the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at [REDACTED]

If you would like to participate in this research, please contact me at your earliest
convenience by phone or email to arrange an interview.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Debra A. Miller
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Counseling, Adult and Higher Education
Northern Illinois University
I agree to participate in the research project titled: Faculty and Student Interactions at a Midwestern University in the United States: A Qualitative Study of the Impact on International Graduate Students’ Academic Experiences being conducted by Debra A. Miller, graduate student and doctoral candidate, at Northern Illinois University.

I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to understand how international graduate students’ perceptions of interactions with faculty impact their experiences and academic success.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following: participate in a 60-90 minute in-person interview that will be digitally, audio-recorded. Interview questions will include questions about my program of study, experiences in the classroom, interactions with faculty, cultural beliefs, and support services I have used. If needed, I may be contacted for follow-up questions to clarify information obtained during the interview.

Additionally, the researcher is interested in observing 3-4 participants in an academic setting. I understand that I may be asked if I would be willing to have the researcher attend a class of my choice with the permission of your professor. The researcher is interested in observing general activities, discussion and interactions in an academic setting. I will be asked to participate in a 20-30 minute follow-up interview after the observation to share my perspectives regarding the classroom experience. I may participate in the initial interview and decline to participate in the classroom observation and second interview.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact: Debra A. Miller, [redacted] or Carrie Kortegast, faculty advisor, [redacted] I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at [number].

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include the opportunity to converse in English and share my university experiences in a safe environment in addition to adding to the body of knowledge regarding international students studying in the United States.

I understand that all information gathered during this study will be kept confidential by securely maintaining all records and utilizing pseudonyms. No identifying information will be reported or shared.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Participant signature to participate in the study

Date

Participant signature allowing use of digital, audio-recording

Date

(Pseudonym)_________
APPENDIX F

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION AND FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

I have agreed to participate in the research project titled: Faculty and Student Interactions at a Midwestern University in the United States: A Qualitative Study of the Impact on International Graduate Students’ Academic Experiences being conducted by Debra A. Miller, graduate student and doctoral candidate, at Northern Illinois University.

I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to understand how international graduate students’ perceptions of interactions with faculty impact their experiences and academic success. I understand that if I agree to allow the classroom observation, I will be asked to do the following: allow the researcher to attend a class of my choice for observation with the permission of the professor. I understand that the researcher will be observing general activities, discussions and interactions and will take notes during the class but will not actively participate during the class.

Additionally, I agree to participate in a 20-30 minute follow-up interview about the observation which will be digitally-audio recorded. The interview will be on or near the DeKalb campus at a mutually agreeable time. During the interview I will be asked to share how I feel about experiences and interactions with faculty, practices in the classroom, and cultural beliefs, behaviors or expectations that may have impacted my experiences during the class. Also, I will be asked to describe support services used or programs attended which may have contributed to my experience in the class. If I change my mind, I understand that I may decline the follow-up interview.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact: Debra A. Miller, [redacted] or Carrie Kortegast, faculty advisor, [redacted]. I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at [redacted].

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include the opportunity to converse in English and share my university experiences in a safe environment in addition to adding to the body of knowledge regarding international students studying in the United States. I understand that all information gathered during this study will be kept confidential by securely maintaining all records and utilizing pseudonyms. No identifying information will be reported or shared.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant signature to allow observation in the classroom</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participant signature to participate in a follow-up interview</td>
<td>Date</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant signature to allow use of digital, audio-recording (Pseudonym)</td>
<td>Date</td>
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APPENDIX G

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Faculty and Student Interactions at a Midwestern University in the United States: A Qualitative Study of the Impact on International Students’ Academic Experiences

Debra A. Miller, doctoral candidate

Demographic/Background Questions:

