

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS: EXPERIENCES OF NEW INTERNATIONAL
GRADUATE STUDENTS ENROLLED IN U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all past, current, and future international students who have made significant sacrifices in pursuit of US higher education. To you, I applaud your perseverance, determination, and bravery as you not only seek enrichment for your life, but you also help diversify, educate, and beautify the US. Thank you for your courage and thank you for your struggle.

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엄마, 감사하고 사랑해요.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
CPB	Customs and Border Protection
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DS-160	Online Nonimmigrant Visa Application
DSO	Designated School Official
Form I-20	Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
IHE	Institution of Higher Education
IIE	Institute of International Education
NAFSA	Association of International Educators (formerly National Association of Foreign Student Advisers)
OPT	Optional Practical Training
SEVIS	Student and Exchange Visitor Information System
SEVP	Student and Exchange Visitor Program
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
US	United States
USCIS	US Citizenship and Immigration Services

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the holistic motivations and decision-making experiences of new international graduate learners who made conscious decisions to engage in US higher education. International graduate students are adult learners, and this study was interested in understanding why and how international individuals become motivated to learn in adulthood. Specifically, this study investigated the process in which international adult learners engaged with their social worlds and made choices to pursue graduate education at public higher education institutions in central Texas. This study was particularly focused on how and why international adults made decisions to study in the US given recent geopolitical changes that threatened international student mobility trends. This study moved beyond identifying what motivated adult learners and sought to uncover the conditions that support and influenced international adults to choose graduate education in the US. The *synthesis model* developed by Chen (2007) was used to holistically explore international adult learner decision-making. The two research questions that guided this study were:

1. Why do international graduate learners choose to enroll in US higher education?
2. What is the decision-making experience of international graduate learners who chose to enroll in US higher education?

In this study, the researcher collected data from new international graduate learners who recently navigated the decision-making process from pre-arrival to newly enrolled. Overall, a phenomenological approach guided this study to move beyond

identifying motivational factors and focused on describing the interaction between international graduate learners and their socio-cultural environments. Moreover, this study sought to ascertain how socio-cultural influences impacted the ways international graduate learners interpreted their motivations and decision-making experiences to pursue higher education in the US.

This study asked nine newly enrolled international graduate learners to share their journeys navigating the decision-making process of choosing to enroll in US higher education. Their lived experiences provided vivid details of the many complex decisions and unexpected challenges they experienced in pursuit of graduate studies in the US. This study's findings compare, contribute, and challenge the larger body of research examining international student enrollment in US higher education.

The two research questions guiding this study moved beyond identifying *what* motivates international students, but instead provide an understanding as to *why* and *how* international adult learners choose to enroll in US graduate studies. Findings provide insight into why participants chose to enroll in US higher education and how they describe their decision-making experiences.

The findings of this study can be used to inform institutional policies aimed at international student recruitment and engagement. They indicate that international adult learners are motivated to enroll in US higher education; however, learners experience varying levels of difficulty with familial support, career development, financial stability, gendered expectations, and immigration processes that may be different from younger

undergraduate learners. Indeed, graduate learners are often in different stages of life and have more responsibilities when compared to undergraduate students. As a result, international adult learners have several needs and concerns with enrolling in US higher education that can best be addressed by structured communication outreach and action from US institutions.

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Higher education in the US is becoming increasingly more internationally diverse as each year a record number of international students enroll in US higher education institutions. This steady increase of international student enrollment in US higher education should not come as a surprise. An annual report published by the Institute of International Education (IIE), called the *Open Doors Report on International Education Exchange*, is the leading source of statistical information on international student mobility. Since 1953, IIE has recorded international student mobility in the US, and shows that each year there are more international students engaging in US higher education. The 2016 *Open Doors Report* proclaims that the US remains the number one destination for all international students in the world. The report shows that 25% of international students worldwide chose the US as their host country destination. The US was followed by the UK (12%), China (10%), France (8%), and Australia (7%). The 2016 report estimated that nearly two-thirds of all international students worldwide were studying in one of the five countries mentioned. The 2018 *Open Doors Report* showed a 1.5% increase in international student engagement in US higher education in the past year, and a 63% increase in overall engagement in the past ten years. This report included both students who were enrolled in higher education and those that were participating in temporary work authorization called Optional Practical Training (OPT). Optional Practical Training is a 12-month temporary work authorization granted by the Department of Homeland Security to international students who have completed a program of study which include associates, bachelors, master's, certificate, or doctoral programs. Students on OPT continue to maintain an F-1 visa status, and thus do not

require an additional work visa to lawfully engage in employment in the US. Some students on OPT take courses while others may only be working. Overall, the total number of international students engaged in US higher education for the 2017-18 academic year surpassed one million with 1,094,792 total students in US higher education. During the 2017-18 academic year, international student enrollment in US higher education represented 5.5% of the total student enrollment in US higher education. International graduate students represented 35% of the total number of international students in the US. For the 2017-18 academic year there were 382,953 international graduate students, which was a decrease of 2.1% from the previous year. The significance of these statistics was to establish the relevancy and importance that international student engagement has on the US higher education landscape. As Chen (2007) explained, a country's future sustainability and growth will depend on immigrants who are educated skilled workers. Chen described the importance of understanding international graduate student decision-making by emphasizing that international graduate learners are particularly important because of their advanced education and research capabilities that can contribute to the growing occupational, cultural, and economic landscape.

The continued growth in mobility of international students to US institutions of higher education had great importance to several key stakeholders which included the student body, the institution of higher education, the local community, and economic value to both the sending and host countries. Knight (2004) discussed rationales that were driving internationalization and supporting international student mobility in US higher education. According to Knight, those rationales included national and institutional level benefits that occurred during the internationalization of US higher education. For

instance, Knight explained that international students' contributions to the institution are not only revenue generating benefits, but also aid in expanding intercultural understanding for domestic students, faculty, and staff as well as increased international dimensions to curricula, research, and teaching. In addition, Knight explained that the national benefits were commercial trade of skills and knowledge, strategic economic and geopolitical alliances, and human resource development in nation building purposes such as citizenry and a skilled workforce. To emphasize the national benefits, Ortiz, Chang, and Fang (2015) discussed the economic perspective on international student mobility. They found that in 2014 international students contributed nearly \$27 billion to the US economy, which represented a 12% increase from the year before. The economic benefit from international students have some international educators, institutions, and associated stakeholders viewing international students as a commodity. In other words, there have been instances where stakeholders relied on the revenue generated by international student enrollment, and thus focused recruitment strategies on maximizing the number of international students enrolled. Unfortunately, in these cases, there was little focus on understanding and supporting prospective international students during their decision-making processes nor upon their experiences once enrolled (Kubota, 2009). Regardless of whether revenue generation was an institution's goal for enrolling international students, there needs to be a focus on understanding the experiences international students had when navigating pathways to US higher education. This understanding should begin with examining the experiences of new international students who were making decisions to enroll in US higher education.

US institutions wanting to maintain a competitive hold on the international

student mobility market must meet the needs of international graduate students preparing for international higher education. In this study, lessons were learned from newly enrolled international graduate students who recently navigated the decision-making processes. Understanding international learners' experiences provided insight to the factors, influences, and emotions involved in making decisions during a global socio-political climate that is dynamic and complex. Knowledge of what students experienced, though, and felt, may help US institutions in maintaining a competitive hold on the international student market as well as create programs for international student recruitment, engagement, and university initiatives that support goals for increasing international student populations and overall university internationalization.

The Institute of International Education acknowledged that there was a greater recognition of higher education institutions across the world which may soon result in fewer students choosing to enroll in US higher education. In fact, Hser (2005) advised institutions that funding and perceived lack of institutional interest in internationalization has resulted in negative experiences of international students who then hold negative perceptions of US education when returning home. Hser also mentioned that, "Australia, Britain, and Canada are competing with the US in recruiting international students...[and] are opening more educational marketing centers and spending more money to recruit international students" (p. 41). The international student market continues to see increased numbers of international students choosing countries such as Canada and Germany, which offer international students free or reduced tuition (Ghazarian, 2014). Canada offers benefits to international students such as opportunities to work off-campus throughout their degree program, which is attractive for student

needing additional financial resources. Additionally, off-campus work authorization allows students to gain real-world work experience and earn additional income to help off-set the cost of attendance. In comparison, international students in the US are not allowed to work off-campus unless the student receives proper work authorization, which only occur through program specific internships or upon the completion of the degree program. According to IIE, in 2018, despite differences and benefits between host countries such as the US or Canada, international students still chose to attend higher education institutions in the US more than any other country. The most recent mobility trends showed that international student enrollment continues to increase; however, the future is uncertain given shifts in the US national political climate and global internationalization mobility patterns. Therefore, this study became necessary in hopes of igniting research that focuses on learning about the lived experiences of international graduate students and how to best support these adult learners interested in US higher education.

Process of Becoming an International Student on F-1 Status

Literature and research on international students has too often neglected to explain the process of becoming an international student in the US. Working in international education as a designated school official (DSO), I assist international prospective students with understanding and navigating the process to becoming an international student in the US. Therefore, I have recognized the necessity for this section to be mentioned as it provides the reader with thorough knowledge of the legal process to becoming an international student on a nonimmigrant F-1 visa. Moreover, acknowledging this process of becoming an international student is vital to understanding how and why

international students choose to pursue higher education in the US.

For the purpose of this section, I have chosen to begin the process of becoming an international student with Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) three-stage decision-making process that includes (1) a student's decision to study internationally, (2) selection of host country, and (3) selection of host institution. Although this three-stage process of decision-making presents a clear and linear path to becoming an international student, the process does not fully describe the decision-making experience in its entirety. Moreover, this three-stage process does not detail the legal steps mandated by federal regulations which dictate international student pathways to the US (see Appendix B for Becoming a Nonimmigrant Student). Moreover, a student wanting to pursue a degree in the United States must interact and receive authorization from both the institution of higher education and several government agencies. The necessary steps are outlined by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and executed through the monitoring and facilitation of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), and finally a Designated School Official (DSO) located at a SEVP-certified US institution.

In my professional practice as a DSO, the steps outlined in this section are components of how to become an international student in the US. To start, in order for an international student to study in the US on an F-1 visa, the student must first receive acceptance to a SEVP-certified institution. Institutions have full discretion to set admission policies and requirements for international students. Most often, international students are required to meet the same admission standards as domestic students, with the

addition of English language proficiency requirements. An SEVP-certified school is one that has received authorization by DHS to issue the Form I-20 also known as the Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status. The Form I-20 will be referred to as an I-20 for the remainder of this paper. Once a student has gained acceptance to a SEVP-certified school the student can then request an I-20 from the school's DSO, who is usually housed in an International Student and Scholar Services Office. When international students request an I-20, the student must provide a DSO with a valid passport, proof of acceptance to the institution, and financial documentation that shows liquid assets for at least one year's worth of the institution's cost of attendance. Once an I-20 is issued by a DSO, the student will receive a SEVIS identification number and pay the I-901 SEVIS fee which is \$350. Paying this SEVIS fee allows the student to complete the Form DS-160 which is an online application to request a visa appointment with a consulate officer at a US embassy. The Form DS-160 requires that the student upload a passport-style photo and pay a \$160 application fee online. The process for which a student can meet with a consulate officer varies greatly by country. In general, a student will be interviewed by a consulate officer who will ask the student about her or his purpose for studying in the US. Often students can be denied a visa if the consular officer believes the student has immigrant intent. Since the F-1 visa is a nonimmigrant visa status, students who are unable to demonstrate nonimmigrant intent are at risk of being denied an F-1 visa. Although there is no perfect formula to demonstrating nonimmigrant intent, NAFSA the Association of International Educators, formerly known as the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers, suggests that international students need to prove ties to their home country during the visa interview. Students who are able

to establish having ties to their home country are more convincing to a consular office of their intention to return to home country upon completion of the educational objective as outlined on the I-20. When creating an I-20, a DSO will adjust the I-20 program length depending on the student's level. For instance, at some institutions, undergraduate and doctoral I-20s are made for five years, whereas master level I-20s are for three years. The program length of the I-20 validates the student's duration of stay, meaning the time allotted to complete a program of study. When a student is approved an F-1 visa, the student will likely need to wait a few days or weeks to allow for the processing of the F-1 visa stamp that is inserted into the student's passport. After receiving the visa stamp, the student will usually book a flight ticket and prepare to travel to the US. However, even with an approved visa stamp in the student's passport there are still a few more steps. Once the student arrives at a port of entry, the student will meet with a CBP officer who after reviewing the student's documents (passport, visa, I-20, and acceptance letter) will provide the student with an I-94 admission stamp in the passport. If for whatever reason the CBP agent deems the student inadmissible to the US, the student can be detained for further questioning or denied entry into the US. If the student is granted entry, the student must report to the I-20 issuing institution within 30 days and enroll full-time by the program start date indicated on the I-20. Once the student arrives on campus the student is required to check-in at the institution's International Student and Scholar Services Office which usually includes completing more internal documentation and presenting the signed I-20. Once the student has checked-in and the semester has started, a DSO will register the new international student in the SEVIS system. Registering new students in SEVIS confirms to DHS that the student is maintaining the terms of their F-1 status.

Even after a student has successfully completed these steps, the student must continue to enroll full-time every semester and comply with all federal regulations that govern the F-1 status, otherwise the student's SEVIS record and subsequent F-1 status can be terminated. In my experience, common reasons why international students do not maintain their status is due to the inability to pay for tuition bills, failure to enroll full-time, or unauthorized work off-campus. In these situations, the DSO is responsible for terminating the student's SEVIS record. A student whose status is terminated may apply for reinstatement with USCIS or must prepare to depart the US immediately.

The purpose of explaining the steps on how to become a nonimmigrant F-1 student in the US is to highlight the complexity and multitude of decisions that international students endure in becoming international students in the US. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) provided a basic three-stage decision-making process, which includes 1) the choice to pursue international higher education, 2) the choice of host country, and 3) the choice of host institution. However, there are many more decisions that international students must make in order to become an international student in the US. Many of these decisions are not free and require strong financial and personal commitment. As a result, if a student commits to pursuing higher education in the US, the student may be challenged by political and external barriers that seek to prohibit the student from studying in the US. As this study has shown in the following chapters, there are many challenges to becoming an international student in the US.

In my professional opinion, I feel these steps are necessary to highlight in order to fully recognize how complex the decision-making experience can be for international students. After a student selects a host institution and is granted admission the student must

continue to make several more decisions on how to request an I-20, pay associated fees, schedule a visa interview, meet with a consulate officer, purchase a flight ticket, and gain admissibility to enter the US. This basic understanding of how international students navigate immigration processes of becoming an international student in the US provides further insight to some challenges students may endure in their decision-making experiences. Examining students' experiences from those who have newly completed this process provides institutions with valuable information that may help shape pre-arrival policies aimed at easing the transition of a new international student to US campuses.

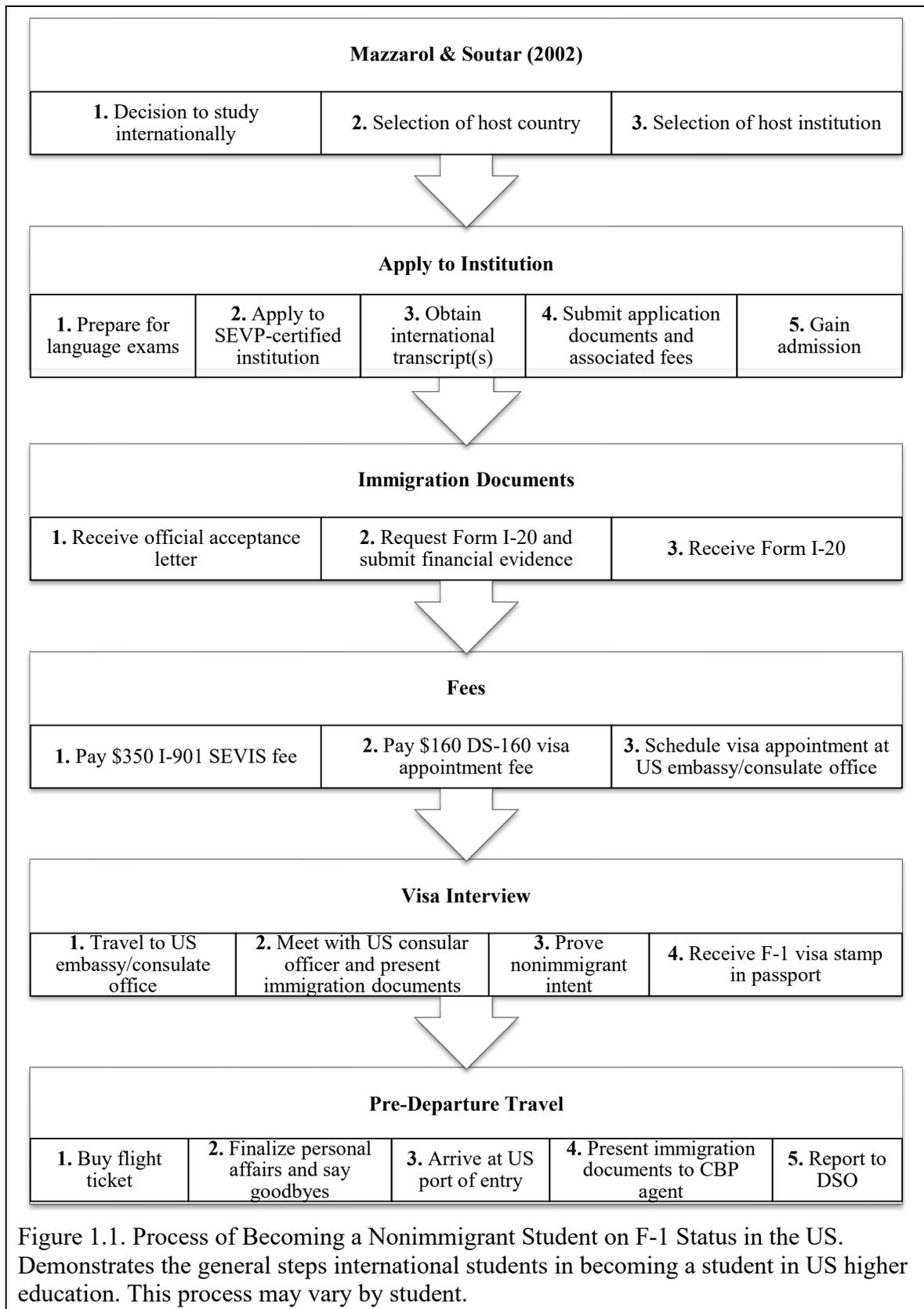


Figure 1.1. Process of Becoming a Nonimmigrant Student on F-1 Status in the US. Demonstrates the general steps international students in becoming a student in US higher education. This process may vary by student.

Researcher Positionality

My passion for international education stems from my own background as an individual who has spent a large portion of my life living, working, studying, and traveling around the world. I chose this topic focusing on the decision-making experiences of international graduate students because as an international educator I see real-world implications from holistically understanding international student motivation and decision-making experiences. I believe the long-standing economic view of commodifying international students based on the revenue they bring to institutions mitigates the true value of international education and the contributions of international students in the US. As Kubota (2009) states, “this discourse reduces the full-tuition-paying international students to commodities that are exploited to benefit the university financially and to increase its international branding and profile” (p. 614). Working directly with international students in my day-to-day work I am privy to their lives and stories which inspired me to further investigate how and why international graduate students navigate their way to becoming students in the US.

Additionally, working as an international education administrator at a large public university in Texas, I am privy to the impacts international students enrolling in US higher education have on the local and campus community. The state of Texas is the third largest state, hosting 84,348 international students in 2018 (Baer, Bhandari, Andrejko, & Mason, 2018). My office and university have internationalization goals and are challenged with recruiting and supporting a growing international student population. Research regarding international students’ decision-making experiences and interaction with motivational factors to pursue US higher education has been understudied. I believe that international student motivation literature seemed content on identifying

motivational factors and not understanding how these factors specifically influenced international graduate students' behavior to enroll in US higher education. Chen (2007) asserted that the available research on international graduate learners was minimal and more research must be done to understand international graduate students' experiences. As the number of international students continued to increase, there was a need for more research into how international students, specifically graduate learners, decided to study in the US. Not only were motivational factors important, but this research study was conducted with the belief that researchers needed to examine beyond motivational factors. Further research is needed to understand how international graduate learners interact with their social environments to make decisions with regards to applying to higher education outside their home countries, choice of host country, choice of host institution, and the ultimate choice to enroll in US institutions. Chen (2007), in her research on international graduate students in Canada, found that of all international graduate students surveyed, 98% reported that Canada was not their first choice of country but rather the US was their first choice. Chen's research on international graduate students in Canada provided important groundwork for the exploration of international graduate student enrollment in the US.

Given recent changes in the political landscape because of the 2016 US presidential campaign, I was aware that international students were experiencing tighter restrictions on immigration, visa issuance, and educational opportunity. With tighter visa restrictions, nativist and anti-immigration rhetoric, travel bans, and other federal policies that affected international students, research regarding the needs, goals, desires, concerns, and decision-making processes of students who decided to enroll in US higher education

was needed, and thus I decided to pursue this study.

