New Landing, New Transition: A Phenomenological Investigation of the International Student Arrival Experience

by

Brit Wagner

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2020

Date of final oral examination: 08/26/2020

The dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Xueli Wang, Professor and Advisor, Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis
Clifton F. Conrad, Professor, Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis
Peter M. Miller, Professor, Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis
Mary Louise Gomez, Professor, Curriculum & Instruction

Acknowledgements

I have reached this point of my dissertation journey with immense gratitude to the many people who have supported me, my research, and my graduate school career over these past seven years. I first have to thank my participants, who took so much time out of their busy, early semester schedules to meet with me on multiple occasions. Each of them were so welcoming and helpful to me as a visitor to their campus, and their openness to share their lives inspired me to continue honoring their stories every day.

I thank everyone in the ELPA department for providing me with my academic home. I could have never predicted how much I would enjoy getting to know my professors, mentors, and peers. Dr. Weijia Li, in particular, is the heart of the Global Higher Education master's degree program and one of my greatest mentors. It was from his support and guidance that I even considered pursuing international higher education through a PhD. I am also deeply thankful to my committee members. Dr. Clifton Conrad, who modeled finding the purpose of written words and with whom I engaged in countless spirited dialogues. Dr. Peter Miller, who validated the value of my research through encouraging feedback and reflections. And Dr. Mary Louise Gomez of Curriculum and Instruction, whose teaching stirred my excitement for writing someone else's story through narratives and life histories. Finally, I thank Barb, Jenny, Jessica, and especially Shari, for the opportunity to work with them in my final year, and for their continuous support in getting us all through the program.

Above all, I thank Dr. Xueli Wang, who understood my potential and provided me with the rigorous training and opportunities that empowered me to undertake and persist through my dissertation. Her mentorship, patience, and belief in me as I chipped away at every chapter, guided me to the finish line. More important, her genuine care for my wellbeing—tested even

during a global pandemic—assured me that I would make it through. It has been a joy and honor to work with her, write with her, and know her.

I would not have made it through graduate school without my "team," which includes many classmates, writing partners, and sibling advisees, who were a source of positivity and encouragement at every milestone. I have to thank Chelsea for her friendship and inspiring research; Nadia, who helped shape my entire graduate school experience since our fateful first meeting at the orientation snack table; and Xiwei and Nicole, who helped me get through my final writing days. Finally, I am forever grateful to Ning and Tanu, who were by my side at all hours until the pandemic drove us apart. I am so excited to have developed lifelong friendships with you all.

I must also thank my parents, who never questioned what I was doing for all of these years, and who taught me to confidently go with the flow. To my mom especially, whose career I have emulated since I was a child growing up on her campus, and whose practical outlook and drive shaped my belief in my ability to pursue this work. I am also deeply thankful to Keegan and the Ray family, who became my family during this process and rooted for me every day.

Finally, I thank Mohanna, Mohammed, Mohammed, Mohanned, and Anas, the international students whose memorable arrivals to my campus inspired me to learn more. They may not have known what they were getting themselves into when they first arrived, but their bravery and willingness to pursue the adventure led me to where I am now. Our time together taught me priceless lessons about empathy, hospitality, and trust—using mainly our shared language of smiles and laughter.

Table of Contents

Abstract

There is widespread research related to international students' cultural adjustment and transition into higher education. Yet, most studies fail to pause at the earliest stage and investigate what happens when students first arrive. This dissertation seeks to fill this gap and using a hermeneutic phenomenological study design, takes a deeper dive into what exactly occurs when students leave their home countries and "arrive" in the United States to pursue higher education degrees. Following a three-interview series approach, this qualitative dissertation consists of a total of 26 interviews with nine international students from five different countries to reveal three essential elements of the international student arrival experience. These include (a) realizing the (in)accuracy of and re-adjusting expectations, (b) arriving in the company of others, and (c) maneuvering through communication and cultural norms. The central findings of this dissertation demonstrate that although no two arrival experiences are exactly alike, their commonalities yield important implications for policy and practice for both international offices and higher education institutions overall. Specifically, institutions should re-visit their offerings both before and during the "arrival period," which ends when students begin their courses. Policy changes should include personalizing communication with new international students by enhancing student outreach and informing students about their level of control over their experience. Prioritizing meaningful social interactions throughout orientation programing, with residence life partnerships, and through virtual platforms composes the practical recommendations. Given the novelty of investigating the international student arrival experience, there remains space for further research, which should focus on how the arrival is experienced by different sub-populations of students, as well as perspectives on orientation, and the potential ongoing impact of COVID-19.

Chapter I: Introduction

Nearly 1.2 million international students studied in the United States during the 2018-2019 academic year (Open Doors, 2019). In 2019 alone, nearly 432,000 were undergraduate students, with the highest populations coming from China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Canada (educationdata.org). With many of these students coming from countries whose culture is vastly different than that of the U.S., it is important to consider how they experience the transition into their American college life, particularly students at the undergraduate level arriving for the first time to commence degrees at four-year institutions.

Supporting international students through the cultural transitions that occur at the commencement of their education in the U.S. remains an important feature of higher education institutions. Prior to arriving, institutions generally offer tips about transportation to campus, how to check into residence halls, finding off-campus housing, and information about overcoming feelings of disorientation (KCiSS, 2013). After arriving to campus, institutions generally provide special orientations for international students, which is a vital opportunity that provides information and guidance about approaching and embracing their new environment (KCiSS, 2013; Major, 2005). While institutions use various modes to deliver orientation programming, most typically cover topics related to international student policies and procedures (EducationUSA, 2017), immigration regulations, cultural adjustment, classroom behavior and expectations, and student support services (KCiSS, 2013; Major, 2005). Regardless of the mode of delivery, it is crucial for American institutions to understand how students experience both these programs and other early experiences so that they are prepared to receive students, help them transition into their new environment, and provide the expertise needed to support them as they begin working towards their degrees.

There is a rich line of research on international student adjustment as a whole (e.g., Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Chavajay, 2013; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Yan & Berliner, 2013; Zhang, 2016; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), which demonstrates what we do know about their transition over a longer period of time. Specifically, studies focus on the challenges international students encounter, as well as the coping strategies they utilize throughout the duration of their degree (e.g., Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Hung & Hyun, 2010; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2013; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). For example, language barriers lower students' confidence and limit their ability to connect with native English-speakers (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011), which makes it more difficult to seek support and friendship from Americans. On top of that, international students also struggle to overcome feelings associated with culture shock, including rejection and marginalization (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Other personal stressors, such as finding a job, paying for college, and maintaining compliance with immigration (Yan & Berliner, 2013) impact students' abilities to adjust to life in the United States.

Despite this insightful research on international student adjustment as a whole, there is scarce research that specifically focuses on a period of "arrival," or examines what it is like for international students to arrive to their foreign institution. In particular, researchers have not conducted an in-depth examination surrounding the days preceding the start of their course-taking. This omission is notable given the extensive interaction students have with their institution during this time, as well as the importance of starting well on overall academic pursuits (as cited in McPhail et al., 2015). Although every international student will experience their U.S. arrival differently, studies show that over the multiple years students spend obtaining their degrees, those studying in foreign countries experience particularly intense challenges in

the beginning (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Furnham, 2004; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). These early struggles can be critical to their overall success, and include overcoming homesickness, culture shock, loneliness, anxiety, stress (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Furnham, 2004; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011) and perceived discrimination by domestic students (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Despite these challenges, other studies indicate that international students experience substantial gains during their first semester, such as increased familiarity and comfort with their new culture (e.g., Andrade, 2009). Although these perspectives provide clear clues about students' early experiences, there is little evidence to indicate what exactly transpires during those earliest days that might contribute to them. Moreover, extant research reflects student accounts pertaining to the entire time of their studies, leaving unaddressed the nuances of a specific window of time. In sum, previous research lacks contextual depth that provides nuanced understanding on what exactly occurs during the days after students first arrive to their American university.

To address this important gap in the literature, the following research question guides this dissertation: **How do degree-seeking undergraduate international students experience arriving to a four-year institution in the United States?** Answering this question could shed light on a multitude of factors that impact students' adjustment and chances for success throughout their degree. Even more, gaining personal, first-hand reflections of arrival experiences from students' perspectives is an opportunity for expanding upon the existing knowledge base on challenges and coping strategies by adding layers of contextual and causal factors. More importantly, collecting student narratives about the earliest days at their institution would provide new lenses with which to view the arrival experience, namely, factors beyond adjustment challenges. These lenses may also provide more evidence about the particular time window (i.e., the "arrival period") in which institutions could target new international students

and encourage them to engage with institutional support services. This approach also paints a more detailed picture of students' encounters, interactions, campus engagement, impressions and questions about their new surroundings, and aspects of navigating their daily lives.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Before undertaking this dissertation, it was necessary to review what is included in research on international students' sojourns abroad. This section provides a review of the literature to synthesize and critique how researchers have studied international student adjustment among all levels of higher education and reveal opportunities for research specifically dedicated to the arrival experiences of degree-seeking, undergraduate international students at four-year institutions. Establishing a foundational understanding of how adjustment has been studied leads to a clearer picture of whether and how the arrival experience is discussed as its own distinct phenomenon that occurs within the adjustment process. Additionally, the potential areas of investigation uncovered in this review serve to help individuals invested in supporting international students consider the relationship of the arrival experience to students' educational experiences overall and determine strategies to enhance or change the structure of those supports. This relationship would also aid in determining both the arrival experience's overall significance and identifying unanswered questions and gaps that warrant additional inquiry. Given the large body of research on international student adjustment, filling in these gaps offers a new lens with which to view students' transitions into their new institution. Lastly, analyzing the methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks utilized in empirical research on international student adjustment provides a base for developing a nuanced, yet grounded, approach to undertaking a dissertation about international student arrivals.

Literature Search and Analysis

This section outlines my literature review process, including the sources accessed, key search terms, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and my process for synthesizing the literature, all of which is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Example of Initial Literature Search Process

Databases Used	Filters for Article Search	Search Terms Used	Key Words for Consideration	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
University of Wisconsin Library Google Scholar JSTOR ScienceDirect WorldCat	Advanced Search Peer Reviewed Online Availability	International students + U.S. Arrival (10 articles) International Students + Higher Education (42 articles) International Students + Culture Shock (24 articles) International Students + Acculturation (23 articles) Not Tracked (23 articles)	Initial Orientation Onboarding Arrival International student	ESL speakers First time international students Degree-seeking international students	Non-English speaking students in non-English speaking country Specific student groups in single degree program

The primary research database I used to generate literature was the online catalogue from the University of Wisconsin Library. From within that system, I utilized other databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and WorldCat. The library's "advanced search" feature was useful for developing a general bibliography of empirical resources, allowing for searching with key terms. The key terms I used included a combination of "international students" plus each of the following: acculturation, culture shock, higher education, and U.S. arrival.

After yielding thousands of articles in each search, I reduced the results to peer reviewed journal articles and narrowed that search further to articles that were available online. To begin

pulling potential articles, I scrolled through each search result page and opened (in a new tab) any article that seemed slightly relevant based on its title. After saving, on average, 15-20 articles, I spent time opening each and reading its abstract for clues that it contained relevant information about international student experiences.

Another search procedure I used often was to review reference pages from studies I had already selected or related studies that seemed relevant. Given the number of existing articles, I skimmed these pages for key words such as "initial," "orientation," "onboarding," "arrival", and "international student." When I identified a potentially useful article, I returned to either the university library catalogue or a general Google search using the article's title. I followed this process any time I felt I needed additional literature to expand upon a specific point in my writing.

Many journals were represented at this stage of the literature review. These included the following: *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*; *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling; College Student Journal; College Student Journal of Studies in International Education; The Counseling Psychologist; Education Research International; Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology; Higher Education; International Journal of Intercultural Relations; International Education; International Education Journal; International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling; International Journal of Intercultural Relations; International Educator; Journal of College Student Development; Journal of Counseling Psychology; Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management; Journal of Intercultural Communication Research; Journal of International Students; The Journal of Psychology; Journal of Research in International Education; Journal of Studies in International Education; Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences; Psychological*

Reports: Sociocultural Issues in Psychology; Studies in Higher Education; and *Research in Higher Education.*

This literature search process began nearly three years ago when I decided to focus my research to the international student arrival experience. I immediately began building an ongoing document that resembles an annotated bibliography (see Table 2). Every article I have considered remains in this document, including an alphabetized list of APA references, and bullet points under each reference to indicate the dissertation's main focus, research methods, theoretical framework, and key results.

Table 2

Documents Used Throughout Literature Searches and Writing

Document Title	Information Included	Information Used For
References_Master List	APA citation (full) Search terms used	Referencing APA citation Conducting supplemental literature searches
References_Titles Coded	Full title Key words and phrases that describe the topic	Providing general overview of topics studied
References_Notes	APA citation (full) Search terms used Notes: Key findings, methods used, theoretical frameworks applied	Categorizing findings Coding for broad themes
References _2018 Update	APA citation (full) Search terms used	Updating original Reference List to reflect subsequent literature searches
References_ Methodologies	Article author(s), year, title Notes: Methods, population studied, no. of participants, study setting, institution type(s), study limitations	Referencing methodologies used in prior research
References_Theoretical Frameworks	Article author(s), year, title Theoretical frameworks used Theory author, year Notes: study overview, notes about theory, study's key findings	Providing overview of frameworks used in prior research Identifying potentially useful frameworks for future study on international student arrivals
Article Themes_from Notes	Category/Theme Key findings from literature	Descriptive coding Constructing an outline and narrative

I often returned to this reference list to "save it as" a different version according to a specific need. In one version, I eliminated all data except the methodologies and key findings so that I could use the document to code and identify themes in the literature. Most importantly, I developed inclusion and exclusion criteria to determine which articles would actually become useful and created another reference document with articles that met the inclusion criteria. This inclusion criteria initially included articles about international student populations I would likely be studying, such as international students who speak English as a second language, who are coming to the United States for the first time, or who are seeking degrees. I excluded studies about non-English speakers studying in non-English-speaking countries, and studies about very specific student groups in specific degree programs. For example, I disregarded one study about students from a small country pursuing degrees in a niche medical field. However, I did retain a few studies that may have seemed unrelated at the outset, but that provided unique insight, such as Arthur's (2001) study of seven Canadian students studying in Vietnam.

The next phase of the literature review process involved coding the key findings to develop categories of results. I used the document mentioned above that included methods and key findings. In Microsoft Word, I used the "review" feature to manually code the data using an open coding scheme and descriptive codes. Some examples of codes included "social support as a strategy," "early experience in foreign culture," "homesickness/loneliness," and "initial stress." Upon completion of coding I reduced the codes into broad themes, which were "social," "language," "academic," "initial arrival experiences," "culture shock," "stressors," "perceptions of culture," and "support." I then re-organized my bibliography by copying coded segments, pasting them into a document organized by theme, and labeling each segment by the authors whose work they came from. This process helped me to track the data as I moved it around and

alleviated any worries of losing important points within the vast number of pages of search results. I was also able to re-copy data segments when they fit into multiple themes without losing track of their source.

Finally, to begin making sense of the literature and prepare for writing, I again used Microsoft Word's review feature to synthesize the information, identify relationships across data, and create memos along the margins that pulled the findings together. Under each category I rearranged coded segments so that related codes remained together. When I began writing the first draft of my literature review, I was able to select one theme and build a narrative by following the codes and memos along the side. In the end, I cited approximately 39 articles related to international students and student experiences throughout this review, the results of which are described in the following section.

Factors Influencing International Student Adjustment

Before exploring how international undergraduate students experience arriving to their institution, it is necessary to consider if and how prior research has framed this important topic. Overall, a long line of research focuses on the adjustment and coping strategies of both international undergraduate and graduate students throughout their time in U.S. higher education (e.g., Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Chavajay, 2013; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Yan & Berliner, 2013; Zhang, 2016; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). These studies provide useful information for practitioners, faculty members, and other individuals who are interested in supporting international students throughout their academic careers. Although the populations under investigation may be different, understanding the experiences of international students from all educational levels is a helpful strategy in understanding the nuances and gaps that may emerge in future empirical work.

In the following sections, I describe a variety of factors that impact international students' adjustment while attending higher education institutions. These include barriers to adjustment based on starting a new life chapter, grappling with a non-native language, managing a new social life, and navigating a new culture. For every challenge, I briefly discuss relevant literature that describes students' experiences, and discuss major takeaways that inform future inquiry about the arrival experience specifically. I end the literature review with two sections that set the foundation for developing my dissertation about international student arrival experiences. The first considers methodological approaches used in prior research, which serves to summarize how international student adjustment has been studied and to identify opportunities to use other approaches that would reveal new information. The second considers how researchers have applied theoretical frameworks in the past and discusses new theoretical approaches to help make sense of international student adjustment and arrival. I also point out how researchers have failed to address international student arrivals and early experiences, which are potential areas in which to influence student success as they pursue American higher education.

A majority of the research on international students' transitions into foreign universities broadly covers the large range of stressors and challenges that they face throughout the entirety of their academic sojourn. The overarching challenges presented in research include those related to language (e.g., Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Sherry et al., 2010), academic stress (e.g., Mak et al., 2015); culture shock and intercultural competence (e.g., Arthur, 2001; Brown & Holloway, 2008) and social support (e.g., Brown & Holloway, 2008; Major, 2005; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). An in-depth review of these overarching challenges follows that inform potential areas of investigation for factors underlying early arrival experiences among international students.

Starting a New Life Chapter

Early Challenges. International students face countless challenges over the duration of their studies abroad. While research specifically dedicated to the first days upon arrival is rather limited, there exists a body of literature that references international students' initial experiences in general. Three main themes emerged in the literature related to initial experiences. First, the U-Curve model illustrates how international students adjust to their situation over time, describing challenges they face at the beginning. Next, students' perspectives are influenced in different ways based on the degree of difference between their home and host cultures. Following that, interactions with others impact their level of culture shock.

The U-Curve Model and Passage of Time. There is no standard length of time or defined term that describes sojourners' earliest experiences in foreign universities. Without assigning a definitive time window, studies do indicate that the initial transition after arriving to study in a new country can be particularly challenging (e.g., Brown & Holloway, 2008a; Brown & Holloway, 2008b; and Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). This demonstrates the need to research this topic further to learn more about what occurs in students' day-to-day lives during that time, thereby finding strategies to relieve students of some of these hurdles. Results from Brown and Holloway's (2008b) ethnographic study of the adjustment of international postgraduate students conflicted with the first stage of the U-Curve model, which suggests that students' first experience of culture shock is marked by feelings of excitement. Instead, although their students did feel excitement, any positive feelings about their new lives were far outweighed by states of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. In their other study, Brown and Holloway (2008a) described that the initial stage of international students' sojourn also marked the height of students' stress, which, along with homesickness and loneliness, was also caused by the challenge of using a

foreign language, and unfamiliarity with the academic and sociocultural environments. From their findings, Brown and Holloway created a model of adjustment that describes the gradual decrease in stress over the passage of time due to the new self-understanding brought forth by a distance from the familiar. However, the negative feelings occurring during the initial stage indicate the importance of institutions to focus their efforts on providing services early on in students' academic sojourn.

Similar to Brown and Holloway's (2008a & 2008b) work, a previously mentioned related study focused on the experiences of Canadian students enrolled in a seven-week seminar in Vietnam (Arthur, 2001). Although the context of this study is reversed—with English-speakers traveling to a non-English speaking country—the language-related challenges are comparable. In particular, Arthur found that students' adjustment was especially difficult when they first arrived, despite having participated in a four-day pre-departure orientation workshop. For many, this experience was overwhelming and unsettling. Stressors encountered at this early stage included recognition of personal needs related to safety, health, diet, basic communication, and transportation, which are needs that tend to be taken for granted in one's home country.

Degree of Cultural Distance. Another important factor impacting the Canadian students' experiences in Arthur's (2001) study is the degree of cultural difference between the home and host country. In this case, students felt unprepared for the levels of poverty they were exposed to as well as challenges associated with navigating their day-to-day living and addressing personal needs. Other studies reached similar conclusions. In their study about social skills difficulty for international graduate students in Canada, Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) found that the higher the degree of cultural distance between countries, the less comfortable students became with interacting with individuals from the host country, thereby increasing the

degree of culture shock. This conclusion is especially unfortunate considering the important role that social interaction plays in cultivating international student adjustment. Lin (2006) also interviewed international graduate students, in this case, members of a Chinese student organization, and found that the degree of cultural distance as well as institutional distance, added to students' stress and anxiety.

Psychological distress due to cultural distance was also apparent in Furukawa's (1997) study of Japanese high school students studying abroad throughout 23 countries. Experiencing high degrees of cultural distance meant greater adjustment challenges. Some of the contributing factors included differences in food and leisure activities. For example, cultures requiring significantly less emphasis on college entrance exam preparation challenged Japanese students to adjust how they spent their free time. Lastly, leisure time and recreational differences were also apparent in a study by Glass et al. (2013). They surveyed 824 international students at a research university in the U.S. and concluded that students from non-European countries (i.e., students experiencing a high degree of cultural distance) struggled more than students from European countries to access recreation and leisure activities. This negatively impacted students' social adaptation and overall attachment to their college.

Developing Social Interactions. Social factors affecting international student adjustment will be discussed more thoroughly in the following section, but it makes sense here to address the fact that social interaction plays a significant role at the start of students' time in their host country. Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) surveyed and interviewed twenty undergraduate and graduate international students who had spent nearly two years studying in the U.S. They also found that a majority of these students regarded their initial entry adjustment phase to be particularly challenging and stressful partly because their desire to be accepted by a group in

their new environment left them feeling marginalized. It should be noted, however, that students with more emotional security had an easier time interacting with others who were dissimilar from themselves. Despite their initial challenges, the students surveyed gradually experienced positive identity transformations over the course of their studies.

Researchers often present international students' initial experiences as being part of an overall larger discussion about adjustment over time. At the same time, they fail to pause and thoroughly investigate what exactly occurs at the beginning. Given that research clearly indicates the challenging nature of early experiences, it is worthwhile to inquire further about the underlying causes. It would be pertinent to ask students to describe what it was like to begin building a life in a culture vastly different than their own and determine strategies they used to make that process easier. Similarly, they could share strategies and resources that other international students could use to develop social connections at the beginning of their studies. Student perspectives would help identify if there were any gaps between what they expected and needed during their arrival and the information, services, and opportunities the institution provided.

Grappling with Life in a Non-Native Language

Language Challenges. As discussed in the previous section, the degree of difference between cultures presents an array of challenges for international students as they navigate their new surroundings (Arthur, 2001; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Furukawa, 1997; Glass et al., 2013; Lin, 2006). For those studying in a country in which the primary language is not their first, the language barrier would widen the cultural distance between the home and host country even further. As this section will describe, language barriers also impact students' confidence and self-

efficacy, as well as their ability to interact with others—important factors that facilitate adjustment.

For students studying in English-speaking countries, lack of English proficiency is often attributed as being one of the most critical challenges of transitioning into the host culture (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Liu, 2016; Lewthwaite, 1996; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), and is a hurdle that students encounter immediately upon arrival. In addition to already having to balance elements of culture shock with their academic experiences, students with lower English-proficiency also develop a heightened awareness of their positionality as EAISs-ESOL (English Speakers of Other Languages) (Hung & Hyun, 20110), which may add to their already existing discomfort. Similarly, Arthur (2001), who conducted the previously mentioned study of English-speaking students on a short-term sojourn in Vietnam, also noted that the combination of speaking a foreign language and navigating a new sociocultural environment can be especially challenging while students are also struggling to overcome homesickness and loneliness. Students in this study demonstrated that seeking social support was crucial in overcoming some of their daily challenges.