1. When did you arrive in the United States?
2. Is this the first time you have traveled to the United States?
   No: What was the purpose of your previous visit(s) and where did you visit?
3. What is your country of origin (where were you born)?
4. What is your first language?
5. Do you speak other languages?
6. What program of graduate study are you enrolled in?
7. What degree are you hoping to earn?
8. How many semesters have you been enrolled at NIU?
9. Are you currently enrolled in classes at the main campus in DeKalb?
10. Have you previously earned a degree at NIU or another U.S. institution?
    a. If yes, what degree and from what institution?
11. How old are you?
12. Are you living on or off campus?
    a. Off campus:
    b. With a domestic family? In an apartment? By yourself? With a roommate?
13. Have you had any challenging experiences since you have been here?
    a. On campus? Please explain.
    b. In the community? Please explain.
14. How have these challenging experiences influenced:
    a. Your persistence in your program?
    b. Your academic success in the classroom?
    c. Your overall experiences acclimating to NIU and the DeKalb community?
15. Has anything surprised you since you have been here?
16. What advice would you give incoming international students about what they should know before they come to NIU?
APPENDIX H

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Faculty and Student Interactions at a Midwestern University in the United States: A Qualitative Study of the Impact on International Graduate Students’ Academic Experiences

**KEY QUESTION:** How do international graduate students perceive interactions with faculty contribute to their academic experiences?

1. How do international graduate students describe their interactions with faculty?
2. According to international graduate students, how do these interactions influence their experiences?
3. How do international graduate students describe classroom practices and the impact specific practices have on their academic experiences?
APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Faculty and Student Interactions at a Midwestern University in the United States: A Qualitative Study of the Impact on International Graduate Students’ Academic Experiences

Thank you for meeting with me today for the voluntary interview. We will spend 60-90 minutes talking about your experiences as an international student at NIU and in the community. This interview will provide information to help me understand your experiences as you persist in your program. With your permission, I will be taking notes and audio recording the interview. I have a consent form for you to sign stating that you agree to participate in the study and that you give me permission to audio record our conversation. No identifying information will be reported about this interview. To help maintain confidentiality I will be using pseudonyms, rather than using your name, to report findings in my dissertation. Also on the consent form, I will ask if you would be willing to allow me to visit one of your classes with the permission of your professor. If you are interested, I will give you more information about that when our interview is completed.

Today I would like to learn about your program of study, your experiences in the classroom, interactions you have with faculty, and cultural influences.

Can you share a little about your experiences since you’ve been in DeKalb?

What activities do you enjoy?

Have you traveled to Chicago?

Can you describe your adjustment to NIU and living in the United States?

Program of Study (RQ1)

1. What is your program of study?
2. What degree are you hoping to earn?
3. Can you tell me why you chose this program of study?
4. How are you feeling about choosing this program of study?
5. What influenced your decision to attend NIU?
6. How are you feeling about your decision to attend NIU?
7. What courses are you taking this semester?
8. What course(s) do you enjoy the most?
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Experiences in the Classroom and Academic Success (RQ2, RQ3)

14. Can you share some of your educational experiences from your home country?
15. Would you discuss how your experiences in your classes here are different from classroom experiences in your home country?
   a. What are some of the differences?
   b. How do these differences influence your experience in your program?
16. How would describe your English language ability?
   a. How does your level of English language proficiency contribute to your ability to participate in class?
   b. Can you share some challenges in understanding peers or faculty or being understood by peers or faculty?
   c. How do these challenges inhibit your understanding of the course material?
   d. Have these challenges impacted your ability to meet with success in the class or affected your grade?
17. How have faculty members accommodated international students in your classroom?
18. Can you share a story about how a professor adjusted a class to accommodate you as an international student?
   a. In what ways have these accommodations impacted your experience in the classroom?

Interactions with Faculty (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, KQ)

19. If you have a faculty advisor, what is their role in your program?
   a. Can you describe your relationship with your advisor?
20. For what reasons have you met with faculty?
21. Describe the kinds of interactions you have with them.
22. How would you describe your level of comfort when approaching faculty to ask questions?
23. What have been the benefits in getting to know faulty and for them to get to know you?
24. Do you feel you have been treated differently by faculty because you are an international student?
   a. Can you share some examples?
25. Highlighting two or three professors, describe how you feel about your experiences interacting with faculty.
26. Have any of your professors been especially helpful in the classroom or outside of the classroom?
   a. If yes, in what ways?
   b. Can you share a story describing this experience?

27. Can you describe how this interaction with faculty has influenced your experience?
28. If this help from faculty has impacted your academic success, can you share some examples?