Research Problem

According to the Institute of International Education, international student mobility trends indicated further increases in international students engaged in US higher education. However, during the 2016 presidential climate with US national and geopolitical sentiments that dictated federal immigration policies, international students experienced political, cultural, social, and physical barriers that impeded their choices to study in the US. Despite the strong hold the US had on the international student mobility market, according to the *Houston Chronicle* in 2017, international student applications were reported by several four-year public institutions in Texas as having dropped collectively by nearly 10,000, which was preceded by a nearly 30% increase in international student applications from 2013 to 2016 (Ellis, 2017). A decline in international student enrollment nationwide impacted US higher education institutions' missions and visions to internationalize their campuses and threatened to jeopardize US economic, sociocultural, and global partnership benefits that existed with a large and healthy international student population. The US ranking as the number one destination for international students worldwide was threatened by increasing political tenor toward nationalism and anti-immigration sentiments including specific policy action such as the travel bans of 2017. Therefore, institutions of higher education needed to start understanding why international graduate students chose to enroll in US higher education.

Lee (2008) conducted a college access to US higher education multiple methods case study investigation with twenty-four graduate and undergraduate students. Lee

suggested that, “the process by which an international student decides to study outside his or her home country is complex and under investigated” (p. 323). Lee explained that institutions assess international student needs after arrival but fail to understand what students need while they are prospective students. Lee warned that these strategies may “marginalize international students and perpetuate negative impressions to prospective applicants” (p. 314). Lee argued that much research has uncovered domestic student pathways to US higher education, but “college access research has failed to adequately address the half-million international students studying in the US” (p. 310). Chen (2007) explained that research regarding college access for international graduate students was limited, because often international graduate students were either grouped with domestic graduate student college access research or undergraduate international students. Chen further expressed that very little was known about international graduate students, especially with regards to who they are and why they are motivated to pursue international study in the US. Therefore, higher education institutions and international education professionals need a more robust understanding of how international students navigate the pre-arrival decision-making process. Research can no longer correlate motivational factors of international students as a causal pathway to international student enrollment. In examining the phenomenon of international student motivation and decision-making, much research has been devoted to identifying motivational factors with the assumption that these factors alone are enough to influence a student’s decision to enroll in US higher education. The inherent challenge with this assumption was that it ignored the individual physical, emotional, cultural, and social actions that influence each student’s decision-making experience. The lived experiences during the decision-making

process are not articulated when only examining motivational factors. The motivational factors provide insight into *what* motivates international students but not the *why* and *how* international students are motivated.

There were many challenges to higher education access for international students which influence the decision-making experience. Perhaps the biggest challenge was the cost of higher education, as Leong (2015) suggested, international students' decisions to enroll in US higher education are influenced by the affordability of US higher education institutions. Often a decision to enroll would be dictated by the cost of attendance, and usually students settle on the least expensive institution. According to the 2018 *Open Doors Report*, 34% of international graduate students identified their primary funding source was from US universities in the form of assistantships and scholarships. However, 58% of international graduate students identified their primary source of funding was from personal or family funds which are often in the form of educational loans borrowed from banks. Students borrowing money plan to pay back education loans by engaging in temporary work authorization through OPT employment after graduation. However, in my experience, many students were worried about their employability after graduating due to the most recent political climate in the US. Therefore, if pending changes to work visas progress forward, the opportunity for work after graduation could act to negatively impact future international student decision-making. Hser (2005) suggested that the potential for work authorization upon graduation was a challenge that international students considered when choosing a country. In addition, prospective international students may be challenged in their institutional searches because of a lack of availability of the internet or access to college recruiters or agencies that assisted students with

international enrollment abroad. Leong (2015) also asserted that cultural differences, language barriers, and pedagogical differences were issues facing international students.

Given these challenges, understanding how students were still motivated to enroll in US higher education may help institutions develop international student recruitment and support strategies that result in higher levels of student enrollment and achievement. Moreover, in higher education and educational psychology research, student motivation was connected to academic preparedness, persistence, self-empowerment, and a student's overall drive to succeed academically (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014). Often motivational research for higher education have used understandings of domestic student motivation to understand and inform institutions about the reasons why domestic students choose to go to college (Lee, 2008). However, when institutions commit to understanding the decision-making experiences and motivational factors influencing prospective international students, those studies' results may play a role in enhancing a student's pre-enrollment experience as well as impacting enrolled student retention and success rates. Similarly, understanding how international students navigate motivational factors and decision-making could have benefits for both the institution and international students. As international student engagement in US higher education hits record numbers, institutions were ill-prepared because of a lack of research and concern with investigating the factors that influence international student decision-making (Lee, 2008). Overall, assuming the motivations of domestic and international students were the same, ignored the geopolitical, economic, linguistic, and sociocultural backgrounds that uniquely characterize international students. Additionally, motivational research that sought to quantify a student's experience into a single motivational factor diminishes the value of

the international student's holistic experience.

As international student engagement in higher education continued to increase there was a growing concern regarding the current political climate and how initiatives directed by US political leaders would impact global perceptions of US higher education particularly among international students abroad. There were real issues that could have severely impacted the near future landscape of international education in the US. For example, former executive orders that affected the issuance of visas, travel bans, federal regulations for work authorization for nonimmigrants, and political rhetoric that argued for an America First Foreign Policy, played a role in the perceptions that international students hold when viewing the US as a top educational destination. Moreover, executive order 13769 issued in early 2017 prohibited the entry of people from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, for at least 90 days (Trump, 2017). According to the 2016 *Open Doors Report*, Iran ranked 11th in top country of origin with over 12,000 Iranian students engaged in US higher education. The impact of federal policies such as the travel ban negatively impacted the global perception of US politics and US cultural openness towards international populations. Correspondingly, Allan Goodman, president and CEO of the IIE, wrote in the 2016 *Open Doors Report* that political developments and global events may influence the perceptions international students hold regarding US higher education (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2016). Similarly, NAFSA, the largest non-profit association of international educators, had called upon all members and institutions to participate in the national #YouAreWelcomeHere campaign inspired to extend a warm welcome to international students around the world especially those who had hesitations to enroll in US institutions because of global and political events.

In international student mobility research, there existed gaps in examining the decision-making experiences of international students and their pathway to US higher education (Lee, 2008). Researchers have often gathered a list of motivational factors from students who were already enrolled (Kim, 2011; Lee, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Park, 2009). This research relied upon reflective methods to gather data on motivational factors that influenced students' choice to enroll. However, motivational factors are one piece of the decision-making process and further studies regarding personal narratives may provide more insightful information that would be useful in the ways that universities devise their recruitment, outreach, and international engagement plans. Further research on these decision-making experiences were certain to become a valuable source of knowledge for international educators and practitioners so that informed decisions regarding improvements in recruitment and engagement of international students in US higher education.

The need to reexamine international student mobility from the personal student experience provided valuable knowledge to international educators and institutions. Neglecting the nuances of the 'how' and 'why' involved in the international student decision-making experience exposed practitioners and institutions to prematurely engage with international students without the cultural, emotional, and geopolitical factors underpinning these students' choices to pursue US higher education, or not.

Purpose of the Study

International student mobility projections suggested that international graduate student enrollment in the US would continue to increase. However, political developments and increased anti-immigration policies impacted the upward trend of

enrollment and threatened to cause a decrease in total international student numbers for the first time since the years following the 9/11 attacks. Therefore, as institutions were faced with uncertainty regarding international student enrollment, many relied upon research to provide strategies for implementing effective international recruitment and engagement plans. These plans could be aimed at not only preparing the university for international students, but also to help provide rationale for creating support systems that would ensure successful engagement with prospective international students and retention of those already on campus. As such, the purpose of this study was to understand the holistic motivations and decision-making experiences of new international graduate learners who made conscious decisions to engage in US higher education. The following research questions guided this investigation.

1. Why do international graduate learners choose to enroll in US higher education?
2. What is the decision-making experience of international graduate learners who chose to enroll in US higher education?

Theoretical Framework

Synthesis Model

I proposed moving beyond the push-pull model, which has been the most commonly used model to understand international student enrollment choices, and instead utilize a lens that incorporated elements of the push-pull theory, focused on international students, and considered the possibility that the decision-making experience is a culmination of choices that happened over time. Therefore, the framework that guided this study was developed by Chen (2007). Chen, who studied college choice, and found that international graduate students were often grouped with international

undergraduate students or domestic graduate students. She stated that, “there was a need to develop a more comprehensive and dynamic model to explain international graduate students’ choice and decision-making process” (p. 273). As such, she developed the synthesis model that was derived from bodies of literature regarding undergraduate, graduate, and international students as well college choice factors, location characteristics, economics of international graduate education, immigration, mobility, and the push-pull model.

The synthesis model is a three-stage process where international graduate students made choices to pursue graduate education outside the home country. Stage one is the *predisposition stage*, followed by stage two the *search/selection/application stage*, and finally stage three the *choice stage*. In this model, international graduate students made decisions whether to pursue international higher education based on a combination of five factors that include: 1) student characteristics, 2) personal motivations, 3) career-related factors, 4) academic-related factors, and 5) significant others. This model expanded on Mazzarol and Soutar’s (2002) work that extended the push-pull model by creating a three-stage decision-making process for international students. Mazzarol and Soutar’s process included 1) decision to study internationally, 2) selection of a host country, and 3) selection of a host institution. In each step students’ decisions were influenced by their perception of push and pull characteristics. Mazzarol and Soutar’s large scale multi-country study illustrated how diverse motivational factors can be for international students. Elements of Mazzarol and Soutar’s three-stage decision-making model were included in Chen’s synthesis model.

In Chen’s synthesis model, stage one began with the predisposition stage. In this

stage, students made inquiries about studying abroad and gathered information before making an informed decision. In addition to the five factors, students may still be influenced by external positive or negative push and pull factors. Subsequently, the search/selection/application stage happened after an international graduate student decided to study internationally.

In stage two, students searched for graduate schools through various outlets including but not limited to electronic, print formats, books, friends, family members, professors, embassies, and other organizations. Students in this stage searched and gathered information on a country, city, and institution to which they were wanting to apply. Throughout this process there were external influences that pushed and pulled a student's decision. Moreover, while searching for institutions, students often reviewed institutional rankings and reputations as well as reviewed program-specific information about concentrations and course descriptions. Some students even interacted with faculty members to learn more about research projects and program focus. In addition to academic factors, location and environmental factors also played an important role in where international graduate students decided to apply.

In the final stage, students reviewed institutional admission offers and revisited the factors previously considered in the search/selection/application stage. The ultimate decision to enroll was based on how students considered factors about what the country, city, institution, and program had to offer. Chen's model explained factors influencing country choice were environment, visa/immigration, and cost of living. Factors influencing city were location and population diversity. Factors influencing institution were quality, reputation, financial aid, and tuition. Lastly, factors influencing program

choice were faculty, research focus, program specialty, program reputation, and ranking.

Chen (2007) described the push-pull model, on its own, as insufficient for explaining why students made decisions about college choice, particularly when studying graduate students. The push-pull model helped to identify motivational factors that were economic in nature, but it did not explain all aspects of the decision-making process. Chen's model provided an appropriate research frame because it offered a complex and comprehensive understanding of how international graduate students engaged with information sources, then made decisions to enroll internationally.

Significance of the Study

At the time this study was created, the US continued to maintain a strong hold as being the leading host country destination for international students. However, concerns among international educators suggested that political and social challenges in the US would shift international student mobility away from the US. Nevertheless, continuing to neglect international students' decision-making experiences with choosing US higher education proved to have grave consequences for US institutions of higher education hoping to remain competitive in the international student mobility market. The Institute of International Education reported that the economic impact of international students from tuition fees and living expenses was nearly \$42 billion to the US economy in 2017. Additionally, international students offer many additional contributions to US higher education and society. Kubota (2009) asserts while, "one can hardly escape economic realities in the capitalist world, a heavy focus on economic ends obscures the educational significant and sociocultural meaning" (p. 613). In other words, previous focus only on the monetary benefit of international students negates the educational and research

contributions international students brought to the US. Knight (2004) added a discussion about how international student mobility also supported international and collaborative research and education between countries. This international collaboration promoted closer geopolitical ties and economic relationships with other countries. Knight emphasized these types of relationships are strategic alliances where institutions and governments recognized the complex and substantial contributions of the international student mobility market.

Overall, investigating the decision-making experiences of international graduate students enrolling in US higher education provided new insight on how recruitment and engagement strategies can be better implemented in ways that would continue to attract international graduate learners. In this study, I examined the decision-making experiences and motivations of newly enrolled international graduate learners in US higher education.

Defining and Clarifying Definitions

The following key terms were defined to provide clarity to the reader on how these terms were to be understood in the context of this paper.

F-1 Student

Nonimmigrant students with F-1 visa classifications, as defined in section 101(a)(15)(F) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, are foreign students coming to the United States to pursue a full course of academic study in a SEVP-certified school (US Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs).

Higher Education Institution

A university or college that has been given authorization by the US Department of Homeland Security to grant nonimmigrant F student visas for the purpose of taking

courses.

Home Country

The home country was where an international student originated from, which may be the student's nation of birth, nation of citizenship, or both. The home country was where a student has decided to leave in order to pursue international education.

Host Country

The host country is the destination country where an international student sought international higher education.

International Student Mobility

Patterns or trends regarding the movement of international students from a home country to a host in pursuit of education. (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007).

Internationalization

Process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education (Knight, 2004).

International Student

A student who intentionally crossed a border with the intent to study in a different country that is not one's home country of citizenship (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007).

International students were limited to the nonimmigrant F-1 student visa classification.

Motivation

“Motivation is a concept that is used to explain why human behavior occurred ... [and] is a process that can (a) arouse and instigate behavior; (b) give direction or purpose to behavior; (c) continue to allow behavior to persist; (d) lead to choosing or preferring a particular behavior” (Wlodkowski, 1977, p.6). Motivation can also be understood as the

natural human capacity to direct energy in the pursuit of a goal (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009).

Motivational Factors to Study Internationally

Motivational factors were understood by McMahon's (1992) explanation which identified internal and external, or push and pull factors, that influenced one's decision to pursue international higher education.

Motives

Any condition within a person that affected his/her readiness to initiate or continue any activity or sequence of activities (Wlodkowski, 1977).

International Graduate Student

A student who was enrolled in a master's or doctoral degree program and not a graduate certificate, post-baccalaureate, non-degree, or short-term visiting exchange program.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the process of becoming an international student as well as provided statistical information on international student mobility trends. The researcher explained the need of this dissertation research topic on international graduate students and their pursuit of US higher education.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

I began this literature review discussing international student mobility to the US using the most widely used international student motivational model known as the push-pull model. The push-pull model was included for historical research and reference of what had been done to understand international student mobility thus far. I discussed the history of the push-pull model, the benefits and the critiques. Next, I examined research regarding motivation through self-determination theory. I highlighted specific motivation and regulatory types that were more commonly used to understand undergraduate and graduate student motives to pursue higher education. Finally, I included literature on adult motivation theory to provide a deeper understanding of the influences that affected graduate student decision making. Overall, these sections were included to explore why international graduate students continue to seek US higher education. Lastly, conclusions were drawn based on the current findings from the literature.

The focus of this literature review was to identify motivational factors that affected international graduate students' decision-making experiences in choosing to pursue higher education abroad. In order to situate this topic in the literature, a thorough analysis was drawn from research on international student mobility, adult motivation to pursue higher education, and international student motivational factors. It was important to note that a large majority of available research on international students often does not differentiate between undergraduate and graduate students. Of the available research that does differentiate, there was a strong focus on undergraduate international students and their motivational factors. Therefore, this literature review included motivational factors and influences that affected largely undergraduate students and their decisions to pursue

higher education. Although differences in motivation between graduate and undergraduate students were acknowledged, the use of undergraduate student motivation literature provided a broader review of the international student mobility phenomenon. Furthermore, most of the research regarding international student mobility had explained international student motivation from the push-pull framework. Therefore, a short overview of the push-pull framework was explained to provide background on how previous researchers had examined economic and sociocultural influences that motivated international students to pursue higher education abroad. Additionally, adult education literature regarding adult motivation was used to provide an understanding as to why adults sought higher education. Overall, the decision to use these academic vantage points as bodies of literature was to ensure a holistic understanding of international student motivation and decision-making in pursuit of higher education. Using these bodies of literature ensured a thorough understanding on how international students navigated social influences and made various decisions that resulted in their international enrollment.

Search Methods

Primary sources in academic journals were used in this review. Search terms included the following: *international student, international graduate student, student motivation, foreign student, international student motivation, push-pull model, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-determination, higher education, international student mobility, motivational factors, internationalization, decision-making, choice, and adult motivation*. The literature found was then filtered for articles and dissertations that described international student motivation, recruitment, and enrollment in the US and

abroad were both used due to the value they offered in understanding international student motivation and mobility.

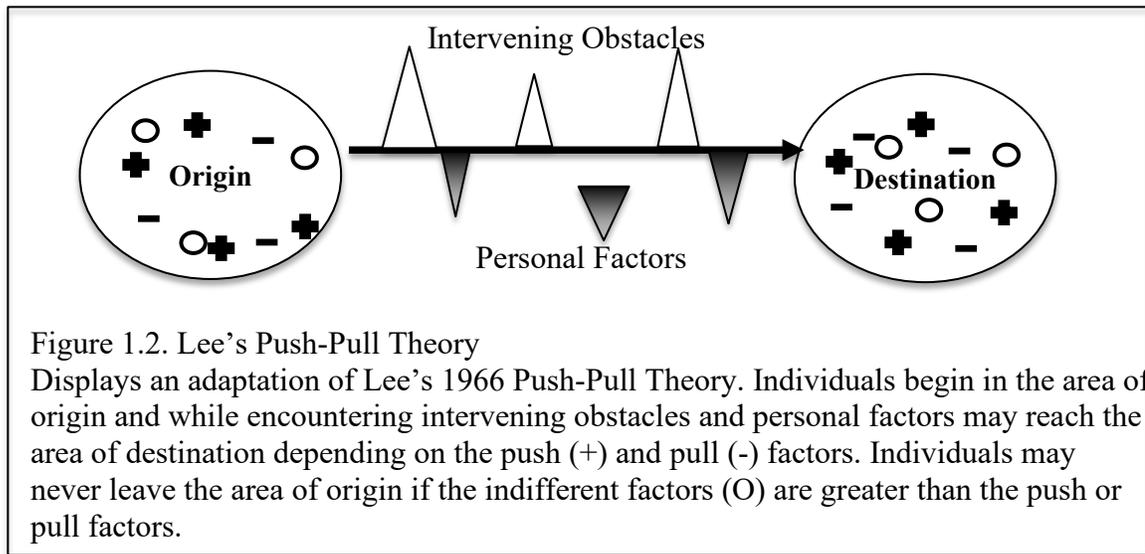
Push-Pull Model

Most of the research on international student mobility had been framed from the push-pull theory. According to McMahon (1992) the theory presumed that international students were being influenced by positive and negative influences in a student's home country that acted as push factors which drove students away from their home country higher education. Similarly, international students were also influenced by positive and negative influences in a host country that pulled or attracted students to higher education. Combined, the push and pull factors had served as the main theory for broadly understanding international student mobility as well as identifying international student motives to pursue international higher education.

History. In 1966, Everett Lee wrote the *Theory of Migration* and described a push-pull theory that was an econometric model outlining the relationship between two points of migration which were the *area of origin* and *area of destination* (see Figure 1.2). In his model, people interacted and examined their environment in order to decide whether to migrate, and that decision was challenged by a range of factors. Moreover, Lee's model explained people's decision to migrate and the process of their migration with four headings: 1) factors associated with the area of origin, 2) factors associated with the area of destination, 3) intervening obstacles, and 4) personal factors.