Language's Affect on Confidence and Self-Efficacy. International students' confidence and self-efficacy are two of the major qualities effected by proficiency of the host-language. Hung and Hyun (2010) interviewed seven doctoral students and found that as their English literacy increased over time, students gained confidence both inside and outside the classroom. Similarly, Khawaja and Stallman (2011) conducted focus groups with 22 international students studying in Australia and inquired about their language-related challenges. Specifically, they asked about difficulties students encountered immediately after arriving along with their coping strategies. Speaking English as a second language caused some of their initial challenges,

including their speaking abilities and confidence in their speaking abilities. This resulted in students being less willing to ask native English speakers for assistance navigating day-to-day needs. To cope, students pushed themselves to become involved on campus, used technology to gather information, developed good organizational and time management habits, and reached out to others from their same country when needed. These studies highlight the need for studying the effectiveness of support and services students use early—before they have acquired knowledge and competencies that increase their confidence. They also point to the need for additional research that emphasizes language learning experiences that are less challenge-focused in order to develop a broader understanding of how language impacts international student arrivals.

Language's Affect on Social Connections. Additionally, limited English proficiency becomes a barrier to building social connections with English speakers, whom many researchers indicate as a useful resource to aid in cross-cultural adjustment (e.g., Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Chavajay, 2013; Zhang; 2016). The literature provides some clarification as to why students struggle to communicate with English-speakers despite knowing the importance of making these connections. First, depending on their cultural background, some students would not have encountered many opportunities to interact with native English speakers prior to embarking on their U.S. studies. Yan and Berliner (2013) found this to be the case through interviews of 18 Chinese graduate students who had been in the U.S. for at least two years. The lack of interaction with native English speakers back home in China made it difficult to follow English conversations once they were in the U.S. On top of using and listening to pronunciation and accurate word usage, students had little knowledge of societal, lifestyle, and pop culture references. Kim and Okazaki (2014) also point out that anxiety about conversing in English leads students to withdraw from initiating interactions with others, despite being aware

that limiting their interactions to others from the same country interferes with their English learning. Similarly, through in-depth focus group interviews, Zhang (2016) found that although Chinese doctoral students expressed a willingness to make friends with Americans and other non-Chinese international students, their fear of being embarrassed or making mistakes during conversations made them more cautious to try.

Given the necessity of using communication to meet one's needs, developing a greater understanding of how international students navigate language-related challenges during their arrival is essential. In particular, it would be helpful for students to provide insight about their perspectives and sense-making of those experiences. In addition to gathering these details, more can be done to illustrate how communication factors into their arrivals. We can draw from experienced students' strategies to build confidence and self-efficacy early on so that they may access important resources (e.g., other international peers) even when lacking language proficiency. Further, knowing that students forego forming social connections because of language barriers makes it even more urgent that we ask students to share their experiences. This would also be helpful in assessing other factors that inhibit communication upon arrival and learning what it takes to encourage newly arrived students to leave their comfort zones and begin advocating for themselves.

Managing a New Social Life

Social Connections. International students are exposed to other international students early in their sojourn through orientation and other programs sponsored by their institution. They also take courses, socialize, and live among peers from the host culture. Although international students will encounter opportunities to connect with a diverse range of individuals, taking advantage of the benefits of diverse friendships and networks often presents major challenges. In

fact, one study demonstrated that approximately 50% of international students report that their friends were mainly limited to other international students, while 8% reported they had been unable to form friendships with any individual from the host culture (Sherry et al., 2010). Social connections in the host country, particularly the benefits and challenges associated with various forms of interaction, was another significant theme among research on international student adjustment. Studies often break down interaction types according to whether they occur with individuals from the same country, the host country, or with other international students. There are benefits and challenges among each type that influence the international student experience.

Multiple Forms of International Interactions. Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) specifically studied social interactions among international graduate students using the following terminology: *self-segregation* for interactions with conationals[1]; *exclusive global mixing* for a mixture of interactions with conationals and other internationals; *inclusive global mixing* for a mixture of interactions with conationals, internationals, and host nationals; and *host interaction* for host nationals, some co-nationals, and exclusion of other internationals. Based on interviews with 60 students, two focus groups, and observation data, most international graduate students in this study reported bypassing relationships with individuals from the host country and forging bonds primarily with other international students. As a result, students built effective social networks that the researchers interpret as an alternative form of social capital, challenging the notion that students must assimilate to the host culture.

Alternatively, Zhang and Goodson (2011) demonstrate that social connectedness with domestic students impacts the psychosocial adjustment of Chinese international students and facilitates the management of emotional strains and mastery of U.S. sociocultural skills. Further,

[1] The terms *conational* and *co-national* are used interchangeably through literature, and likewise in this dissertation.

students report gaining a better understanding of interpersonal interactions and a higher sense of belonging at their institution through their connections with domestic students (Slaten et al., 2016). At the same time, given that international students face feelings of marginalization, isolation (Baba & Hosoda, 2014), and interpersonal rejection (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013) while studying in the United States, understanding the negative aspects of students' social lives could guide institutions toward providing adequate opportunities for students to build their social network.

Other researchers studied degrees of social support that international students receive (Adelman, 1988; Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998). They distinguished between "fringe" relationships and "close ties"—the former being non-intimate relationships with acquaintances (e.g., shopkeepers or bartenders), and the latter existing with family and friends either at home or in the host country. Forming close ties with individuals in the host country was found to be an important strategy in the adjustment process. Close ties with others from the same home country or with the same cultural background influences international students' self-esteem. And while developing close ties with domestic students is also a strategy, they found it to be less important than developing relationships with "coculturals." The researchers suggest that international students form close ties with both communities while they study in the U.S. as a strategy to assimilate to American culture and reduce uncertainties about the social environment.

Other research supports Al-Sharideh and Goe's (1998) conclusion that international students should connect with both domestic students and "coculturals." By surveying undergraduate and graduate international students who had spent at least eight months studying at one institution, Chavajay (2013) determined that although international students rely on support from Americans, they gain more socioemotional support from other international people.

Friends from the same country are likely suffering from the same challenges and pressures (Yan & Berliner, 2011a). And those who have been in the host country longer would be able to offer knowledge-based resources, provide emotional support, and share information about coping with their new environment. At the same time, Yan and Berliner (2011a) also warn of the risk of forming ties solely with other co-nationals, namely, that students might isolate themselves from American society and culture, adding to their stress. These friendships may be easier to form given international students' minimal interaction with and difficulty in forming friendships with domestic students (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011).

Barriers to Developing Relationships with Host Nationals. There are various barriers that prevent international students from forming relationships with domestic students. As indicated earlier, language barriers affect students' willingness to approach native English-speakers (e.g., Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Chavajay, 2013; Zhang, 2016). On top of that, international students must also negotiate new communication patterns. These may cause awkwardness during social interactions, leading to social isolation and other cultural barriers such as dealing with different value systems, signs and symbols of social contact, and other interpersonal relationship patterns (Wu et al., 2015).

Yan and Berliner (2013) conducted a qualitative study of Chinese doctoral students in which they specifically examined the most stressful aspects of their personal and social lives at a large public university. One of the key themes in their findings surrounded the difficulty of forming friendships with Americans due to a series of factors. Understanding, or lack thereof, of sociocultural differences between Chinese and American students seemed to be an underlying cause. For example, the meaning of "friendship" changes between the two cultures, often leading to unexpected incidents that may cause confusion or frustration. Additionally, special gestures

are important in Chinese culture and friendship networks tend to be reliable and effective when help is needed. Participants in this study found that American friendships are not based on exchanging favors and that Americans tended to have very direct communication styles, which made interaction with them more difficult.

Understanding the significance and nature of social connections between international students and other populations could be very useful when we think about arrival experiences—which is another angle that prior research has not thoroughly investigated. First, having knowledge of students' existing social networks both prior to and upon arrival to the United States would be useful. Are students traveling with others from their home country? Were they able to make connections with others working at or studying at their host institution in the United States? Are they able to use their social connections as resources for gaining information about their new culture? Second, it would be helpful to have an idea about what kind of relationships students hope to and are willing to develop while they are in the U.S. This information could be beneficial for anyone coordinating orientation, arranging housing, or developing social programs on campus. Additional qualitative research could be used to gain further insight into this topic, giving students the chance to explain the nature of their social ties, how they are helpful in their daily lives, and how institutions might better coordinate opportunities that allow students to begin growing their networks.

The Ongoing Impact of a New Culture

Negotiating a New Academic Culture. The experiences and challenges discussed thus far are endlessly interchangeable, with one affecting any of the others. However, it is important to remember that every degree-seeking international student shares the ultimate goal of successfully navigating through their education and obtaining their degree. Yet, various

academic challenges interfere with students' abilities to reach success. For many students, overcoming academic challenges is a top priority. Through a mixed-methods approach to investigate cultural adaptation, Lewthwaite (1996) found that only when post-graduate international students felt able to adjust to their academic environment and complete their academic requirements did they begin using available resources and seeking deeper cultural integration. Adding to this, a survey of nearly 400 Asian-born international students in Australia indicated that along with social support, academic self-efficacy is a significant predictor of student satisfaction (Mak et al., 2015).

Mak et al. (2015) also concluded that studying abroad is an overall satisfying experience despite the challenges international students face, and that it is in the classroom that both intercultural and academic self-efficacy is most effectively developed. Major (2005) reminds us that adjusting to university culture is more complicated than simply displaying English proficiency. Yet, this is a significant obstacle that students must overcome. Limited proficiency inhibits student's ability to read, write, comprehend the subject matter in their classes, verbally participate, and work with their English-speaking classmates (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011).

International students are also tasked with adjusting to a new educational culture and different ways of thinking compared to what they are used to in their home countries (Wu et al., 2015), which can lead to stress and anxiety (Lin, 2006). For example, Chinese students come from a more hierarchical society where classroom participation is less of an expectation compared to American classrooms where individuals are more direct in asserting their opinions (Yan & Berliner, 2013). Liberman (1994) also found Asian students to be critical of the informality between students and professors in American classrooms. In contrast, the students in Liberman's study also remarked on their enthusiasm for their professors' openness and concern

for their students' thinking and analysis. Reservations of classroom instruction were apparent in Campbell's (2015) phenomenological research of international doctoral students as well. Although the participants in this study showed a willingness to adapt to the classroom culture and teaching methods, they found it challenging to speak openly, which may have reduced their interaction and participation.

Academic culture comes into play significantly during international students' earliest classroom experiences because that is the time in which students presumably encounter it for the first time. At this point, these occurrences have not been thoroughly investigated. It would be helpful, therefore, to learn about the experience of adapting to new styles of learning and becoming aware of helpful campus resources during this time. Asking international students to recall initial classroom cultural experiences would be an opportunity for them to share more about the differences between educational practices and expectations between the home and host cultures. Even more, given the literature's demonstration of the importance of overcoming academic hurdles, it opens the opportunity to learn more about preparing students prior to attending their first courses.

Personal and Lifestyle Challenges. The lifestyle of an international student in the United States encompasses aspects from all of the preceding sections. Beyond what they experience at their institution, students must also adapt to completely new lifestyle contexts. Lin (2006) created a list of personal stressors post-arrival that include housing, transportation, living expenses, language barriers, separation from family, political bias from host culture, insufficient living facilities, and in some cases, adjusting to boring small town life. Yan and Berliner (2013) conducted an in-depth qualitative study on personal and sociocultural stress that Chinese students face while in the U.S. Semi-structured interviews of 18 master's and doctoral students uncovered

a range of stressors faced both at the beginning of their studies and throughout their degree. For one, students revealed insecurity about their job opportunities following graduation. This was partially attributed to the challenges associated with visa requirements and restrictions—having to delay graduation or change majors to maintain an F-1 student status, for example—as well as hearing about other international students having difficulty finding a job or losing a job. Another personal concern came from pressure associated with relationships, such as finding a partner or maintaining a long-distance relationship. Financial aspects also come into play in causing stress for international students (Yan & Berliner, 2013). Beyond living expenses and the cost of attending a U.S. institution, international student job choices are limited. Even more, they must also consider choosing programs that offer assistantships relevant to their major.

Many of these personal and lifestyle challenges occur externally to students' campus lives. However, it is important that individuals who create and provide resources to students are aware they exist, and continually assess whether or not students' needs continue to be met. Situating a dissertation within the context of the international student arrival experience offers a different lens for consideration because prior research has, for the most part, focused on students' entire sojourn. In what ways do the first days on campus impact students' beliefs about their situation? Additionally, because researchers have focused on the stressful and challenging nature of students' day-to-day lives, there is room to learn more about other elements impacting students' early experiences. Asking students to reflect on their personal struggles as well as opening the floor to other directions, could be a strategy for identifying remaining gaps between what students needed early on and what their institutions provided. As a result, institutions could better determine the most effective strategies to offer to their newly arrived students.

Major Takeaways from International Student Adjustment Literature

It is evident that international students, whether they are studying in the U.S. or in other countries unlike their own, face numerous academic, cultural, language, social, and personal challenges as they adjust to life as a student in a post-secondary institution. Often occurring at the same time and interchangeably, these challenges are experienced differently by each student depending on factors such as background knowledge of the new cultural context, the social ties students develop throughout their studies, and their use of available campus resources. What appears to be less explored are the essential experiences students encounter when they first arrive, and the factors that contribute to them. Many of the ongoing challenges will undoubtedly factor into their earliest arrival experiences. An empirical dissertation that focuses on students' initial time at their institution will pull these early factors into focus within the context of their "arrival." Additionally, further empirical research is needed to generate contextual knowledge—from students' perspectives—that begins to explain how and why these experiences occur in the first place. Gaining more information about students' backgrounds, upbringing, cultural norms, support networks, and other factors contributing to their perceptions of their arrival will help institutions begin to better understand not only their international students' needs, but to better understand their students as individuals as they progress through their degrees.

Aside from the general lack of focus on the arrival period, what is also largely left out of the picture are other experiences not associated with stressors and challenges. Limiting international student adjustment research to these areas presents a false picture that leaves the reader assuming students' experiences in their new country are primarily difficult. However, asking students to describe their earliest experiences open lines of dialogue about helpful experiences, or aspects of their new culture that they found particularly interesting or surprising. Even more, students may recall stories about encounters or incidents they found memorable and

enjoy revealing. All of these could shed light on important (and impactful) experiences that warrant consideration and that present opportunities for further inquiry. More importantly, inquiring about these experiences is a key strategy to learning more about international student and institutional characteristics that shape and define the arrival experience as a whole. This rings true especially considering that students bring with them a breadth of cultural knowledge, global cultural capital, and a diversity of perspectives.

Methodological Considerations

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, studies about international student adjustment tend to encompass students' entire academic tenure rather than isolating the time period following students' arrivals. Aside from this commonality, other methodological considerations can be made that highlight the need to diversify the techniques used to study the earliest experiences of international students. Doing so could demonstrate to higher education institutions the need to intentionally direct their attention to newly arrived students' needs and to expand their capacity to provide innovative support services that reflect the needs of students as determined from their perspectives. In this section I will outline how researchers use qualitative and quantitative methods to examine international student experiences, and then describe advantages and disadvantages of using each within the context of the international student arrival experience.

Investigating International Student Experiences Using Qualitative-heavy Research

In general, methodologies used to inquire about international student experiences are evenly distributed between qualitative and quantitative approaches, with a limited amount of mixed methods used as well (e.g., Mckinlay et al., 1996). In the qualitative realm, researchers have utilized interviews, focus groups, and observations to ask participants to reflect and describe

their experiences as they relate to international student adjustment and coping strategies at foreign institutions. Participants range from high school, undergraduate, master's and doctoral students, as well as practitioners who serve and support international students at their institutions. A majority of the research sites were at schools in primarily English-speaking countries, while one study included English-speaking participants studying in a non-English speaking country (Arthur, 2001). Given relatively small sample sizes, data collection procedures include interviews, focus groups, and observations, which allowed participants to offer explanations to their responses and researchers to follow up with additional questions. Of particular note regarding the qualitative studies under review, many findings center on social aspects of international students' lives, which, given the personal and subjective nature of relationships, may be indicative of how qualitative research is conducive to investigating experiential topics.

Investigating International Student Experiences Using Quantitative-heavy Research

Researchers using primarily quantitative methods often use completely different approaches, such as widening the sample population to include more participants and more research sites, which leads to producing more generalizable conclusions. Data collection procedures in research about international student experiences include surveys and questionnaires, most of which are distributed online. Similar to the qualitative studies, participants range from various educational levels and institution types and reach across student populations from institutions all over the world.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

As outlined above, there are clear strengths to using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, as well as using a combination of both in the form of a mixed method study. The

international student arrival experience can be examined using either. Quantitative methods allow for a greater sample size and more flexibility to communicate with participants at multiple sites in a short amount of time. This would be beneficial in comparing onboarding practices across various institutions, or in determining how many students across different schools share similar experiences and challenges. Generating such a data set would be useful in building a case for institutional or policy changes to better serve international students.

As beneficial as quantitative methodologies could be in understanding the international student arrival experience, they provide limited room for extensive detail or space for follow-up questions. Even more, distributing surveys and questionnaires—especially online—omits any opportunity of meeting and building rapport with the participant. This, however, is one of the strengths of qualitative research. Through the researcher-participant relationship, there is greater opportunity for trust and a willingness on behalf of the participant to share their story.

There is a need for additional qualitative research that features students' reflections of how they experienced arriving to their institution and that factors in further background and contextual information. Additionally, the time needed to collect students' narratives and develop responses based on the information they reveal reinforces the logic behind speaking with a smaller sample size. A qualitative approach is also a viable method to account for nuances among individual experiences, for probing deeper into the underlying causes of students' perspectives, and for providing students the opportunity to offer input about their institution's handling of newly arrived international students. Even more, there are currently no apparent studies in which students are encouraged to deeply reflect upon and isolate their arrival experiences as a unique stage in their educational journey. Any sense-making of the construct of the international student

arrival experience may be developed through face-to-face conversations between the researcher and participant.

Theoretical Frameworks

Just as methodological considerations used in prior research informs future inquiry, it is also pertinent to consider how researchers use theoretical frameworks to understand international student adjustment. Literature about the international student experience in American higher education is full of references to various frameworks that fall into three large categories: psychological adjustment, cultural learning and adjustment, and individual concept and competence. I will provide a brief summary of the theories in each category, explain how they are generally used in empirical research about adjustment, and then asses the ways in which components of each may or may not be applicable to the international student arrival experience. Finally, I will describe why it makes sense to apply Schlossberg's transition theory to a dissertation about international student adjustment and early arrival experiences.

Frameworks Related to Psychological Adjustment

Researchers who examine international student adjustment in higher education often apply theoretical frameworks to make sense of the psychological experiences that individuals and groups of international students face (e.g., Berry, 1996, 2006; Berry et al., 1987; Yan & Berliner, 2013). These frameworks take into consideration factors such as to social adaptation, emotional needs, ideologies of the dominant society, and motivation and personality of individual and groups of students. Even more, they help researchers explore the psychological effects of stress and coping in the new culture with the purpose of developing models or strategies to influence one's acculturation experience (e.g., Wu et al., 2015).

Frameworks Related to Cultural Learning and Adjustment

In addition to psychological frameworks, researchers have applied models related specifically to cultural learning and adjustment to understand how international students overcome hurdles related to cultural differences. For example, Lysgaard's (1955) U-curve model illustrates different stages of a sojourn abroad and Spindler's (1987, 2000) cultural therapy model characterizes students' self-concept and ability in relation to cultural frames of reference. As with psychological adjustment frameworks, cultural learning and adjustment frameworks aim to explore challenges and coping strategies associated with adjusting to a new culture.

Frameworks Related to Individual Concept and Confidence

The final category of theoretical frameworks examined in this review center on an individual's concept and confidence throughout their transition as they adjust to life in a foreign culture. For example, the ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1995; Kelly, 1990; and Kelly et al., 2000) calls for the researcher to study an individual's interaction with their immediate and wider environment, including the social and physical context, to uncover the interchange between them.

Applying Transition Theory to the International Student Arrival Experience

Stepping back to reflect on each of these categories within the context of international student adjustment, it would seem that students who transition into foreign universities likely encounter experiences that can be explained by frameworks within each. Therefore, it makes sense to apply Schlossberg's transition theory, which does not fall explicitly into any of the above categories, but instead takes into account any and all components of an individual's transition experience. For a new international student, this could potentially include changes to their psychology, cultural knowledge, and self-concept. In addition, whereas the frameworks described above were used to understand students' entire sojourn, transition implies moving

between stages or experiences, suggesting that the theory would apply to an examination of initial experiences after a transition is made.

Broadly, Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson, et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1984), consists of a model that helps individuals navigate life's various transitions. According to the theory, a transition is defined as any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. The theory describes different types of transitions: anticipated—one that occurs predictably; unanticipated—one that is not predictable or scheduled; and non-event—one that is expected but does not occur. Using these terms to consider my dissertation, the international student arrival experience as a whole is an anticipated event that students and their families plan sometimes for years before it occurs. At the same time, there are moments within the arrival experience that are undoubtedly unanticipated. Inquiring about the occurrence of both types of events during international students' arrival experiences invites participants to reflect on events they had planned for yet leaves room to discover experiences they had not expected.

In addition to unpacking anticipated and unanticipated events, transition theory provides a lens with which to regard international student's changes to relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles, in the context of their arrival. Learning about the ways each of these areas evolves could be especially useful for practitioners and others who work with international students in preparing information for and guiding students through their adjustment.

Summary

As evident throughout this review, many studies examine various elements of international student experiences—particularly as they relate to adjusting to life at a foreign institution. Yet, few seriously consider the unique window of time between their arrival and the

start of their coursework, which is the setting I planned to situate my dissertation. Without disregarding the challenges and experiences students encounter throughout the rest of their degree, this gap indicates a need for further research to provide more depth about the essential elements shared by international students when they first arrive to their new institution. Ultimately, this work could be helpful in revealing how those elements contribute to the entirety of their educational experiences while abroad.

Developing a holistic, empirical foundation of literature about international student adjustment is a necessary first step into learning more about how the arrival experience is discussed, if at all. As described in this chapter, adjustment challenges compose a large portion of this research. Specifically, five clear categories emerged that demonstrate elements of international student adjustment among higher education institutions: 1) early challenges, 2) language challenges, 3) social connections, 4) negotiation of new academic cultures, and 5) personal and lifestyle challenges. Throughout their time abroad, international students encounter these ongoing challenges—often balancing multiple, intersecting challenges at once. What is less studied, however, are the factors causing these challenges, other impactful experiences that may be alternatives to "challenges," and student-suggested improvement strategies for institutions to pursue.

In addition to uncovering elements of international student adjustment through a review of literature, it is also necessary to examine the methods researchers have employed in prior studies. In general, scholars have used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to study the international sojourn, often asking advanced students to reflect upon their entire journey through various modes of questionnaires and interviews. What has not been done is a study that asks

students to specifically reflect back to the time they first arrived and the essential elements that defined that experience.

In addition to surveying literature for methods used, prior research also indicates theoretical frameworks used to better understand international student adjustment. Many are related to psychological adjustment, aspects of cultural learning, and individual concept and confidence. Yet, it is transition theory that best characterizes international student arrivals because it accounts for changes in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles throughout anticipated and unanticipated events (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1984). Situating international student arrivals within transition theory will facilitate a new understanding of how students experience their arrival and introduces a holistic portrayal of all elements of students' transition into life within an American higher education institution.

The lack of literature on international student arrivals presents an opportunity to use in-depth, qualitative approaches to shed light on students' perspectives of their earliest experiences as new students in a foreign institution. Even more, employing a hermeneutic phenomenological study design to this work will uncover students' common experiences (i.e., the "essences"), thereby illuminating potential gaps between those experiences and the support services students are offered. Eliciting student narratives will also broaden the scope of what it means to arrive to a foreign institution. What can we learn about students and their arrivals beyond their stress and hardships? Providing a contextual foundation through in-depth interviews will bring to light the ways international students understand the cultural changes they encounter as they navigate the early experiences that ultimately set the tone for the rest of their educational tenure in the United States. Considering all of these opportunities for exploration, I pursued the following research

question in my dissertation: **How do degree-seeking undergraduate international students experience arriving to a four-year institution in the United States?**

Chapter III: Methods

In the following section I lay out the dissertation study design I followed to explore how international undergraduate students at a four-year institution experienced arriving to the United States. First, I explain how hermeneutic phenomenology is the methodology best suited to my research design. Second, I outline the steps I took to carry out my dissertation, including characteristics and philosophical routes taken in phenomenological research. Third, I describe the analytical procedures I used in light of those routes. Finally, I address my ethical considerations, positionality as the researcher undertaking this topic, credibility and trustworthiness, and study limitations.