29. Have any faculty presented barriers in the classroom or outside of the classroom?
   a. If yes, in what ways?
   b. Can you describe how this has influenced your experience?
   c. If this has impacted your academic success or your ability to persist in your program, can you share some examples?

30. What recommendations would you offer faculty to make classes more welcoming for international students?
31. If you could tell your faculty about your experiences in graduate school, what would you say?

Cultural Beliefs, Behaviors, Expectations and Practices (RQ2, KQ)

32. How familiar do you think faculty are with cultural practices in your home country?

33. What specific beliefs, behaviors, expectations or practices from your home culture have impacted your experiences since you have been at NIU?
   a. Can you describe some of these beliefs, behaviors, expectations, or practices and the impact:
      a. In classes?
      b. Interacting with faculty?
      c. In the community?

34. Are there specific programs you have attended or support services that you have utilized to assist with your adjustment to campus, classes, or the community?
   a. If yes, can you share what programs or support services you have used?
   b. How has this influenced your experience?
   c. What has been the impact on your academic success?
   d. Can you share a story about a particular program or support service and how that has impacted your experience?

We are nearing the end of the interview. Do you have any comments you’d like to share or questions you would like to ask of me? Thank you again for participating in the interview. Are you willing to allow me to observe in one of your classes? If so, let’s discuss how to set that up. If not, thank you so much for your time.
APPENDIX J

FOLLOW-UP CLASSROOM OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

Faculty and Student Interactions at a Midwestern University in the United States: A Qualitative Study of the Impact on International Students’ Academic Experiences

Debra A. Miller, doctoral candidate

Interviewer: Debra A. Miller

Interviewee: ___________________________/# _______

Date: _________________________________

Time/Length of interview: _______________________/___________

Location of interview: ______________________________________
________________________________________________________________

Thank you for meeting with me today for the voluntary follow-up interview. We will spend 30-60 minutes talking about your experience in the class that I observed. This interview will provide information to help me understand your experiences as you persist in your academic program. With your permission, I will be taking notes and audio recording the interview. I have a consent form for you to sign stating that you agree to participate in the follow-up interview and that you give me permission audio record our conversation. No identifying information will be reported about this interview. To help maintain confidentiality, I will be using pseudonyms rather than your name, to report findings in my dissertation. Before we begin, do you have any questions? If you are ready, I will start the recording.

________________________________________________________________

Interview Questions:

1. For this particular class, how would you describe your relationship with the professor? (RQ1)
2. Describe the kinds of interactions you have with them? (RQ1)
3. Describe how you feel about your experiences and interactions with this professor. (RQ2)
4. In what ways has your interaction with this faculty member influenced your experience in your program? (RQ3, KQ)
5. Are there any specific beliefs, behaviors, expectations or practices from your culture that have impacted your experiences in this class? (RQ1)
   a. If so, can you describe these cultural beliefs, behaviors, expectations, or practices? (RQ2)
   b. In this class
   c. Interacting with this faculty member
6. How has this faculty member helped you in the classroom? (RQ3)
   a. Describe how this has influenced your experience.
   b. Describe how this has impacted your academic success.
7. Has this professor presented barriers in any way in the classroom? (RQ3)
   a. If yes, in what ways?
   b. Describe how this has influenced your experience?
   c. How has this impacted your academic success and your ability to persist in your program?
8. Are you aware of any specific practices in the classroom that this professor has implemented on your behalf such as a different teaching style, having you work with a partner or in groups? (RQ3)
   a. If yes, can you share some examples, please?
   b. Have these practices impacted your academic experience in the classroom? (RQ2, RQ3)
   c. If so, in what ways?
9. Are there specific programs or support services that you have attended or utilized to assist with this particular course? (RQ1, RQ2)
   a. If yes, please explain.
   b. How has this influenced your experience?
   c. Has this impacted your academic success? If so, in what ways?
10. We are nearing the end of the interview. Do you have any comments you’d like to share or questions that you would like to ask me?

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me as I pursue my research. I greatly appreciate you sharing your information and stories. If you would like to contact me in the future, please don’t hesitate to send me an email or call me.