Lee's theory explained the decisions of people to migrate, or leave their places of origin, were influenced by attraction (pull) and repel (push) factors. The attraction factors are illustrated in Figure 1.2 as positive (+) whereas the repel factors are illustrated as

negative (-). Positive and negative notations reflected influencing factors in the



environment that impacted decision making and existed in both the origin (home country) and destination (host country). Positive and negative factors would influence someone to feel either pushed or pulled, and result in the migration from the home country to a host country. Also included were indifferent factors (O) when people were not pushed or pulled and were content with their current environment. The theory explained that there were good climates which attracted and bad climates that are repulsed. For example, a family may find moving to a community attractive due to the community's exceptional schools. However, a homeowner without children may find the same community unattractive due to the high property taxes. A married couple with no children may feel indifferent about the community schools and high taxes. Overall, decision to migrate was also affected by intervening obstacles (blue triangles) and personal factors (black triangles). In the same example, the family may be attracted, or pulled, to moving to a new community with exceptional schools but an intervening obstacle such as distance and personal factor money serves as barriers to the family's migration. Overall, Lee suggested that push factors included a lack of economic opportunities, professional

advancement, religious or political persecution, and/or environmental conditions. The pull factors, either real or imagined, included the perception of better job availability, religious or political freedom, and favorable environmental conditions. Intervening obstacles acted as challenges to migration such as opportunity, distance, cost, transportation, having dependents, physical barriers (e.g., the Berlin Wall), and immigration policies, just to name a few. Intervening obstacles and personal factors were many and impacted each person differently. Lee explained the challenges with understanding migration by stating,

Indeed, since we can never specify the exact set of factors which impels or prohibits migration for a given person, we can, in general, only set forth a few which seem of special importance and note the general or average reaction of a considerable group. Needless to say, the factors that hold and attract or repel people are precisely understood neither by the social scientists nor the persons directly affected. (p. 50)

Despite the innate challenge in understanding and identifying factors that impacted migration decisions, Lee suggested there were important differences between the factors associated with the place of origin and destination. Individuals were often very familiar with their place of origin and could make what Lee describes as, *unhurried judgements* about one's place of origin. He suggested that people were experienced in their place of origin to make decisions as to whether remaining in a place of origin was in their best interests. However, individuals' knowledge and experience with a destination place was often limited and thus the perception of advantages or disadvantages can sometimes be misunderstood. Nevertheless, Lee was interested in understanding despite limited

knowledge or experience with a place of destination, what compels people to migrate. Lee described the area of destination by stating, “there is always an element of ignorance or even mystery about the area of destination, and there must always be some uncertainty with regards to the reception of a migrant in a new area” (p. 51).

Lee (1966) suggested that migration may occur as a result of a comparison of factors at the place of origin and destination. However, as individuals spent most of their formative years in the place of origin free of responsibilities there may come a time when the over-evaluation of the positive elements in the environment begin to conflict with an under-evaluation of the negative elements. Lee warned that the understanding of migration and the push-pull factors were not entirely decided upon a simple calculus of pluses and minuses but rather,

The balance in favor of the move must be enough to overcome the natural inertia which always exists. Furthermore, between every two points there stands a set of intervening obstacles which may slight in some instances and insurmountable in others...Different people are, of course, affected in different ways by the same set of obstacles. (p. 51)

Since Lee’s (1966) work on migration, other researchers have adapted the push-pull theory as a lens through which to further investigate international student mobility. For instance, a seminal economic study widely cited by researchers investigating international student mobility was the research conducted by McMahon (1992). McMahon’s study differed from Lee’s in that McMahon specifically investigated the mobility of international students whereas Lee focused on the migration of people. Moreover, McMahon’s research defined push factors as variables that promoted the flow

of students out of a country and pull factors as variables that attracted students toward a country. Moreover, McMahon suggested, much like Lee's earlier work, that push factors acted as a trigger for the outbound flow of international students out of their home countries to a host country due to the home country's economic strength, trade, and emphasis on education (p. 468). In comparison, the inbound or pull influence was the flow of international students to the host country due to the host country's economic capacity and institutional support (p. 469).

McMahon (1992) examined historical studies investigating international student mobility patterns through a statistical review of the flow of international students from 18 Third World countries to more developed countries including the US. During this period, the 1960s and 1970s, the population of international students in the US nearly tripled in 15 years. Her study examined the economic strength through gross domestic product, global trade, and availability of education to number of international students studying in the US. McMahon's study suggested that students often pursued knowledge and education abroad because of pull and push factors in both the host and home countries. She concluded that push factors such as the home country's economic weakness, desire for greater involvement in the global economy, and emphasis on education were the leading reasons for students seeking international higher education. Pull factors included economic capacity and institutional financial support for reasons why students were attracted to higher education institutions in the US. McMahon's work has since become an influential resource for future international student mobility researchers. Her contributions to understanding international student mobility had enabled many to focus on the economic opportunity when examining motivations for international students who

pursued international higher education.

Benefits. Lee (1966) explained that the value of the push-pull model, despite its simplicity, was that it “provides a framework for much of what we know about migration and indicates a number of fields for investigation” (p. 52). Lee further pointed out that migration is a complex phenomenon that may be impossible to realize, but the push-pull model was immediately testable and could be applied to variety of populations.

The investigation in the push-pull model seemed to indicate that during the 2000s many institutions were focused on understanding specific motivations of international students. This may be related to the fact that many US institutions of higher education were focused on internationalizing their campuses (Knight, 2004). Therefore, much of the related international student research was focused on identifying international students’ motivational factors. There may have existed a correlation between institutions seeking internationalization and international student mobility research investigating student motives. The analysis of the findings across the literature showed that many researchers conducted large scale quantitative studies in order to examine the international student mobility phenomenon and to identify motivational factors. The benefit of utilizing the push-pull model to conduct large-scale survey data gathering was the hope for generalizability of the findings. In other words, researchers would survey hundreds of students in order to identify general themes, patterns, and trends within the international student mobility market. Included in this paper are examples of how the use of the push-pull model contributed to the body of research for understanding international student mobility, including international student motives.

Since McMahon’s (1992) study, further variations of the push-pull model have

been conducted investigating a range of international student motivational factors varying by social demographics and educational level. For instance, Park (2009) conducted a study at seven Korean high schools in Seoul investigating Korean high school student choice to pursue higher education abroad. This study utilized a questionnaire that was completed by 1,359 high school students at schools with a preparation class for studying abroad. This course was specifically designed for students who had intentions to apply to universities in foreign countries. The survey instrument asked students to rank their level of satisfaction with the Korean education system and attitudes toward studying abroad. The results from this study showed that students were faced with a 2-D model. Park explained the two Ds to signify a driving force and a directional force. In Park's study the push and pull factors for Korean students were referred to as driving and directional forces. The directional or pull factors began to emerge when students had desires for outward mobility and the expectations of studying in a host country began to supersede the desire to study in one's home country. Moreover, the driving force referred to the internal motivation that initially fuels a student's drive for international higher education such as dissatisfaction with domestic higher education. The second D referred to the directional factor or a student's perception and expectations for international higher education. The 2-D model mirrored that of the push-pull model, and Park found that Korean students were pushed or driven out of Korea because of dissatisfaction with the Korean higher education system. Additionally, students were pulled or directed towards the US due to an innate perceived sense of higher educational quality and value for the US higher education system. Park's study further confirmed Lee's (1966) and McMahon's (1992) earlier work on the economic and social influences that impacted

international student decision-making. In sum, Korean high school students in this study experienced driving and directional forces, push and pull factors, that ultimately influenced their higher education decision-making.

However, not all studies used the push-pull model to identify solely external push-pull factors. For example, Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, and Lynch (2007) surveyed 122 Chinese students who completed a self-regulation questionnaire on studying abroad. This study found that international students could also be personally motivated to pursue higher education abroad if the student had a high level of self-efficacy or self-determination. Moreover, Chirkov et al. stated that personal motivation was when students chose self-development goals and when, “students endorsed greater interest, enjoyment and internal satisfaction as their motivators” (2007, p. 214). Chirkov et al.'s, work utilized the push-pull model to analyze student motivation beyond environmental factors and begun to understand that motivations may also include non-economically driving decisions.

A further investigation into student mobility was conducted by Van Mol and Timmerman (2014) whose quantitative study comprised of three online surveys from 2009-2011 at 36 European institutions. Their study yielded 5,654 student participants showing that some push-pull factors could be socially driven in situations where a student's decision is a collective decision with the push from her or his family or community. Furthermore, Han, Stocking, Gebbie, and Applebaum (2015) interviewed 166 international students and conducted a quantitative study that examined motivational factors for students enrolling in STEM programs in the US. This study found that some students were motivated to study in the US because they had intentions to bring skills and

knowledge learned in the US back home for the betterment of their home societies.

The benefits of utilizing the push-pull model included the ability to survey and identify motivational factors from large populations of international students as well as understand specific motives of a general or targeted population. The studies described were examples of how the push-pull model contributed to the overall understanding of what influenced learners to pursue international higher education.

Critiques. Lee's *Theory of Migration* (1966) contributed to the understanding of the migration of people in that people's mobility decisions were the result of a variety of life factors. However, what I had found in the application of Lee's push-pull theory, with regards to international student motivational research, was that it had largely been used to argue that students are economically driven with their decisions to pursue international higher education. I felt that although the push-pull model provided a foundation for understanding international student mobility, the way in which it has been widely used comes with limitations due to the oversimplification of the push-pull theory. This understanding negated Lee's original discussion on *intervening obstacles* and *personal factors* as being additional influencers in the decision-making process. Consequently, much of the application of the push-pull model focused on an evaluation of push or pull factors identifying the *what*, motivational factors, rather than *why* and *how* students make choices. Therefore, I, along with other researchers such as Lee (2008), argued that international student motivation research is under-investigated and that a deeper understanding into intervening obstacles, personal factors, and decision-making processes involved when students are motivated to pursue international education was necessary.

Lee (1966) acknowledged that it was impossible to know all influencing factors

that impacted a student's decision-making. Although no exact formula existed that analyzed the value of certain push-pull factors over others, and how these factors influence international student decision-making, there were advantages and disadvantages to using only the push-pull model when describing international student mobility. The push-pull model was often applied to international students due to the model's applicability to create a clear duality between driving forces that pushed and attracting forces that pulled international students to international higher education. Additionally, most research that examined international student mobility used the push-pull model in quantitative research with large-scale populations often identifying a small scale of factors that were used as generalizations for an entire international student population. While the push-pull framework provided researchers with insight into how socioeconomic and geopolitical conditions in a host or home country could influence international student mobility, the disadvantage was that the model focused on motivational factors and ignored the complex sets of individual sociocultural and personal environmental and economic conditions that influenced decision-making. For instance, Han, Stocking, Gebbie, and Applebaum (2015) conducted a study that examined influential factors of 166 international graduate STEM students pursuing education in the US and found, "some studies avoid using the push-pull framework precisely because it has little to say about influences at the individual level" (p. 3). In other words, usage of this model often neglected other important personal and individual factors that affected an international student's decision to study in the US. Furthermore, most international student motivational and mobility research neglected to discuss the challenges to international education as described by Lee (1966) as intervening obstacles.

The discussion on the push-pull model was intended to illustrate the historical importance and research gaps when examining international student mobility. The push-pull model provided key fundamental examples of motivational factors and how previous research was conducted. Moving forward, the push-pull model provided a foundation on how future research can be conducted and modified. This model informed this study by proving the importance of a qualitative study that focused not only on motivational factors, but instead a holistic view of the entire decision-making experience.

Theory and Research on Motivations to Enroll in Higher Education

In addition to the push-pull model, several other researchers had investigated student motivation to enroll in higher education. Before examining student motivation, it was imperative to understand the different types of motivation and corresponding loci of causality. Therefore, I examined self-determination theory (SDT) as explained by Ryan and Deci (2000) and Deci and Ryan (2008).

Self-Determination Theory

SDT was defined by Ryan and Deci (2000) as, “an approach to human motivation and personality...that investigates people’s inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs that are the basis for their self-motivation” (p. 68). SDT recognized that there were different types of motivation, which varied in autonomy and control. Autonomous motivation assumed that an individual’s choice and volition would lead to behavior. In comparison, controlled motivation assumed that an individual’s behavior was externally controlled by pressure or demand toward certain goals. Also, SDT moved beyond the unitary thought that the amount of motivation would cause action and behavior, but rather the type of motivation was more important in understanding why

people make choices. Self-determination includes three types of motivation: amotivation, extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation. If on a continuum, amotivation would be on the far left as a non-regulatory, impersonal type of motivation. Amotivation was an unwillingness or state of being where one lacks the intention to act. The second motivation type is extrinsic motivation which included four types of regulatory styles: external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation. The third and final type of motivation was intrinsic motivation. The purpose of explaining SDT was to situate the various types of motivation that were used by different researchers in understanding motivations to enroll in higher education. See Table 1 for the self-determination continuum.

Table 1

Self-determination Continuum (adapted from Ryan and Deci, 2000)

Behavioral Spectrum						Self-determined
Motivation Type	Nonself-determined		Extrinsic Motivation			Intrinsic Motivation
Regulation Type	Non-regulatory	External Regulation	Introjected	Identified	Integrated	Intrinsic
Locus of Causality	Impersonal	External	Somewhat External	Somewhat Internal	Internal	Internal

Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais, Briere, Senecal, and Vallieres (1992) examined intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors in domestic students that focused on the underlying *why* of behavior to understand why students chose to enroll in university. Vallerand et al. defined extrinsic motivation as, “behaviors which are engaged in as a means to an end and not for their own sake” (p. 1006) and intrinsic motivation as, “doing

an activity for itself, and the pleasure and satisfaction derived from participation” (p. 1004). Participants in this study were asked to respond to a 28-item questionnaire by ranking their reasons for going to university. The study concluded with 745 university students from Ontario including 484 females and 261 male students with a mean age of 21 years old. Researchers found that the most important forms of motivation regulatory types for student enrollment were 1) *identification* – “because eventually it will allow me to enter the job market in a field that I like”, 2) *external regulation* – “in order to get a more prestigious job later on”, and 3) *intrinsic motivation to know* – “because I experience pleasure and satisfaction while learning new things.” (p. 1008). Although the top three regulatory types are the same for both males and females, the researchers found consistency with previous educational motivation research that suggests, “female students display a more self-determined motivational profile than male students” (p. 1015). The researchers suggested motivation to engage in university education goes beyond the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational forces and further innovative research is needed to fully understand the why of behavior for students engaging in university education. Further studies examining student motivation looked deeper into intrinsic and extrinsic factors for enrollment in higher education and focused specifically on international students such as the study conducted by Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, and Lynch (2007). This study examined the motivations for 122 international Chinese students who chose to study in international locales. Participants in this study were asked to complete a questionnaire on why they chose to study in Belgium or Canada. This study consisted of 66 male and 53 female participants with a mean age of 24.5 years old. The measurement used was the Self-Regulation Questionnaire – Study Abroad which includes four

subscales each with a five-point scale (p. 206). Researchers found that student motivation varied and often depended on a student's level of self-determination and economic presumptions. Some motivational types included *preservation*, *self-development*, *intrinsic regulation*, or *external regulation*. Preservation and self-development will be explained in the following section. These motivators were consistent with other researchers' findings (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Lesjak, Juvan, Ineson, Yap, & Axelsson, 2015; Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014; Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais, Briere, Senecal, & Vallieres, 1992) and could shed more light on the international student decision-making phenomenon to pursue higher education abroad.

Self-determination theory provided this study with a focal point of understanding motivation. Also, many of the motivational studies conducted on international students conclude that international student motives were related to SDT. The next sections highlighted research that discussed three of SDT regulatory types: identification/self-development, external regulation, and intrinsic motivation. The decision to highlight these regulatory types was based on the frequency of articles that discussed motivations to enroll in higher education. The exclusion of introjected and integrated was decided due to less frequency of research articles that discussed these topics in association with motivations to enroll in higher education.

Identification/Self-Development

Both identification and self-development have been studied and associated with motivational factors for higher education pursuit. The two terms denote a similar type of motivation and will be discussed as one in this section.

Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, and Lynch (2007) explained self-development as

situations when students internalize their choices to commit to an action such as the act of pursuing higher education abroad. Self-development is in pursuit of personal growth in abilities, knowledge and skill development. Similarly, Deci and Ryan (2008) discussed identification as a process that, “involves people accepting the importance of the behavior for themselves and thus accepting it as their own” and where people, “identify with the value of the activity and willingly accept responsibility” (p. 16). In addition, Ryan and Deci (2000) further clarified identification as a more autonomous form of extrinsic motivation where people have a personal and conscious valuing of an action or goal. This was consistent with Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais, Briere, Senecal, and Vallieres (1992) who examined domestic student motivation to pursue higher education and defined self-development as *identification*.

Chirkov et al. (2007) summarized that students pursuing a better education abroad were seeking more career opportunities and thus wanting to develop or prepare themselves for a better future. Self-development should not be confused with preservation factors. Self-development was the internalization of one’s actions for a better future. In comparison, Chirkov et al. defined preservation factors as the decision to study abroad to avoid disadvantageous physical, social and psychological conditions of one’s home country. With regards to international student motivational research few researchers have found international students’ motivation for pursuing higher education to be the result of preservation factors. It was important to mention preservation factors such as these may influence a student’s decision-making experience. However, the frequency of preservation factors found in motivational research had been limited.

Moreover, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) specifically focused on identifying how

influential the host country and host institution's environment acted as a motivating factor. Investigating deeper into the push-pull model, the Australian researchers conducted four country specific studies with a total student participation of 2,485. The students who participated in the studies were prospective international students from Indonesia, Taiwan, India, and China. The participants included both undergraduate and post-graduate students, age ranging from 16 to 64 years old, and 55% were female and 45% were males. The results from this study showed that international students were strongly motivated by self-development factors. First, students felt the host country offered a better education than that of the student's home country. Secondly, the cost of an international education in one country was deemed more desirable than that of another country. For instance, students were influenced by the part-time work opportunities in certain study destinations that could help offset tuition and living costs. The researchers mentioned that, "the importance of part-time work was substantially greater than the cost of fees, travel costs or living expenses" (p. 86). With regards to graduate students the researchers found that, "postgraduate students from India viewed part-time work as an essential part of their study program. Many seek an opportunity to work in a research laboratory during their studies to gain experience in their chosen fields" (p. 86). Thirdly, students wanted to gain a better understanding of the Western culture through international education. In this case students were more likely to study in a country that had a stronger reputation and presence in the students' home country through means of media, commercial goods, and global trade. Moreover, the authors explained why students chose a host country, particularly the US, by stating,

The better knowledge or awareness a student has of a particular host country, the

more likely they will select it as a study destination. This is not surprising and may explain why so many students from particular source countries choose to study where they do. A major factor in explaining the popularity of the USA as a host country for many of the world's international students is the general knowledge people through the world have of the USA. US domination of the world's media and news services in the second half the twentieth century has assisted in this process, as has film and television. (p. 88)

Another study that highlighted international student self-development as a motivator was conducted by Kim (2011). Kim's study sought to understand Korean students' preference to study in US graduate schools rather than Korean universities. Kim conducted in-depth interviews with 50 Korean graduate students enrolled in US research institutions. Many participants in this study were found to have self-development motivators. For example, a student offered, "anyone in Korea who aspires to climb the social ladder should pursue the US degree, despite its expense, to acquire necessary cultural capital" (p. 116). This student explained that in order to obtain certain cultural capital in Korea, one needed to have a PhD from the US. Kim further emphasized the student's comment by stating, "cultural capital means valued and exclusive cultural resources that enable one to signal, attain, or maintain, a certain type of social status or position" (p. 111). The student rationalized earning a PhD in the US by believing this would elevate her or his employability and occupational potential in the Korean economy. Other students mentioned that a Korean PhD is less valued than a PhD from the US. Therefore, in order to work as a professor or have preferential treatment in the Korean workplace, these students chose to earn a graduate-level degree in the US. The following was an excerpt

by a Korean student who gave her reasoning,

I'm going to get a PhD anyway. The degrees in both Korea and US are the same, but the results are so different. They treat you differently. When you get a job, even if you both have PhDs, the one with the US PhD receives better treatment.

So, if you're going to study anyway, why not do it in the US? (Kim, 2011, p. 115)

In sum, Kim found that Korean students recognized the value of a US degree and reported feeling pushed away from studying in Korea due to a devaluation of the Korean degree when compared to an equivalent US degree. In comparison, Korean students were pulled toward studying in the US due to the high value placed on a US degree by the Korean social, economic, and occupational markets.

Additionally, Han, Stocking, Gebbie, and Applebaum (2015) examined the reasons for why international graduate STEM students, from 32 different countries, pursued US higher education. The results indicated that international students viewed professional factors as more important than social and personal reasons in their decisions to pursue US graduate studies. Han et al. reported that professional factors included higher quality education and future career opportunities, 88% and 74%, respectively were influential in students' decision making (p. 8). Overall, Han et al. reported why students chose to pursue graduate studies in the US and found,

On a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high), students strongly believed that their U.S. education will provide them with a strong advantage in their careers (mean = 4.36, SE = 0.07). Large percentages of respondents believed that in comparison with their home country, a U.S. education provides better education/knowledge of their chosen field (83%), better professional network (73%), better

advisors/mentorship (70%), and better job opportunities (69%). (p.8)

In sum, the research regarding international student choice to pursue international higher education showed that self-development was an important motivator. Moreover, the research explained that self-development was an international student's internalized belief that engagement in international higher education, particularly in the US, would yield a better career outlook with more opportunities for personal, social, and occupational advancement. Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested that self-development had a somewhat internal perceived locus of causality but was not to be confused with intrinsic motivation which is discussed in the next section. Overall, further exploration into how international graduate learners made choices to commit to international education may result in a more holistic understanding on how students navigate current situations in order to project future goals and outcomes.

Although self-development, or identification, is an extrinsic motivator it differs from external regulation in that students internalized their decisions and could value the importance of the outcome. Self-development contributed to this study in that it helps explain how students could be extrinsically motivated but still maintain autonomy and control of their decisions.