A Qualitative Approach Using Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The purpose of my research was to better understand what international students experience when they first arrive to their U.S. institution, and learn from them how their experiences shape their adjustment and overall life while working to complete their degree. To accomplish this, I followed a qualitative approach and drew from the philosophies of hermeneutic phenomenological research.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative researchers are interested in how people "interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 15). The researcher is the primary instrument for qualitative data collection and analysis and seeks the participants' perspectives of the phenomenon of interest. Often, a study is undertaken because there is a lack of existing theory or explanation for the phenomenon. Therefore, the research process is inductive, with the researcher building concepts, hypotheses, and theory, rather than being tested deductively as would be in an experiment.

Of the various types of qualitative research, phenomenology is a philosophy that informs all forms of qualitative research in some way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Broadly, it is the study of lived experience or the life world (Gallagher, 2012; Seidman, 2013; van Manen, 1997), which might include basic things such as time, lived space, lived body, or lived human relation (van Manen, 1997). Edmund Husserl is widely known as the father of phenomenology (Gallagher, 2012; Groenewald, 2004; Laverty, 2003). From his standpoint, the lifeworld is what we experience pre-reflectively, including things we take for granted or that are common sense (Husserl, 1970). In other words, Husserl believed that contents of personal consciousness can be certain and that anything outside of the immediate experience can be ignored in order to arrive at the pure "phenomena" (Eagleton, 1983; Fouche, 1993) or "essences" of an experience (Laverty, 2003). The process of digging deeper and deeper to arrive at the phenomenon involves bracketing (also called reduction), which means removing any theories, scientific conceptions, or thematizations that prevents the researcher from seeing the phenomenon in a non-abstracting manner (van Manen, 1997).

Under the umbrella of phenomenology, researchers have developed a number of methodological routes that I considered while trying to choose the most appropriate measures to learn about the international arrival experience. For example, empirical phenomenology is unique because it places an emphasis on ensuring that both the researcher's and participants' perspectives comes through (Aspers, 2009). Further, it calls for an explanation grounded in the social sciences (such as a theory). Together, these characteristics did not align with the dissertation I wanted to undertake. First, while I indicated earlier that Schlossberg's transition theory informs my work, I did not use it as the sole base for my interview questions and data analysis. Second, my intention of investigating international students' arrival experiences was to

better understand students' experiences with the phenomenon, not my own. Therefore, my own perspective was not at the center of the data. For these reasons, empirical phenomenology was not suitable for my dissertation.

I also considered using a descriptive phenomenological psychological method (Giorgi, 2012) which emphasizes description over interpretation throughout the analysis process. Descriptive phenomenologists would describe the data precisely as it is presented by the participant, making meaning based only on what is given, which is more similar to Giorgi's training in natural science. However, interpretation, which Giorgi defines as the "adoption of a non-given factor to help account for what is given in an experience" (p. 6), is not the focus of this vein of phenomenology. In my approach, I wanted to remain open to explanations not presented directly from the participants and used their words to make connections to prior information from the literature and experiences of other students.

In heuristic inquiry, the researcher seeks to understand a problem or question that has been a personal challenge or puzzle by including an analysis of his or her own experiences along with the participants' perspectives (Moustakas, 1990). Similar to my reservations with empirical research above, although the international student arrival experience has been of interest to me for a long time, I have not personally experienced what it is like to be new in an American context. This made heuristic inquiry unsuitable for my dissertation. Even more, as in descriptive phenomenology, heuristic research is not meant to be interpreted because in Moustakas's (1990) words, it "removes the aliveness and vitality from the nature, roots, meanings, and essences of an experience" (p. 19).

Founded by Martin Heidegger, hermeneutic phenomenology is also concerned with the life world and lived human experience (Laverty, 2003), yet unlike the classic phenomenological

approach of Martin Husserl, it places a different emphasis on context and interpretation. Heidegger broke away from Husserl's school of thought after it became apparent to him that "one's background cannot be made completely explicit" (p. 24), and that interpretation is critical to the process of understanding. This means that rather than bracketing aside biases and assumptions to reveal the true essences of an experience (as Husserl believed was possible), the hermeneutic phenomenologist reflects on those biases and assumptions and uses them to inform his or her interpretation of the data (Kafle, 2011; Laverty, 2003; Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998). Elaborating on that, Henriksson and Friesen (2012) and Gallagher (2012) describe hermeneutic phenomenologists as remaining open to interpretation, meaning, and insight, rather than seeking something that is final and stable.

Given the importance of context on the international student arrival experience, both before and during their arrival, the defining features of hermeneutic phenomenology fit the purposes of my dissertation. I wanted to learn, from students' perspectives, how they interpret and make meaning of those experiences. I was also interested in how students' arrival experiences differ based on their worldviews. Likewise, as the researcher, I engaged in ongoing and contextualized self-reflection about my positionality and previous knowledge about the topic, from the literature and personal experience, as a strategy to mitigate unfounded assumptions and make sense of my data.

Lastly, I connected with Nakkula and Ravitch's (1998) presentation of hermeneutic empathy, which they describe within the context of developmental psychology as a "joining with another through the co-construction of interpretations" (p. 327). Nakkula and Ravitch applied hermeneutic empathy in their research of disenfranchised populations and the barriers they face in school settings. They point out that because those working with such populations may never

experience similar barriers in their own day-do-day functioning, they should not strive to fully understand or relate completely to the magnitude of those students' challenges. Instead, they should try to connect with them, explore their histories and barriers, and join them as strategists for their futures. Although I did not consider newly arrived international students to be a disenfranchised population in my dissertation, I approached my participants with hermeneutic empathy. I have never, and will never, face the same challenges as my participants, yet I strived to connect with them through the interview process and jointly become a strategist for international students in the future.

Research Design

In this section, I describe how I executed the research design of this phenomenological dissertation. I first provide details on the research site, participants, and sampling strategies. I then outline my data collection procedures, including brief descriptions of my three-interview series design, and describe my analytical strategies.

Research Site

I chose a regional, public, 4-year institution located in a Midwestern state, which will be referred to as the University of River Valley (URV). This particular institution was selected because it held a population of international students from all over the world, and who are enrolled in a large variety of disciplines. This institution is highly ranked on world ranking scales of regional universities in the Midwest. Thus, given the importance of university world rankings to international students and their families (wenr.wes.org), this mid-size institution serves as a representative institution in comparison to others of similar size. Further, it is a public, state university that offers a variety of academic disciplines in the humanities and social, physical, and biological sciences, and opportunities for research, athletics, extracurriculars, and student clubs

and organizations. Located in a mid-sized city, the community also offers a diversity of cultural and recreational activities, which heightens its appeal to students who want a balance of academic and student life opportunities.

Participants and Sampling Strategies

My goals was to interview between six and eight students which would yield 18 to 24 interviews. I began my participant recruitment with a purposive sampling method, which meant choosing participants based on a specific purpose (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). In this case, I sought to speak with international undergraduate students who have experienced arriving to their university. Even though the "arrival experience" occurs during the earliest period students attend their institution (i.e., the first week after arriving to the U.S.) I was interested in speaking with any international undergraduate students, regardless of how long they had been enrolled. Students who were beyond their first year of study could better reflect upon the significance of their earliest experiences and how their arrival impacted their educational experiences overall.

During the summer of 2019, before reaching out to interview participants, I first contacted the director of URV's international office, which in this research will be titled the International Student Center (ISC), to outline the broad parameters of my research as well as to determine the best contact points for future questions and IRB regulations. After successfully obtaining IRB approvals from both the University of Wisconsin-Madison (IRB: 2019-0728) and URV (see Appendix A), I proceeded with my recruitment process by emailing the international student advisor, who provided a list of URV's 45 undergraduate international students and their email addresses. In this document, the advisor marked whether students were "new" or "continuing" for the Fall 2019 semester, as well as which students she believed would be in

River Valley during the summer—and potentially available for interviews prior to the start of the academic year. Students' countries of origin were not included.

In early August 2019, I emailed initial recruitment invitations to the six students who were marked as "here" for the summer. I sent a second follow-up recruitment email one week later. One student responded that she was out of the country but would be available to meet upon her return. We scheduled our first interview for the second week of September, which is the week after URV courses were to begin.

Keeping the international student advisor updated on my recruitment progress, she suggested sending an email to students on my behalf and incentivizing them with one participation point for joining my research. As a strategy to promote and increase engagement with the institution, ISC provides a small scholarship to international students who attend three activities during the semester. Completion of an activity earns a student one participation point and acquiring three points qualifies them for the scholarship. This approach was appropriate because as long as students self-reported their participation to ISC, I would not be revealing their identities to any party. Then, attaching my participant recruitment script (see Appendix B), which included a summary of my dissertation's purpose and interview focus, the advisor contacted students on my behalf during the second week of September 2019. This strategy garnered nine additional participants, who are briefly described in Table 3.

Table 3

Description of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Home Country	Major(s)/Minor	Education Background
Malin	Woman	Norway	Social Studies Education & Political Science Education	Short-term study abroad in U.S. (high school)
Sanjay	Man	India	Computer Science	First-time student in U.S.
Aisha	Woman	Congo	Microbiology/chemistry	Community college transfer
Yue	Woman	China	English/Communication	2+2 program
Tingting	Woman	China	Chemistry/Math	First-time student in U.S.
Rui	Woman	China	Finance	2+2 program
Adeline	Woman	Norway	Psychology/Sociology	1-year high school exchange in U.S.
Yiyun	Woman	China	English	2+2 program
Lim	Woman	Malaysia	Archeology/Geographic Information Systems	Community college transfer

Data Collection

Phenomenological investigation can be implemented in different ways, with the most popular strategy being in-depth interviewing. I followed an interview approach described by Seidman (1998), and designed by Dolbeare and Schuman (Schuman, 1982). This method consists of three long, iterative interviews of each participant that together examines the participant's experience and the meaning that experience had for them. Each interview served a specific purpose. The first inquired into the participant's history and life story. The second centered on the specific experience of interest (the international student arrival experience, in my case). Finally, the third interview drew the first two together through a reflective dialogue about

the meaning of the experience in light of the participant's life history (see Appendix C for a sample of one participant's three-interview series).

I chose this three-interview series in part because I did not share a similar background with my participants. Therefore, it was important to establish a foundation of understanding of their background, especially given the co-constructive nature and shared understanding that phenomenology requires. Meeting on three separate occasions also provided the opportunity for both myself and my participants to reflect on each previous interview and allowed for additional reflective dialogue about anything that had already been discussed, including additional recollections or elaborations by my participants, or my own additional follow-up questions.

I asked my participants to select interview locations on or near the university. The majority chose spaces on campus, including common seating areas in the student union, a study room in an academic building, an admissions office conference room, group study tables in the library, the library cafe, study space in the ISC, and study tables in the student activity center. One participant chose to meet in a coffee shop adjacent to the campus. First-round interview times, locations, and scheduling changes were communicated by email and text, and second- and third-round interview times were determined at the completion of the previous interview. With students' permission, I audio recorded all interviews and transcribed them verbatim when all had been completed.

My interviews were open-ended, semi-structured, and between 45 to 90 minutes in length. Semi-structured interviews are characterized by an emphasis on relatively open questions (Wengraf, 2001) with the researcher designing a set of initial questions or issues to be explored (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and then developing a follow-up strategy as the interview unfolds. To accomplish this, I prepared interview guides for each interview that included a set of questions

and prompts to provide direction for the conversation. Based on the information shared in the first interview, I adjusted my subsequent questions for second and third round interviews when needed. During the week-long period between interviews, I listened back to the previous week's interview prior to the both the second and third round interviews for each student. This was a helpful reminder of what we had discussed and provided me with assurance that my follow-up questions were as relevant as possible to what the participant had already shared. Keeping the "arrival experience" at the heart of each interview, my questions were guided by the following insights adapted from Seidman (2013).

Interview One: Focused Life History. The purpose of the first interview was to put the student's arrival experience into context by asking about their past lives up until the time they arrived to the U.S. As a reminder to keep the subsequent discussion focused within the context of the dissertation, I asked the participant to summarize their arrival experience. Additional topics included experiences in their family, their education, or any other situations that may have impacted their arrival experience. Asking "how" questions about their experiences helped the participant reconstruct past events to place their U.S. arrival experience in the context of their lives, which helped me understand the meaning behind the information they shared.

Interview Two: The Details of the Experience. During the second interview, I asked my participants to reconstruct (rather than provide opinions on) the details of their arrival experience, including their interactions with other people, the campus community, and any other resources or encounters with which they engaged during the first week at their university. For example, I elicited details by asking students what it was like to leave home and travel to the U.S. or to share a story about something they experienced while they were traveling or when they first arrived to the institution.

Interview Three: Reflection and Meaning. The third interview was an opportunity to find "meaning" to international students' arrival experiences and address intellectual and emotional connections between the phenomenon and their lives. This meant asking the student to think about how factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their current understanding of their situation. For example, I asked how given what they have shared with me, how did their arrival experience impact their educational experiences over the years or to provide recommendations for future students based on their own experiences and what they have learned about life in the U.S. since first arriving. After building a foundation during the first two interviews, the third interviews provided clarity and meaning, which helped me better understand what the arrival experience meant for that particular student.

Analytical Strategies

There is no required step-by-step process for analyzing data in hermeneutic phenomenology (Kafle, 2011; Laverty, 2003), however, researchers have outlined various recommendations for maintaining fidelity to hermeneutic philosophies. For example, with the call for ongoing self-reflection in hermeneutic phenomenological studies, Laverty (2003) recommends revisiting biases and assumptions in preparation for identifying their influence on the researcher's interpretation of the data. Accordingly, I kept an ongoing journal and field notes to remark upon my positionality and perspectives. Along with my positionality statement, I referred to these documents as a method to constantly compare how my position related to my interpretation of international students' experiences.

Laverty (2003) also notes how the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to data analysis involves co-construction of data between the researcher and the participant. While I did not directly involve my participants during the data analysis stage, the three-interview series

involved meeting with my participants on multiple occasions, which provided opportunities to clarify meanings of anything shared, or to revisit or expand upon something from a previous conversation. This process helped orient me toward meaningful concepts and interpretations of the data at-hand.

Although I just demonstrated the flexibility of hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, I used the following steps for coding and categorizing data as a means to organize my findings and produce a holistic portrayal of the lived arrival experience of international students in the United States. I first used multiple rounds of coding common to qualitative data analysis, specifically, coding schemes related to grounded theory and phenomenology. Within Microsoft Word, I hand-coded all of my interview data and stored and organized interview transcripts in a secure Box file. Concurrently with coding, I also wrote ongoing process and analytic memos as I made meaning of students' descriptions of their arrival experiences (Wengraf, 2001). According to Warren and Karner (2010), memos are conceptual notes that cohesively tie the data together and are key to sense-making.

During the first phase of coding, I applied a combination of initial codes (which included some In Vivo codes) and concept codes to capture relevant data segments that illuminated aspects of the international student arrival experience. Initial coding involves breaking down the data into smaller parts to examine and compare for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with the goal of remaining open to any theoretical direction (Charmaz, 2014). This meant using both my existing knowledge of the international student arrival experience to assign codes, while also paying attention to information that was new and/or unexpected. During initial coding, I also followed Saldaña's (2016) suggestion of coding the developments of broader

categories, which were noted in a separate file that could be referenced if needed during later coding phases.

When applicable throughout, I also applied concept codes, which assign "bigger picture" meanings to the data (Saldaña, 2016). According to Saldaña (2016), concept codes tend to be used on larger segments of data and are an appropriate method to "transcend the local and particular of the study to more abstract or generalizable contexts" (p. 120). Given the significance of interpretation in hermeneutic phenomenology, I used concept codes to begin thinking about big-picture ideas about the arrival experience and interpretations of my participants' descriptions. Saldaña (2016) provides the example concept code of "American Excess" to demonstrate how a researcher might interpret a visitor to the United States' (or possibly in my case, an international student's) description of a mall: "And the malls – you'll never see things like that over here. It's usually one shop at a time, but there you've got it all under one roof. Big stores, too, big stores" (p. 121). Concept codes also served as a starting point for developing broader themes and categories related to the international student arrival experience.

To help track data after I started moving it around, it was important to develop an organizational system within Microsoft Word. I assigned a number to each participant based on the first round interview order (i.e., 1-10), and assigned a font color. I then changed the font color of each transcript accordingly, thereby making all quotes immediately identifiable to the participant in later rounds of categorizing and theming. After conducting multiple rounds of initial and concept coding, and documenting emerging potential categories, I created a "master list" to house all initial codes and their source quote, copying and pasting each into the master list document. Each source quote was labeled with a number to note its original location in the

transcripts, which became useful in times when I needed to search for additional context. For example, "1.1.1" refers to *Participant #1, Interview #1, Transcript page 1*. A sample of this process can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Sample of Master List Codes and Quotes

Initial Code	Source Quote
Parents value education	my parents, they only have me as a single child. They value education a lot because my dad received a high level of education. But my mom is like, less educated. But still, she tried to give as much education as possible to me. 5.1.8
Participated in extracurriculars when younger	during my early age, I wasn't only just studying, going to school, I also do a lot of talent classes, like music, art, that kind of stuff. Yeah. Yeah, I would say, like, my early age is more colorful than my high school years. Because I can- I even go to dance class. Like, music class. That kind of thing. 5.1.8
Learned about other cultures through books	my mom is a librarian. She do a lot of coding for books. And I thought that is really cool. So every time she was working in her office, I was just reading the books in the library. So I got to know of culture and stories from history of China, stories from authors who wrote about outside of the country—outside of China. So I know I want to go somewhere more colorful, because I don't want just reading about this, I want to really go there and see it, that kind of stuff. 5.1.8
Parents highly educated	he received a high level of education, so he—I don't know—he says he always trained me as a master's degree student, because he received a PhD. And he's also have a PhD in history, so that is a lot of—it's a subject requires critical thinking. So during that time, I didn't build critical thinking during middle school, and he start using his way to train me. 5.1.8
Father encouraged critical thinking skills	he received a high level of education, so he—I don't know—he says he always trained me as a master's degree student, because he received a PhD. And he's also have a PhD in history, so that is a lot of—it's a subject requires critical thinking. So during that time, I didn't build critical thinking during middle school, and he start using his way to train me. 5.1.8
Parents are her best friends	my parents said they don't regret getting involved to my life during that time because it's a perfect timing for getting along with each other. Yeah. So my dad and I become really good friends. Even my mom came home—she said she didn't even recognize- Oh, we're really good now. Like yeah, she was amazed. And I was like, I actually feel left out. Because she was my best friend before. And now they're both my best friends. 5.1.9

Following the creation of the master list of all coded segments, I proceeded to review and streamline all codes by consolidating any with duplicate meanings or eliminate codes that were not in any way related to the international student arrival experience. As an example of this process, I determined that it was worth considering if two similar codes--*affordability* and *financial concern*—were suited to be combined into one term. I reflected on the context surrounding each code and realized that *affordability* was mentioned with regard to selecting an institution based on its tuition price, and *financial concern* referred to the student's concern over spending money while they were studying abroad. These codes remained separate as a result. Similarly, *family support* meant ongoing support provided by families while the student was abroad, and *family supportive* describes a family's support of the student's decision to study abroad. To demonstrate when two codes were combined, *prior perception of U.S.* and *pre-conception of American culture* both referred to a student's belief of what American culture was like. I re-coded segments labeled *prior perception of U.S.* to *pre-conception of American culture* to more accurately reflect their shared meaning.

During the second phase of coding I conducted focused coding (or category development), which involves further refining the initial codes from the first phase (Hahn, 2008). I created a new version of the master list document, adding another column to list the emergent categories. I reviewed each coded segment and source quote and assigned a category to each, always checking back in the document to determine if a previously used category could be applied. In no particular order, emerging categories at this stage included terms such as *social life*, *new living situation*, *family background*, *co-national network*, *resources from home*, *first impressions*, *learning cultural norms*, *prior U.S. experience*, and *excitement for American*

culture. Next, I re-organized all codes in the master list by category and reconciled appropriate category names following the same process as outlined above for finalizing initial code names. To aid in this constant comparing process, I copied all categories into an alphabetized list, again, reconciling duplicate and irrelevant terms. Once finalized, I applied the updated category names to the coded segments.

The category list was also essential during theme development. It was first important to group all coded segments together according to their common category, for example, compiling orientation-related segments into the *orientation* category. Doing this helped to synthesize across all of the related data and begin making thematic connections about the common experiences shared by students. Through continuous reviews of the category list, it was also possible to determine broader groups that eventually crystallized into themes. Early in this process I sorted the categories into groups and sub-groups according to their chronological order: 1) *prior to arrival* (sub-groups: *pathway to study abroad*, *excitement*, *preparation*, and *expectation*); 2) *during arrival* (sub-groups: *realizing the (in)accuracy of expectation, first impressions*, *experiences*, *mindset*, and *resources and strategies*); and 3) *since arrival* (sub-groups: *academic experiences*, *considerations*, and *strategies and resources*). Upon further reflection about what these groups and sub-groups revealed about the phenomenon, it became clear that the sub-categories offered more nuance and depth about the international student arrival experience. Placing the sub-group topics at the forefront of the next phase of analysis, the codes and categories began to take shape. Finally, I generated the following three themes that captured the essential elements of the phenomenon: a) Realizing the (In)accuracy of and Re-Adjusting Expectations, b) Arriving in the Company of Others, and c) Maneuvering Through Communication and Cultural Norms. I describe these themes in great detail in Chapter four.

Ethical Considerations

It was vitally important to protect my participants' identities and data throughout my dissertation. I first applied for permission to begin my dissertation by my institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB) as well as the IRB at the research site (URV). I also communicated with the director of URV's International Student Center before recruiting participants (Creswell, 2014). I protected my participants' confidentiality by having each sign a consent form where they agreed to the provisions of my dissertation (see Appendix D). The form explained that the information they provide would not be used beyond the purposes of my research, that they could refuse to answer any questions, and that they could stop the interview at any time. I also kept my participants' identities anonymous by assigning a pseudonym of their choice and changing certain identifying details in the interview transcripts and write-ups (names, locations, etc.). These changes were made so that the reader cannot identify the participant yet done in such a way that they do not destroy the social-science research value of the final report (Wengraf, 2001). As I transcribed the data, I removed any identifying information shared by my participants about other individuals. To account for any language barriers, I also explained the content of my consent form orally and did my best to make sure that I was understood before collecting their signature (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 74).

I also took precautions to ensure that my data remained secure. I transferred all audio recordings to a password-protected personal computer and immediately deleted the files from the recorder. I also locked all consent forms and hand-written field notes in a secure file in my office. Finally, I developed a system to label all files (i.e., Excel spreadsheets, interview transcripts) with assigned numbers and pseudonyms to help maintain the anonymity of my participants.

Researcher Positionality

According to Rossman and Rallis (2012), qualitative researchers must reflect on who they are and how their perspective influences the lens through which they view their research. Further, Seidman (1998) notes the importance of the researcher to be aware of issues of power in the researcher/participant relationship and how those issues may affect the participants. In phenomenological research in particular, the researchers and participants often share similar experiences of a phenomenon. As indicated earlier, I did not directly share similar backgrounds with my study participants, nor have I have experienced the phenomenon of arriving to a university in the U.S. for my degree. This meant that I had to spend time developing a foundational understanding of my international student participants and thought critically about how my positionality and potential biases impacted my interpretation of the data. In this section, I will provide some context about who I am, how my positionality as the researcher might have impacted my dissertation, and how I approached my research and mitigated assumptions.

My interest in understanding the earliest experiences of college students arriving to study in a four-year institution in the U.S. originates from my personal background of becoming friends with international students in high school. I became close friends with some of the foreign exchange students from China, Turkey, and Japan, and enjoyed sharing my city with them and learning about each other's daily customs and ways of life. We rarely spoke of their struggles or challenges, but instead focused on having fun experiences outside of school. These friendships gave me the desire for international travel and oriented me towards pursuing a career in international higher education during college.

My own transition into college was relatively seamless. I grew up in a "college town" with three higher education institutions. Like my parents, I attended the four-year public

university where my mother also worked as a psychologist and professor of student affairs. Given my familiarity with the university and college life in general, I was able to leave home for college with no hesitation and easily transitioned into balancing my social life, academics, and being a student-athlete.

My early friendships in high school, followed by my own transition into college, impacts how I see my research. My international experiences and professional background also play a role. During college I volunteered as an ESL conversation partner and tutor, worked as an intern in the study abroad office, and pursued research projects about the expectations of international students. I also spent a semester abroad in the UK, where I experienced student life in another country and traveled throughout Europe. These opportunities helped me land a job as a coordinator for international students at a nearby private, Catholic, four-year institution. It was in this position that I gained real-life experience advising international students during their arrival. I saw first-hand how students experience arriving to study abroad and learned of the challenges and barriers they were really facing. For example, many of my students spoke little to no English and had to navigate small town life with limited ways of communication and forms of transportation. Even more, a number of students were placed (rather than chose to be) at the institution and were dissatisfied with their circumstance at the outset of their education.

Finally, I believe my cultural experiences in the U.S., travels abroad to over 15 countries, and professional background demonstrate how I care about international students' university experiences and how I may be able to relate to students to some degree. That being said, I must admit that I am very privileged to have had such educational opportunities while facing few struggles. I realize that most students—regardless of their being international or domestic—do not have it as easy as I did. I am aware that this privilege may have potentially skewed my

perception of the arrival experience for international students because I cannot relate to the challenges they face. As a result, I used the following strategies to keep my perspective in check throughout the research process.

First, I tried to approach my research with an open mind. I could not assume that my participants had the same experiences as the students I have met or worked with in the past. During everyday, non-research related conversations, I have a tendency to interject with my own stories as a means to show that I hear and relate with what the other person is saying. During interviews, I held back any desire to do this as much as possible and instead was mindful about listening without interrupting, patiently waited for my participant to finish their responses, and asked thoughtful follow-up questions that in no way directed my participant to respond in ways I that would have been convenient for me.

Second, I was aware of the potential dynamics and influence of my positionality. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) point out how insider/outsider status issues may affect research when the researcher does not share the participant's identity. In my case, I had never been an international student experiencing arriving to a U.S. university, nor was I a fellow undergraduate student, which automatically positioned me as an outsider. This might have harmed my ability to gain my participants' trust, and as a result, might have caused them to be suspicious of my intentions for researching their experiences. To adjust for this possibility, before each interview began I tried to establish trust by sharing a little bit of my own working background along with my intentions and interest in this research topic. I explained to my participants that I was interested in their arrival experience because I hoped to work toward making the experience better for future students.

I was also prepared for the influence of perceived power differences between myself and my participants (Hoffman, 2007). Factors such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and institutional affiliation can affect the interviewee's perception and in turn, the conversation (Sriram, 2016). As an advanced graduate student who was older than my undergraduate student participants, I might have been perceived by them as having more authority. To empower my participants—and hopefully their willingness to share—I followed Hoffman's (2007) recommendation of reminding my participants that I was also a student, and that I was studying the international arrival experience without having ever been in their position and was there to learn from them. As an American, I also considered the perceived power imbalance of a cross-culture research relationship and made an effort to understand the conception of ethics of my participant's country of origin (Marshall & Batten, 2004). Liamputtong (2007) suggests sharing personal stories to build rapport and help the participant feel more at ease. While it was not my intention to take a long time during each interview to share stories, I made sure to be friendly and conversational prior to starting each interview. Seidman (1998) also points out that the three-interview structure can mitigate tensions in cross-racial interviewing because the interviewer has "the opportunity to demonstrate respect, thoughtfulness, and interest" (p. 202) which can reduce existing skepticism. I found this to be the case as meeting on three separate occasions created many opportunities for small talk and off-topic conversations before and after each interview, which helped build trusting interviewer/participant relationships.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Along with the ethical considerations and my positionality I described above, I used a variety of techniques to establish credibility and trustworthiness. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, hermeneutic phenomenology requires the researcher to partake in ongoing self-

reflection to mitigate biases and assumptions and account for how these influence his or her interpretation of the data (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998). I engaged in this process by writing notes and memos in an ongoing log where I tracked my process and methods.

Another method to add credibility to my dissertation was to return to the participants and show them my emergent findings. Rossman and Rallis (2012) refer to this form of member checking as "participant validation." It provides the participants with the opportunity to elaborate, correct, extend, or argue about the data. I was able to accomplish this organically during the interview process because I met with my participants three times. At the beginning of the second and third interviews, I was able to summarize both our discussion and my emergent findings from the previous meeting and asked my participants to provide any additional input.

Once I began writing the results and findings of my data, I conducted a series of reviews with my advisor, who both oversaw the research process, and challenged the integrity of my data and writing. In addition, we further validated my research by meeting regularly—both in person and virtually—to discuss my research progress, with my advisor serving as "devil's advocate" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to question my methods, meanings, and interpretations. For example, she helped me generate my "themes" to reflect the larger takeaways from my data rather than a generic topic that did not reflect the meaning of my data.

Limitations

First, one of the overall limitations of phenomenology is that it is unable to "provide causal explanations of subpersonal (e.g., neuronal) processes that may underpin some aspect of experience" (Gallagher, 2012, p. 4). Therefore, rather than seeking absolute truths to explain why students experienced their arrivals in the ways they did, I used contextual background data to shed light on students' perspectives, which also helped me as the researcher interpret meaning.

Furthermore, I kept in mind that the purpose of hermeneutic phenomenology is to uncover an individual's understanding of a phenomenon as opposed to a decontextualized, essential element of an experience that all individuals share.

Second, my intention for undertaking this line of inquiry was to reveal details of the arrival experience, and in order to do so, had to speak with students who were years beyond the arrival period. Given the relatively small population of first-year international students at URV, it became important to remain open to speaking to all willing international student participants. Being further removed from the phenomenon challenged students' ability to recollect specific details. However, hermeneutic phenomenology's emphasis on interpretation rather than absolute truth meant that holding to exact accounts was less of a priority than eliciting students' reflections about what that experience meant for their lives.

Third, while the different educational backgrounds of my participants serves as a reminder to take into account that international students follow non-linear pathways through college, the fact that they are arriving with varying levels of college experience (i.e., community colleges and universities in their home country) makes it difficult to compare their arrivals at their shared institution. While one student arrived at URV for their first ever college experience, another student might have one or two years of course taking and independent living under their belt. This also translates to arriving at different ages, which alone can impact their self-perception and worldview. Adding that students also come from diverse cultures, it was hard to ascertain which aspect(s) of a student's circumstance was influencing their perception of a particular arrival experience.

Fourth, as outlined earlier, hermeneutic phenomenology requires the researcher to interpret the data, which means that I used my own knowledge of the international arrival

experience, from the literature and my personal background, to inform my own understanding and relaying of the data. As such, I tried to consider how my own biases and assumptions about my participants' arrival experiences may have influenced this sense-making and kept those in check throughout the analysis process. My interpretations may not align with my participants' intentions, but I tried to mitigate any misconceptions by being transparent about my positionality and perspective throughout the research process.

Fifth, the open nature of this qualitative dissertation, along with the characteristics of hermeneutic phenomenology, places value on the participants' own interpretations of their arrival experiences. This emphasis on the student perspective is extremely important because they are on the receiving end of the policies and structures that are in place and meant to serve them. However, limiting this dissertation to the student voice leaves a void with regard to the practitioner perspective, which holds more knowledge of student needs at the institutional level. This is a missed opportunity to examine the alignment between what students expect and hope from the institution and the intentions and capacities of those who serve international students.

Lastly, although meeting on multiple occasions garnered a lot of depth about the arrival experiences of my participants, the findings are not meant to be generalizable beyond those nine individuals. Even between the individuals in this group, their unique qualities and personal contexts demonstrate how vast of a subject the international student arrival experience can be.

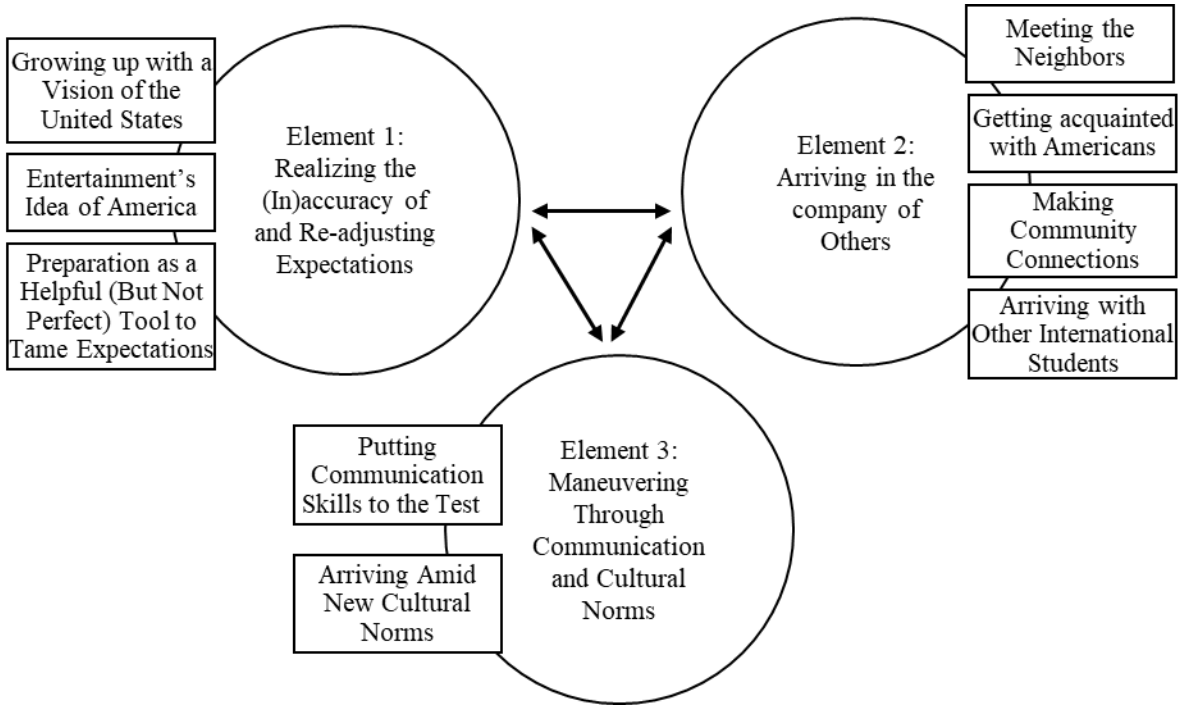
Chapter IV: Findings

Description of the Phenomenon: What Does it Mean to Experience Arriving?

The purpose of this research was to perform an in-depth investigation of how international degree-seeking students experience "arriving" to a four-year institution in the United States, particularly during the period between moving in and starting classes, a period marked by numerous activities that orient students to their new lives as college students. The three-interview series provided my participants a platform to describe in detail their arrivals, the contextual factors—past and present—that influenced how their arrival was experienced, and then reflect upon their arrival's import on their academic journey as a whole. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to analyze the data, I searched for my participants' common essential experiences that characterized their arrivals. Most significantly, hermeneutic phenomenology values the life world and lived human experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology also allows for interpretation without requiring the researcher to bracket aside their biases and assumptions. This allowed me to analyze student's descriptions of their arrivals against both the body of literature surrounding international students as well as my own familiarity with the topic. To summarize, the international student arrival experience is characterized by the following essential elements: (a) realizing the (in)accuracy of and readjusting expectations, (b) arriving in the company of others, and (c) maneuvering through communication and cultural norms. Figure 1 illustrates the essential elements of the arrival experience and how those elements interact with one another according to the international student participants at URV.

Figure 1

Essential Elements of the International Student Arrival Experience



It is first important to note that although the essential elements of the arrival experience themselves do not follow a prescribed order, the natural chronological backdrop of pre-, during-, and post- does exert an influence on how all students arrive to the U.S. and begin their degree. This timeline aligns with the interview structure in that each of the three interviews was designated for 1) collecting background and contextual information, 2) describing the details of the arrival experience, and 3) making sense of and reflecting on the arrival experience as it fits into the overall educational journey.

The three circles in the middle mark the three main themes of my findings, i.e., the essential elements of the arrival experience. There is no hierarchical or chronological structure that indicates when each essential element occurs. Rather, they are experienced differently by

each individual (i.e., one at a time or multiple at once). The bi-directional arrows in the center illustrate how the essential arrival elements occur interchangeably. For one, upon arrival, students come to realize the accuracy or inaccuracy of their previous expectations for studying abroad and make adjustments accordingly. Their expectations are influenced by three main areas: 1) how they grew up (i.e., family and educational influences), 2) what they learned from being exposed to American entertainment, and 3) their preparations for studying abroad. Those who more accurately predicted what their lives would be like when they arrived had an easier time transitioning to campus life. The second element represents arriving in the company of others, which means that although students might have traveled to the U.S. alone, their arrival experience involves varying degrees of interactions with other people. Within this element, students described what it was like to meet and live with their neighbors, the challenges of meeting other people, connecting with Americans, connecting with the local community, and becoming friends with other international students.

The third element illustrates how international students face communication and cultural norms that they must learn to maneuver, which often present obstacles that interfere with meeting others and getting along with the people around them. Finally, given that the interviews occurred in the participants' final years of their studies, it is important to acknowledge that much of what they shared was done so reflectively. As such, students described how they have grown and changed over time, other important elements of their entire academic journey, and their ideas and recommendations for both new students and the institution. These reflective takeaways are compiled into a second series of short participant vignettes at the end of this chapter and can be used to influence future policy and practice.

Before diving into the details of my participants' arrival experiences, I will first introduce each student by providing a brief summary that describes who they are, where they are coming from, how they came to enroll in their program at URV, and other contextual information that illuminates their educational pathways and diverse personalities.

Getting to Know the Participants

Malin, Norway

Malin started her first year at URV in the fall of 2017 and is now a secondary education major. She grew up in a town of 6,000 people, where she lived with her parents—later, just her father—and three younger siblings. Malin began enjoying school when she reached the upper secondary level and started taking agricultural classes and working with horses. In the summer of 2013, Malin participated in a month-long 4H study abroad program in River Valley, living with what she now refers to as her "second family." They took her on trips around the U.S. and welcomed her into their extended family. Back in Norway, after narrowly missing the test marks required to enroll in teacher school, Malin took a gap year to live and work at the horse stables. The flexibility of her gap year allowed her to return to River Valley and tour the local colleges, which helped convinced her to later apply to URV. Once accepted, an ISC staff member connected her with the other Norwegian student—Adeline—who had been an exchange student in a nearby town, and they became friends during their first semester at URV. When she was accepted, she was "super excited and stoked." And, "now I'm here, and I just love it."

Malin's arrival involved flying to River Valley early so that she could spend time with her host family and help move her host-sister to college. Because she was already familiar with the area, she opted out of attending most of the orientation programming. However, she and Adeline did attend a shopping trip and boat ride sponsored by the international office. Malin

works as a tour guide in URV's admissions office, which has provided her with a lot of insight about the university. She is dating another international student who plays on URV's football time. They plan to move back to either Norway, Sweden, or his home country of Finland, where she will find a teaching job.

Sanjay, India

Sanjay grew up watching American movies and television and had always hoped to be part of the lifestyle he saw on screen, especially the social aspect of *Friends*. He recognized that moving to the United States for his university studies would be his best chance to accomplish this goal, and he set his sights on studying abroad while he was in high school. Admittedly, Sanjay let his mother do everything for him growing up, so college would also be a time to become more independent. His family was unhappy when he opted out of taking college entrance exams in India to pursue a computer science degree in the United States. He gave his parents an ultimatum: "Either I go to the U.S., or I don't go to college."

Sanjay's rebellious attitude during his arrival was the root of many challenges throughout his arrival and first year at URV. In addition, one of his closest friends back home died during his first month abroad, and at the same time, he began to understand that college was going to be much harder than high school. His social life was also a challenge because although he met friends through a job he started during the arrival period, he thought he was too cool for the other first-year students in his dorm. Other than his grades, Sanjay shares very little about college with his family back in India. He enjoys the life he has built in the U.S., including learning new hobbies, exchanging culture with his American and American-Indian friends, and working on and off campus. For Sanjay, college is about "finding exactly who I am" and trying to achieve the social group he admired from watching *Friends.*

Aisha, The Democratic Republic of the Congo

Growing up speaking French, Aisha had hoped to study abroad in France. However, the decision to go to the U.S. was made by her parents, who told her that she would either go to the U.S. or stay in the Congo. Others in her small hometown had already gone to the Midwest for their studies, and it was decided that she would join them in Capitol City. Although she had not chosen her path herself, Aisha still recognized that studying abroad was a big decision and would be an opportunity to grow up and become independent. She also wanted to be an example for other people and show that she could leave her family and go to a new country.

Aisha first attended an ESL institution before transferring to an associate degree program to study science. She was accompanied by her mother on the journey over, who stayed for the first three months. All living arrangements were made by the friends who were already there, and Aisha moved into an apartment complex with around 30 other Congolese students and enrolled in an ESL institute. From there, she transferred into a nearby technical college to begin taking college-level courses.

Aisha had not considered racial demographics when she chose URV, but she started questioning her decision when people began warning her that she would not see others like her there. Her parents reminded her that everyone is human and that she should not worry about the lack of diversity. In any case, she was transferring for her education and realized that she did not need to focus on anything else. When she did arrive to River Valley, Aisha reluctantly moved into the dorms. However, after having a solid friend group back in Capitol City, she struggled with the loneliness she felt at URV. She was able to meet other international students through some of the orientation activities, but as a transfer student it was difficult to meet other people.

Rui, China

Rui's introduction to URV began through an established relationship with her Chinese university, who partners with URV through a 2+2 program where students are able to complete dual degree programs at both institutions. This program was an ideal opportunity because Rui had dreamed of someday visiting the United States. Since she was young, Rui and her parents listened to American music, watched American television and movies, and celebrated American holidays and traditions. Christmas in particular is Rui's favorite holiday and it became one of her life goals to celebrate a real Christmas in the United States.

After failing her college entrance exams, English proficiency tests, and having to re-take her final year of high school, Rui was thrilled to learn in 2017 that she would have the opportunity to study abroad. Her excitement continued for the first month when everything felt new. Rui continued taking English courses in URV's ESL program and is now in her final year as an English major with a writing and rhetoric emphasis. Over her three years at URV, Rui has changed a lot. She said, "I'm really proud of those changes. And I'm really glad that I came to the U.S. to have school here."

Tingting, China

Like Rui, Tingting's parents introduced her to the world beyond China. Her father has a PhD in history and her mother is a librarian who took advantage of having access to books from diverse authors who inspired her to get out and experience the world. She said, "I know I want to go somewhere more colorful, because I don't want just reading about this, I want to really go there and see it." Growing up, Tingting's creative personality disliked the intensity of school because she preferred to "do her own thing" and "building stuff" on her own. Although she found high school to be draining, it provided a solid base for studying science and math, and helped her develop techniques that would make it easier to get through her college education.

Tingting and her parents began researching about studying abroad after her first year of high school. She considered many schools in the northern states (so she could experience a snowy winter) and ultimately chose URV because of its high reputation in science and undergraduate research. Expecting to see an exciting and diverse society, she was disappointed to discover that life in River Valley was not diverse and not full of pop culture, but quickly re-adjusted her outlook. Throughout college Tingting has become very involved on campus and seeks opportunities to better herself and develop meaningful relationships, which has been one of her greatest challenges.

Yue, China

The most soft-spoken of the participants, Yue shared fewer details about her experiences than the others. Growing up, her father worked abroad and so she spent most of her time with her strict mother, who is a geography teacher. Like Rui, Yue had a hard time passing her college entrance exams. Not wanting to repeat her final year of high school, Yue and her mom chose a 2+2 program so she could attend a good university. This pathway was very upsetting to Yue, who was not familiar with the U.S. culture. Her mother was also fearful that the U.S. would be too dangerous.

Worries aside, Yue spent two years in her Chinese university. She visited the U.S. as a part of a short-term exchange program, so she was a somewhat familiar with the culture before attending URV. By the time she started the journey to River Valley, she had grown a little more excited and nervous. It would be her first time traveling alone and she feared that people would not understand her English. When Yue's last flight landed in River Valley, the international advisor picked her up and drove her to campus. Her American roommates had not yet arrived,

but she met other international students through the orientation program. Being an ESL student for her first year, Yue became friends primarily with other Chinese students.

Adeline, Norway

Adeline had not grown up planning to study abroad until she came across an exchange program during high school and randomly decided to try something new. She spent a tumultuous junior year living first with a family of dairy farmers, followed by a supportive young host family who she remained in contact with throughout college. Adeline truly began enjoying her year abroad only after school had ended, and she spent two weeks of summer with her friends before returning home. During that time, in hopes of recreating the feeling of those two weeks, she decided to pursue her bachelor's degree at nearby URV.

Adeline's arrival experience at URV did not meet her expectations. After a renewed appreciation for being home during her final year of high school, she regretted that she had not applied for Norwegian universities. This regret persisted as she said goodbye to her family and flew to River Valley. To make matters worse, her host parents had divorced and were in the process of moving when she arrived, and she discovered that her roommate—a high school friend—changed her mind and decided not to attend college. The highlight of her arrival period was meeting Malin, the only other Norwegian student on campus. Despite the negative aspects of her arrival experience, Adeline stubbornly refused to give up. She is highly motivated to complete her degree and loves being a psychology major.

Yiyun, China

Growing up, Yiyun talked and played differently than her peers. She was a good student, but preferred other activities such as riding horses, playing guitar and flute, and reading history books. Her mother, who had moved to Beijing from a small city and hoped for Yiyun to expand

her vision of the world, believed that Yiyun might be more suited for another country's context. Her "disappointing father," however, was racist and disliked anything foreign or different from himself. Despite her family moving to a city with better educational opportunities, Yiyun's school performance suffered when her parents began having marital problems. As a result, she did poorly on her university entrance exams, which therefore limited her university options in China.

Yiyun was frustrated with the learning environment at her Chinese university and became very excited when the opportunity arose to enroll in the 2+2 program connected to URV. She was glad to be able to study English and creative writing in an English-speaking country. Aside from being nervous about using her speaking and listening skills, Yiyun's first reaction after arriving to the airport in the U.S. was that it was an amazing and interesting experience to see so much diversity in one place. She was also relieved when she met another Chinese student who would be attending URV. They arrived to River Valley together and were met by an international office staff member who brought them to their rooms and took them out to dinner. Overall, Yiyun felt comfortable throughout her arrival, which she attributes to having an inclusive and calm personality.

Lim, Malaysia

Lim began her U.S. studies around the age of 20 and has always been goal-, career-, and financially driven. She had known for a long time that she would study archeology in college and chose a science track in school. She also knew she would need to leave Malaysia to study archeology. Although Mandarin is her native language, Lim had learned science vocabulary in English and therefore searched for archeology programs in English-speaking countries. Also wanting to make a smart financial decision, she decided to reach out to programs in American

community colleges, ultimately choosing the only institution that responded to her inquiries. Lim's parents, who are not science-oriented, had safety concerns about her choice to study in the United States, but trusted her decision and let her go with their full support.

Going to college is now a cultural expectation in Malaysia because most from Lim's parents' generation were not able to attend. The Malaysian school system requires university-bound students to attend a pre-university, where they spend one and a half to two years living on campus and taking pre-college courses. Upon completing Pre-U courses, Lim was able to enroll at her community college beginning in the spring semester of 2017, knowing from the start that she would transfer to a four-year institution. Her memories from arriving to the U.S. are based on how different it felt compared to her home, particularly that it was cold and isolating. She described the town as sad and depressing, and that it reminded her of the isolated towns she had seen in Hollywood movies. Arriving to the college, however, was very easy because the staff took care of everything. Lim chose to transfer to URV based on connections between her college and both the archeology department and international office. Having lived in the U.S. for three semesters, her transfer to URV was also seamless. Not wanting to follow the requirements for new international students, Lim found an apartment off campus and arrived after the orientation programming had ended. Being primarily focused on completing her credits, Lim was confident that regardless of any challenges, she would successfully complete her program.