External Regulation

Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, and Lynch (2007) defined external regulation as factors that motivated students to engage in international education in order to avoid punishment or external award by meeting the expectations of others. Ryan and Deci (2000) explained that extrinsically motivated behaviors are the least autonomous and individuals who are externally regulated act to satisfy an external demand, reward, or

avoid punishment. Ryan and Deci explained that the perceived locus of causality was completely external. In other words, this type of motivation is driven by the influence of people in students' social networks, particularly those in authoritative positions. Students found to be influenced by external regulation were often externally motivated by social influences. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) defined social factors that influenced motivation as *social links*. Students in this study were found to sometimes have followed recommendations from friends but more often followed parental preference when choosing a study destination. In fact, parental preference was more influential on student choice regardless of how strong the student's attraction was to a particular host country. Moreover, the researchers emphasized how important parental influences and parental perspectives of study destinations were for some students by mentioning that,

Young female students from Indonesia indicated that they had been sent to Australia by their parents, even though they would have preferred to go to the USA. They explained that their parents thought Australia was 'safe' and less likely to offer the girls 'undesirable influences' that might be found in California. Most hoped to go to the USA as postgraduates. (p. 89)

External regulation was also identified in a study conducted by Kim (2011). In this study, Korean students were found to have followed their parents' expectations for a quality education by enrolling in US graduate programs. Parental expectations were grounded in a long-held belief in the prestige of US higher education. Han, Stocking, Gebbie, and Applebaum (2015), applied the push-pull model to international STEM students. Han et al., surveyed 166 international graduate students from 32 different countries enrolled in graduate STEM programs in the US. Han et al. also found that

international students were heavily influenced by personal recommendations of friends, family, and professors when choosing a host institution. These reviewed studies on international graduate students enrolled in US higher education, revealed that social links play an important role in an international student's decision-making experience.

The importance of reviewing external regulation is to identify how external motivation can impact student decision-making. As the studies have shown, international students were influenced by people in their lives to pursue higher education abroad, so much that the autonomy and control was not possessed by only the student. This informed the study by demonstrating the complex decision-making experience some students encounter. While conducting interviews with students this research was mindful to differentiating the diverse types of motivation students experienced.

Intrinsic Regulation

Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, and Lynch (2007) defined intrinsic regulation as factors influencing students who engaged in studying abroad for the sake of interest and enjoyment. Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais, Briere, Senecal, and Vallieres (1992), who investigated domestic student choice to pursue higher education, defined intrinsic motivation as, "the fact of doing an activity for itself, and the pleasure and satisfaction derived from participate" (p. 1004). Deci and Ryan (2008) suggested individuals who are intrinsically motivated engaged in activities because the activity itself was interesting or satisfying and had resulted in positive feelings from the activity.

In practice, Lesjak, Juvan, Ineson, Yap, and Axelsson (2015) applied the push-pull model to 360 male and female international exchange students, age 19-32, from 26 European countries. The authors found distinct differences in motivational factors for

European students involved in the ERASMUS (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) exchange program in Europe when compared to European students studying in North America. The authors reported that international students studying in Europe were pulled to experience leisure and vacation related desires whereas those pulled to North America were influenced by job opportunities.

In comparison, and in reference to the previous self-development section, a majority of the studies have shown that international students are focused on career and professional advancement rather than engaging in higher education for the sake of pure interest or enjoyment. However, as educational motivation research used a quantitative research approach, often in the form of survey questionnaires with prescribed motivational factors, there was little opportunity for international students to identify intrinsic motivational factors such as curiosity, satisfaction, pleasure, or excitement. Similarly, preservation factors also had been absent from survey questionnaires thus not allowing international students to truly identify their motivation factors. In other words, in review of international student motivation and mobility research, survey questions often do not provide international students with an opportunity to explain the multitude of factors that influenced their international higher education choice. The study conducted by Lesjak et al. (2015) explained that many European students described wanting to pursue international higher education in neighboring European countries due to a desire for adventure opportunities, leisure-vacation related desires, compulsory requirement for degree, or wanting to experience something new. On the other hand, European students who opted to study in the US did not share the same intrinsic motivations. Therefore, further research should not limit students from opportunities to fully describe their

educational motives especially with the possibility of intrinsic motives. Furthermore, Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested that research in intrinsic motivation should examine supportive conditions that elicited and sustained intrinsic motivation rather than identifying solely what caused intrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation was important to this study because it refers to how people pursued education for the sake of pure interest or enjoyment. This differs from what had traditionally been understood about international student motivation enrollment in international higher education. This informed the study because it provided an opportunity for the research to uncover an area of motivation that was less explored or least discussed.

Adult Motivation in Education/Learning

In the US the legal age of adulthood is 18 years old. However, in adult education literature, adulthood was not only determined by one's age but included a range of factors. For instance, Elias and Merriam (2005) suggested that adulthood was not only one's age but rather one's psychological maturity and social roles. Furthermore, Merriam and Bierema (2014) described adults as having greater life experiences for which they make more complicated choices, such as the choice to seek higher education. Adults who chose to engage in education made a conscious choice to do so. Therefore, to ascertain why international graduate students enroll in US higher education the discussion began with understanding adult motivation in education and learning.

Regarding motivation, Knowles (1989) has suggested that adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own lives and when necessary would become ready to learn things they need to know in order to effectively cope with real-life situations. The

following section explored adult motivational theory in order to give a thorough basis for why adults engaged in education. Also, the section provided opportunities to further recognize what influenced and under what conditions adults chose to enroll in education.

Motivation for Learning in Adulthood

In striving to understand what motivated adult international learners to enroll in US higher education, it was important to review the adult education literature regarding what motivates adult learners to pursue education. To start, Houle (1996) defined adult education as, “the process by which men and women (alone, in groups, or in institutional settings) seek to improve themselves or their society by increasing their skill, knowledge, or sensitiveness” (p. 41). Moreover, Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback (2002) proposed that adult learners decided to enroll in college due to a multitude of reasons including but not limited to the desire to create new occupational opportunities, personal development, or economic security. Also, the authors found that most adults attribute their decisions to enroll in higher education to wanting a better career and/or to improve one’s family’s financial future. Jacobs and Hundley (2010) explained that adult learners entered higher education with more fully formed ideas and values based from more life experiences. Therefore, adults were more goal oriented than adolescent learners and often sought relevant practical application from content learned in education.

I began this discussion on adult motivation for learning in adulthood with Houle (1961), who conducted interviews with 22 adult participants, with the aim to uncover what motivated these participants to enroll in education. The study found that all participants varied in their motivations to learn, but Houle grouped adults into three motivational orientations. These three motivational orientations included adults who were

goal-oriented, activity-oriented, and learning-oriented. Houle found that adults who are goal-oriented do a great deal of reading and engaged in education based on the need to satisfy an interest, goal, or to solve a problem. Adults who were activity-oriented did little reading and thus their reasons for enrolling in education were typically unrelated to the content in which they were enrolled. Those adults chose to engage in education in order to obtain social contact. Houle explained that activity-oriented adults enrolled in education in order to avoid loneliness by socializing with others. Learning-oriented adults engaged in education because they enjoyed reading and engaged in education for the sake of learning with a real desire to know. Similarly, Boshier (1971) was interested in expanding Houle's work on motivational orientations of adult education participants. He conducted a study using the Education Participation Scale that was administered to 233 adults who were enrolled in non-vocational university extension adult education courses. Boshier hypothesized 14 motivational factors (i.e. social welfare, social contact, educational preparedness, intellectual recreation) that was later grouped into two categories of defining adult motivation. These include adults who were deficiency motivated and desired homeostasis, the need for equilibrium and balance, or adults who were growth motivated and desired heterostasis the need for change and growth. Boshier's deficiency and growth motivation model provided a clear dichotomy of why adults pursue education.

In order to analyze Boshier's model further I examined Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback's (2002) work that identified three initial motivators for adult entry into higher education, 1) personal transition and changes, 2) proactive life planning, or 3) a mixture of both personal transition and proactive planning. The first motivator, *personal*

transition and changes, described motivations that learners made when deciding to enroll in higher education as a reaction to personal life events. In other words, adult learners were pushed into higher education as a result to changes in their world. In comparison, the second motivator *proactive life planning* refers to individuals who intentionally and purposefully made decisions to create changes in their lives by seeking new opportunities through engagement in higher education. The authors explained that students who were proactive in their decision-making would be well-focused, thinking about the benefits and rewards of their actions. In comparison, the student who was pushed into higher education due to life changes would need more encouragement and support as the student would often experience more challenges with academic persistence. The third motivator occurred when adults exhibited both personal transition and proactive life planning. These learners' desired to change their social circumstances as a result of both external pressures and proactive planning of life priorities.

This section provided a broadened baseline for understanding why adults were motivated to learn in adulthood. Houle (1961) explained that adults desired knowledge but possess varying and sometimes overlapping motivational orientations. Boshier (1971) explained that beyond goal, activity, and learning motivational orientations adults were conflicted with innate behavioral tensions that required adults to seek satisfaction. These behavioral tensions were based on the dichotomic motivational view where adults were either deficiency or growth motivated. In either instance, adults sought education to obtain a goal. Finally, Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback (2002) explained a step further in more practical terms by suggesting that adults engaged in education as a reaction to an external experience or were proactively preparing for the future. The authors reminded

educators that it was imperative to identify and understand the complexities and changes in adult goals and motives for engaging in education. With regards to international graduate learners the descriptions provide aided in the investigation into why and how international graduate learner chose to pursue higher education in the US.

Houle (1961) emphasizes that, “the desire to learn, like every other human characteristic, is not shared equally by everyone” (p. 3). Houle’s statement informed this study because it reiterated that each adult learner possessed her or his individual reasons for engaging in education. The individual decision-making experience of each adult learner should not be taken for granted. It was important to incorporate motivation for learning in adulthood because this study conducted interviews with international adults engaged in graduate education. International adults possessed unique life experiences that had resulted in the decision to enroll in US higher education.

Adult Participation in Learning

Looking beyond motivations for learning in adulthood I examined additional factors that impacted adult participation in learning. Cross (1981) created a chain-of-response (COR) model that was used for understanding the decision-making process of adults participating in adult learning activities. Cross explained the COR model with,

It assumes that participation in a learning activity, whether in organized classes or self-directed, is not a single act but the result of a chain of responses each based on an evaluation of the position of the individual in his or her environment. This conception of behavior as a constantly flowing stream rather than a series of discrete events. (p. 125)

Cross’ model consisted of seven points that included 1) self-evaluation, 2) attitudes about

education, 3) life transitions, 4) importance of goals and expectation that participation will meet those goals, 5) opportunities and barriers, 6) information, and 7) participation. Adults contemplate engaging in adult learning during stages 1, 2, and sometimes 3 before deciding whether or not she or he is suitable to engage in education. Stage 1 occurred when adults evaluate her or his own ability to be successful in education. This stage was often coupled with stage 2 where adults consider her or his past positive or negative experiences with school and education. Stage 3 was the consideration of life transitions where some, though not all, adults experienced sudden or dramatic changes such as a divorce or loss of job. Therefore, for some adults, stage 3 was where one decided whether or not now was the right time to engage in adult learning. Stage 1, 2, and 3 all interacted to impact stage 4 where the adult decided based on ability, past experiences, and current environment whether or not engaging in adult learning would likely enable the adult to achieve a goal. Cross explained that adults who were highly motivated would progress to stage 5 and would use their strong motivation to overcome any reasonable barriers to participating in learning. Adults with lower levels of motivation were likely to be inhibited from participating in learning due to barriers. Barriers can include time, family obligations, work schedule, and availability of courses. Adults who persisted to stage 6 occurred when the adult seeks out accurate information on participating in learning. Cross explained that if information was scarce, this too then became a barrier for those who were weakly motivated and consequently would preclude any participation in learning. Given the first 5 stages, if an adult found relevant information the adult was likely to participate in learning. Overall, Cross acknowledges that the model overemphasizes the linearity of adult decision-making but argued that it does provide

understanding for the nature of adult participation in learning as well as factors that may influence choices for or against learning.

Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback (2002) discussed six essential decision-making forces that influenced adult participation in higher education. These included *work*, *family*, *finances*, *community*, *student*, and *self*. During the decision-making process, adult learners often contemplated their abilities to engage in learning along with their abilities to maintain life roles. The authors found that for adult learners, *work* was most often reported as the strongest force motivating adult learners to participate in college. Whether it was seeking a promotion or obtaining a new job, the motivator of work was strong amongst adult learners. *Family* roles were important as most adults had, “primary responsibility for supporting and nurturing personal relationships with their spouses, their children, their parents, and significant others” (p. 30-31). The authors explained that adults often negotiated family role expectations and time commitments to family relationships. The time that was required to be committed to education may be taken away from family roles. The third influence was *financial responsibilities* which included financial concerns such as savings, material costs for school, utility bills, and emergency funds. These financial concerns were weighed by adult learners who evaluated their abilities to remain financially stable while enrolled in higher education. The fourth influence is *community* where the adult was a member of a community and the engagement in higher education would reduce her or his ability to stay actively involved in community activities. On the other hand, the adult learner would seek out higher education to garner knowledge or skills that could be brought back and benefit her or his community. An adult learner’s role in community would require sacrifice and could

displace one's role in the community. The fifth influence was the *student role* where adult learners must consider the impact of being a student and the time commitments of assignments or participation in class. Moments spent in higher education would be sacrificed from other aspects of the adult learner's life, and in return affect her or his balance of work, family, and other social responsibilities. The final influence was the *responsibility to self* where adult learners contemplated sacrifices to their own personal needs in order to meet the demands of being enrolled in higher education. Often these sacrifices manifested in health, nutrition, sleep, emotions, social engagement, and changing perspectives on what was important.

These six key decision forces emphasized the impact of enrolling in higher education had on adult learners. Therefore, understanding how adult learners navigated and negotiated their life roles when engaged in the decision-making process informed this study because it underscored the importance of specific forces that affected adult learners. Applying these forces to international adult learners provided a further appreciation of how and why international adult learners made decision to engage in US higher education. Since adult learners participated in many diverse life roles the absence of those roles when discussing international motivational factors was concerning. It was important to consider the lived experiences of adult learners including the social sacrifices an adult international student made to study in the US.

Cost-Benefit Analysis Theory

Gary Becker was a behavioral economist who researched human capital specifically focused on the cost-benefit analysis in understanding human behavior and the choices people made. Becker (1964) explained that education was a type of investment in

people and was one of many “activities that influence future monetary and psychic income by increasing the resources in people. These activities were called investments in human capital” (p. 11). Becker understood that students may have had a variety of choices when choosing what to do after high school. What he found was that students often weighed several life factors before choosing to invest in higher education. According to Becker, students who made decisions about higher education enrollment were doing so with a cost-benefit analysis perspective in mind. This meant that students considered the cost of 1) attending a four-year institution, 2) the cost of attending and commuting to a community college or 3) the cost of working full-time. With each option students would bear in mind the out-of-pocket expenses such as cost of living, cost of tuition, and the cost of foregone earnings while attending school full-time. Castleman, Schwartz, and Baum (2015) expanded on Becker’s work and used the cost-benefit analysis theory to understand how decision-making occurs at a simple economic-behavioral level. This theory described a dichotomy between cost and the perceived benefit of education. In cases where the cost of education exceeded the benefits, students were less likely to enroll. For instance, the authors found that lower income families considered the cost of going to college outweighed the benefits, and thus students from lower-income families were less likely to enroll (despite more federal and state level financial aid distribution to lower income families). In situations where the belief of benefits of higher education exceeded the cost, students were more likely to enroll. The cost-benefit analysis at its core attempted to show a relationship between two variables. The authors suggested that the cost-benefit analysis alone does not represent the entire decision-making experience but rather incorporates behavioral economics, social and

cognitive psychology, and even neuroscience in order to highlight how students made decisions. The authors continued to discuss possible connections between the future goals that students had and their willingness to invest in their future. Castleman, Schwartz, and Baum (2015) suggested that the absence of financial aid from higher education would result in students from low-income families concluding that the cost of higher education exceeded the benefits and thus may choose to not enroll. While the research on cost-benefit analysis for educational investments by Castleman, Schwartz, and Baum focused on decision-making by prospective undergraduate students, cost-benefit analyses would also influence international graduate students' decisions. According to the 2018 *Open Doors Report*, 34% of international graduate students reported that tuition assistance from US institutions was their primary source of funding. The cost-benefit analysis theory suggested that students weighed the cost of education and the perceived benefit education may provide. This theory was important to understanding how international students examined their own lives in pursuit of US higher education.

The cost-benefit analysis informed this study by providing an economical perspective on how people made decisions about education despite one's financial situation. This analysis provided a specific review of how finances could influence one's motivation to pursue education. The cost-benefit analysis was important to incorporate in this study because, as explained in the process of becoming a nonimmigrant international student, there were several significant costs that international learners paid prior to enrolling in US higher education.

Motivation and Culture

Ginsberg (2015) suggested that there is an inseparable connection between the

motivation to learn and one's culture. The author explained that motivation was the convergence of language, values, beliefs, and behaviors that made up every aspect of an individual's life. Through the socialization of culture, students learn specific orientations towards education and learning. Some cultures dictated who was allowed access to education, whereas others have unrestricted freedom for education regardless of gender, race, physical ability, or age. Ginsberg suggested remembering US history with regards to access to education and the right to learn. She explained that most people are only a few generations removed from legally sanctioned educational segregation, discrimination, assimilation, and other forms of marginalization that have been used as methods to perpetuate the dominant Anglo-American hegemonic culture.

Other countries have also had challenges with unequal access to higher education. For instance, Villalobos, Treviño, Wyman, and Scheele (2017) discuss the historic challenges Latin American countries had with higher education admission inequalities. For instance, Villalobos et al. explained that the Brazilian higher education system was predominantly privately owned and accounted for 73% of the total student enrollment in higher education in Brazil. The authors detailed that student success on the Brazilian entrance exam, Vestibular, was highly correlated with the quality of private secondary institutions or attendance to preparatory courses both which are paid for by the families of students. Therefore, attending private institutions and preparatory courses continued to be a barrier for socioeconomically disadvantaged families. As a result, only 5.4% of the poorest population quintile participated in higher education. The authors further discussed despite almost half of Brazil's population being composed of Black (pretos) or mixed (pardos) ethnic descent, this population's enrollment in higher education remains

minimal. A similar study on college access in China by Li, Wu, Loyalka, Rozelle, and Xie (2015) examined college access for students from rural counties compared to students from urban counties. The authors explained that historically, college access in China was extremely limited in the 1990s where the total enrollment rate for college was only 3.4%. In comparison during the same time China's enrollment rate was significantly lower than developed countries such as the US (71%) and developing countries such as Brazil (11%). Li et al. found that in the 2000s students from rural counties were five times less likely to participate in college entrance exams, eight times less likely to access any college, and eight times less likely to access four-year colleges when compared to students from urban counties. The authors explained that students from rural counties had fewer resources to prepare for China's competitive high school and college entrance exams. Also, rural households had fewer financial means to pay for the rising tuition rates. According to Villalobos et al. and Li et al. both Brazil and China have recently recognized college access inequities and have instituted quota systems that sought to increase the participation rate of socioeconomically and socially disadvantaged students in higher education. In comparison, according to the Finnish National Agency for Education, the Finnish education system contains educational policies that emphasized equal opportunities for all citizens to receive high-quality education. The Finnish educational policy was so connected to the country's culture that the basic right to education was even recorded in the Finnish Constitution. As a result, the Finnish government believed in the principles of lifelong learning and free education.

Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017) described what people learn in their cultural groups deeply impacted their perceptions and interactions with their social environment.

Moreover, the authors explained motivation and culture,

We are the history of our lives, and our motivation is inseparable from our learning, which is inseparable from our cultural experience. Being motivated means being purposeful. We use attention, concentration, imagination, passion, and other processes to pursue goals, such as learning a particular subject or completing a degree. How we arrive at our goals and how processes such as our passion for a subject take share are, to some extent, culturally bound to what we have learned in our families and communities. (p. 3)

Motivation and culture informed this study by discussing how an individual's motivation toward education could be influenced by her or his culture. Moreover, the three country examples provided a brief overview on how different countries viewed college access and the right to learn. When examining student decision-making Ginsberg (2015) suggested to critically evaluate the impact culture had on one's perception, understanding, and engagement with education. This was especially true when trying to uncover the decision-making experience and the *why* and *how* international graduate learners sought US higher education. It was important to examine motivation as it related to culture because often international students were seen as one unit with no regard to diversity in cultural backgrounds, gender, and age, which inherently impacts one's expectation, desires, and will towards education.

Synthesis of Theories

The inclusion of various theories informed this study by providing a thorough and broad review of international student motivation and decision-making. I began this literature review by examining the historical importance of the push-pull model. Much

research to date had explained that international students were motivated by push and pull factors in both the home and host country. I moved from the push-pull model to identify more specifically about motivation using the self-determination theory (SDT). Under SDT, I highlighted the three most common motivation regulatory types found in research describing international student motivation which were external regulation, self-development/identification, and intrinsic motivation. Understanding how motivation impacted adult learners, I inspected motivation for learning in adulthood and adult participation in learning. Finally, I concluded my theoretical investigation with the cost-benefit analysis as well as motivation and culture.