Essential Elements of the International Student Arrival Experience

In this section, I describe the essential elements of the international student arrival experience as it was lived by the nine student participants from the University of River Valley. They encapsulate how students come to realize the accuracy of their expectations, how they

arrive in the company of others, and how they maneuver through communication and cultural norms as they begin their degrees in the U.S.

Realizing the (In)accuracy of and Re-Adjusting Expectations

When most students reflected back to the time they first arrived to the United States, they spoke about what they had thought the experience was going to be like compared to what it was actually like in reality. The phenomenon of "arriving" included not only the physical acts of traveling and reaching their destination, but also, for the first time, realizing the accuracy of their expectations through initial experiences, encounters and first impressions. The basis for students' expectations derived from a multitude of sources, including how they perceived U.S. culture through the traditions and values instilled by their families, consuming American media and entertainment, and previous personal experiences abroad. Some who knew they would be studying abroad also took time to do research in preparation for their sojourn and developed assumptions based on what they were told or found. It took leaving home and experiencing American life for themselves to quickly realize if their expectations matched reality. Those whose arrival experiences more closely aligned with what they assumed an American experience would be like had a smoother arrival experience than others. Some were shocked or disappointed to discover that their American life would not be what they had envisioned, and thus had a harder time transitioning into their new college life. How students reacted to, made sense of, and re-framed their experiences during their arrival made a lasting impact on their overall university lives.

Growing Up with a Vision of the United States. How students form their expectations of their arrival is largely influenced by what they had learned about the U.S. while they were growing up in their home country. Rui, for example, had an overall positive arrival experience in

part because she was able to see that the culture met her high expectations, which assured her that the things she had hoped to do while abroad were going to be truly possible. She had dreamed about traveling to the United States for a long time because of the memorable American traditions and entertainment her parents had introduced her to. Additionally, as part of her 2+2 program, she took courses from professors who had been to the United States, was inspired by their English pronunciation, and learned from them what living in America was like. These factors, among other classroom experiences, enhanced Rui's excitement for studying abroad:

> They also gave me different experience on the school life. And when I was in China, I had the Chinese-English teacher and foreigner English teachers. They're all teaching English class, like speaking, writing, and communication English. And they gave me the different experience. Like, the foreign teacher always encourage me to—even I think I didn't do very well, but they still encouraged me. They always say, "You did a good job. You are very good. You are not a low grade student. You did great." That gave me a lot of confidence to chase my goal to the U.S.

Having admiring and encouraging teachers not only gave Rui confidence, but motivated her curiosity about American culture even more.

Rui's impression of American educational culture was also very positive, which influenced her perception of American life and made her want to be a part of it. These feelings were heightened by her dissatisfaction with the educational experiences she had had growing up in China. She believed that American students studied hard, yet "have a lot of things to do after class, and those things are very healthy, like, healthy life." She compared this situation to a somber setting back home:

> But when I was in China, people don't like, go exercise. And they even don't like to study. I can't feel their passion on school life. They see TV games every day after class. And no exercising. And they even play phones on class. They don't do much to prepare for their college life. That's how I feel about Chinese college. Or the college where I took.

Like Rui, Malin also had a relatively seamless arrival experience because her vision of the U.S. growing up and her first-hand experiences prepared her with accurate expectations. Being already familiar with the River Valley area worked to her advantage when she arrived, as did having her second family as a nearby support system. She had anticipated that she would be able to immerse herself in American culture with American people, which she was able to do by making friends with her neighbors in the dorms, but also understood that college was going to be completely different from the experiences she had had before. That awareness made her more open and welcoming to unexpected experiences when she arrived.

> I didn't know what to expect. I did not know what college was. I was like, all these other people are coming in from basically just being done with freshmen—or, with senior year from high school and then going straight on, while I've had a gap year. We also not had the same education system growing up, so I was like, "Will I be the oddball out, not knowing what everyone's talking about? Or will it be fine? Are the education systems close enough so that it's going to be okay?" And I feel like that's just what it started with. It was just, like, all of these questions that I was like, "I don't know what to expect." I'm older than most of the incoming students. I mean, there are some nontraditional students, but most of them I would be two or three years older than them. So just like- It was just everything. I was like, "Oh my gosh, it's going to be so weird."

In contrast to Malin and Rui's background experiences developing a vision of life in the U.S., Aisha had not envisioned it at all. What she knew of the country was primarily based on the experiences of people she knew back home who had been abroad, and it was her parents' decision that she should follow in their footsteps. Aisha's process to apply for and travel to the U.S. was therefore straightforward because most of the work was done for her by others.

> …in high school, my friend, his brother and sister were already here in Capitol City. And then when we finished, they just helped us with the website. We filled everything online with the ESL school. They sent us all the documents, went to the embassy.

As described earlier, Aisha first moved into apartments with other Congolese students when she arrived to the U.S. for the first time. The ESL institute hosted orientation for her and other new students, where she was able to tour the city, set up a banking account, learn the bus system and

take her first English test. Her transfer and arrival to URV was the first time she faced an immersive experience on her own. Aside from having a strong academic reputation, all Aisha knew of URV and River Valley was that it was not as diverse as Capitol City. Her friends' warnings about this difference added an element of worry to her expectations of what her life was going to be like.

> You know, when I was applying, I wasn't even thinking. Because when I grew up, it's not like, oh, this person is Black, this person is White. I see everybody just like me. If we can talk, we can, I think we are all humans. I don't think that- I don't know if that's in my head, like, "Oh, okay, I would just be here because I'm Black, I won't talk to these people." No, we are all people, human being should just all talk. There is no- When people told me, "Are you going there?!" I'm like, "Oh my god, why did I put myself into?"

Entertainment's Idea of America. The international students at URV had developed many preconceived notions about what it would be like to live in the United States based on what they had grown up watching on television and in the movies. American pop culture in particular presented them with an idealized version of student culture, friendship, and bustling big city life. Students arriving to the U.S. for the first time saw first-hand that the country did not match what was portrayed on screen, requiring them to adjust their expectations for what their own experiences would be. For example, Tingting and her parents watched American movies and television, which piqued Tingting's interest in traveling to the United States. She described what she had expected to see upon her arrival and her acceptance of how things actually were:

> I expect a lot of pop culture here. But it's actually not either. I don't know whether you can understand that. So like, back home, all the American culture we received is like Marvel movie, Ariana Grande, Lady Gaga, that kind of stuff. So pop American culture. …But actually it's not here. And I start to notice actually people here, different music here. Sounds really countryside. But actually it's really good. … And even jazz. I know jazz here. I familiar jazz here. I mean, I heard jazz before in movies or something, but it's not like you hear them as your music taste. But now it's like, oh, I think jazz is pretty good for me—that kind of stuff. That's one thing. People really like sports here. I know that people like sports, or like have sports for their entertainment kind of stuff. But I didn't expect how it would be that look like and feel. And after I get here, I realized oh,

it's actually like this.

Similarly, Adeline also explained how pop culture shaped her original perception of the U.S.—particularly shows that presented America like New York City or Los Angeles.

> I think it was because the movies, honestly, if I'm going to be completely honest. It's all the movies and all the tv shows we see. Like, America to me was—which now I'm going to sound stupid—but it was the Kardashians, and it was *Gossip Girl*, and it was, you know, like New York and L.A. and all that stuff. That was America to me. I never would have ever imagined the smaller cities and villages and towns around…ever. I didn't even know [this state] was a state. Because it's like—I don't know if you've seen on Facebook or anywhere, it pops up like a map—America. And then it's like, the middle is like, *What?* And then the whole the side of the coast is New York. And then it's Disney World, and then it's Texas—Howdy. And then it's, yeah. And that was kind of how I saw it, because I didn't know, like, I knew there was—I don't even know, no I'm going to mistake it. There's 50—how many states? … I knew Florida for Disney World and I knew New York because you see it in all the movies. And then I knew L.A. because that's where all the famous people live. And the rest was kind of like, eh.

Adeline's glamorous pre-conceptions of America were shattered when she moved in with her host family on a dairy farm for her high school exchange year. Aside from everything being bigger like she had imagined—from store sizes to food portions—her first experiences abroad made her realize that life would not be like it was on TV. By the time she returned to River Valley for her university studies, she had a more realistic picture of American society and student life. However, Adeline faced further disappointment when she arrived to find that she would not be able to replicate the feelings she had in the final two weeks of her exchange year, when it "finally felt good to be here."

> When I came back for college I thought it would be the same. But it was definitely a different story… Coming here as an exchange student, you have a family assigned to you. You have school, and you have a principal that will tell every kid at the school to be nice to the exchange students. And it's basically just easier for you to float in and be a part of it. Coming for college, I didn't really do much personally. I went through a lot of—I wouldn't call it depression—but I went through a lot of anxiety about coming back, which I think also led to me being very homesick my first two months here. Because it's hard when you go again, and you think it's going to be different. Or in my case, I thought it would be the same as when I left.

During the year Adeline was back in Norway, her host parents had divorced and were in the process of moving when she returned to the U.S. That, plus her roommate situation, soured her arrival experience.

> Coming back for college you were all by yourself. You can't really rely on your host family because they have their own stuff to deal with. Nothing turned out the way I wanted it to.

Sanjay based his expectations largely on what he knew from TV. As a kid, he watched a lot of programming on the *Cartoon Network*, and as he got older became a huge fan of *Friends.* He found out that living in the U.S. was not going to be *Friends*, where the characters had a consistent social circle and rarely spent time working. In reality, he found that it takes effort to establish those friendships and it depends on "how much ever you try." Sanjay described his feelings at the beginning, and why he had a harder time than he expected.

> Confused. Um, curious. Confused and curious. Not scared. Just anxious at least. Or, it was like waiting for things to go a little faster and it was not the pace I wanted. Mostly, it was just depressing. I don't know why, but it just was. Given all the circumstances and how I felt about everything I was and will be.

Yiyun, who had long looked forward to experiencing cultures outside of China, also learned from watching American superhero movies and TV shows such as *The Walking Dead*. Unlike the other students, however, when she arrived to find that the U.S. looked different from what she expected, she was pleasantly surprised.

> I watch those shows, so it's very fantastic for me to see all the houses on the street. They are so American. And also another thing is that I think this is really a small city because I was living in Beijing before that…It has a lot of people there. And here, I can't see many people on the street. Just two or three people on the street. And it's strange for me. Also I can't see those skyscrapers. Yeah, because I have this stereotype. I thought all cities will have skyscrapers… [Beijing] has a very big population. And I feel nice, because I don't like in the crowd. I don't like be surrounded by too many people. So I think it suits me, and I really like the campus because it's really small.

Preparation as a Helpful (But Not Perfect) Tool to Tame Expectations. Given that students expectations could be inaccurately set based on what they learned prior to leaving home, preparing for study abroad was a helpful method in determining what the arrival experience was going to be like. In particular, when students had knowledge of the specific place they were going they were more prepared for the culture and were ready for the challenges they would face.

Rui's desire to participate in the American education lifestyle motivated her to research more about what to expect and to seek advice from others. She spoke with her Chinese advisor who helped her set some realistic expectations about the challenges she might face, particularly regarding her English and academic skills:

> I told myself I probably will have a hard time in the U.S. because it's a foreign country and it's in English—I speak Chinese. And they probably have a lot of work. Because my Chinese advisor told us that you probably will have 13 books to read for one semester, and this program will have lots of papers and reading and you'll have to prepare for it . . . he gave us this information to let me to have the mentally prepared for these difficulties. . . . Expect of the tough life here.

Although she had a hard time finding reliable information about the institution itself, Rui persistently investigated the university's location through the internet and Chinese social media platforms, learning about key information such as how to make travel arrangement and prepare for the cold climate.

> I only get some limited information about URV. Just a few pictures and a little bit of introduction to. But I know River Valley is a place very near Chicago. So the first flight, I bought the ticket which transferred from Chicago. And I know this is a very cold place.

She also communicated with the advisor from URV's international office and learned about social opportunities she could engage with after she arrived. Rui's deliberate information gathering provided her with a realistic vision for what life in River Valley would be like. She maintained her high hopes for a positive experience, yet, anticipated that life would be difficult.

After arriving, she was able to face challenges with a positive attitude. Essentially, her pre-conceptions of life at URV were relatively accurate and she was not forced to significantly adjust her expectations about the rest of the study abroad experience.

The students who had been interested in other cultures and planned for a long time to study abroad also had more time to think about and prepare for life in the U.S. Tingting started thinking about study abroad after her first year of high school, and from that point was able to think "fully" and "deeply" about where she wanted to go. After she made her decision, she gathered information about the things she would need to know:

> I was nervous about it and trying to get information from online, from other people. But during that time, so English—I can't read a newspaper online, so I was only reading comments from people that had already been studying abroad and coming back. So I really wanted and oh, what situation will I be facing during the college? Or what should I be aware of?

Along with learning more about situations she might encounter, Tingting watched online videos to practice new speaking styles. She described how she wanted to make sure she was able to politely convey when she didn't like something. Like Rui, Tingting also recommends that future students take steps to prepare for their experience abroad:

> I would probably give advice that be prepared as possible as you can before you come here. Because it's definitely will be different and definitely will have hard time and also happy time at the same time. Or like, even like, happening again and again back and forth. Um, so, being prepared is very important.

Having had high expectations, Tingting was little bit disappointed to find upon her arrival that River Valley and URV were not diverse, and it was not easy to make friends. However, her positive attitude and self-reflections helped her to re-adjust her mindset quickly and make the most of her experience anyways.

Yiyun and her mother had both hoped that Yiyun would be able to experience new cultures, and Yiyun was very excited about the opportunity to study abroad. Even though she had

wanted to study in the U.S., Yiyun still had concerns and spoke with the URV professor who had introduced her to the 2+2 opportunity.

> I still have some concerns, like, because the guns. The gunshots in USA, it scares me. So I ask a lot of questions about safety in River Valley. And [the professor] said it's a peaceful town. There's not much violent cases or gunshots in this region. It's really safe. And she also give me the example that the police here don't have real guns with them because this is a safe area. So you're pretty safe. So my last concern was solved. And I decided to be here.

Yiyun also had concerns about traveling alone and researched what she would need to know to make it through customs for the first time. She was pleasantly surprised to find upon her arrival that the officers were in fact pleasant.

> …I feel terrified. And they said like, the officers in USA are very serious and like, not like good people. But when I first came here, it's my first time went through customs and there's a guy who stood in the counter and he was checking my passport and he asked questions like, "where you are heading for?" And I said, "I'm heading for [River Valley in the Midwest]." And he make some jokes…So I feel he's pretty good. He's nice. He's not that serious. Not like Chinese officers. They are very serious.

Sanjay's primary preparation strategies involved seeking other people's opinions. He was first concerned whether or not he would be able to meet the immigration requirements so that he could leave the country. His cousin helped him to prepare for his visa interview by having a career plan ready when asked what his plans were for after graduation. He also worked with an educational consultant to help him prepare for everything. After he received acceptances into U.S. institutions and it was confirmed that he would be going to the United States, Sanjay reached out to other Indian students online who were already overseas to ask them what life was like for them: "So I found people online. 'So like, how is your school?' Like, all the opinions I had talked to people from Washington State University, or something like that. They're like, 'School's good, but it's more like a party school.'" This information helped Sanjay put the college lifestyle into context. Finally, when his departure date was drawing nearer, he became

nervous about the school shootings he had seen in the news and contacted a URV staff member to get their perspective on safety in River Valley.

Arriving in the Company of Others

As students shared details about arriving to URV, there was almost always a story about meeting another student, connecting with a group of friends, or the challenges associated with meeting other people. In general, making a social connection was a high priority, with some arriving to the U.S. for the first time feeling an urgent need to connect with someone—anyone—as soon as possible. These early relationships did not necessarily transform into long-term friendships. Rather, at the time of students' arrival, they provided them with assurance that they would not have to confront living in a new country alone. Those students who had a harder time meeting people during their arrival experienced elevated feelings of isolation and homesickness.

International students at URV are allowed to move to campus a week earlier than domestic students, which means that most of their initial interactions are between other international students through numerous opportunities and activities in their dorms or facilitated by the international office. The environment changes when the American students move to campus the following week. Although they are surrounded by both international and domestic peers, meeting friends is often a major hurdle, especially for individuals who are the only student from their home country. As students described their experiences of meeting other people, it became apparent that some types of relationships were more challenging to form than others, and that different types of friendships (i.e., with Americans or other international students) carry distinct advantages that were or could have been useful during students' arrivals.

Meeting the Neighbors. From day one, students' living situations influenced who they were surrounded by and interacted with. Their roommates and neighbors were by default, some

of the first encounters they were required to navigate. With some exceptions—like Lim, who transferred from another institution and lived off campus—international students are given two living options. They can either live in Raven Hall, a modern dorm where three people share a room, and two rooms share one bathroom; or Ruger Hall—an apartment-style dorm housing four students per unit each with their own bedroom, and a shared living room, kitchen, and bathroom. Students' satisfaction with their arrangement depended on multiple factors, including the living styles they were used to at their old institutions (i.e., residential high schools or previous universities), and how they got along with the people around them.

Malin chose to live with American roommates so that she could have an immersive experience, which is what she believed most international students came for.

> You don't get into the American culture living with a bunch of international students . . . If I were in a dorm with only international students, I wouldn't want to live there. Because that's not why we're here . . . I think most students come here to hang out with [American] students.

Both she and Yiyun discussed being excited about their living situations. Malin stated that "it was like a weird thing…living in the dorms. Because that's something we don't have back home at all. So that was a big thing. And the dorms in Raven are gorgeous." She was also thrilled with the large size of the rooms and the fact that she got along with her roommates. Yiyun, too, was satisfied with the physical space of her dorm, particularly after having previously lived with five other people in a small room that felt like a "bird cage."

> I was living in Raven Hall. And I only had one roommate. And it's fantastic. Because I don't like to share room with others. I'm a selfish person in that way. And I feel embarrassed if someone can see me changing my clothes, something like that.

Satisfaction with the physical space added to the excitement of their overall arrival experience.

Reflecting back to his first year at URV, Sanjay had enjoyed the social aspects of living in the dorms because "it was very nice having people just come in whenever and just talk."

However, he got off to a bad start with his neighbors when he first moved in. First, on a friend's recommendation, he assumed that making friends would be easy because Americans would find him interesting and "exotic." Second, he believed from watching movies that everyone around him would have an "f*** you and all that stuff" attitude and thought he would be cool if he acted the same way. Instead, his attitude toward his neighbors backfired and caused the other people on his floor to hate him.

Adeline, however, was unhappy with her living situation after her roommate decided to drop out. At that point, she had just arrived to campus and felt isolated from other students. She said, "It was definitely hard being there alone. And I wish I had been in a different situation with that, because [international students] were separated into different buildings too." At the same time, when her new roommates did join her in her dorm, she felt confined living with people that were not her family, adding an additional annoyance to what was already becoming a negative experience.

> That was the process of living with two completely strangers, which was definitely hard. I didn't even meet them before two days after school started because none of them arrived. Because I was going through the whole international student orientation. So yeah. That was basically my first two weeks. And just feeling alone at school, I guess. Because you don't really know the other students. And then the real students don't come until a couple of days after, which was definitely harder. Because you sit there and, "okay, what do I do now? There's one orientation tomorrow at 7:00 am, and then you leave and do anything. Then we get a little folder of information, but you still just sit there and think about what's going to happen next.

Adeline further reflected on what she wished her experiences meeting people would have been like during her arrival and articulated what might have made her experience better.

> I don't even know what I was hoping for when I came…What would happen. But I definitely was hoping that there would be more people around and not just me sitting in my room. Even if someone just volunteered to help me unpack, I would take it right away. Just to not sit by myself. Because international students—I'm not talking for everything—but for the people I know that I've talked to, it's hard for us to go interact with people we don't know because we're from another culture and we don't know how

to interact with people from, say, American culture.

Getting Acquainted with Americans. Getting acquainted with, let alone meeting, American friends, whether in the dorms or elsewhere on campus, was a struggle for more than just Adeline, which is an unfortunate hurdle considering how helpful having a American acquaintances can be. Arriving a week earlier than most domestic students meant that there were fewer opportunities to meet Americans in the first place. Additionally, Americans who were returning students tended to be comfortable with their already established friendships and were rarely looking to meet new students.

Despite all of her efforts trying to meet people at the beginning, Tingting felt depressed when she was unable to meet American friends. She described how looking back, it was important to understand herself before she could be embraced by others.

> I want to make friendship with American students too. And I've tried really hard. And now I think it's working out. I would say it really depends on how people embraced—how generous you are. And it also depends on how you identify yourself. I feel like you have to identify yourself first. Because I know that my belongings is not here, but I always want to find- I want to have American friends.

Hindsight has also allowed Tinging to see that meeting American friends was difficult at first because she was less trusting of opening up to other people. She explained that after getting "involved with the ideas here, it's nice to people and more open conversation with people. I start to realize, oh, it's actually a good way to make friends." Tingting's initial reluctance to opening up to others also manifested in her non-verbal behavior, and she was not familiar with what she called the "open-hearted" style of socializing.

> I was actually not familiar with this type of open-hearted kind of social every time, so I always like having like, icy face. Always make sure that you're trustable before opening my heart to you. It's like that. It takes a long time to get over-hearted with people. And it's also like when I did this for a few times, it's hard for me to make friends.

Once Tingting became more familiar with the American communication style, she felt less judgement from other students, and even found them to be nice and communicable.

> I didn't experience that in China. So this is the first time I experiencing people and having like, some more open heart with people, like that. Yeah, the first time I really experienced that is here. And then, I feel like it's really good. It's really nice."

Yiyun, who had been looking forward to having a cultural study abroad experience and was excited about seeing more diversity than she was used to in China, also had difficulties connecting with American students during her arrival. Proximity played a part in this because international students were one of the first groups on campus and spent a lot of time together. Naturally, Yiyun became friends with other Chinese students during this time, eating meals together in the dining hall and going shopping for essential supplies. When more American students began arriving, Yiyun was disappointed to discover that she felt a "barrier between local students and international students." For example, it seemed that Americans did not want international students to sit by them in the cafeteria. Likewise, Yiyun felt more comfortable sitting with her Chinese student friends. At first, she worried that this feeling made her racist, until she spoke with one of her professors who provided some helpful insight.

> I think one of my professors said that if you want to make connection with locals, you have to force yourself to do that. Because people are more intended to sit with their own people—like the same color or the same cultural background. It makes you feel better because it's your comfort zone. And if you want to make connection, you have to force yourself to do it because it's uncomfortable. And he says it's a common thing. It's not something to be ashamed of. Because I was very ashamed—racist.

Aisha typically meets people at work or church, but explained that "when you have a different background than someone, [meeting people is] hard. Unless the person is willing to understand and to communicate with you." When she first arrived to URV she did not feel she could openly talk about religion because she feared how others would see her, which meant she

had to use other strategies to meet people. She tried to meet people by joining campus activities and fitness classes.

> When I came here, I was just—since I wanted to meet people—I got involved in a thousand things. I would go to everything so that I could meet people. But I didn't even meet people. So now I'm like, kind of reserved.

When she attends now, she looks for new attendees and reaches out to them to help them feel comfortable.

> …sometimes I'm a person who likes to talk. I would just be like, "Hey, how are you? Is this your first time coming to Zumba? Oh, okay, I've been doing this since last semester." "Oh, wow, I've seen—what's your name?" Yeah, I just interrupt you at Zumba. Because I like fitness classes because there's a lot of people and you can meet people, compared to going to workout alone.

Being the only incoming student from India, Sanjay had no other option but to become friends with either American students or other international students. He began social networking through his job as a student ambassador in the university's housing office, which he had applied to before leaving home and began immediately upon his arrival. There, he met his work friends, including many resident assistants who had also moved to campus early to begin working. The American friendships he established provided opportunities for cultural exchange and became a resource for Sanjay to learn societal rules.

> They understood what I come from. So they taught me what I should be doing and what I should not be. That was pretty much my gateway to know them. Because I was able to talk, "Oh, this is how I was raised. And that's why I thought this was perfectly okay."

Making Community Connections. Although international students at URV found meeting American students to be challenging, they had other opportunities to connect with Americans outside of the university. Students described multiple ways that community connections were a source of social support and a gateway to learning about the local culture, including through church and volunteer opportunities.

While most of these opportunities emerged after the arrival period had ended and students had progressed farther into their academic year, the international office did offer a program that matched international students with a local host family. Rui had discovered this program while she was preparing for study abroad and in communication with international office staff. She was placed with a host family of retired professors who helped introduce her to the local culture. She described her host family as "…like, elderly people, and super, super nice. And they treat me just like their family. Yeah. They are my—another home in the United States. I super appreciate them." She also described some of the specific activities that she and another international student experienced with the host family.

> At the beginning, they just took me and another student—because they have two—we went to like, the apple farm, and to concerts, to dinner. And we also brought our Chinese food to them. And we shared lots of cultures, and we communicate a lot. But not at the beginning, because I couldn't. But later, we have more communications about culture differences, and policies, and social events, this kind of thing.

Malin met her host family long before she arrived at URV and explained why having a host family is important. She found that having community connections was a relief and that it is "really good to know that there's community connection also, because you're not just moving to campus. You're going to be part of a community—especially if you're here four years." An added benefit of having a host family was interacting with other community members, including people who were interested in learning more about Norwegian culture. Often, when people learn she is from Norway, they jump at the opportunity to discuss Norwegian culture and their own Norwegian heritage. Malin said, "Like, here in [this state], people are always like, "Oh, my grandma is half Norwegian, which means I'm like, 5%, right?" So there's always people who are like, "Oh, you're from Norway? I'm from Norway." Others have reached out to her for advice about Norwegian culture, including a woman who wanted to know how to dress for a wedding

she'll be attending in Norway. Reflecting on how meaningful her interactions have been for her, Malin's advice to other international students includes finding opportunities to become involved with the community.

> I would definitely go on the university's home page and search, because you can search for like, community events, or anything like that. Or even go to like, River Valley probably has a home page somewhere that you can go on to see what organizations are around and reach out to them. Like, if you are, I don't know, if there's a specific religion that you are a part of, and you know that there's probably a student organization on campus with that religious group. There's probably a church somewhere in this town that you can reach out to their, what's it called, their minister people, whatever.

Arriving with Other International Students. Despite wanting to develop social networks with Americans, friendships with other international students—from the same or other countries—were the likeliest to form during the arrival period. The largest sending country at URV is China, which means that the arriving Chinese students have more opportunities to become friends with their co-national peers. Having a shared language and cultural understanding made building relationships with one another easier than with individuals from other countries. From the outside, it seemed to some students that the clustering of Chinese students was isolating. Adeline commented that during orientation related activities, she did not feel welcomed or included among the group. However, those who were in the group were able to establish a sense of belonging with one another early on.

Malin and Adeline were the only two Norwegian students at URV. Given that both of them arrived even earlier than other international students so they could spend extra with their local host families, they met and bonded prior to moving to campus. Malin explained that after they met, they "just started talking a little back and forth. Kind of comparing, getting to know each other. So we knew each other a little bit before we came here." Malin described that it was

nice living near Adeline in the dorms, but that they made the conscious decision not to room together so that they could "get to know other people too."

Over time, Adeline's attitude regarding the friendships she valued changed, saying that "…in the beginning I was like, 'Oh my god, I'm going back to America to hang out with Americans,' and now I'm more like, 'Oh, where is the international students? I want to hang out with them.'" When asked if she had expected to have mostly American friends, Adeline said:

> Yes. But I have more international student friends than I have- My boyfriend's from the Netherlands and he's studying here. He's a master's student though, so he never lived in the dorms. But yeah. I expected a little more American friends than exchange students and international students. I like it. I love it.

One of the major advantages of having a friend from the same home country is the ability to fall back on what is comfortable. For instance, Malin and Adeline were able to communicate in Norwegian when they did not want other people to understand what they were saying.

> If Adeline and I are talking about something we don't want everyone else to understand, we can sit in a room full of people and nobody's going to be able to know what we're talking about, or who we're talking about. We also learned that instead of saying names of, our roommates for example, annoyed with something they had done, we could talk about it in front of them.

Malin attributed her and Adeline's friendship to the fact that going through the same experience brings people together.

> I think most students come here to hang out with American students. Obviously, they will find their people that are international too, because they're going through the same thing so they can talk about stuff and that's why I think Adeline and I got so close, because we were going through the same thing. We were from the same place and all that.

Even more, having friends from the same home country eases feelings of homesickness and loneliness. Tingting feels most connected to the other Chinese students because of their shared sense of belonging to China.

> I feel like my belonging is always, always China. I mean, I feel more comfortable talking with international students compared with domestic students. And, even most comfortable talking with Chinese students, because we have same language, same ideas,

same mindset, same culture.

Rui shared a similar sentiment, and also noted that being able to speak Chinese with her friends helped her feel more at ease. When two of Rui's Chinese student friends became homesick, they turned to her because she was able to remind them of home.

> When they got homesick, they come to me, and I said, "Oh, why you come to me? I'm not the mother." "You feels like mother because you can cook the Chinese food and you make me feel like safe and home." Like, oh, okay.

During her arrival, Rui also became friends her Taiwanese and German roommates, and other international students, and described that international students feel close to one another.

> The first two people who arrived at our dorm. So we talk a lot before our American roommate come. And we went to the orientation together, and after the orientation we had meals together and we talked a lot. At dorms. So that's the very first friendship with the international student.

The Chinese students at URV have an additional advantage of being able to join a Chinese Students and Scholars Association, which is an organization run by students and who teach one another about life at URV through fun activities. They also provide Chinese students with information about other aspects of daily life, such as getting a driver's license and advice about careers. Although students also participate in a university sponsored orientation, the CSSA organization facilitates its own orientation for new Chinese students. According to Rui:

> They have the new Chinese student orientation. Take us to know how to take bus. And where we can buy some Chinese food, and where are some Chinese restaurant. And know other Chinese friends who have already been here a while—a couple years. And basically what I remember from the very beginning when I just got here.

Maneuvering Through Communication and Cultural Norms

As international students confronted with and adjusted their expectations of what their study abroad experience at URV would become, they were also forced to balance a constant stream of new customs and communication challenges. The arrival period is an especially critical time because it marks the point when students are essentially submerged into a new world, with

no choice but to figure out its norms. The process of learning these customs does not end when the arrival period is over, but this initial week is especially challenging considering the constant breadth of new information they receive in a short period of time.

Putting Communication Skills to the Test. Regardless of their training, international students who speak English as their second language face challenges associated with meeting and conversing with other people, as well as interpreting communication norms and signals. Yue's memories of her travel experiences were about the communication challenges she met when she first landed in the U.S. She wanted to connect with her parents, who she knew were anxious about her safety while she was traveling alone, but she discovered she was not able to use her phone card or access the internet. She became increasing nervous while she tried to find a solution because she knew her parents would become even more worried about her if they did not hear from her.

> …my phone have problems and I don't know how to do. And if I find help to the staff on the airport, I'm worried I can't understand them. So if I have an emergency thing, the first thing, I will call my parents.

This was the first time Yue had to use English to communicate with other people. She first had to call the phone company and ask a representative for assistance. When it was too difficult to understand the person on the phone, she found a store clerk who could help her.

> I got a text and they said I don't have enough money in my card, so I need to go- Yeah, it has a number and it said if I call this number I can retract for this card. So I called the number and I couldn't understand. So I gave my phone—I gave my phone- You know there are many stores in the airport, so I found a bookstore and gave my phone to the owner. She helped me to re-charge the money to my card.

On top of everything else, bad weather caused multiple flight delays, which meant she would be arriving to River Valley later than expected. Yue also had to continue pushing herself to speak English and contact the university to provide staff with her travel updates.

The airport is also where Yiyun discovered for the first time what it felt like to have to think about which language she should speak at a given time. When she encountered other Chinese students at the airport she was initially unsure whether or not they were really from China. They spoke in English together first, and then they switched to Chinese. She said, “It’s very interesting because you don’t know who you are talking to.”

Similar to what Yue had experienced during her time in the airport, Yiyun also found herself needing to ask for help in English and became nervous about her using her language skills to interact with other people. This happened for the first time when she needed to borrow some supplies in the bathroom and asked a woman for help. Navigating the airport system was another source of worry, fearing that she would miss important information or announcements because she would not understand.

> I was very nervous because it’s my first time I came to America. And I’m worried about my listening skills. If I can’t catch my flight I was stuck there. So I was very nervous. So every time there’s an announcement, I will listen to it very carefully just in case it’s my flight. And I really don’t understand how to board when I first came here.

Yiyun’s communication concerns were eased when she was welcomed by staff from the university. Overall, they provided more help than she had expected.

> When I first time landed in River Valley and I saw those first people who are welcome us, like, “Welcome to River Valley. We are going to take you to the campus.” And I feel it’s very lovely because when I was in China, I imagined the situation when I came here. I imagined that nobody will take us to the campus and I will have to take like, I have to book a cab to take me here. And it’s very nice to have people to take me to the campus.

Tingting described how she had difficulty knowing what to say when she encountered Americans. She had to first assess the situation and determine whether or not something is appropriate to say.

> If we meet with each other, I don’t know what to say. Have that situation. So I try having topics with them. And I think I’m still working on this now, even though I’m living here for a couple years. But I’m still working on having like, an idea about what moment

> should I say this. Or at this situation right here, should I not say something. Like that. I'm still learning it.

Similarly, Tingting later discussed how hard it is to say something polite to avoid hurting another person's feelings, even when it feels dishonest. She used her opinion of Chicago style pizza as an example: "I feel there is too much cheese in it, and I feel really oily. And people ask me, 'how is it?' I feel like it's very unkind to say I don't like it." Because her friend was hopeful that she would like it, Tingting tried hard to explain her feelings without making her friend feel bad. She told her that although she had not expected so much cheese, the pizza was good. As challenging as this was, Tingting had tried preparing for these kinds of scenarios. She had found a YouTube channel about studying English, and the host talked about "15 ways of saying something you actually don't like it, but in a polite way." This was helpful, but "really tricky," for Tingting because she had never before had to think about polite ways to express her feelings.

Part of the challenge of navigating these situations is getting past the feeling of disingenuousness of having to be polite. Quite a few of the students likened this cultural expectation to feeling that Americans are "fake." Yet, participating in this "fake" behavior felt necessary in order to be accepted by others. Tingting discussed coming to the realization that this was the norm. Rather than being intentionally dishonest, Americans are following a cultural norm.

> Also, it's one thing that I was once mad, and not accepted, when I was in freshmen year. Because I think people are so fake here. It's like, "Okay, you're not like it, but you didn't say you don't like it." It's like, it's like it's something else. And I perceive it as something else. Instead of you don't like it. It's like, I feel like not having a very honest conversation with the person, and that makes me feel bad. Yeah. So now, I watched that video and realized, oh, it's actually a culture thing.

Another example from YouTube helped Tingting understand how to find words to accurately express her feelings politely; when a friend asks how you liked a theater performance

they acted in, you could say, “It is (pause) interesting.” Or, “It is (pause) eye-opening.” She explained that “the pause is different. Because once you pause, people know that ‘oh, actually, you’re not a fan.’” Although this advice was helpful, Tingting still struggles to convey what her pauses mean when she is trying to find the right words to use, which impacts how people interpret her reactions.

> Because a lot of people ask me, “Oh, how do you feel? Do you like it?” Because they’re asking for my feedback. And like I said, I want to experience new things. So my dilemma is I paused. But not because I didn’t like it, it’s because I was finding words to correctly expressing my feeling. But people take it as “she doesn’t like it.” You know? So it’s very hard.

Even more, this confusion was especially difficult at the beginning of her time at the university, when she was having a hard time getting people to understand her. She wanted people to know that even though she may not have liked something, she did not want to hurt anyone’s feelings because she rejected something of theirs.

Aisha has noticed a similar dilemma. As someone who prefers to be forthright with others, she commented about the pressure to be complementary and its impact on building relationships.

> But here, even if you are friends, like, I think people in the U.S., even if you wore really bad—they won’t really say- They would just say you look nice. Even if they would just tell you, “Oh, you look nice.” Me? If I know you don’t look nice, I won’t say- I don’t want to lie to you. Yeah.

Lim and Adeline both brought up the point that Americans say “how are you?” but don’t really mean it. Lim finds that most people ask the question and then walk away without waiting for a response,

> The people. First time I didn’t know. But I think you guys used to saying “how are you” when you just bump into each other. But you never, like, wait the person to respond. Then you just walk away. And I feel very awkward.”

Malin felt it was "definitely weird" when she first encountered it. She explained that back in Norway, anyone would answer this question by describing their whole day. Aside from this, Americans have other similar tendencies that international students must learn and adapt to. Adeline said:

> …saying like, "Okay, I'll call you later." And then you sit there and like, *Oh. Where's the call?* So it's definitely bad. And then the way people behave. I don't want to say all Americans do, but at least my age, students, I feel like, they have their own groups and they are very distant when it comes to letting new people in.

Along with expressing honest opinions politely to others, interpreting the meaning of others' nonverbal behavior was also challenging initially. In particular, walking past strangers who smile in greeting felt nice, but was also hard to reciprocate when they did not share their same levels of trust. Tingting said:

> During freshmen year, all I noticed is that random strangers smile to you. I just feel, "Okay, that's really nice" I know. At the same time I don't want to do the same thing to you. That is just. My problem. Like, I don't want to do the same thing to you, but I feel that is really nice. Yeah. So I think I was just having a time or like, a hard time gets familiar and get involved to the culture and the life here.

Arriving Amid New Cultural Norms. URV puts on its best show during the international student arrival period. Not only is the late summer weather ideal for being outside and exploring the River Valley area, the campus is bustling with student-centered activities. For students who want to experience the American college culture, the first couple of weeks show it off best. Malin attended some of the college's athletic events, experienced the marching band, and enjoyed being part of the crowd.

> I remember my first game too. We were so excited when the team runs out from their locker rooms, and through the band is playing. The band is something awesome that we would never- That's not a thing back home. I mean, there's bands, but not like for games and stuff… I just like, remember everything. And then our first game too, they played "Take on Me" by Aha, which is a Norwegian group. So I was like, '*Ugh. Representing.'* So I remember that was a huge thing. And we were just sitting there not understanding anything that was going on. But it was it was so fun to see the community coming

> together. Like, standing for the National Anthem even though you know nothing and just like, stand there because you don't want to be the oddball out sitting down and people are like, "What are you doing?" And just like, all those fun things that like, seeing the community come together. Just, the excitement.

Rui, too, felt the excitement of attending social and cultural events on campus during her arrival, especially an ice cream social that was organized by the international office.

> …the marching band played music near the ice cream social area. That was super surprise me and excited me. Because I could feel the American energy. Oh, so energetic… That's how the college look like. That's what I'm looking for. And I think [the international office] hold that ice cream social is because we give us an activity to know about the band.

Among the enjoyment of participating in quintessential American college culture, international students started navigating the cultural behavior norms so that they could integrate into campus life. For those international students living in dorms, part of integrating into university culture included learning how to live alongside American students through understanding their routines and habits. During the first semester, new students are generally encouraged to keep their doors open for some time during the day as a way to meet their neighbors. This practice requires a certain level of trust that international students have not necessarily developed yet when they first arrive to the U.S. Tingting elaborated:

> We should keep our doors open for 10 minutes at least every day. It's like you have to do this as a rule. I didn't like it during that time, because I feel like I didn't have any personal space. And too much social creeped me out. Like, "Uh, I really don't trust you. And I don't know who you are. And I don't know if I should trust you or not and you're coming to my room!"

Opening up to new friends and peers was something that seemed casual and easy for American students. Tingting recognized that students who acted like this were trying to be nice with her, but she felt that she hadn't gotten "to that spot yet." She further described, "It's kind of too much to get like, 'Oh hey, I want to tell you this.' It's like, 'Oh, we just met yesterday.' Tingting wanted to develop more of a trust-based relationship before being so open with others.

After coming to a better understanding of how Americans more quickly open up to one another, Tingting has become more comfortable with opening up herself.

> I know that they just want to be really nice and get friends with you because they like you. And I was just, yeah, sure. We can go friends. And if I like you too we can definitely hang out and do fun stuff. I am like, shortening my trusting time with a few groups of people I realized, oh, they do this because they trust you. They are nice. They want to get like, conversation with you. That sort of thing.

Sanjay openly talked about many of the mistakes he made after arriving to the U.S., some of which were a result of his overconfidence that being an international student would automatically be enough for others to like him. Such mistakes were compounded by the fact that, like some of the other students suggested, he perceived Americans to be disingenuous, stating that "no one is straightforward." He had a hard time interpreting what he refers to as communication "sub-text." In a sense, Americans follow a set of unwritten rules that international students must discover for themselves. There are certain rules for texting, for example, such as not "double texting" a person when they have not responded to your first message. Sanjay explains that double texting can make you "sound too desperate." He has also discovered the importance of learning sub-text when he has tried dating—finding clues about someone's interest (or disinterest) in him, often with help from his American roommate.

> How do you want to read the sub-text? I don't know. Because I don't know what people text. I'm pretty sure they probably think different. I think it's hard to explain, but when I talk to many people, I would be just nice and asking questions. But they'd be like, "No, don't do that, that's too many questions." You feel like you're interviewing. I'd be like, "I'm just asking. I don't know."

Compared to the beginning, Sanjay feels like he can now predict what things are like, and he has become more aware that his thinking style is unique. What he would typically think of as being fine may not be fine for anyone else. He said, "…now I understand what the social rules

are. Starting to understand. So I'm feeling a little confident with talking to people. But there are still some obviously stuff around, I guess."

Privacy norms were another issue for Sanjay. Unlike students like Tingting, who felt Americans were too open with one another, Sanjay discovered that Americans preferred to keep a "space bubble" around themselves, particularly after assuming he could walk into a neighbor's dorm room without knocking, or when he made someone uncomfortable by patting them on the shoulder in greeting. When asked what advice he would give to new international students, Sanjay said:

> I would just teach them what the things all I did wrong, and what should you have done. That's basically, like, I don't know if you guys do that or not in your culture—but knock on their door, ask for things. Don't look into peoples' phone—which I did. I was a very eaves-dropping kind of guy, which was funny. Definitely do stuff that other people want to do.

Dorm life intrigued Rui as well. She learned a great deal about cultural norms from living in close proximity to her American roommates and neighbors, including privacy preferences and communication norms.

> …we have six people in a dorm. And we share every space because it's a very little dorm. And we share every space. We share lots of things. But here, when I live in Ruger, we have our little room. And people here—the American people—it's very, like, they need their private space is very important. So sometimes I didn't know the rules of the dorm things.

While she made some mistakes with her roommates, Rui also learned important lessons from them that made it easier for her to adjust to American culture.

> But even I seldom talk with friends or my roommate, but I still feel I am adjusting the new life here, and I tried my best to learn how to communicate with others. Like, when my roommate chat with me, or chat with—my Germany roommate chat with me or chat with other American roommate, I will like, recognize how they communicate with each other, and how they like, explore more topics to talk. How they expand their conversation. I think it helped me a lot on my communication skills.

Reflecting on the Role of the International Student Arrival Experience

The international student arrival experience at the University of River Valley is essentially the period of time when students gain a realistic sense of what their overall study abroad journey is going to be like. It involves physically arriving in a new home, processing what that home is in relation to what it was expected to be, arriving with or seeking interactions with others, and then learning about and maneuvering through communication and cultural norms. While URV's international office takes care of many of the logistical preparations and offers space for students to seek help when they need it, the students themselves control how often they engage with the institution. As time passes and students become more entrenched in their academics, the university, and local culture, they become more aware of the strategies they could have taken and services they could have used that might have made their arrival to URV more seamless and effective. Reflecting upon their arrival experiences in their later years through this research allowed students to think about their arrivals in relation to what they have experienced since. Their perspectives provide useful knowledge that can both be shared with future students and be applied to future policies, practices, and research. The following vignettes illustrate participants' takeaways of their arrival experiences and offer a window into the rest of their educational journeys, bringing their stories full circle.

Malin, Norway

Malin had fallen in love with the River Valley area during her exchange program and had expected that she would enjoy her college life as well. Because she was already familiar with the city she did not feel the need to attend the informational orientation activities. Instead, she focused on expanding her social network, enjoying dorm life, and soaking in the cultural activities that were happening around campus. Malin recognized that in comparison to students from Asian countries, looking and sounding more like an American was an advantage that

helped to make her transition easier. Being open-minded to differences and ready to take on new challenges also facilitated Malin's smooth arrival experience. Working as a tour guide and mentor in the admissions office, Malin tells incoming international students to be prepared to live in a different culture and without the same support system. She also lets them know that if she were to do her arrival again, she would get more involved with student organizations so that she could meet more people with similar interests.

Sanjay, India

Now that he has developed a deeper understanding of American culture, Sanjay has a more reflective perspective on his arrival experience. Despite some of the initial negative experiences he had with the people living around him, he felt that he "gelled in very nicely" during his first year, and that his Indian-American friends were a bridge between himself and White people. In general, Sanjay tries to move forward rather than looking back and believes that who he was at the beginning is not who he is anymore. The more he explored and learned, the more his confidence grew. In his opinion, the URV international office provided enough opportunities for international students to explore themselves and learn what they want, and that the challenges that arise for students are necessary life experiences.

Aisha, Congo

Compared to her initial U.S. arrival when she was surrounded by other Congolese people, Aisha's transfer to URV was much more isolating. Although studying abroad has made her a more independent and responsible person, her difficulties in meeting new people during both her arrival to URV and the rest of her studies has ultimately made her more reserved. She tried attending activities and getting involved on campus but wishes she had taken advantage of more opportunities with the community, such as joining a host family or a buddy program. Reflecting

on what might have made her arrival experience better, Aisha recommended that rather than focusing on offering American style activities, the institution could facilitate activities they are used to doing to help them feel more at home.

Rui, China

After years of pushing hard to meet the requirements needed for study abroad, Rui had one of the happiest arrival experiences. She was finally able to see first-hand the culture she had wished to be part of while she was growing up and embraced the American style activities that were offered at the start of the new semester. Throughout the rest of her years at URV, other students recognized that she had adapted well to the American culture and came to her when they were feeling homesick. She tells them about the challenges she has met along the way and advises them to find balance between their studies and social life. Rui believes that "it's very important because you can't just have school life here without any social life. That kind of life just like, boring."

Yiyun, China

Yiyun believes that if she had not come to the U.S. she would have continued feeling sorry for herself for being stuck at her Chinese institution. She is proud of having made the difficult journey to the U.S. alone and from the experience, learned that she is more capable and can handle more than she realized. Looking back, the initial confidence boost she experienced from accomplishing a successful arrival was a buffer that lasted for the first month of her semester. She now recognizes that she is motivated by adventures and by trying new things. Throughout her time at URV, Yiyun has learned to accept kindness from others and to be confident in fighting for her own rights and defending her own opinions. Her advice to new

students is to not be afraid of making mistakes because “no mistake, no achievement, no improvement.”

Yue, China

Yue has become more independent since first coming to URV and feels more confident in her ability to solve problems without her parents’ help. Now in the middle of a busy final year, she often thinks back to the beginning and wishes she could spend time relaxing with her friends. Yue had difficulty expressing details about her experiences in English but shared some of the unexpected encounters over the course of her time in River Valley, including few public transportation options, limited access to Chinese food, and a surprising number of international students with high English proficiency.

Adeline, Norway

The negative aspects of Adeline’s arrival experiences overshadowed any enjoyment she felt over returning to River Valley. Living in the dorms without the social life she expected, she felt locked up and restricted. Even more, she felt she had lost much of the independence she was used to having in the big city given the lack of public transportation and the higher drinking age in the U.S. Despite being unhappy with the American education experience overall, Adeline has stubbornly persisted and wants to prove to her family that she can follow through to graduation. Her advice for new international students includes socializing as soon as possible, reaching out for help when needed, and to travel and experience other things. She attributes finding people who were willing to listen to her story and perspective as helping her feel more comfortable.