Each of these theories emphasized an element of the theoretical framework that guided this study. For instance, the push-pull model suggested there were motivational factors that pushed and pulled students from a home country to a host country. Push and pull factors existed in both the home and host country. Self-determination theory (SDT) differentiated motivation types and suggested that the right type of motivation, under the right conditions, could cause action. SDT challenged conventional notions that often argued the right amount of motivation influenced behavior. Moreover, adult motivation theories explained that motivational factors, push and pull, can be personal, social, occupational, cultural, economic, and environmental. These factors combined would either create or inhibit supportive conditions where students embraced the opportunity to pursue international higher education. In other words, it was important to understand the decision to engage in US higher education was not a singular decision but rather a collection of decisions that occurred over time. Motivational types such as intrinsic and extrinsic further explored the degree of autonomy and control one had over one's own

decision to study in the US. This was important to recognize as some students collectively made choices with their families when deciding to pursue US graduate studies.

Combined, these theories helped situate the importance of Chen's (2007) synthesis model. Chen's model included three stages where at each stage students experienced a variety of social factors that interacted with a student's own personal and social characteristics. In sum, understanding the holistic decision-making experiences of international adult learners warranted a robust review of diverse theories. These theories were carefully selected due to level of frequency and use by other related researchers. Additionally, these theories were believed to have contributed the best in understanding international adult learners and their engagement in US graduate education.

Discussion

The 2018 *Open Doors Report* showed 1,049,792 international students engaged in US institutions of higher education during the 2017-2018 academic year. Despite being the largest number of international students in the US in history there remained gaps in understanding why and how international adult learners decided to study in the US. Studies investigating international student motivation had most widely used surveys and questionnaires in order to assess what motivates students to seek international education. However, understanding these factors alone did not describe holistically the complexity of international student mobility to the US. The lack in understanding brought challenges for practitioners looking to recruit and engage with students from around the world. International student motivation was still not well understood outside the push-pull factors that focus on larger economic or geopolitical frames. A deeper investigation into

individual experiences and decision-making helped uncover the complex motives and influences that had yet to be discovered. One way of uncovering deeper meaning of the international graduate students enrolled in US higher education phenomenon was to examine the decision-making experiences of international graduate students throughout the different stages of decision making. This literature review had demonstrated that motivational factors are diverse and infinite; however, a holistic examination of the decision-making experiences of international graduate students was lacking.

To investigate an international learner's motives and decision-making experiences to pursue US higher education it was important to understand the historical and cultural background of a student. Understanding a student's social background helped researchers uncover what students endured when navigating the decision-making experience. Additionally, reviewing historical data of international student mobility trends was important to understand how the landscape of international education had become and where international education in the US may be headed.

Furthermore, the few studies conducted on international student motivation have relied heavily upon quantitative research and survey analyses in attempt to quantify international student motivation from larger social, political, and economic factors. Specifically, Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, and Lynch (2007) used questionnaires and investigated the role of motivational factors from 122 students and their decision to pursue international education. Similarly, Han, Stocking, Gebbie, and Applebaum (2015) used online surveys and examined factors that influenced 166 international students' decision to pursue science, engineering, technology, and math education in the US. Also, Park (2009) used two questionnaire surveys and analyzed 1,359 questionnaires in order to

understand the dynamics of Korean national student mobility. Lastly, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) conducted three studies that surveyed a total of 2,485 international student and investigated factors that influenced an international student's choice to study in the US. Each of these studies used a push-pull model because it identified macro-level factors that influenced motivation. However, the challenge with framing motivation and decision-making research with this model alone was that it can over-simplify international student motivation and a student's decision-making experience by focusing on larger economic factors that would not be applicable to all students from a given country. Moreover, an individual student's intrinsic or extrinsic motives combined with the student's perception of his or her home country, and expectation for the future contributed to a student's decision-making experience. Furthermore, the use of the push-pull model had mostly been utilized in exploring large scale international student mobility. More often than not, the model was used to generalize international student motivation rather than creating theoretical propositions that aimed to understand the variables influencing an international student's decision to enroll as well as the student's experience in choosing to pursue US higher education. According to Lee (2008),

Although this [push-pull] model has helped to identify some of the larger social, political, and economic factors that contributed to the global imbalance of student flows, the way these forces interacted within the individual process was highly speculative. In other words, despite its appeal, the push-pull model did not fully account for an individual's background, information sources, and reasons for choosing a particular institution. As such, more empirically based research was needed to better understand and address shifting international enrollment rates in

the US and elsewhere. (p. 232)

Consequently, scarce qualitative research existed that examined international student decision-making experiences and how motivational factors influenced students to study in the US. Additionally, understanding the individual student's background with regards to family, culture, self-efficacy (Kim & Park, 2006) as well as gender, familial education, social class, and language ability (Lee, 2008) had been absent from most international student motivation research. Understanding these factors would better inform US institutions of higher education and international educators looking to recruit and support international student populations. The contribution of investigating the decision-making experiences of international students provided US institutions with a competitive advantage over other international education markets in Europe, Canada, and Australia. In addition, with a better understanding of the holistic decision-making process, international educators would have opportunities to assist future prospective international students navigating US higher education enrollment successfully.

Chapter Summary

In this literature review, I identified theories that described international student motivation to enroll in international educational institutions. Despite the lack of information available on international student decision-making processes or steps, historical and motivational research provided substantial information that guided this qualitative study investigating international graduate student decision-making experiences to enroll in US higher education.

The analysis of the literature indicated that the push-pull model was the most prolific framework used to understand international student motivation. However, the use

of the push-pull model had been adapted in ways that quantify large numbers of international students from various countries and created a collective motivational experience without regard to country of origin, age, gender, culture, religion, familial education, socio-economics, class, language, employment history, and many other social identities and demographics. Few studies had undertaken a phenomenological approach focused on in-depth interviews with select international graduate learners. Also, due to the complexity of international student motivation, research needed to move towards uncovering the personal and individual motives influencing international students to make decisions about studying in the US. This shift towards examining an individual's decision-making experience proved to be beneficial in understanding the interactions between information sources and choices made by international students who attended US institutions. The available push-pull research on motivating factors provided the framework from which research could examine how motivational factors influenced decision-making. In addition, using the theory of planned behavior helped uncover how students made decisions based on their personal perspectives and external influences. By examining the entire decision-making experience, this research aimed to fill a void that was lacking in previous examinations of the decision-making experience. In other words, motivating factors were a piece to the experience, but there was still much to be researched regarding how students choose to study in the US. The conversation needed to utilize the lived experiences and stories of new international students. These powerful stories better inform practitioners looking to recruit and support international student growth and development on US campuses.

III. Research Design and Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the holistic motivations and decision-making experiences of new international graduate learners who made conscious decisions to engage in US higher education. More specifically, this study was interested in understanding the phenomenon that existed within the decision-making experiences of new international graduate students who chose to study in the US. Creswell (2009) suggested that in a qualitative study, the research questions should ask for an exploration of a central phenomenon. Therefore, the research questions for this study were:

1. Why do international graduate learners choose to enroll in US higher education?
2. What is the decision-making experience of international graduate learners who chose to enroll in US higher education?

The methodology that was discussed in this chapter describes the research questions, research design, research perspective, setting, participants, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design. Merriam (2009) suggested that qualitative research was interested in “understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). The use of a qualitative research approach was appropriate to investigate, understand, and describe how international graduate students interpreted their decision-making experiences to pursue higher education in the US. In order to explore the lived experiences of international graduate students’ decision-making experiences to

enroll in US higher education I used phenomenological inquiry. Creswell (2006) described the importance of using this inquiry approach, as a “phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57). Moreover, Van Manen (1990) explained that phenomenological research was not interested in modern truths gathered by categorizing or reducing a phenomenon, but rather phenomenological research was concerned with examining and interpreting the lived experiences of individuals as articulated by those who have lived the experience. This interpretive process was reflective and allowed for new meaning to be constructed and brought into consciousness. Therefore, this study used phenomenological inquiry to bring to light the lived experiences of new international graduate learners enrolling in US higher education for the first time.

Research Perspective

According to Crotty (2010), there were four basic elements to any research process which included the epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods. Crotty reminded researchers of their inherent basic assumptions about the reality in which they live, and thus it was by examining this reality that one could begin to uncover a deeper and more sound understanding of what they wished to research. Therefore, in conducting this research it was important to define these four elements.

Crotty (2010) defined epistemology as the theory of knowledge or, “a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know” (p. 3). I viewed this study through a constructionist epistemological lens. Constructionism was concerned with meaning making and suggested that meaning was not waiting to be discovered but rather it is constructed out of interactions between people and their world. I believe that the

meaning behind one's decision-making experience was constructed through individuals' experiences and interactions with others and her or his environment.

The theoretical framework that was used in this study was the synthesis model by Chen (2007). Chen's synthesis model was a three-stage process that examined international students' choices to pursue graduate education outside their home country. The three stages in this model included, the *predisposition stage*, the *search/selection/application stage*, and finally the *choice stage*. Throughout the three stages student characteristics, personal motivations, career-related factors, academic-related factors, and significant others influenced decision-making. Furthermore, the methodological approach that was used is constructionist phenomenology. Crotty (2010) suggested that in constructionist research, "all reality, as meaningful reality, is socially constructed" (p. 54). Regarding this study, as international students engaged in the decision-making experience to study in the US, their reality or interpretation of that decision-making experience was diverse but were not any more or less true as compared to the interpretations of other international students who also engaged the decision-making experience. The choice to conduct a phenomenological study, then, was to describe the lived experiences of people as they interacted with their worlds (Merriam, 2009). Phenomenology was appropriate for this study because this research aimed to describe the common experience of new international graduate learners and their decision-making experiences.

Patton (2002) explained that a phenomenological study was concerned with describing the essence of an experience of a given phenomenon. Additionally, Patton added that the focus of these studies was on descriptions of the lived experience.

Moreover, the emphasis was to describe and interpret one's experience in order to obtain the basic underlying meaning of that experience. According to Crotty (2010), phenomenology required researchers to be aware of and recognize their own assumptions and personal biases. Also, researchers must examine the world afresh while seeking a reinterpretation of reality in order to create new meaning.

Crotty (2010) defined a methodology as the strategy behind the methods that linked the methods to a desired research outcome. In other words, the methodology could be understood as the rationale for selecting a particular method. Creswell (2013) explained that a phenomenological study was concerned with describing the common meaning of several individuals' lived experiences. Van Manen (2016) labeled the aims of phenomenology as describing and interpreting lived experiences.

The purpose of choosing phenomenology as a method enabled me to examine the lived experiences of international students and their decision to study in the US. Examining a phenomenon this way allowed me to describe the lived experience as it was and interpret the meaning of this collective experience as described by the participants.

Setting

The setting was in US public higher education institutions in Central Texas. Since this study was examining graduate learners enrolled in higher education, interviews were conducted at times and locations convenient for the participants. Participants were contacted in advanced to schedule a date and time that was appropriate for their schedules, at a location that was easily accessible and conducive for audio recording of the interviews.

Participants

Merriam (2009) suggested that there is no perfect sample size but rather sampling should cease once the data gathered become redundant. The choice in the number of participants was based on the work by Bobby (2016) who investigated qualitative sample size. The author found that sample size had many dependent variables such as research paradigm, population homogeneity, and time spent with each participant. Moustakas (1994) suggested that phenomenological research was best conducted with the use of at least six participants. Creswell (2013) added that a sample size should consist of a group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon. Creswell further mentioned that a heterogeneous group can vary in size from three to four or ten to fifteen. Finally, Seidman (2006) posited that a sample size reaches enough participants when two criteria are met. First, sufficiency, meaning there are sufficient number of participants to reflect a population. Second, saturation of information, which is defined as the point at which the research is no longer learning anything new. Based on the recommendations of the aforementioned methodologists, this study included two 60-minute interviews, per participant, with nine new international graduate learners enrolled in a public higher education institution in Central Texas. Overall, I collected 18 in-depth interviews, two interviews per participant, which allowed me to reach data saturation. My aim was to recruit 4-5 male and 4-5 female volunteers who were at least 25+ years of age with a total of 8-10 participants.

Only qualified participants who met specific criteria were asked to participate in this study. Study inclusion criteria required that each participant be enrolled as a full-time, degree-seeking international graduate student on an F-1 nonimmigrant student visa at the time of the interview. Also, participants must have not previously engaged in any

secondary or post-secondary education in the US prior to their current degree.

Given cultural differences based on geographical location, this study focused on identifying male and female participants from the same country with an overall diverse country representation including participants from different parts of Asia. According to the 2018 *Open Doors Report*, students from Asia represented nearly 47% of all international students in the state of Texas and 66% of all international students in the US. Since the interviews were conducted in English, each participant was required to have a mastery level of English proficiency. To meet these criteria, participants' admissions to a graduate program at a US higher education institution was used as evidence of English proficiency sufficient for participation in an interview conducted in English. Students who received conditional admission due to English proficiency or who were required to complete English language training prior to the start of taking degree courses were not considered for this research study.

Graduate students were asked to participate in this study as this research sought to understand the decision-making experiences of adult learners. Adult learners are unique because they, "seek out, enter, and participate in college because of their needs and their key life roles, and because they value collegiate knowledge for their future" (Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002, p. 2). The 2018 *Open Doors Report* shows that 35% of international students enrolled were graduate students in comparison to 40% undergraduate students. In the US, the legal age of adulthood is 18 years old. However, Elias and Merriam (2005) suggested that adulthood was not only defined by one's age but rather one's psychological maturity and social roles. In addition, Merriam and Bierema (2014) suggested that defining adulthood was complicated but adults were individuals

who are in a different lifecycle than that of a child, and adults have greater life experiences that were rich resources for learning. Therefore, it was the assumption of this research that graduate students would have richer life experiences that would help to better examine and understand their decision-making experiences.

This study sought participants that were majoring in one of the top three fields of study: engineering, math and computer science, or business and management. The purpose for selecting students in these fields of study was to garner a sample population that was consistent with the overall international student population. According to the 2018 *Open Doors Report*, nearly 56% of all international graduate students in the US are enrolled in one of these three fields of study. I recruited students who were newly arrived in the US and who had not lived in US for more than one year. It was my assumption that participants who had resided in the US for less than one year were more likely to better reflect and articulate their decision-making experiences, in comparison to students who had resided in the US for longer than one year. Participant demographics were collected and included the following: name (chosen pseudonym), age, country of birth and citizenship, academic level, enrollment status, field of study, length of time in the US, native language (and all spoken languages), length of time studying English, visa classification, and location of secondary and post-secondary education.

Sampling. Criterion sampling was determined to be the most appropriate sampling method because it allowed for research to be conducted with participants from a specific population that met certain criterion (Given, 2008). Given explained that this sampling method was a strategic choice with the goal of narrowing a population to represent a situation that was under-investigated. Additionally, Merriam (2009) posited

that criterion-based sampling included creating a list of participant characteristics that must be met for an individual to qualify for participation in the study. The choice for a criterion-based sampling was to help bind the population that was studied. The method for recruitment involved sending a link to an online fillable questionnaire to International Student and Scholar Service Offices at two public institutions of higher education in Central Texas, requesting that the questionnaire be forwarded to international graduate student populations. The questionnaire introduced students to the purpose of this study regarding international student decision-making. Students were asked to complete a short questionnaire that captured participant demographic information as outlined in the previous section. In addition, contact information, such as phone number and email, were collected in order to contact qualified participants about participating in this study. Completed questionnaires were screened by the researcher with the aim to identify qualified participants that met the study's inclusion criteria. Participants were notified by email that they were invited to participate in the research study. Participants selected to participate in the study received a gift card upon completing both interviews. The researcher chose qualified participants in the order that they completed the questionnaire. Had a participant dropped out of the study then the next qualified participant, based on order of completed questionnaires, would have been contacted to join the study.

Data Collection

The methods for data collection was two 60-minute face-to-face interviews, with each participant, in person. Two interviews per participant was decided based on using the synthesis model from Chen (2007). The first interview examined the predisposition stage and the second interview explored the search and choice stages of the synthesis

model. Each 60-minute interview took place at a location that was convenient to the participant. Each interview was conducted by the researcher and digitally recorded so that the conversation could be transcribed verbatim at a later time.

English had been chosen as the interview language because participants would have demonstrated their English proficiency by being admitted to a graduate program in the US. In the event participants code-switched between their native language and English, I would have encouraged participants to describe to the best of their ability in English the meaning of their thoughts. I then provided a written transcript to the participants of their individual interviews in order for them to make any updates/clarifications/revisions as they may deem necessary. Riessman (2008) suggested that repeated interviews allow for deeper meaning to be revealed. Multiple interactions were more beneficial than a one-shot interview meeting because after the first interview both the participant and researcher would have time to reflect on the interview experience. Seidman (2006) elaborated by stating that multiple interviews allowed for knowledge to be built over time, and the first interview helped focus the second. Seidman explained that this reflective process helped build rapport, trust, and further the researcher's ability to gather more information about the phenomenon. Furthermore, he explained the benefit of multiple interviews by stating, "interviewers who propose to explore their topic by arranging a one-shot meeting with an 'interviewee' whom they have never met tread on thin contextual ice" (p. 17). Overall, using a two-interview process provided the researcher and interviewee more time to develop deeper meaning, as well as reflect on what was previously discussed.

According to Patton (2002), researchers conduct interviews to learn about

experiences and events that were not directly observable. Therefore, an interview was an appropriate method for data collection for this study since this study attempted to capture the holistic decision-making experiences of new international graduate students who recently navigated enrollment in US higher education. To learn more about an experience, researchers must begin with the participant and examine meaning through conversation. Moreover, Patton explained that the benefits of conducting interviews was that it allowed the researcher to enter the participant's perspective and experience. Riessman (2008) encouraged researchers to move beyond the traditional model where the interviewer acted as a facilitator asking questions and the interviewee is a, "vessel-like 'respondent' who gives answers" (p. 23). Rather, the approach endeavored to engage eight to ten participants who co-construct meaning about an experience. Therefore, in this study, interviews were conducted face-to-face, allowing both the researcher and participant to develop a physical, social, and mutual level of rapport and respect that was necessary to foster a data-rich interview experience. Riessman warned that the concept of an interview should be carefully articulated to a research participant as a storytelling experience because the notion of an interview implies a question and answer, back-and-forth style that can inhibit storytelling.

The interview protocol used open-ended questions. Seidman (2006) suggests that these types of questions allow for the participant to reconstruct her or his experience within the topic of study. Also, Patton (2002) explained that open-ended questions helped reduce researcher bias while increasing the comparability of interviewee responses. Furthermore, the open-ended questions were semi-structured. Merriam (2009) explained that a semi-structured interview style was an interview guide where all questions are

flexible and there was no predetermined working order of the questions. Using open-ended, semi-structured interview questions helped garner the essence of the decision-making experience as described by international graduate students. See Appendix A for the interview protocol of the two interview sessions.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2013) outlines steps for phenomenological data analysis beginning with bracketing prior to an in-depth and thorough data review. The first step was for the researcher to reflect upon and describe her or his own experience in relation to the study. Further, Creswell suggested that in order for a researcher to begin to interpret a participant's lived experience, the researcher must first identify one's own bias and understanding of the phenomenon. The purpose of this was to make the researcher aware of personal experiences that may influence the interpretation of a phenomenon. Husserl (1970) and Moustakas (1994) described the act of acknowledging research bias as *epoché* or *bracketing*. Bracketing was the process where a researcher reflected deeply on her or his own biases and assumptions prior to analyzing data in order to explore the phenomenon without presumptions. Moustakas explained that this allowed the researcher to view the experience being described freshly for the first time. As such, prior to investigating the participant's experience, I first identified and described my own experience, perceptions, and biases with the phenomenon. It was only after bracketing that I was able to take a new perspective on the experience under investigation.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. I carefully listened, relistened, and read through each transcript multiple times. While doing so, I highlighted statements of significance or, "quotes that provide an understanding of how

the participants experience the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). The statements of significance included small and long quotes or phrases that helped convey the experience. After these statements were identified, I then grouped the statements of significance into themes. The themes enabled me to develop two types of descriptions that lead to building the essence of the phenomenon. First, themes were used to write a description of what the participants experienced. Creswell calls this the textual description. Second, I analyzed the themes further to construct a description of the context or setting that influenced how participants experienced the phenomenon. This secondary description was referred to as the structural description. Finally, Creswell explained that the textual and structural descriptions provided the researcher with the content necessary to write a composite description of the essence of the phenomenon, which is called the essential, invariant structure. Creswell reminds researchers that the essence should focus on the common experiences of the participants and that all experiences are rooted in an underlying structure. The result described the underlying structure and provided a deeper and meaningful sense of understanding of the phenomenon to the readers.

Trustworthiness

Merriam (2009) suggested that qualitative researchers can use various strategies to better promote the trustworthiness of their studies. For this purpose of establishing trustworthiness, triangulation, bracketing, and member checks were used.