Lim, Malaysia

In comparison to the other students, Lim’s arrival experience—and educational experiences in general—was uneventful and smooth. Looking back on what makes her unique,

she believes that she is “more open minded” and does not “really have a lot of culture shock.” In addition, she said, “I don’t have language barriers. I think I kind of like, get comfortable quicker than other international students.” Lim’s home city in Malaysia was somewhat “Americanized” in that she grew up with different people who had different religions. Even though they were from all different places, they spoke either Malay or English with one another and learned to respect each other’s culture. Growing up around this diversity, Lim believes, is why she did not experience any shock when she arrived to the U.S.

Tingting, China

From her first arrival experience, Tinging realized that she likes adventure and that she was in fact very excited to be experiencing one. She also sees now that she was brave and open-minded at that time and has slowly come to embrace new adventures and new experiences. She also learned that she can be very confident and always seeks to improve herself and her situation. Tingting believes that URV mistakenly expects international students to feel as comfortable as domestic students. Yet, it has been her personal desire during study abroad to become comfortable being a Chinese student in America. Regarding what future international students should know about studying at URV, Tingting says they should remain open-minded and be prepared to experience both hard and happy times at once.

Chapter V: Discussion and Implications

The decision to move to another country to pursue a four-year degree is life-altering and often comes after years of thought and planning. The arrival experience of each international student is influenced by their upbringing, home culture, and understanding of the world. Although every individual experiences their arrival uniquely from one another, there are common experiences that international students attending the same institution will face. The purpose of this dissertation was to learn more about how international students experience arriving to a four-year university in the United States. Through a hermeneutic phenomenological investigation of 26 interviews across nine participants at a university in the Midwest, three essential elements of the international student arrival experience emerged. These elements describe common experiences across all participants. First, through experiences and encounters both along their travels and on campus, students realize the accuracy of the expectations developed from factors related to their upbringing and preparation and adjust their expectations according to reality. Second, students arrive in the company of others, which requires navigating interactions with both Americans and other international students. Finally, students must learn and adapt to communication and cultural norms—which are often one in the same—so that they can progress into their study abroad experience. The three-interview series approach allowed the participants time to provide context and depth, which in turn allowed them space to reflect on the role their arrival played in their overall educational journey. This chapter provides a discussion of the essential elements of the international student arrival experience, as well as implications for policy and practice, and directions for future research.

Discussion of the Findings

The following sections discuss the essential elements of the international student arrival experience from a wider lens, situating the experiences of my participants against previous literature surrounding international student transitions and adjustment and explaining what about their experiences offer new insight to the current body of research. It is also of great import to acknowledge the context of this dissertation in light of the current conditions of higher education as a result of COVID-19. The participants' arrival experiences occurred years prior to COVID-19, which means that the essential elements of their arrival experiences—and the basis for this hermeneutic phenomenological dissertation—reflect this particular group of students enrolled in a "normal" academic year. The insights gained from their experiences are useful for stakeholders planning future international student onboarding services. However, the ongoing challenges related to COVID-19 demonstrate that extensive adjustments will be required to meet whatever the needs are of that time. For example, there are currently severe immigration restrictions that are impacting international students' abilities to attend institutions in the United States for the upcoming year, and institutions are grappling with lower enrollments and serving students virtually. With the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on international higher education being unknown, this dissertation's findings pose implications for policy and practice for international student arrival experiences that occur in both "normal" and post-COVID-19 circumstances.

Reconciling Expectations and Continuing Forward

The literature surrounding international student adjustment leans heavily on the associated challenges, which presents the transition experience as something negative that students must overcome. While the arrival experience is not easy, the findings of my dissertation characterize the phenomenon as a series of encounters that confirm or refute students' preconceptions about attending college in the U.S. These assumptions are based primarily on

things they have learned from their families, from what is depicted in the media and entertainment, and from their own research conducted in preparation for studying abroad. Once students have physically arrived and have begun developing a greater understanding of what their new lives are going to be like, they are able to more accurately determine what will lie ahead as they enter their academic year.

The international student arrival experiences at URV exemplify Leask's (2004) metaphor that arriving to university can be like a new game where students must learn, apply, and 'win' rewards to be successful. Mistakenly applying familiar rules from their home culture that have served them well before can result in unpleasant surprises. In this dissertation, students' background knowledge and expectations of the U.S. were sometimes useful in preparing them for this 'game.' In some cases, students were ready to experience diversity because they had seen that people of all ethnicities were portrayed in the movies. Yet, in other ways, their expectations led to high hopes that their arrival experience could not match. Some of the unpleasant surprises they met included misunderstanding Americans' "sub-text" in their communication style or finding that they could not easily make American friends.

The fact that results from prior research about international student experiences are so fraught with challenges and stressors implies that the students had little prior knowledge of the host culture they were living in. For example, Lin (2006) compiled a list of personal stressors that included housing, transportation, living expenses, language barriers, separation from family, political bias from host culture, insufficient living facilities, and adjusting to boring small town life. In this dissertation, each of these elements (with the exception of political bias) were present in students' experiences at the beginning. They were especially difficult for students who had developed high expectations for what their experiences would be like, and then discovered upon

arriving that these elements became unexpected hurdles. However, they were not solely sources of stress, but also points of interests for students who were curious about and ready to face those challenges.

As Lin (2006) indicated, adjusting to life in a small town was a significant source of dissatisfaction during the arrival experience. All but two students in this dissertation hailed from large, metropolitan areas where they had been used to using numerous public transportation options and having easy access to everything they needed on a daily basis. Arriving to their small midwestern city with very limited access to resources (relative to the big city) was an initial cause for adjustment. Paired with international student rules and policies, such as living in dorms with an attached meal plan, along with the higher legal drinking age than in their home country, students experienced a certain loss of independence.

Experiencing disappointment about the host country could be a sign that preparation was inadequate or that students rely too heavily on what they have seen depicted on screen. It may also be an indication that regardless of prior knowledge of what living in the host culture will be like, students simply cannot envision their lives in the U.S. until they arrive and start experiencing the culture for themselves. This is demonstrated in Arthur's (2001) study about students studying abroad in Vietnam. Even though they had participated in a four-day pre-departure orientation program, they still encountered challenges related to personal safety, health, diet, communication, and transportation upon arrival. In this dissertation, even the participants who had previously lived in or visited the United States before enrolling in their degree program encountered surprises when they arrived and as a result, had to re-adjust their expectations moving forward.

Accuracy aside, arriving to the United States to attend college is a challenging venture for most international students. Predicting what life is going to be like, whether based on background knowledge or prior experience, does not guarantee an ability to predict what the arrival experience will be. For some students, having a more accurate idea of the U.S. made their transition less difficult. For others, previous knowledge prepared them for what lied ahead.

The Company of Others Becomes a Resource

During their arrival experiences, the international students in this dissertation were acutely aware of where they fit in in relation to others. Although all of them embarked on their journey alone, they accumulated a variety of interactions over the course of the entire arrival period. For most students, acquiring a social network was one of the top priorities upon arrival. For others such as those who already had a social network in place or whose primary focus was something else, there was still an awareness of the interactions around them while they began their study abroad.

The findings of my dissertation confirm how previous literature defines the various forms of relationships that international students develop. Yet, at the time of arrival, the nature of each type of relationship is different given that so little time passes in which to develop a long-term connection. Instead, international students meet diverse peers with or around whom to experience the arrival. Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) differentiated between multiple forms of social interactions that international graduate students experienced over the course of studying abroad, including *self-segregation*, *exclusive global mixing*, *inclusive global mixing,* and *host interaction*. Each of these were discussed in various degrees within the context of the arrival experience, including some of the advantages of each. In particular, students were able to meet American friends through work and from the residence life community. Students

met other international students, including short-term European students on J-1 visas, through global mixing. For the Chinese students in my dissertation, co-national friendships were the easiest to form and most common. They were able to find a social group to experience the arrival with and together gain familiarity with the campus.

Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood's (2013) study, however, suggests that international students' interactions are within their control—as if they selected with whom and to what extent they interacted. In fact, during the arrival experience at URV, opportunities to socialize with other students during the arrival period were largely limited by who was present on campus. Arriving one week before American students meant that international students had access primarily to each other. Most lived in the same two residence halls, and their participation in the same events and activities during the first week facilitated global mixing. Host interaction was thus available after the domestic students arrived the following week.

Both Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) and Chavajay (2013) pointed out that international students gain more socioemotional support from other international people, which aligns with the findings of my dissertation. Those who were able to interact with peers who reminded them of home or who could speak their language demonstrated a higher sense of wellbeing during their arrival. This challenges the assumption that students must assimilate to the host culture in order to adjust. For some students who had hoped and planned to build a network of American friends, in reality, friendships with other international students became the most meaningful relationships. International students could related to one another as being new to campus and friendships felt more sincere in comparison to friendships with Americans.

Zhang and Goodson (2011) conclude that being socially connected with domestic students facilitates the management of emotional strains and mastery of U.S. sociocultural skills.

While this is somewhat true in my dissertation, particularly for the students who had previous experience at an American high school or university, it is hard to confirm given the lack of friendships students were able to form with Americans. Their emotional strains were managed through connecting with any type of individual—not necessarily domestic students. Most commonly, they found it possible to decompress and relieve homesickness by socializing with other international or co-national peers who could relate to being new, shared a similar culture, or spoke the same language. Students also dealt with stress by speaking with their families through Facetime or other technological means. Remaining closely connected with their own culture was the most prominent form of coping.

The lack of host relationships is impacted not only by proximity, but also by the challenges associated with connecting to Americans, both through communication and through cultural misunderstanding. During their arrival, international students lack opportunities to have deeper, more meaningful interactions with Americans. Living in the residence halls with them does not even guarantee they will be able to form strong relationships. This supports the work by Yao (2016) who specifically studied international students' roommate experiences and found that missing out on developing friendships with American roommates—due to cultural differences that stem from communication challenges—negatively influenced their sense of belonging at the institution. This dissertation highlighted some of the communication behaviors that are perceived differently. For example, Americans perceive smiling, nodding hello, or asking "how's it going," as polite gestures, but these are often perceived by international students as disingenuous or "fake." These different perceptions are compounded by the fact that American students are not looking for friendships in the same way as international students and are not in need of international friends to teach them about culture. Yet, Yao (2016) pointed out

that international students often anticipate that having American friends will help them adjust to the new culture, and thus are disappointed when their expectations go unfulfilled. Findings from Yan and Berliner (2013) help to explain that socio-cultural differences contribute to intercultural friendship challenges, with the meaning of "friendship" changing between different cultures. The confusion and frustration that some of the students in this dissertation experienced during their arrival, such as being surprised by Americans' willingness to openly share their feelings, could be a result of these different interpretations and expectations for cultural behaviors.

It is worth keeping in mind that students who have transferred or who have had previous experiences with American educational culture have different social arrival experiences than students who are entering an American institution as a first-time student. The international transfer students in this dissertation experienced fewer social encounters upon arrival in part because they were older than the new freshmen and less interested in experiencing the dorm culture. As the only students from their respective countries, they also did not have other students to connect with culturally. Lim was driven by academics and not searching for friendships, so the impact of having fewer social opportunities was not significant. However, Aisha had a larger circle of friends at her previous institution, and despite her efforts and desire to meet people, she was unable to make significant friendships during her arrival.

Newly arrived students face many hurdles when it comes to forming friendships. However, they have the added advantage of exposure to peers from all over the world who are experiencing many of the same things. For those who are lucky to arrive with co-national peers, their opportunities for social engagement are even higher. Although most desire friendships with students from the host culture, they often discover that other international students are in fact one of the most helpful resources as they navigate the arrival experience.

Maneuvering Through Communication and Cultural Norms

Along with managing expectations and social interactions, the findings of this dissertation also illustrate how students experience communication and culture during their arrival. Khawaja and Stallman (2011) describe that limited English proficiency inhibits students' academic ability. Although not course-taking per say, it was evident that during the arrival period, international students already have a good sense of their language abilities. Any difficulties inhibited their socializing experiences more than their ability to get information or for classes. In particular, students in the 2+2 programs knew they would be taking ESL courses, transfer students had already been immersed in American classrooms, and the students who were enrolling directly into credit-bearing courses were already proficient in English. At the time of their arrival, students in this dissertation were aware of their English language abilities and their proficiency skills themselves were less of a concern. Rather, they were more concerned about their ability to interpret what Sanjay referred to as the "sub-text" of a word or phrase. Students also interpreted statements such as "how are you?" as not feeling like Americans were being genuine.

A significant challenge highlighted in the literature was that the higher the degree of cultural distance between the home and host culture, the higher were students' culture shock, stress, and anxiety (Arthur, 2001; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Lin, 2006). Although not explicitly stated as a challenge, my participants described instances and encounters that would deem degree of cultural distance as a secondary or underlying factor that impacts certain other challenges. For example, the Chinese students faced barriers that the Norwegian students did not. They had a harder time making American friends, interpreting communication norms, and faced limited access to Chinese food and ingredients, to name a few. Meanwhile, the Norwegian

students were able to meet American and European friends, had communication styles that more closely aligned with American norms, and made no mention of their access to any preferred foods. Additionally, the fact that they looked "American" and had only slight accents allowed them to blend in with their American peers. Unlike what these studies found, students' arrival experiences were in some ways enhanced by cultural differences, especially for those students who had been hopeful that they would experience new things and found enjoyment and adventure during the arrival period. Therefore, the degree of cultural difference—although challenging at times—can also be a welcomed experience rather than solely a cause for struggle as characterized by Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) or a reason for psychological distress (Furukawa, 1997).

Broadly, the international student arrival experience involves maneuvering through communication norms rather than language challenges. Mirroring prior literature on adjustment, it is also marks a period when students discover the impact of cultural differences on their experiences and encounters. These takeaways, along with earlier findings that describe the significance of expectations and social interactions, shine a spotlight on how students experience arriving to a university in the United States, an area that has largely been left in the dark.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this dissertation contribute to the wider body of knowledge surrounding international student experiences while attending American universities. This section outlines a series of implications for policy and practice that will further equip institutions to zero in on arrival experiences so that they can prepare students in the best ways possible for the academic year that lies ahead. Of critical note, however, the findings are reflective of the experiences of a group of international students who arrived to their institution before the COVID-19 disruption

began. Therefore, their experiences, encounters, and interactions took place during a time when higher education institutions were operating "as normal." Looking ahead, colleges and universities' ability to serve both new and returning international students remains largely uncertain. In recent months, federal policymakers have attempted to block international student visas in relation to online course-taking and have considered restricting new international students from entering the United States altogether. International travel restrictions have also impacted international students' educational opportunities[2]. In attaining the following implications, which pertain to personalizing communication and prioritizing meaningful social interaction in arrival activities, institutions must hereafter take into account the current and fluid conditions of higher education and develop onboarding plans in anticipation of possible further global disruptions.

Personalize Communication with Incoming Students

Students who are accepted to the institution and preparing to embark on their journey are often excited for the adventure, open minded to new experiences, and ready to engage with the university. The university should thus capitalize on this enthusiasm and establish policies that encourage routine, personalized communication patterns with new international students. This is particularly important because every arrival experience is unique given their varied backgrounds and expectations for their study abroad experiences. This strategy benefits the students in multiple ways, including the formation of a personal connection to the institution and a trusted resource for accurate and relevant information. This strategy also benefits the staff who provide services for the students, as they will be better able to assess and address individual needs, take more control of the information going out to students, and pre-determine students' on campus

[2] Federal and institutional policy decisions are in flux and may not be accurately reflected in this work.

needs prior to their arrival, which will allow them to prepare the most relevant services and information during the arrival period. Knowing that students often lack confidence in initiating contact, personalizing communication on an individual basis would be an inviting way to begin conversations with students so that they may better prepare themselves for their study abroad experience in ways that will actually help them at their specific institution. Even more, virtual connections are sustainable regardless of whether or not university instruction is held online or in-person. If personalized communication is established early, students will at least have a foundation in place to partake in ongoing, long-term communication with the institution.

Inform Students About Which Aspects of Their Arrival are Within Their Control. Also in their personalized communication with incoming students—both before and during their arrival—institutions should be forthcoming about which aspects of their educational lives are within their control to change and likewise, how they can go about advocating for themselves. Cultural norms, language, immigration regulations, and laws are obvious big-picture elements that cannot be controlled. It is less obvious which institutional-level policies and general behaviors are more flexible. Additionally, being unfamiliar with campus resources, it might be unclear who to turn to during problematic situations. For example, students should be told ahead that they can request new housing assignments if serious problems arise, and for less serious issues, they can speak to their RA or visit the office of residence life. Knowing such possibilities exist in advance reassures students that there are solutions available to them. This information will also help to provide students with accurate and realistic expectations about their arrival experiences.

Institutions should provide space for both new and returning international students to reflect upon and share their insights about what would be best for newly arriving students,

whether that be through ongoing assessments or regular meetings with an international student advisory council. They should also take advantage of returning students' ability to share useful tips or strategies they wish they had used during their own arrival experiences. Once again, interactions with returning students can be conducted online if and when needed.

Ensure Wellbeing Through Student Outreach. During the arrival period, it is also important that international staff be mindful of what happens to students outside of scheduled programming, when they are left to find activities on their own or spending time in their dorms or apartments. The international office should develop a policy of regular outreach so that all students, particularly those having a harder time meeting people or feeling isolated, have options for continued engagement throughout the arrival period. Offering evening orientation sessions and activities or organizing social gatherings or meals for students in the residence halls are some strategies. For students who are not able or willing to reach out to others or admit when they are having a harder time, international staff should make sure that there are staff members or student leaders who reach out and invite students to join in on some of these informal activities. Lastly, staff should organize a system of evening "check-ins" in the residence halls, which would help gauge how new students are doing, be an additional social opportunity, and serve as a simple strategy to demonstrate the institution's general care and support for students' wellbeing.

Prioritize Meaningful Social Interaction Through Activities and Partnerships

My research shows that social interaction was the most salient subject across the participants and touches every aspect of the international student experience. Given the isolation felt by students unable to form meaningful connections during the arrival period, as well as students' dissatisfaction with what they felt were superficial interactions with Americans,

institutions need to make meaningful interactions a top priority while they are welcoming new students to campus. The goal for facilitating interactions should not necessarily be matching international students with their long-term friends, but rather providing opportunities to connect them with individuals who they can turn to as a resource when they need assistance or have questions related to their adjustment. Re-purposing new student orientation programming, accommodating virtual connections, and enhancing partnerships with residence life are all practical strategies to promote meaningful social interaction.

Re-Purpose New Student Orientation to Prioritize Social Engagement. Just as meaningful social interaction should be a top priority during the international student arrival period, so should it be the top priority throughout in-person new student orientation programs. As the findings of this dissertation demonstrate, new student orientation programming was a less salient component of their arrival experience. Some of the students—albeit those who were already familiar with the American educational context—bypassed much of the orientation offerings altogether. Given the open and flexible schedules that international students have upon arriving to the institution, especially prior to domestic students moving to campus, this is a lost opportunity for institutions to capitalize on students' initial enthusiasm and desire for engagement.

As such, every aspect of orientation programming should integrate a networking component so that students receive direct and indirect opportunities to meet other people. For information sessions in classroom settings, this could mean facilitating group work, discussions, or activities related to the topic at hand. For activities in other settings (e.g., tours, meals, or shopping trips) staff and other leaders could help facilitate conversations and encourage interaction among participants. Orientation should also be a platform for new international

students to explore and practice different forms of engagement with diverse groups of people. This is especially important knowing that international students have difficulties connecting with American students and largely benefit from forming relationships with other international students and conational peers. Therefore, international staff should invite American students to participate in international orientation programming—particularly the more informal sessions—as well as consider other individuals from the campus community who would then become familiar with them, such as staff from other campus units, resident assistants, and faculty members.

To ease the pressure of seeking social interactions and initiating conversations with new people, international offices should offer a variety of orientation opportunities where the activity becomes the focus of the conversation, which, in turn, would cultivate more organic and deeper interaction. Some suggestions include dining at a restaurant or café off campus; attending an event or festival in the local community; exploring a nearby tourist attraction; spending time in someone's home; or organizing recreational outings or athletic competitions. Students may also find shared interests through such activities, interact with people they may not otherwise meet, and discover opportunities they can take part in beyond the arrival period.

Finally, although some of the students in this dissertation were eager to experience American culture, others were turned off by opportunities that were unfamiliar to them or that they perceived to be childish, which risks their opting out of participating and subsequently, meeting other students. This is another reason to create dual-purpose orientation activities to incentivize participation. For example, important information sessions could be held at a location off-site so students also have a chance to see something new; excursions off campus could end with a shopping trip for groceries and other essential items; and social networking sessions could

be held while exploring local natural areas (e.g., hiking trails, bike paths, popular city walks) so students can socialize and become familiar with local recreational opportunities. Or, instead of simply pointing out on-campus activities, participate in activities as a group for an orientation session (equipment rentals, or attending a campus sporting event or a welcome week activity). Attending such events alone can be intimidating for new international students, particularly when a majority of attendees are typically American students who may be less likely to reach out to non-Americans.

Partner with Residence Life to Enhance Existing Arrival Experiences. Planning ahead for incoming students is a universal activity conducted across most campus departments. Residence life offices are especially involved in new student onboarding and orientation activities. International offices should work closely with offices of residence life to ensure that international student needs are considered within program offerings and to examine which opportunities and sessions international students should attend that were not covered during international orientation. Additionally, at larger institutions it can be assumed that residence life offices have higher staffing capacities than international offices, which means there might be opportunities to train their staff about international student services. Designating "international RAs" to be a point-person in the dorms—especially during the arrival period, could be an especially useful support strategy. Ideally, these roles would be filled by at least two returning students—one man, one woman—who have extensive knowledge of the campus and local culture. They might also have specific training or experience working with students from diverse backgrounds or who have lived or worked abroad, which would increase their ability to empathize with students who are new to the country. Leaders in these roles could be the individuals who attend and diversify engagement at orientation sessions or who conduct check-

ins with students living in the dorms. Given that students in this dissertation described having issues with initiating conversation with Americans, the face-to-face presence of an international RA would be an additional chance for students to connect with an American and to feel connected to the larger institution.

Accommodate Virtual Arrivals. The purpose and nature of social interactions change significantly during times when instruction is virtual and students are not able to "arrive" in-person. Without needing to navigate day-to-day living or socializing with Americans, new students will not find themselves relying on other students for social interaction or decompressing after a long day on campus. Therefore, international programs should instead focus their attention on introducing new students to their peers through online platforms so that they have others to speak with who are in similar situations. When the time comes to move to campus, students who have connected virtually will have established connections that will make their eventual transition to the institution easier. As many institutions do in person, pairing students with a domestic student "buddy" can also be done virtually so that new students have an ongoing point of contact who can help with language practice, cultural questions, and academic culture.

If it is the case that international students are arriving during a time of COVID-19, when all students must be masked and socially distant from one another, it is even more imperative to have established and continuous virtual connections. For one, meeting their neighbors and roommates ahead of time will help to increase familiarity with those around them when they do arrive. Second, they could meet other international students and conationals who may share the same culture as well as some of the same challenges. When they do arrive, they can build upon those existing relationships rather than starting completely from scratch.

These practical changes take into consideration that international students arrive to the U.S. with diverse background experiences and different understandings of and expectations for social interaction, which is a crucial component that pervades the arrival experience. By embedding social interaction within all components of organized, institutional arrival activities—whether they are in person or virtual—institutions can provide an assortment of opportunities for students to connect with others.

Taken together, the implications for policy and practice demonstrate that there is significant room to strengthen departmental and institutional capacities to serve new international students before and throughout their arrival to the United States. Strategically communicating with students about their wellbeing and touching base regularly will help the institution identify areas where assistance is needed and assures students that staff will advocate for them. Even more, assisting students with meaningful social interaction both during and outside of orientation programming should be a top priority.