Triangulation. Merriam (2009) defines triangulation as the use of multiple methods of data collection by stating,

Triangulation using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different times or in different places, or

interview data collected from people with different perspectives form follow-up interview with the same people. (p. 216)

Moreover, triangulation served to check for consistency of findings that was generated using multiple data collection techniques (Patton, 2002). Patton suggested that researchers use triangulation in order to describe multiple perspectives. This study used triangulation by digitally recording two in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews, interview transcripts, and research field notes. The combination of these data collection techniques helped to ensure the trustworthiness of this study.

Bracketing. While engaging each participant I was reminded by Creswell (2013) to check my own bias and the impact this may have on my ability to remain objective conducting this study. Moreover, because of the nature of my work, it was imperative to allow each participant to share their raw experience without any false assumptions or distractions by me. Also, while analyzing the data it was important to allow the data to present underlying themes without any interference from my own experiences and knowledge working with international students. Therefore, reviewing my interpretation with my committee and understanding how my own background can impact the interpretation of this data were important steps taken.

Member checking. Participants were asked to participate in a member-check. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that member checks are a crucial technique for establish credibility because they provide participants with the opportunity to check or challenge a researcher's interpretation. Merriam (2009) also added that conducting a member check was a common strategy to ensure internal validity and credibility. Maxwell (2005) states that member checks are important for, "ruling out the possibility

of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on” (p. 111). Maxwell explained that member checks could help identify a researcher’s own bias and misunderstanding of what is being observed. Given (2008) explains that by conducting a member check, the researcher was inviting participants to be engaged in the analysis process, thus opening the analysis up to multiple perspectives. This ensured that the data presented were accurate and represented the participant’s experience. Therefore, participants were asked to review the underlying themes to ascertain if the findings were true to their experience as international graduate students enrolling in US higher education. Member checking provided participants with an opportunity to assess the authenticity of my interpretation of their experience, and how it helped to answer the research questions. Participants were invited to provide feedback based on their reflection of my interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

According to Patton (2002), interviews are interventions and thus the researcher needs to consider the impact on the participant while participating in an interview. Patton suggested that the interview process is often reflective, and this process may result in the participant reliving traumatic experiences or realizing new perspectives that may cause stress or negative emotions. It is important to consider how to minimize participatory risk. For this study, while there was not a perceived high level of personal risk, I briefed each participant that reflecting on their own experiences may cause reliving stressful or traumatic experiences. I assured participants they may refuse to respond to any question or discontinue participation at any time if they choose. As well, during the member check, participants were allowed to identify parts of their story they would rather not

share. Finally, digital data was stored on a password-protected computer, and any written data will be stored in a secured filing cabinet only accessible by the researcher.

Risk assessment and mental health. Included in the consent form were resources for mental health. These resources included local phone numbers and address to psychological, counseling, situational, and gender-specific support centers offered at each participants' higher education institutions. Participants were informed verbally, prior to the start of the initial interview, that in cases when the participant felt psychological stress then the interview and their participation can end immediately. Also, participants were informed about resources available to them.

Explaining purpose and informed consent. To start, participants were given a consent form that included an overview of this study. Participants were informed about the expected value of this research. Participants were not coerced in any way to participate. Those who willingly choose to participate were reminded of their right to end their participation in this research study at any time or refuse to answer any question.

Confidentiality. Participants chose a pseudonym, or one was chosen for them, that was used through the entire research process in order to ensure participants' identities were kept confidential. Although participants participated in a digitally recorded interview, the audio files and transcripts were kept on a secured computer only accessible by the researcher. Upon the completion of this research the audio files were deleted. During the data analysis process, some key information such as places, names, dates, and any other identifying facts which can potentially identify a participant were changed or excluded to help protect a participant's identity.

Data collection boundaries. As a phenomenological study, it was important to

examine the lived experiences of international graduate students. However, some experiences may be very personal or traumatic, as such participants were reminded of their right to refuse to answer any questions as well as decline any probing to elaborate on a stated point. The researcher avoided probing or asking questions that could cause damage to the participant.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the research design used to conduct the research and included the four basic elements of the research process: the epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods. Overall, this study focused on a constructionist epistemological lens and constructionist phenomenology. Phenomenology was appropriate for this study because this research aimed at describing the common experience of new international graduate learners and their decision-making experiences. The setting, participants, data collection, and data analysis were described in detail to provide a thorough understanding of how this researcher gathered and analyzed data. Finally, this chapter concluded with trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

IV. FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the holistic motivations and decision-making experiences of new international graduate learners who made conscious decisions to engage in US higher education. This phenomenological study was conducted to move beyond identifying motivational factors as influential causes for international graduate student enrollment in US higher education, and instead examine the conditions that support, foster, or discourage an international graduate learner's decision-making experience to pursue US higher education.

Creswell (2013) explains that phenomenological studies carefully examine a phenomenon as it is experienced by several individuals in order to forge a common understanding. This study aimed at understanding the motivations and decision-making experiences of international graduate learners pursuing graduate education in the US. The following research questions guided this study:

1. Why do international graduate learners choose to enroll in US higher education?
2. What is the decision-making experience of international graduate learners who chose to enroll in US higher education?

Nine international graduate learners were carefully chosen to participate in two face-to-face interviews at a date and time that was convenient to their schedules. During the interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions that focused on gathering in-depth information that could later be analyzed and used to answer the two stated research questions. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were entered into ATLAS.ti 8.4 for further analysis.

Creswell (2013) directs researchers using phenomenological data analysis to

identify significant statements or codes in the data. These codes are clustered together to form groups of meaning which in turn develop into themes. When analyzing the transcripts, I selected both *textual descriptions* which describe what the respondents experienced and *structural descriptions* which describe how they experienced the phenomenon. Combining both the textual and structural descriptions I then wrote a composite description which represents the essence of the participants' common experiences. My hope of presenting the following findings is that readers will gain a sense of understanding for what it means to be an international graduate learner navigating the decision-making process when choosing to enroll in US higher education.

The stories in this chapter are made possible by the nine courageous international graduate learners who opened their hearts and shared their experiences. In their words, the journey of deciding to become an international graduate learner in the US is not a simple, singular decision but rather a collection of decisions that are immensely multifaceted and often challenging. These participants' valuable insight discussing their choices and experiences provides a more thorough understanding of the decision-making experiences of international graduate learners.

Overview of Participants

Creswell (2013) explains that in phenomenological studies it is important to collect data from several individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon. Then it is the researcher's task to describe and interpret what all participants have in common as they experience the same phenomenon. Creswell (2006) states that, "phenomenology is not only a description, but it is also seen as an interpretive process" (p. 59). I begin here because it is important to state that in order to fully understand the international

graduate learner decision-making experience with enrolling in US higher education phenomenon it was imperative to identify participants who were indeed new international graduate learners. I assumed that newer international graduate learners would be more likely to better remember, reflect, and articulate their decision-making experiences in comparison to international graduate learners who had been enrolled in US higher education longer.

Additionally, in order to enhance validity and consistency with the international graduate student enrollment phenomenon, I used criterion sampling to help identify new international graduate learners on an F-1 visa. The F-1 visa status is critically important as this is the dominant student visa classification in the US that has a strict educational objective. All other visa classifications have different objectives for the visa holder. In other words, non-F-1 visa holders enter the US with different motivations which may not be to pursue US graduate education. Moreover, recruiting international students who are a change of degree level, change of status, or who are not in the US on an F-1 visa student would provide a diverse and uncommon decision-making experience amongst the study volunteers. For instance, change of status students are those who are already in the US on a different visa then change their status to the F-1 student visa. Similarly, change of level students are those who have already completed a degree in the US. Both change of level and change of status students would have resided in the US and may have difficult remembering their decision-making experience to enroll in US higher education. Overall, the objective for all F-1 students is to complete a program of study. Therefore, a participant pool that was not inclusive of new F-1 graduate learners may convey different motivations and decision-making experiences. In sum, the international graduate learners

selected for this study had the following characteristics in common: length of time spent in the US as a graduate learner, visa classification, prior experience studying in the US, full-time enrollment in a graduate degree program, proficiency in English as determined by being admitted to a graduate degree program in the US, enrolled in a large central-Texas public higher education institution, and age range of 25-35 years old.

A recruitment survey was distributed by email to international graduate learners at two large public institutions of higher education in central Texas. The recruitment survey reached 857 enrolled international graduate learners and yielded 94 responses. In the survey, participants were given the opportunity to choose if they wanted to participate in interviews. Out of 94 responses 83 participants expressed interest in participating in follow up interviews. Using the sampling criteria, learners who had already completed a degree in the US, who were enrolled as a graduate learner for more than one year, and who were not on an F-1 visa were not selected to participate. Therefore, based on the sampling criteria only 30 students were eligible to participate in interviews. The 30 participants were broken down into male and female groups from both institutions in the order by which participants completed the online survey. Participants were contacted by email and asked to participate. The final volunteers that agreed to participate included a diverse group of 4 females and 5 males. All nine study volunteers were full-time enrolled graduate learners between the ages of 25 and 35 years old. All participants received their post-secondary education outside of the US and were new to the US with having one year or less of study experience in US higher education. All learners received their prior degrees, undergraduate or masters, in their home country. Therefore, studying in the US as a graduate student was the first time for all participants to study in a different country.

Two were married, both with spouses back in their home country, and only one of the married participants has a child in the US who is under 4 years old. The remaining five learners all reported being single at the time of the interviews, although two learners expressed having formerly been in a relationship that ended after arriving in the US. All participants reported coming from low to middle socio-economic class families, and all but one participant's parents completed post-secondary education from community college to a doctoral degree. All respondents reported have full-time jobs and working in their home country prior to enrolling in US higher education. Regarding English education, one study volunteer began learning English at the age of 3, five began learning English in middle school, two others started their English education in high school, and one began learning English while studying in his master's program. Four respondents are bilingual with their native language and English, three are trilingual, and one participant is quadrilingual. Three of the nine participants are enrolled as doctoral students, while six are in master's programs. All study volunteers were eager to share their decision-making story and welcomed the opportunity to participate in this project. Table 2 provides a demographic overview of the interviewed study volunteers with pseudonyms assigned to protect their identities.

One goal for recruiting participants was to identify a male and female from the same country to possibly uncover any gender specific differences in the decision-making experiences. This goal was achieved for three countries, China, India, and Mexico which are the three leading countries of origin for international students in the state of Texas (Baer, Bhandari, Andrejko, & Mason, 2018). Additionally, three students, one each from Bangladesh, Iran, and Malaysia participated in this study. These three countries all have

shown strong increases in the number of students engaging in US higher education and are in the top 25 leading countries of origin for international students in the US (Baer, Bhandari, Andrejko, & Mason, 2018). Another goal for recruiting international students was to identify international graduate learners who were majoring in one of the top three fields of study: engineering, math and computer science, or business and management. According to the 2018 Open Doors Report, 60% of all international graduate students in the US were enrolled in one of these three fields of study.

Table 2

Research Participant Demographic Summary

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country	Marital Status	Degree	Field of Study	Mother (M) and Father (F) Education	Languages Spoken
Fahim	27	F	Bangladesh	Married 1 child	Masters	Engineering	High school (M) Masters (F)	Bengali, Hindi
Ismail	25	M	Malaysia	Single	Masters	Business	High school (M) Masters (F)	Chinese, Malay, Cantonese
Ema	27	M	Iran	Single	PhD	Engineering	High school (M) Bachelors (F)	Farsi
Honey	26	F	India	Single	Masters	Computer Science	Bachelors (M) Bachelors (F)	Marathi, Hindi
Raju	35	M	India	Single	Masters	Business	Bachelors (M) Bachelors (F)	Hindi, Assamese
Thi	34	F	China	Single	Masters	Creative Writing	Middle school (M) Associates (F)	Chinese
Zhou	26	M	China	Married	PhD	Engineering	Middle school (M) Middle school (F)	Chinese
Fernanda	25	F	Mexico	Single	Masters	Clinical Mental Health Counseling	MD (M) PhD (F)	Spanish
José	28	M	Mexico	Single	PhD	Mathematics	Bachelors (M) High school (F)	Spanish, Japanese

Emergent Themes

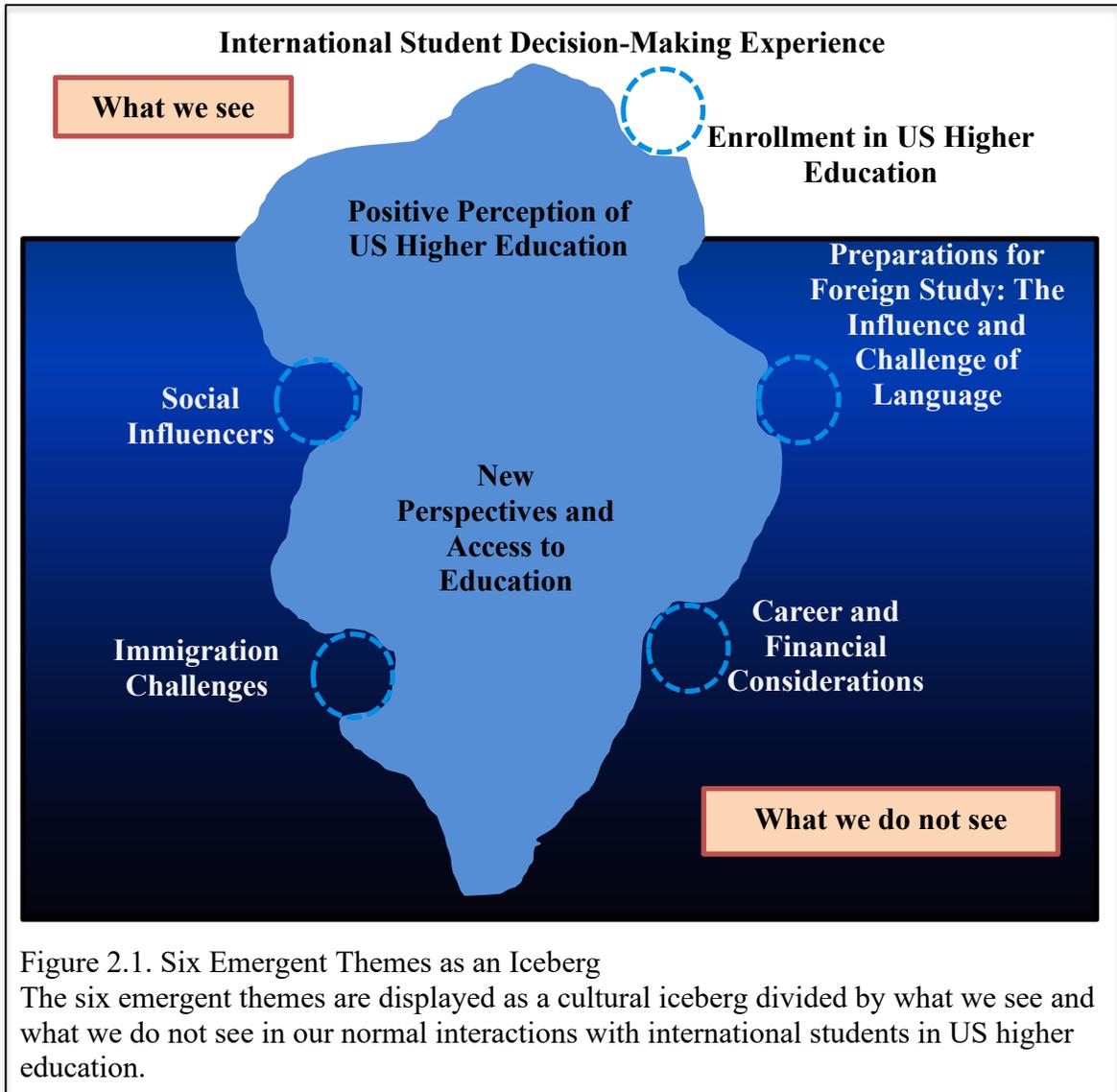
Although experiences varied by participant, using Creswell’s (2013) steps for phenomenological data analysis allowed me to uncover six major underlying themes addressing international graduate learner motivation and decision-making experiences.

Using these six themes I explain what the decision-making experiences were for new

international graduate learners enrolling in US higher education. Illustration 1 presents the six themes as an iceberg. I chose to use the iceberg illustration because there are many hidden aspects of the decision-making experience that are not widely discussed or known after international graduate learners arrive in the US. For instance, Zhou explained that he did not give much thought about what he endured in his decision-making after arriving in the US. In his words he stated,

Once you get to this position or to this situation [being in the US], you sometimes have already forgotten that part [deciding to come to the US]. I don't know why, maybe this is human nature...because I never thought about this again before you asked me for an interview.

What Zhou shows is that as an international graduate learner, he did not often consider or discuss his decision-making experiences after arriving in the US. New international graduate learners like him might be either too focused on adjustment to their new environments or people are not as interested in hearing about their paths coming to the US. Furthermore, the tip of the iceberg represents the physical international person that we see walking around our college campuses and sitting in our classrooms. What we do not see are the multitude of decision-making experiences that influence an international graduate learner's success



Overall, the common experience of the nine participants was one full of constant challenges buttressed by strong resiliency. Their experiences, explained by their direct quotes and stories, are highlighted throughout the six themes that will be discussed. What was most surprising about the data was the absence of many positive descriptions for their decision-making experiences. Instead of many positive expressions, respondents described their experiences as full of stress, difficult conversations, persuasion, tight schedules, challenging situations, and discouragement. Overall, the struggles

international graduate learners endure may best be articulated by Zhou who stated,

I think for Americans, you should feel very happy that you are in the greatest country in the world. For all you, maybe you can never understand what's happening [in our experience]. You'll never experience such things. Maybe you can hear [our story and think], oh, it's a hard life.

Zhou expressed his belief that it may be difficult for US citizens to understand the lived experiences of international students in the US. His sentiments underscore the importance of this study as well as the general lack of awareness of what international students experience in order to study in the US. Overall, even though the nine participants encountered many negative stressors, each study volunteer expressed and displayed an unwavering resiliency to push forward with their decision to enroll in US higher education. The six themes and subthemes are shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 3

Emergent Themes and Subthemes for RQ1: Why do international graduate learners choose to enroll in US higher education?

Positive Perception of US Higher Education	New Perspectives and Access to Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Academic Quality• US Professors• Value of the US Degree	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Seeking New Knowledge• Gender Equity in Education

To answer the first research question, why do international graduate learners choose to enroll in US higher education, I found that participants felt motivated to enroll because they held a positive perception of US higher education, a desire for new perspectives, and access to quality education. First, respondents believed that the academic quality in the US exceeds what they could receive in their home countries.

Secondly, international learners in this study assumed that in the US, students have opportunities to build relationships with professors, and that US professors actually care about teaching and success of their students' learning. Third, all respondents expressed a common understanding that a US degree still maintains strong value worldwide, with regards to future employment and economic opportunity. In addition to holding a positive perception of US higher education, participants looked forward to acquiring new perspectives by living and studying in the US. Finally, several female respondents were motivated to study in the US because of perceived gender equity and access to education that exists in the US.

The second research question asks, what is the decision-making experiences of international graduate learners who choose to enroll in US higher education. The stories shared by this study's international graduate learners show that their decision-making experiences were influenced by language, people in their lives, career and financial considerations, and immigration challenges. Each respondent contemplated pursuing graduate education in her/his home country or abroad. Ultimately, all study volunteers choose to study in the US where the language of instruction is English. Next, participants often had to make complex and life changing decisions with regards to social or occupational responsibilities. These decisions were not always well received by family members or friends. In the end, each respondent expressed strong immigration concerns with either the visa process, the consular interview, or the 2016 presidential election.

Positive Perception of US Higher Education

The first theme that was uncovered relates to the first research question which asks, why international graduate learners choose to enroll in US institutions. Despite

diversity within the international graduate learner population from cultural background, educational experiences, and social value on education, there are commonalities for why these international respondents enrolled in US higher education. The data also uncovered three subthemes: academic quality, relationships with US professors, and the assumed value of a US degree.

Academic quality. Regarding academic quality, in some cases these international graduate learners chose to enroll in US higher education because their home country lacked graduate studies in a specific field. Fernanda commented that her field of study is not viewed the same back home as it is in the US,

I started looking more into this program in the US. What we in Mexico call psychology, it's not the same as in the US. Counseling doesn't exist in Mexico. If I tell people in Mexico [about counseling] they don't understand, and it took me a year to understand – I didn't even know the word. So, I was looking for a psychology master's and ... I'm interested in research, so I was looking more for training to do therapy ... I was just looking for something more humanistic.