Directions for Future Research

The international student arrival experience is an important period of the study abroad experience, yet, the lack of existing research is problematic. Given the recent uncertainty over in-person or virtual instruction due to COVID-19 and the consequences these decisions have on international students, continuing this research is critically important. My research lays a foundation for understanding the details of what goes on during the window of time between students leaving home and then beginning their coursework. However, the nature of this arrival period depends on in-person instruction. There are myriad opportunities for future research directions, including avenues of inquiry that more deeply explore the critical role of social

connection, that place a spotlight on orientation, and that examine the influence of specific cultural differences on how students experience arriving to their U.S. institution.

The three-interview series design of this dissertation was integral to capturing the international student arrival experience within the context of pre-, during- and post. As a qualitative dissertation investigating details of an experience from the participants' perspective, this approach allowed me to capture details and depth of the phenomenon. Yet, this design was also limiting in that it only allowed for the experiences of a relatively small number of students. Future qualitative inquiry about the international student arrival experience could be even more generalizable by increasing the number of participants and conducting one interview each. Other methodological designs, such as grounded theory or narrative inquiry, would also be useful in capturing the arrival experience from nuanced angles, shedding further light on this understudied topic.

Exploring the Role of Social Connection

The significance of how international students develop social connections warrants further inquiry. Given that a majority of students discussed how they formed friendships with other students and the challenges they encountered in doing so, future research needs to continue with this strand to better understand what goes into relationship-building. Considering the different social experiences between students who looked and acted more "Western" and students from Asian countries, it would be pertinent to uncover the factors that impact their abilities to form relationships with students from the host country, as well as between cultures. In-depth qualitative interviews with both advanced international students and American students would be useful in uncovering additional strategies and challenges they experienced in forming inter-cultural relationships on college campuses. Their perspectives could be used to modify and

enhance current social activities promoted during orientation, welcome week, and within the residence halls.

Orientation Outcomes and the Role of the International Office

The international student arrival period marks a time of high engagement between students and international offices, often because students are required to attend orientation and are seeking opportunities for engagement and social networking. However, there seemed to be misalignment in this dissertation between what was being offered to students and what students were actually seeking from the institution. Therefore, it is important that future studies seek students' perspectives of the role of international offices so that staff can adjust their goals and objectives for serving students accordingly. One method to accomplish this feat would be to conduct surveys across a large sample of students at multiple institutions to gain an overarching sense of students' expectations. Another method would be to conduct a document analysis of orientation programming coupled with outcomes assessment reports, which would showcase the array of orientation offerings and also assessing whether students' needs are in fact getting met. Lastly, it is important to gain the perspective of international office directors, coordinators, and other staff who have extensive experience serving international students. Over the years, what strategies and challenges have they encountered in serving students during the arrival period, and what are their hopes in serving students in the future?

Arrival Differences Between Sub-Populations of International Students

The current dissertation revealed that arrival experiences—as well as ongoing educational experiences—are experienced differently by different sub-populations of students. For example, students who come to the U.S. from China are more likely to develop quick friendships compared to students who are the only individual from their country. Additionally, students

whose appearance and language proficiency help them blend into the majority culture experience their arrival differently from students who look or sound international. In the future, researchers should investigate the factors that dictate students' early experiences. Specifically, in what ways are arrival experiences impacted as a result of being perceived as "other?"

How will COVID-19 Impact the Future of the International Student Arrival Experience?

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact American higher education, it will be a crucial time to study the impact on the current body of international students. Studies in the near future should attempt to capture in real-time how new international students are impacted by the influx of virtual learning. In what ways do international students virtually engage with their U.S. institution beyond their coursework? What is the role of the international office when students are not coming to campus? How do new international students experience "arriving" to their institution when they are unable to be physically present? And later, when students are able to return to campus for in-person instruction, how do institutions engage with international students who are still unable to travel due to visa restrictions and travel limitations? The answers to these questions could become important resources in the future should institutions have to shut down again to accommodate pandemic-level disruptions.

Conclusions

It seems unfathomable that comparisons can be drawn between individuals who come from all over the world and all walks of life. Yet, the pursuit of higher education in a foreign country pulls these individuals together. The one sure commonality among such vast populations of students is that each of them will start by "arriving" to their university. The empirical base is startlingly thin when it comes to understanding the first and earliest experiences of students when they arrive for the first time to begin their educational pursuits.

This dissertation builds upon the little existing information and using a hermeneutic phenomenological study design, takes a deeper dive into what exactly occurs when students leave their home countries and "arrive" in the United States to pursue four-year degrees. Twenty-six interviews with international students hailing from five different countries revealed three essential elements of their arrival, including the realization of the (in)accuracies of their previously held expectations about life in the U.S.; that they arrive in the company of others (i.e., fellow international students and American students and community members); and that they must maneuver through communication and cultural norms.

These findings both support and transcend related literature. In particular, many of the challenges students face align with previous research that outlines difficulties related to adjustment, such as feelings of isolation when they are unable to develop social ties with American students or misinterpreting the sub-text of the American communication style. Regarding implications for policy and practice, the participants' arrival experiences in this dissertation reinforce the importance of personalizing their communication so they understand the needs of their incoming students and devoting institutional onboarding activities to facilitating meaningful social connections. In addition, and partnering with residence life when possible, international offices should consider re-formatting their orientation practices so that sessions serve dual purposes of information sharing and social activities, paying particular attention to targeting students who may be challenged to speak up for themselves.

Given that the international student arrival experience itself has been so infrequently pursued as its own strand of inquiry, there remains room to expand upon this dissertation in the future, particularly as the future of international higher education is and will continue to evolve as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Broadly, future research should continue investigating

the dynamics of forming social connections, examine the arrival experiences of advanced students, individual sub-populations of students, and even American students to diversify the lenses with which we understand international student arrival experiences as a whole.

References

Adelman, M. B. (1988). Cross-cultural adjustment: A theoretical perspective on social support. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 12,* 183–204.

Al-Sharideh, K. A., & Goe, W. R. (1998). Ethnic communities within the university: An examination of factors influencing the personal adjustment of international students. *Research in Higher Education, 39*(6), 699–725.

Anderson, M. L., Goodman, J., & Schlossberg, N. K. (2012). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world*. Springer.

Andrade, M. S. (2009). The value of a first-year seminar: International students' insights in retrospect. *Journal of College Student Retention, 10*(4), 483–506.

Arthur, N. (2001). Using critical incidents to investigate cross-cultural transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 25*(1), 41–53.

Aspers, P. (2009). Empirical phenomenology: A qualitative research approach (The Cologne Seminars). *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology, 9*(2), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/20797222.2009.11433992

Baba, Y., & Hosoda, M. (2014). Home away home: Better understanding of the role of social support in predicting cross-cultural adjustment among international students. *College Student Journal, 48*(1), 1–15. http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=119bd94e-f96c-45d4-b374-68c04c85ba70%40sessionmgr4006&vid=1&hid=4212

Berg, B. L. (2007). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (6th ed.). Pearson.

Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review, 46*, 5-34. https://doi.org/10.111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x

Berry, J. W. (2006). Acculturative stress. In P. T. P. Wong & L. C. J. Wong (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural perspective on stress and coping* (pp. 287–298). Springer.

Berry, J. W., Kim, U., Minde, T., & Mok, D. (1987). Comparative studies of acculturative stress. *International Migration Review, 21*(3), 491–511. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2546607?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1995). The bioecological model from a life course perspective: Reflections of a participant observer. In P. Moen, G. H. Elder, Jr., & K. Luscher. *Examining lives in context* (pp. 599–618). APA.

Brown, L., & Holloway, I. (2008a). The adjustment journey of international postgraduate students at an English university: An ethnographic study. *Journal of Research in International Education, 7*(2), 232–249. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240908091306Furnham, 2004

Brown, L., & Holloway, I. (2008b). The initial stage of the international sojourn: Excitement of culture shock? *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 36*(1), 33–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/0306880701715689

Campbell, T. A. (2015). A phenomenological study on international doctoral students' acculturation experiences at a U.S. university. *Journal of International Students, 5*(3), 285–299. https://jistudents.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/6-phenomenological-study-on-international-doctoral-students.pdf

Chapdelaine, R. F., & Alexitch, L. R. (2004). Social skills difficulty: Model of culture shock for international graduate students. *Journal of College Student Development, 45*(2), 167–184. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2004.0021

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. Sage Publications.

Chavajay, P. (2013). Perceived social support among international students at a U.S. university. *Psychological reports: Sociocultural issues in psychology, 112*(2), 667–677. https://doi.org/10.2466/17.21.PR0.112.2.667-677

Eagleton, T. (1983). *Literary theory: An introduction*. Basil Blackwell.

Fouche, F. (1993). Phenomenological theory of human science. In J. Snyman (Ed.), *Conceptions of social inquiry* (pp. 87–112). Human Science Research Council.

Furnham, A. (2004). Foreign students: Education and culture shock. *Psychologist, 17*(1), 16.

Furukawa, T. (1997). Cultural distance and its relationship to psychological adjustment of international exchange students. *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences, 51*(3), 87–91. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9225369

Gallagher, S. (2012). *Phenomenology*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Glass, C. R., Gomez, E., & Urzua, A. (2013). Recreation, intercultural friendship, and international students' adaptation to college by region of origin. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 42,* 104–117. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2014.05.007

Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 3*(1), 42–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300104

Giorgi, A. (2012). The descriptive phenomenological psychological method. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 43*(2012), 3–12. https://doi.org/10.1163/15691612X632934

Hahn. C (2008). *Doing Qualitative Research Using Your Computer: A Practical Guide*. Sage Publications.

Henriksson, C. & Friesen, N. (2012). Hermeneutic phenomenology. In N. Friesen, C. Henriksson, & T. Saevi (Eds.), *Hermeneutic phenomenology in education* (pp. 1–14). Sense Publishers.

Hoffman, E. A. (2007). Open-ended interviews, power, and emotional labor. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 36*(3), 318–346. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241606293134

Hotta, J., & Ting-Toomey, S. (2013). Intercultural adjustment and friendship dialectics in international students: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 37*(5), 550–566. http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.06.007

Hung, H. L., & Hyun, E. (2010). East Asian international graduate students' epistemological experiences in an American university. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 34*(4), 340–353. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.12.01

Husserl, E. (1970). *The idea of phenomenology*. Nijhoff.

Kafle, N. P. (2011). Hermeneutic phenomenological research method simplified. *Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 5*(1), 181–200. https://doi.org/10.3126/bodhi.v5i1.8053

Kelly, J. G. (1990). Context and the field of community psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 18*, 769–792.

Kelly, J. G., Ryan, A. M., Altman, B. E., & Stelzner, S. P. (2000). Understanding and changing social systems: An ecological view. In J. Rappaport & E. Seidman (Eds.), *Handbook of community psychology* (pp. 133–159). Kluwer.

Khawaja, N. G., & Stallman, H. M. (2011). Understanding the coping strategies of international students: A qualitative approach. *Australian Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 21*(2), 203–224. https://doi.org/10.1375/ajgc.21.2.203

Kim, H. J., & Okazaki, S. (2014). Navigating the cultural transition alone: Psychosocial adjustment of Korean early study abroad students. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 20*(2), 244–253. https://doi.org/10.1037a0034243

Knowledge Community for International Student and Scholar Services (KCiSS) (2014). *International Student Orientation: A Common Thread*. www.nafsa.org/kciss

Laverty, S. M. (2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology: A comparison of historical and methodological considerations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 2*(3), 1–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690300200303

Leask, B. (2004). Plagiarism and cultural diversity: Responsibilities, accountabilities and pedagogy. *Plagiarism, Practice, and Policy Conference,* Northumbria University, 28–30 June 2004.

Lewthwaite, M. (1996). A study of international students' perspectives on cross-cultural adaptation. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 19*, 167–185.

Liamputtong, P. (2007). *Researching the vulnerable: A guide to sensitive research methods*. Sage Publications.

Liberman, K. (1994). Asian student perspectives on American university instruction. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 18*(2), 173–192. https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(94)90027-2

Lin, C. (2006). Culture shock and social support: An investigation of a Chinese student organization on a US campus. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, 35*(2), 117–137. https://doi.org/10.1080/17475750600909279

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage Publications.

Liu, D. (2016). Strategies to promote Chinese international students' school performance: Resolving the challenges in American higher education. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education, 1*(8), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-016-0012-9

Lysgaard, S. (1955). Adjustment in a foreign society: Norwegian Fulbright grantees visiting the United States. *International Social Science Bulletin, 10*, 45–51.

Major, E. M. (2005). Co-national support, cultural therapy, and the adjustment of Asian students to an English-speaking university culture. *International education journal, 6*(1), 84–95. http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/education/iej/articles/mainframe.htm

Mak, A. S., Bodycott, P., & Ramburuth, P. (2015). Beyond host language proficiency: Coping resources predicting international students' satisfaction. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 19*(5), 460–475. https://doi.org/10.1177/0138315315587109

Marshall, A., & Batten, S. (2004). Researching across cultures: Issues of ethics and power. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 5*(3). http://nbn-resolving.de/um:nbn:de:0114-fqs0403396

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.

Mckinlay, M. J., Pattison, H. M., & Gross, H. (1996). An exploratory investigation of the effects of a cultural orientation programme on the psychological well-being of international

university students. *Higher Education, 31*(3), 379–395. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00128438

McPhail, R., French, B., Wilson, K. (2015). Valuing orientation efficacy: Rethinking undergraduate business student's first impressions. *Journal of Education in Business, 8*(2). 109–124.

Moustakas, C. E. (1990). *Heuristic research: Design, methodology, and applications*. Sage Publications.

Nakkula, M. J., & Ravitch, S. M. (1998). *Matters of interpretation*. Jossey-Bass.

Poyrazli, S., & Graham, K. M. (2007). Barriers to adjustment: Needs of international students within a semi-urban campus community. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 34*(1), 28–45. http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=6&sid=4b45d61d-bd30-4e4b-8236-5a0681e85e17%40sessionmgr101

Poyrazli, S., & Lopez, M. D. (2007). An exploratory study of perceived discrimination and homesickness: A comparison of international students and American students. *The Journal of Psychology, 141*(3), 263–280. https://doi.org/10.3200/JRLP.141.3.263-280

Ritchie, J., and Lewis, J. (Eds.) (2003). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. Sage Publications.

Rose-Redwood, C. R., & Rose-Redwood, R. S. (2013). Self-segregation or global mixing? Social interactions and the international student experience. *Journal of College Student Development, 54*(4), 413–429. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2013.0062

Rossman, G. B. & Rallis, S. F. (2012). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage Publications.

Schlossberg, N. K. (1984). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory*. Springer.

Schuman, D. (1982). *Policy analysis, education, and everyday life*. Heath.

Seidman, I. E. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.

Seidman, I. E. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. Teachers College.

Sherry, M., Thomas, P., & Chui, W. H. (2010). International students: A vulnerable student population. *Higher Education, 60*, 33–46. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9284-z

Slaten, C. D., Elison, Z. M., Lee, J., Yough, M., & Scalise, D. (2016). Belonging on campus: A qualitative inquiry of Asian international students. *The Counseling Psychologist, 44*(3), 383–410. https://doi.org/10.1177/001100001663506

Spindler, G. (Ed.) (1987). *Education and Cultural Process: Anthropological Approaches (2nd Edition)*. Waveland Press.

Spindler, G. (Ed.) (2000). *Fifty Years of Anthropology and Education, 1950-2000. A Spindler Anthology*. Lawrence Elrbaum Associates.

Sriram, V. (2016, February 19). The power dynamics of elite interviewing: Methodological issues and considerations. *Health Systems Global*. https://www.healthsystemsglobal.org/blog/94/The-power-dynamics-of-elite-interviewing-methodological-issues-and-considerations.html

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

van Manen, M. (1997). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (2nd ed.). The Althouse Press.

Wengraf, T. W. (2001). *Qualitative research interviewing: Biographic narrative and semi-structured methods.* Sage Publications.

Warren, C. A. B., & Karner, T. X. (2010). *Discovering qualitative methods: Field research, interviews, and analysis* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Wu, H., Garza, E., & Guzman, N. (2015). International student's challenge and adjustment to college. *Education Research International, 2015*, 1–9. http://dx.doi.org/10.1155/2015/202753

Yan, K., & Berliner, D. C. (2013). Chinese international students' personal and sociocultural stressors in the United States. *Journal of college student development, 54*(1), 62–84. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2013.0010

Yao, C. W. (2016). Unfulfilled expectations: Influence of Chinese international students' roommate relationships on sense of belonging. *Journal of International Students, 6*(3), 762–778. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1100341.pdf

Zhang, Y. L. (2016). International students in transition: Voices of Chinese doctoral students in a U.S. research university. *Journal of International Students, 6*(1), 175–194.

Zhang, J., & Goodson, P. (2011). Acculturation and psychosocial adjustment of Chinese international students: Examining mediation and moderation effects. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 35*(5), 614–627. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2010.11.004

Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB
6/19/2019

Submission ID number:	2019-0728
Title:	A Phenomenological Investigation of the International Student Arrival Experience
Principal Investigator:	XUELI WANG
Point-of-contact:	BRITNEY WAGNER, XUELI WANG
IRB Staff Reviewer:	OLYVIA KUCHTA

The ED/SBS IRB conducted a review of the above referenced initial application. The study was determined to meet the criteria for exempt human subjects in accordance with the following category(ies) as defined under 45 CFR 46:

Category 2: Research involving the use of educational tests, surveys, interviews [NOTE: If children are involved in the research it can only be determined to be exempt under this category if the research is limited to educational tests or observation of public behavior, the investigator(s) cannot participate in the activities being observed, and the identities of the subjects either cannot be readily ascertained or the disclosure of the subjects' responses would not put them at risk.]

To access the materials the IRB reviewed and accepted as part of the exemption determination, please log in to your ARROW account and view the documents tab in the submission's workspace.

Although the human subjects research described in the ARROW application referenced above was determined to meet the federal criteria for exemption and thus does not require continuing review, please be aware of your responsibilities related to the conduct of the research and when additional IRB review is required. Prior to starting research activities, please review the Investigator Responsibilities for Exempt Human Subjects Research guidance (https://kb.wisc.edu/images/group99/shared/BSIR_Exempt.pdf) which includes a description of the types of changes that must be submitted to ensure the research continues to comply with the conditions of the exemption and/or category(ies) of exemption.

If you have general questions, please contact the Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB at 608-263-2320. For questions related to this submission, contact the assigned staff reviewer.

Appendix B

Email Recruitment Script

Hello,

My name is Brit Wagner and I am a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I am currently working on my dissertation work called “A Phenomenological Investigation of the International Student Arrival Experience.” To summarize the purpose of my study, I am trying to understand how international students at four-year universities experience “arriving” to their institution (i.e., what happens during the time between arriving to campus and the start of classes).

I would like to invite you to participate in a series of three interviews with me so I can better understand your experiences when you first arrived to begin your studies at UW-La Crosse. The focus of each interview is described below. Each interview would take place one week apart and last between 45 and 90 minutes. Anything you share during the interviews will be kept strictly confidential and I will not use your real name in any of my documentation or writing.

Interview #1: How your background informed your arrival experience
Interview #2: The details of your arrival experience
Interview #3: Reflection and meaning of your arrival experience

Please let me know if you are interested in participating. If so, we can schedule times and locations during fall 2019 that work best for you. I appreciate your consideration, as this will greatly help me with my dissertation work, as well as my goal to inform those who serve and support international students at the university level.

Thank you!
Brit Wagner

Appendix C

Sample Interview Protocols Modified from Yiyun's Three-Interview Series

Interview #1

1. To begin, could you first tell me about yourself—your name, your program, how long you've been at UW-La Crosse, and where you've come from?

2. When you were in high school or earlier, did you ever predict that you would study abroad and you would go to another country to study?

3. Can you tell me more about your background, and what your life was like before you came to the U.S.?
    a. Tell me about your family situation, your school, and what that was like to grow up in Beijing?

4. Who decided which university you would attend? How do you make that decision?

5. Can you tell me about middle school, high school, or the school system you attended? What kind of student were you growing up?

6. How did you choose which academic track to follow in school? Did you know what career you wanted?

7. Can you share a little bit more about your family and what your growing up years were like outside of school?

8. When was the first time you started thinking about study abroad?

9. You had some college experience in Beijing. Can you tell me about what happened when you learned that you would come [to the U.S.]? What was it like to make that decision?

10. What was your perception of the U.S.?

    a. Did you have any other impressions of the United States?

11. Are there any other things that were influential to you before you came here that may have impacted your experience here?

12. Is there anything else that I haven't asked you about or anything that would be important for me to know about your background?

Interview #2

1. Thinking about what we talked about last week, is there anything else that you thought about that you want to add? Or any other thoughts that you've had about what we talked about?

2. Could you walk me through the details of what the process was to come here?

    a. Did you have any other feelings besides being nervous?

3. What was it like to move into the dorms?

4. Did you have any other first impressions of campus or the city? Any other things that you thought about in those first early days?

5. I'm curious about friendships and how you started meeting people. How do you meet people and get comfortable talking to them? You talked about your roommates, but what about the others?

6. You said you did some of the orientation activities, you did the campus tour. Did you participate in any other activities when you first came?

7. Can you describe that time before [American] students came and what it was like before everybody else came?

8. Is there something about you, or your personality, or background, that makes your experience in the U.S. different than or unique from others?

9. Is there anything else that I'm not thinking of that you could explain that would be helpful for me to understand what it was like for you at the beginning?

10. Do you remember anything funny that happened to you?

Interview #3

1. Could you let me know if there's anything that you thought about since before? Anything that you talked about last week that you've reflected on or want to add?

2. Describe some ways in which you have changed since you first came here.

    a. Is there anything else besides becoming more trusting and more open? Any other ways you have found that you've changed?

3. Based on your experiences when you first arrived here, is there anything that you learned about yourself from your experience at the beginning?

4. Based on how your experience was when you first came to the U.S., (you shared stories about the airport, the dorm, the shower, just thinking about those days) do you think you realized anything about yourself from those experiences?

5. Do you think that experience impacted your university education? Like, your educational experiences since the beginning? Do you think having that experience of feeling pride made a difference in how you've experienced the rest of your time here in [River Valley]?

6. So that got you through what I'm calling your "arrival experience." So for you, your arrival experience was energetic, and great, and confident, but then after a month maybe. . .?

    a. Is there anything you could have done to keep that momentum? Now that you can reflect on that looking back, what could you have done to keep that confidence the whole time?

7. Is there any advice that you would give to new students, either from China or from anywhere? What would you tell new students?

Appendix D

Consent Form

You have been chosen to participate in a study that seeks to understand how international student experience arriving to their four-year university in the United States. This research will inform a dissertation called "A Phenomenological Investigation of the International Student Arrival Experience." Brit Wagner at the University of Wisconsin-Madison is conducting this study at your university. You are free to contact Brit with any questions or concerns about this study by email (brwagner3@wisc.edu) or by phone (608-769-7671).

I would like to conduct three interviews with you that will each take approximately 45 to 90 minutes of your time. I hope that you will find our conversation enjoyable. Risks to participants are considered minimal. There will be no cost for participating, nor will you benefit directly from doing so. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. The audio recordings and transcripts resulting from the interviews will be stored securely and only Brit and her academic advisor will have access to the data. All identifying information will be removed from the final dataset.

Your participation in these interviews is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question and you have the right to withdraw participation at any time without penalty. If you do not want continued participation during the interviews, simply let the interviewer know and we will stop the conversation immediately.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please call the University of Wisconsin Educational Research and Social & Behavioral Science Institutional Review Board Office at 608-263-2320.

By agreeing to participate, you are giving me permission for several things. I would like to hear about your experiences as a new international student arriving to your university for the first time, including how your background informed those experiences, the details of those experiences, and your reflection and meaning-making of those experiences. I will only use this information for this research project. It will not be shared with others, nor will we ever report on you individually. If any direct quotes are referenced, your name will not be used.

If you agree to participate in my study, please sign and date this form and return it to the interviewer. Thank you for your valuable time and input.

Name _____ _____ _____

(Please print) First Middle Last

Signature: _____ Date: _____