Fernanda was not satisfied with available graduate programs in Mexico and was motivated to find a program that met her needs abroad. She had always viewed US education with high regard and after consulting with a family friend, in the US, she was introduced to clinical mental health counseling. She recalls by stating, “my dad's best friend's daughter told me to look into counseling. So, I looked into this program, and I was like, ‘yes, that's what I'm looking for.’” Similarly, José explains his decision by stating, “I was thinking that if I wanted to keep studying demography it should be abroad because in Mexico, we don't have a program especially on demography.” Zhou

commented that he could pursue his degree in engineering back home but not with the same level of hands-on experience as he could receive in university labs in the US. He further explained that he was drawn to US higher education because of the academic structure, relationships with professors, and hands-on academic experiences with access to conduct experiments in larger, newer labs. Zhou shared that there are, “limited resources for you,” and “if you get into a PhD in [his home country], it’s not worth it ... because you have no connection to professors.” As an engineer, Zhou expressed the strong attraction to the US because of newer, updated engineering facilities and laboratories. In his home country, Zhou explained that there are limited resources for all students, and most university labs cannot afford equipment for students. Zhou further explained that at some universities in his home country the labs only contain models of lab equipment and not the actual equipment engineers need to learn. Similarly, José was looking forward to the education, especially access to labs and resources.

The knowledge, that was the important thing for me and having courses in a structured way so you can follow progressively. Here [in the US] they have big labs, they have more resources to do more experiments, to push the frontiers of knowledge. And in Mexico the budget for education and in graduate education is small, pretty small actually ... especially in hard sciences. If you go over to Mexico you can't expect to have the same lab, the same materials, and the same resources, [that’s why] there are so many of those students in the US.

José describes the challenges with graduate education back home with limited resources which drives students in his country to pursue education in the US. He explains there is limited educational funding and limited resources for students to conduct experiments.

These were some of the reasons for him to decide to study in the US instead of his home country.

Thi expressed her motivation to study in the US was for gaining the ability to contribute in the classroom. She explains that the Chinese education system does not have the same expectation for Chinese students to participate in the classroom.

In China, it's more test oriented. But here, it's writing. So, doing research is super important for your personal growth, your understanding. Bringing your understanding and contributing. So, during classes in China, we are not expected to contribute. But here [in the US], we contribute every class. Smaller class, more contributions.

Thi recognized how important research is for her personal growth and understanding. She explains that she had a desire to be more active in her learning through opportunities to contribute in the classroom. She explained that the Chinese education system does not encourage students to be active in the classroom. As a result, she understood how interactive US higher education classrooms could be and believed in contributing in the classroom as a way to increase her level of understanding.

This study's international learners were motivated to pursue US higher education because they believed the academic quality in the US provided more educational opportunity than what was available in their home countries. More specifically, respondents described seeking US higher education because of availability of specific degree programs, for the hands-on experience with research and labs, progressive structure of US curricula, and classroom participation that fosters personal growth and values student contributions.

US professors. All international learners in this study expressed a strong desire to learn from US professors, because they believed that professors in the US possess different teaching styles that aligned more with how the participants preferred to be taught and to learn. Also, this study's international learners commented on opportunities to build relationships with US professors because of smaller classroom sizes. In addition, respondents thought that US professors wanted to teach by creating a more welcoming and flexible learning environment that invites student contributions. Moreover, the participants shared the assumption that US professors provide more direction and support for the development of student research. Through this direction, the study volunteers felt they would have better opportunities to build skills needed for the workplace. When describing the US academic quality, participants often compared their experiences to past educational experiences with professors in their home country. For instance,

Fahim explained that there were distinct differences in the way professors treat students in her home country.

The education system [in Bangladesh], the behavior of professors, the way they teach, the way we study, and the tiniest thing that in our classes, in our country, if we just say something in the class just giving our own comment ... the professor is likely to ignore it [and say], "you are just a student, you don't know! You don't know better than me." They just ignore their students' perspective or view. So, here [in the US] I can see the professors values them [students] so much.

Fahim expressed feeling undervalued in her home country's education system because of her experiences with professors in Bangladesh. She recognizes that her preferred learning environment is one where students' opinions are valued and freely shared without

dismissiveness from professors. As a result, she was looking forward to graduate education in the US, where she believed students are valued and encouraged to participate in the classroom. Fahim's impressions of relationships between professor and students outside the US were also shared by Ismail who also compared his country's education system to that in the US. Like Fahim, Ismail was impressed that in the US students can ask questions freely and even challenge the professor in the classroom.

The education system in the US is meant for you to be successful. But many parts of the world they [professors] are there to find out your errors, your errors, and to make your grades lower. But I see the US education is a bit more towards you can get correct [answers], your points are there. This is one main thing that I have heard about. The ability to learn beyond the scope is there in the US, because of the openness of the professors and because of the flexibility that they have... They are more open. You are able to ask questions or even challenge them in class.

This point does not [happen] so much in Asia or back in my home country.

Ismail acknowledges that he believed US professors provided a learning environment that allowed for students to succeed. He lamented that in Asia, especially his home country of Malaysia, professors approach teaching and learning in ways that penalize students rather than support their development. Therefore, the ability to build relationships with professors and learn in an educational system that would support his learning were strong motivators for Ismail to choose US higher education. Overall, he discussed feeling optimistic about his learning opportunities in the US.

Raju explained that professors in his home country are not allotted the same level of educational freedom to teach a subject in their own way. Consequently, all professors

across different universities are required to teach the same subject in the same manner. Therefore, Raju discussed looking forward to enjoying the educational freedom professors have to conduct a course differently in the US.

The way that things are taught here, and every teacher has their own syllabus, there is so much flexibility and so many options and variety that you get here...in Indian education system you have a fixed syllabus, you have these prescribed courses, that's it. So, every teacher in every university, say if it is a state university, all of the universities and colleges in the state will teach only those courses – I mean, only those books, novels, poems, that's it. Here every teacher has [the ability to teach] her own finance course, her own English course.

As Raju explains, his understanding of the difference between the US and Indian educational system is that US professors can uniquely design their course curricula by utilizing their personal knowledge and expertise in the discipline. He recognizes the importance of learning from diverse perspectives from faculty.

The respondents in this study had strong motivation to enroll in US higher education because of their beliefs about how US professors teach. They believed that US professors have freedom to facilitate classroom learning that fosters student development and values students' opinions. In comparison, study volunteers explained that education systems in their home countries are not structured in ways that allow students to build meaningful relationships with professors. Having the ability to engage with professors, feel validated in the classroom, and learn from diverse perspectives were recognized as being important factors in graduate education.

Value of the US degree. Lastly, all participants were attracted to enrolling in US

higher education because they believed having a US degree would provide benefits to their future. Respondents all shared a common belief that a US degree still carries significant value in their home country with regards to employment opportunities. For instance, Fahim commented on the value of a US degree by stating, “This idea ... because it’s an American diploma or degree, it’s going to be more valuable.” Honey, shared a similar feeling about how her country views a US degree, “They do consider it because education in the US is considered something which is one of the greatest achievements.” Fernanda describes what it means to study in the US,

Just by saying that you're studying in the US, it sounds more prestigious. If I were to go back [to Mexico] ... [a US degree] is more valuable than the ones in Mexico even though the ones in Mexico may be of better quality or cheaper or easily available. So, I know if I bring any degree from the US ... I feel it [a US degree] can go further ... it has some sort of weight that I think it [a similar degree back home] will lack in Mexico.

Fernanda recognizes that a US degree not only sounds more prestigious but is valued higher in comparison to a similar degree in her home country. Many international students believe that a US degree carries more weight and could increase their employment opportunities when returning home. Thi explained that the degree would benefit her future even if she could not find work in the US.

This degree will help. That is one thing that I tell myself that even if this does not work out [finding a job in the US] and you have to go back, you still have the degree, and I still think that as far as America is concerned, it’s definitely seen as like, wow, you have an American degree.

Regarding employment, international students on an F-1 visa become eligible for temporary work authorization upon completing their degree. All participants were hopeful of obtaining a job after graduating as this would be seen as a great achievement. However, many suggest that obtaining the US degree will be seen as an achievement in their home country even if one is unable to secure employment in the US.

Ismail's goals were to work for an international organization, and he believed obtaining a US degree would help him achieve his professional goals. He reiterated others' comments that future employers value a US degree by stating, "The perception that you graduated from the US, when you have the words *United States* in your resume, this would definitely be catchy to many of employers." Fahim shared her feelings of the future with a US degree and emphasized how the degree opens more opportunity for her than if she had stayed in her home country to pursue the same degree. She shares,

If I get a master's degree in the US, and get that opportunity, then I can literally go anywhere in the world. Really that degree is that much valued. I really don't plan to stay in the US...I really don't plan to go back to Bangladesh, and I really don't have any planning after. But one thing I surely know if I get a degree here, wherever I want to be in my career, it's enough.

Fahim describes obtaining a degree in the US will be, "enough", enough to satisfy her plans regardless of wherever she goes next in her life. She, and the other students, believe that an education in the US carries so much value that they could go anywhere to work upon graduation.

Although most participants believed their home country places a strong value on the US degree, only one respondent recognized that the trend of international students

coming to the US has been strong for so long that he worried about his employability when returning home. José explained that he was the fourth student from Mexico in his current graduate program.

I think the expected outcomes are more positive than the negatives, and if you have a degree from abroad, the US, UK, or any part of Europe, I think I can tell you it has a special value. Like an added value or a plus value if you go back to Mexico. If there is any negative, I would say ... it's not like before in Mexico. I'm talking from experience, I know professors who studied here during the 80s and 90s and came back to Mexico and they found a job pretty easily, a good job, at clinics, public centers, or in the private sector, but they are doing well. Now it's different because it's been almost 20, 25 years of that [Mexican students studying in the US and returning to Mexico] ... so if I'm going to study and get my PhD here, it's not like a sure thing that if I go to Mexico I'm going to have a stable job or a good job.

José was concerned about his employability because the job market in Mexico may be saturated with educated Mexican students who previously studied in the US. José was the only participant who shared concerns about employability back home. But despite his employability concerns, he agreed with all other respondents, that a US degree is still highly valued around the world.

All respondents shared their belief that a US degree is still highly valued worldwide. Obtaining a US degree provides a pathway for international students to gain lawful employment in the US or have more opportunity to secure work back home. However, as record numbers of international students continue to enroll in US higher

education, José's concerns about a saturated job market, filled with international students educated in the US, may also be concerns for future international students seeking to enroll in US higher education.

Overall, the academic quality in the US was a strong influencer in the decision-making experiences of these international graduate learners. Participants acknowledged a strong belief that the US has a great education system which enables students to take advantage of updated research materials, new facilities and labs, as well as access to quality academic structure and caring professors who want students to succeed. Raju explains his beliefs regarding US professors,

Here are really talented [professors] so it's not just that they have a degree and they want to teach, but they have *done something* and they're teaching. So, you know that's something different than what I would say – where I come from it's different.

Raju understands that US professors have industry and practical experience that aids in their teaching. He agrees with the others that there are fundamental differences in how professors conduct classes in the US and in his home country (India). Participants believed US professors were flexible and encouraging. Respondents mentioned that were looking forward to learning in the US educational system because students can ask questions and challenge thoughts in the classroom.

The stories these students shared help to answer the first research question asking why international graduate learners choose to enroll in US higher education. Participants focused their motivation on enrolling in US higher education because of US higher education academic quality, relationships with professors, and the perceived value of a

US degree. Regarding the academic structure, respondents suggested that there were more opportunities to be engaged in the learning process especially with the ability to build a sound relationship with US professors. Also, all participants acknowledged they believed the US degree to hold strong value in their home country and around the world.

New Perspectives and Access to Education

The next theme that responds to the first research question relates to new perspectives and access to education. All participants shared feeling motivated to study in the US because of a desire for new perspectives, new knowledge, or access to education. Moreover, all believed that studying in the US would provide opportunities to seek and obtain something they could not otherwise achieve in their home country. The two subthemes include seeking new knowledge and gender equity in education.

Seeking new knowledge. The common sentiment for respondents, with regards to new perspectives, was the desire to seek new knowledge. Participants were interested in enrolling in US higher education to research, explore, and gain new knowledge by engaging in not only the US education system, but also by exploring and living in the US. Similarly, study volunteers were hoping to gain new perspectives by participating and observing the diverse social world in the US. They believed that the US was a free and open society which provided opportunities to be surrounded by different ways of thinking and to engage in new interactions with diverse people. Ismail expressed his belief of the US by stating,

I want to learn a lot about different cultures ... Back in Malaysia, we have people coming from different countries, but they are mostly from Asia or the UK. I want to have a more in-depth cultural experience from people in the US and

surrounding the US. This is one thing I want to learn very much. In the larger picture itself, for example, same sex marriage is being accepted in the U.S., where it is not in many Asian countries. [Through] these kind of things people can perceive that the US is somehow a country that gives more freedom.

Ismail recognized that for his future profession he needed to develop more cultural awareness. Therefore, he was motivated to study in the US where he believed he could have interactions with diverse people and broaden his cultural understanding. Also, he perceived the US to be an open and accepting society, something he wanted to learn more about.

Thi also shared her thoughts that the US provided more freedom by saying, “U.S. is somehow a country that is very much open and there is more freedom than any part of the world.” This perception of freedom in the US society motivated participants to seek new perspectives about life while in the US. For example, Zhou described that he was hoping to become self-aware while enjoying new perspectives.

I want to know: who am I? I want to know: what am I? I want to know what I'm interested in so I can live a greater life. I'm trying to explore something new and let me see if I can do this, let me see if I can do that. [In the US] you have much freedom for you to explore something new. I have a lot of personal time. I can arrange my study. I can control my study. I can control my research. That's so great. I don't have to obey orders from my boss. I can make my own decisions. [In China] you think, “oh this is interesting”, then you can't just plan by yourself, your professor will not give you this freedom to respond. In China that's impossible.

Zhou shares his experience about the lack of educational freedom he had in China where he could not conduct his own research. He equates his yearning to live a greater life through the opportunity to study and live in the US. Zhou believed that being in the US would provide him a chance to gain more self-awareness and the ability to explore new interests or research. The desire of increased self-awareness proves to be a strong motivator for why Zhou wanted to study in the US.

Raju also expressed wanting to gain new perspectives by studying internationally: “The benefits are, just learning from a different perspective. If you stay in one place you don’t really expand your knowledge and your worldview.” Raju believed that there would be strong advantages from studying in the US, such as expanding his worldview and learning from different viewpoints. Similarly, Ema explains that his motivation to study in the US was to gain new knowledge so that he could contribute to his field of study and help people in the future.

My goal is to find something new, especially in experiments...that have some contribution to the scientific society, publish some good papers that solve people’s problem. That’s important to me. I haven’t decided yet to work for industry or academia. But one thing I’m sure is, rather than money, I really want to do something in my life because the path I chose is a PhD ... to finding something new that helps people.

Ema explains that his goal for studying in the US was not about money, but instead to help people. As an engineer, he believed that education in the US would enable him to make research advancements in his field of study that would provide benefits to society. Overall, Ema felt that the doctoral education in the US was the best path to make a

difference in the lives of others.

Thi was motivated to study in the US in order to broaden her understanding of different world knowledges and perspectives, specifically the differences between Western and Eastern ideologies.

The Western and the Eastern ideology, the difference, that's the problem I always got in my heart. Also, to do something that's different even from other people who are studying here. Like, to writing English, and to get more understanding of cultural things, to broaden my understand of the world. I really know more things than before, and my thinking is quite different from before ... I think broaden the understanding, fighting hard as a warrior in the future. That is the only way I can do.

Like the other international graduate learners in this study, Thi was motivated to seek new knowledge and gain more cultural understanding of the world. She believed that studying in the US would provide her an opportunity to reflect on the cultural influences that affect different people's lives and understandings of the world. She also mentions that she wants to, "fight hard as a warrior in the future" making positive change in her community. Much like Ema, she believed that the education and experiences she would receive in the US would provide her with the tools and understanding to be a change agent. Many respondents had a desire to learn and experience more, whether for their own benefit or to contribute to society. And other participants such as Zhou and Honey, realized that after working for some time they found there was something missing in their lives. In these instances, they were making life changes in order to fill a void they felt. Zhou explains,

I decided to work directly after graduation. I worked for a year. When I started to work, I knew then that there was something I still had to learn. I thought I knew something was wrong ... If I want to do something right my knowledge [was] not enough.

Zhou worked for one year and then began to feel something was missing in his life. He lacked freedom to explore his own research and develop his own personal interests. Zhou believed that by studying in the US he would find out what was missing in his life. Similarly, Honey's work became stagnant and she lamented that her knowledge was lacking after working for over a year with her company. She realized that she did not want to feel stuck at her workplace doing the same routine job.

I knew after a year and a half that my progress was stagnated and that wasn't because I couldn't learn while I was working, it was because I felt that somehow my knowledge was lacking. I had considered not pursuing my masters and continuing to work in [the company] for a year or two years more, but then I would say [even with] the advancement in my position, knowledge, or probably my salary too, it felt like being stuck at a place, stagnated at a point. I worked for a project which went on and on and on, it did not end, it still is going on. Yeah. So that was kind of – it gave me a feeling that I'm going nowhere with this, and if I do have to get out of this project, I would still have to learn something else which my project did not let me do because it was sort of hectic. And since I was the oldest member [of the project team], I had the responsibility of handling the team, major tasks. So, it was like I had to go out of it to learn something and then go back to it, go back to something different to make progress on yourself.

Honey clarified that even with promotions at work, she was not satisfied. Because she felt stagnant at work, she was motivated to pursue her masters and continue her education.

Although she considered pursuing a master's in different countries other than the US, she was encouraged to live near family members in the US by stating, "because I'm a girl, and since I lost my dad, everybody have been overprotective of me, they [family members] wanted me to be near my family as much as possible." Her motivation for new knowledge, and family encouragement to live near relatives, motivated her to consider enrolling in US higher education. Honey explains that she applied to schools around the US such as in New York New Jersey, California, and Texas, but ultimately decided to go to school in Central Texas because she has an aunt and uncle who live there.

Each respondent shared her/his own motivations for seeking new knowledge and recognized that the studying in the US would provide the best opportunity to satisfy her/his goals. They believed that studying in the US would create chances to experience diverse cultural exchanges, broaden understandings of the world, assist with self-awareness, and explore academic research unavailable back home.

Gender equity in education. Nearly all female participants, except for Fernanda, expressed gender challenges in the pursuit of higher education in their home country. These participants shared a desire to come to the US and engage in US higher education because they believed there was more opportunity in the US as a woman. Moreover, female respondents explained their belief in more equitable access to education and general fairness in how male and female students are treated in the classroom.

Thi described challenges female students have by stating, "In China, due to the single child policy ... discrimination is coming from society ... in rural areas of China,

girls are not treated fairly. Sometimes they have to sacrifice a lot.” She explains that as a result of government policies, Chinese society creates less opportunity for female students especially upon graduation and seeking work for equal pay. Honey explained the challenges her country has with educating male and female students.

It’s hard because it does exist where [families] ... will be like, “oh, we don’t have enough money to teach both the boy and girl,” [then] always the boy will get the preference, the girl will never get the preference for higher education. Especially, even at the school level and higher education is out of the question because [families] will be like, “oh, the girl has to get married so what's the point of like making her do a master’s degree?” Gender bias is very, very entrenched over there, so if they want to have a bias against me no matter how many degrees I have, it is not going to help.

Honey suggests that families do not focus their investments in the female’s education because women will ultimately be married into a new family rather than benefitting her maternal family. Honey was motivated to pursue her master’s degree regardless of opposition from some family members because she wanted to achieve something that her current level of education and society could not provide her. Fahim expressed similar reasoning by stating her challenge of being recognized as a woman pursuing engineering in her home country,

I wanted to be an art student. I really loved to draw or design something.

Combining these two, I really wanted to be somewhere, but in our country, there is no scope for this. There is literally no scope for this type [work] ... and if you have some little scope, they're all male dominated. You don't expect a female to

be a mechanical engineer, and if she is, you don't expect her to be a good mechanical engineer.

Fahim illustrates the social views of females wanting to become engineers in her home country. She explains that societal pressures affected her ability to continue her education in Bangladesh and as a result, motivated her to continue her education outside her home country. She explains that she wanted to find a country that provides equitable access to education for female students. She believed that the US would provide her the opportunity to continue her education without interference because of her gender.

Fahim also described the challenges she had with female social responsibilities by saying, “If you get married, then you just do the housework chores, manage your husband, and manage your kids, just do that. You don't need to be you anymore. It's like stopping everything else.” Despite the social pressures she experienced, as a married woman with a child, she always maintained a desire for new knowledge. She also offers,

If you just travel to another country, you learn a lot. You can see new places, you can make friends...You really cannot count what benefits there are one by one, but here really it gives you a broader sense of perspective. Yeah, you think a lot differently [in the US].

Fahim believed that by studying in the US she would encounter greater gender equity in her studies and could further broaden her knowledge and perspective, travel to new places, and make new friends. Most of the female respondents expressed difficulty with access to equitable education in their home country. Despite the dismissive cultural attitudes towards females in education, these study volunteers were highly motivated and persisted to fulfill their desire for graduate education. Moreover, graduate education in

the US was viewed as a gateway to greater economic opportunity, potentially higher levels of equality, and a possibly a better future.

Overall, seeking new perspectives and equitable access to education was expressed by participants as an opportunity to achieve something they otherwise could not achieve in their home countries. For most female respondents the motivation to study in the US was centered on achieving graduate education, having control over their choices, and gaining respect for their academic pursuit. Additionally, a common desire for all study volunteers was seeking new knowledge. Respondents, either longed for new knowledge or were forced to consider seeking new knowledge due to stagnation in the workplace. Therefore, when wanting to gain new knowledge in the US, this study's international students anticipated learning new things in the classroom but also learning new ways of thinking and having diverse interactions outside the classroom. Participants expressed understanding that enrolling in US higher education provided an opportunity to meet new people, broaden perspectives, and gain more understanding about one's self. Values such as seeking new perspectives and desiring access to quality education help to answer why these international graduate learners chose to enroll in US higher education.

Table 4

Emergent themes and subthemes for RQ2: What is the decision-making experience of international graduate learners who chose to enroll in US higher education?

Preparations for Foreign Study: The Influence and Challenge of Language	Social Influencers	Career and Financial Considerations	Immigration Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions Regarding Program Location • English language proficiency, preparation, and language entrance examinations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Acceptance and Sacrifice • Students already in the US • Professors • Other Influencers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions influenced by careers and educational goals • Financial Considerations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visa Interview • Influences of the 2016 US Presidential Election

Preparations for International Study: The Influence and Challenge of Language

In preparation for international study, participants expressed how English influenced and challenged their decision-making experience. Respondents began their decision-making process with weighing the options of choosing to pursue international higher education or study in one’s own home country. The initial challenge with studying in a foreign country is the potential for academic studies in a language other than one’s native language. Moreover, the influence of language affects international graduate learners’ choices in choosing a host country to study. For instance, because all study volunteers were considering international graduate education in the US, each participant had to contemplate their own ability to take graduate courses in only English. Some respondents such as Ema, Thi, Fernanda, and Zhou shared that in order to prepare for education in English, in the US, they engaged in formal and informal ways to improve their English. Similarly, after choosing the US as a study destination, English language proficiency often dictated participants’ eligibility for programs of study. In other words, US graduate programs require varying levels of English level proficiency on English

language exams. José gave the example that he was unable to obtain the score needed to be admitted into his first-choice institution. Overall, this study's international learners' decision-making experience was greatly affected by the influence of language.

Thi explained her preparation by taking English tests many times prior to studying in the US. She stated, "I took a lot of tests in order to improve my English ... I thought I must enhance my English level, to have practical knowledge, and to stand out." When asked about perceived challenges, Zhou explained that his first challenge was language. Zhou further explained that many of his friends also commented on his English ability by encouraging Zhou to improve his English before enrolling in the US. Doctoral student José expressed his initial worrying thoughts of pursuing graduate studies in a different language by stating,

I was thinking initially that it was going to be very hard because of first the language and – actually that was it. Because I wasn't afraid of the mathematical part or using the software. In a way, I was into that [mathematics and software] since my master's...but I was just thinking, what is it going to be like having all of my classes, all of my talks in another language?

Although José was confident in his academic ability, his uncertainty was enrolling in an education system that is all in English. He recognized that there may be inevitable challenges with enrolling in an English-only education system. Fernanda also expressed her initial concerns with taking courses in English and her anticipated challenges with writing in English by stating,

It was difficult because I worry a lot about having never taken a class in English before. I have had English classes but not like when I am learning new theories of

whatever in English. And it worried me a lot to have to write a paper in English or if I eventually have to write a thesis. I knew that I needed to have the same level that I do in Spanish to write as proficiently.

Fernanda shared José's concerns with taking courses in English. Both respondents were undeterred by the perceived challenges, however, and spoke optimistically about enrolling in US education. Participants such as Zhou, Fernanda, Ema, and Thi expressed awareness and concern with how their language ability could impact their goal of engaging in graduate studies in a different country. More importantly, language served as a key challenge for these international graduate learners throughout every step of the decision-making experience. Study volunteers discussed challenges with navigating institutional websites, communicating with in-country university officials, and even passing the visa interview. The stories shared highlight how language challenges shape the decision-making process, and how a lack of language learning experiences can threaten one's potential to achieve international education.

Decisions regarding program location. Many of the participants mentioned studying in the US was not their first-choice country. In fact, several had considered other countries but ultimately chose the US. Some examples of other countries that the nine respondents considered were Spain, the Netherlands, the UK, Canada, Germany, and Sweden. Fernanda explains when she decided to study internationally, she felt as if she had decision paralysis because of the overwhelming options for graduate studies. She explains that experience by stating,

I got overwhelmed because I guess back home it was this idea of, you're going to go to a university in your city or nearby or in the next town. But now that I

opened it to [studying] internationally [my options] went from three options to a thousand or more [institutions to choose from]. It was just so overwhelming. That's why I don't go shopping, I feel like I need to look at all of the options because [I worry] what if I pick one and there's one that's better. I call it like decision paralysis. I think it's just overwhelming to have so many options that you just can't choose.

Narrowing her search, she focused on places where she could pursue education instruction in English. Similarly, Honey who was working for a German IT company at the time, considered Germany as a destination country for her graduate studies. Honey explained her initial thoughts by stating,

I also considered Canada, and I had given a thought to Germany, but then I didn't want to learn German because everything there is in German. To get into Germany I had to learn German. Even though my company [in India] was German, I still didn't know German.

Honey had originally considered other countries to pursue her graduate education but because her familiarity with English she focused on English speaking countries and decided on the US.

Fahim described political and social challenges in her home country as reasons for seeking education abroad.

The education system is very bad and there are political issues, combining those two, I saw no future for my daughter. I thought, in future when she grows up my husband and I decided that, we'll send her abroad, for a better education. Then I was thinking, why send only her, when I can go myself?

Political issues and an education system that does not support female students were motivators for Fahim to decide to take her infant daughter abroad while pursuing graduate education. She comments on why she decided to search for programs with English instruction by stating, “English is always a very strong subject for me.” She also searched for countries that provided strong social benefits including childcare. Initially, she described a strong desire to apply to universities in Sweden because of free childcare. She recalls her initial reasons for not wanting to apply to the US by stating,

We were really uncomfortable [with the US political climate], and I actually tried for [universities in] Sweden ... and I wanted to apply to Canadian universities, but I didn't have the time. When I applied for Sweden I was thinking not coming to U.S. because of the political situation. It might get worse, I might get killed, just because I am a Muslim.

The political climate in the US initially led to concern and complexity in her initial decision-making processes. Ultimately, however, she was encouraged by family members to reconsider the US.

Fernanda was also interested in pursuing graduate studies outside of Mexico and wanted to do so in a different language like her older brother who had studied in Germany and Canada. She describes her initial interest in studying in countries other than the US by stating,

I started looking around and for some reason [the program in the Netherlands] caught my eye. It was going to start as an exchange program, but it got shut down because of management situations. My second option was Spain but then there was a financial crisis going on there, and they told us it was kind of dangerous to

go. Then it was Canada...but I didn't fit in any of the [educational programs I wanted].

After having no success in finding the right program abroad, she sought advice from a family friend who suggested a master's degree program in Central Texas. She commented on her experience growing up in close proximity to the US and past experiences with English by stating,

I'm from the north of Mexico, everything I probably watched my whole life was from the US ... I live around 12 hours south from here [Central Texas], so my state is bordered with Texas ... I went to private school my whole life, and they really push learning English as being really important from kindergarten to high school.

Fernanda shared that learning English was very important in her K-12 private school education. As a result, upon graduating from her bachelor's program she was inspired to pursue graduate studies internationally in places where English instruction was available such as the Netherlands, Canada, and the US. Although Fernanda's first choice was not the US, she grew up believing that the US had always been viewed as "glamorous" and understood that a US degree holds value in Mexico. Her past educational experiences emphasized the importance of English and growing up in close proximity to the US motivated Fernanda to enroll in US higher education.

Ismail explained that in his home country of Malaysia it is common for students to want to pursue graduate studies outside of Malaysia, particularly in the UK. Because of the history between the UK and Malaysia most students choose to study in the UK. He explains his initial thoughts by stating, "all this while I wanted to get into the UK, it was

a dream for a long time to be in the UK, only a few months before I came here, I changed my decision to the US.” Ismail recalled conversations with one of his lecturers who encouraged him to consider the US instead of the UK.

Only that particular lecturer, after talking to him, I changed my mind [from studying in the UK to the US]. In Malaysia, so long as you are studying abroad, that is fine. But there are times where depending on your major, depending on your field, you may want to choose a particular country. So that's it for me, if I'm going to go international, I decided more towards the US.

Ismail explained that many Malay students choose to study in the UK because, “Malaysia is using the UK system” as a result of the historical relationship between the UK and Malaysia. However, Ismail chose the US based on advice from his lecturer, and his employment aspirations where he believed the US was a better destination for graduate studies.

Initially, although all study volunteers decided to pursue graduate education outside their home country, not all volunteers were interested in studying in the US. Each participant began their decision-making process with a desire for international higher education and proceeded to explore potential country and institution study destinations. Respondents were interested in countries whose language of instruction for graduate education is in English. Additionally, participants also considered the social, employment, and economic benefit countries offered when choosing a host country to study.

English language proficiency, preparation, and language entrance examinations. After choosing a program location, respondents next navigated language

requirements by taking measures to satisfy English proficiency and university entrance exams. At both institutions where the nine participants attend, graduate studies require a specific level of English proficiency that is often demonstrated by a mastery level in the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exams. Zhou mentioned that his first worry was speaking English at the time when he was thinking about studying in the US. He explained his friends were critical of his decision to study in the US by asking, “You cannot speak in English, how are you going to go? How can you do research [in English]?” Zhou’s friends suggested that he would not be successful at his level of English and convinced him “in a very positive way” to improve his English speaking and writing before coming to the US. Zhou internalized his friends’ advice and actively began taking measures to improve his English ability. In order to meet English proficiency admission requirements, some participants expressed spending a year or more preparing and studying intensive English, while others discussed more informal learning by watching English TV or media. Thi mentioned that she first recognized years ago the importance for studying English during her sophomore year in her undergraduate program by stating,

But then at the college level, I studied very hard every day. [It] is a very tough balance if you want to go abroad to study. Because you have to maintain your GPA while maintaining your extracurricular activity, while maintaining your English. You have to take time to take the English test. So, I began to take English tests very early ... I took my TOEFL at sophomore age...I take a lot of tests in order to improve my English.

Regardless of the respondents’ background in English education, many were

anxious and uncertain if their English proficiency would be adequate in the US. Zhou expressed that the formal English education he received did not prepare him for daily interactions or conversations in English. He explains by saying, “I was not good at English at all at that time, a year ago. I can barely say words, but I can read, I can listen. But my conversation or oration, it's awful. I can say honestly.” In comparison, Ema explained that he had limited English education from high school and began studying for the TOEFL exam during his master’s degree. Ema recognized that learning English is something that, “should be learned in the environment.” Even with formal education, Ema explained that he felt he was not prepared for everyday English. He recognizes that test preparation is not sufficient for authentic communication and interaction in English,

What we study for the TOEFL exam isn’t at all the same – for example, I came here, I came to airport, I had a taxi and the driver said, ‘how is it going?’ And I said, ‘What?’ I never heard that question before because they always say [in formal English education], hello, how are you?

Despite achieving the required TOEFL exam score, necessary for admission to a doctoral program, Ema still expresses his initial worries with learning formal English and the impact his limited English ability would have on his interactions with others,

I cannot say [what I want in English] – I can't just answer. My life is completely different. I will lose some part of my brain I guess, the part that is responsible for thinking in detail about something and the ability to share [my thoughts] with other people ... Sometimes if I think something is cool or nice it’s hard for me to explain [in English] so I prefer to not talk about it. I guess [how we speak and what we say] somehow represents what is in our mind and in our thinking. So,

when I cannot [express something], I can say logical things. After that, there is a part of my creation, my sense of humor, my different views to something [that are lost in my conversations]. Because I can't talk about issues and problems, and what I see in general in different ways. That's part of my thinking in my brain, I practice in that way, but I just – I'm going to lose that part of my brain because I never use that part anymore, so I guess my thinking is affected by my language.

International graduate learners often recognize their language limitations before and upon arrival into the US and many in this current study believe that language learning should happen in the environment interacting with English speakers. They worry about their English capabilities, which can affect their confidence and ability to interact with others. Ema was further concerned that he would not be able to express himself authentically. He continues to have fears of losing a sense of his identity, his humor, and ability to express his thoughts in totality because of his limited English ability.

All nine participants ultimately chose to enroll in US higher education. However, for some, their choice of US institution was dictated by their test results. Many US institutions of higher education have different English language proficiency admission requirements. Consequently, these admission requirements serve as potential barriers that can limit access to potential international graduate learners. Moreover, admission requirements can be the reason why international students choose one institution over another regardless of institutional prestige, ranking, and quality of the academic program. José recognized that his English ability and English language exam scores limited his choices in schools he considered applying. Although José discussed really wanting to enroll in a quality program such as one available at UC Berkley, and he devoted time to

improving his English, he could not meet the English language admission requirements of his first-choice school. After he could not meet the English language admission requirement of his first-choice school he explained that UC Berkeley's TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) score requirement was much higher than those of other schools he was considering. Once receiving his scores, he indicated,

I didn't have a great score on the TOEFL, and UC Berkeley's TOEFL requirement was 110 points, while other schools were 90 or something. So that's something that I was also taking into account when I got my TOEFL scores. I was more confident about the GRE results ... [but] for the part of the TOEFL I was not confident to send my application to UC Berkeley.

Many of the respondents explained that their decision-making on choosing an institution was strongly influenced by TOEFL exam results. Ultimately, they must choose to attend an institution where their scores met the admission requirements.

Overall, English language proficiency, preparation, and language entrance examinations were dominant influencers in the decision-making experience for many respondents. Language served to influence the reason for directing a participant's path to choose the US as a destination country for graduate studies. The influence of language affected international student decision-making by narrowing the host country and institutional choices for international learners. All study volunteers mastered a specific level of English proficiency that was sufficient for graduate studies in the US. However, the same may not be true for all international graduate learners who decide to pursue graduate studies outside the US, specifically in a language other than English. Although seven of the nine respondents initially considered countries other than the US, all

international graduate learners in this study were seeking programs where the language of instruction is in English as a result from past educational experiences learning English. Moreover, this study's international graduate learners' decision-making process began with identifying host countries whose language of instruction was English, then the specific program search was dictated by English language exam scores and admission requirements. When describing the international student decision-making experience, it is important to recognize how the influences of language initially affects a learner's choice in country and institution.

Social Influencers

The second theme that addresses what the international graduate learner decision-making experiences are can be described as social influencers. Participants shared that their decision-making experience was influenced by someone in their lives. Moreover, all respondents described interacting with someone who left a lasting impression with the decision to enroll in US higher education. These social influencers were family members, students already in the US, professors, and even close relationships.

Sometimes conversations were with people who had traveled or studied in the US. For instance, Raju describes the positive impressions about the US he acquired by listening to others around him describe their experiences with studying in the US.

All my friends and any family member who have studied here have always said good things. They have always had good experiences, and it seems like both friends and family have had a big influence because you know when you talk to them you hear about these things and you're like, oh that sounds really good, I would like to do that, so that definitely helps.

Social influencers either supported, encouraged, or discouraged the participants' decision to enroll in US higher education. The data revealed that in all situations the decision to seek US higher education was not an individual decision but rather a collective decision where respondents sought advice and suggestions, yet sometimes ignored negative recommendations from others. Because of interactions with social influencers, this study's international learners also described challenges with making sacrifices such as being away from family, relationships, and cultural activities. All were keenly aware that their lives and social environments would change dramatically based on the decision and their enrollment in US graduate education. Despite the presumed hurdles all respondents had varying social support systems that impacted their ability to navigate the decision-making process.

Family acceptance and sacrifice. When asked about social influencers all study volunteers described similar sentiments regarding family acceptance and sacrifice. Additionally, almost all participants explained that the largest sacrifice would be time spent away from their families. For example, Honey discusses how emotionally challenging the decision to study in the US was, but fortunately she had the support of her family.

I tried to fight back emotions because in India everybody is attached to you emotionally. Family and friends don't really want you to go away from them so that they can take care and be there for you, or vice versa, and you can be there for them whenever they need something. But my family has been supportive enough to let me go out of the country, study, do whatever.

Honey described strong family support for her decision to study in the US. Although her

family did not want her to leave, many were supportive. Her family recognized that by studying in the US, Honey may obtain a job and continue to reside in the US long after completing her degree. She shared that culturally children are expected to care for their aging parents, and by being in the US her family worried about Honey's ability to care for her family as they get older. Regardless of support, the common experience for many respondents was described as sadness because study volunteers recognized that by choosing to enroll in US higher education the frequency of meeting friends and family would be severely affected by time and money. Raju also shared his feelings about the sacrifice of family to study in the US.

I'm investing a lot in terms of money, and I'm sacrificing my family not seeing them for so long. I knew I would have to leave my family and not see them as often. Right now [back home] there's this major cultural festival going on which is like my community's main festival, and so I am missing out on all the rituals and just the food and the – everything.

All respondents described time away from family as a major social sacrifice that they knew they would experience if they chose to enroll in graduate education abroad. As such, some participants mentioned how they had to have difficult conversations with family members explaining their decisions to study internationally. For instance, Honey explained the conversation she had with her mom by saying,

It was actually difficult for my mom to digest that I am going out of the country and wouldn't be there, you know? But she wasn't saying "no" to anything of it, she was just worried about it because it's a huge step, me going out [of the country] and she not being able to take care of me and not able to see me.

Not all study volunteers had the full support of their family. Zhou explains his challenge with deciding to study internationally during the time his mother was ill. He explained that he did not discuss his decision much with his mother. He clarifies,

My mother, she is sick. She didn't want me to live far away from her. I didn't explain too much about it [deciding to study internationally]. I just made my decision. Actually, my mother she wants me to be better. She didn't say anything about it, just if you want to go, just go.

In comparison, Thi shared that she had no support at all and was left to navigate the decision-making alone. Thi expressed her feelings of what it was like preparing to enroll in the US with little social support back in China as a woman in her early thirties. Thi offers,

This is a very lonely journey. You don't know. You are your own only reference and when you look at yourself, you are your harshest critic of yourself. You only think about your weakness ... Also, I think that I am older. A lot of older people here, they got families. Men, they got their wives. It's very difficult to talk to them. I don't know. I know it's really difficult. You want someone to talk with. Women at your age, they are more attending to their own families.

As Thi explains her journey was a lonely one, she acknowledges that many people her age are married and with families and that she knew it could be difficult to find people to talk to or who would understand her desires to continue her education. However, she maintained a strong determination to pursue her goal despite not having much social support.

Apart from family sacrifice, each respondent described having conversations with

two types of family members, those who were supportive of the idea of enrolling in US higher education and those who were not. Both José and Ismail's parents were supportive with their desire for graduate education in the US. José commented how his parents felt about him studying in the US by stating, "both of my parents, my mom and my dad, they were very cool with that." Ismail shared that his parents were supportive because of their positive experiences in the US, "they came to the US for honeymoon here, and therefore their perception of the US is much stronger than other parts of the world." Supportive family members were sometimes excited for the international learner and looked for opportunities to provide positive advice or resources. For instance, Fernanda commented that, "close family members were really supportive," especially her mother who provided emotional support as well as connected Fernanda with family friends living in the US. Respondents recalled supportive family members' willingness to assist with financing educational expenses and using their social networks to connect participants to family friends who were permanently living or temporarily residing in the US. Honey's family insisted that she should pursue international graduate studies in order to assist with her personal growth and future job opportunities. The positive advice she received was motivation for her to enroll in US higher education because of family who resided in the US. She suggests

So, my family insisted me to study instead of working, especially my aunt and uncle who are in the US right now. They insisted that I should probably have a master's degree, and I should either do it from here or anywhere else – anywhere I'd like but I should probably do it because just having one degree wouldn't be so good in terms of job opportunities or knowledge. You know growing further in

whatever you want to work in. My aunt here and her husband pushed me a lot to come here to study.

Honey was positively influenced by her family members who insisted that she continue her education and pursue a master's degree. She explains that her family believed it would be better for her to obtain a master's rather than continue working. Her family believed that with a master's degree, Honey would have more job opportunities and knowledge in the future. In Honey's experience, she was well supported by some family members and even had relatives living in the US who provided a positive perspective of the US. Although not all of Honey's relatives were supportive of her decision, those closest to her were supportive and encouraged her to study in the US. Surprisingly, Honey's positive experience with strong supporting and encouraging family members was uncommon among other study volunteers.

Most international students in this study did not have supportive and positive family members. Discouraging family members sometimes needed more time before accepting the idea of international education. Ema explained that his parents were more worried about not being able to see him for a few years but eventually accepted his decision. Ema explains the cultural differences with suggesting that big decisions such as enrolling in US higher education or leaving the country for many years are not easily individually decided.

For my mother and somehow father, they didn't agree [with my decision to study in the US] because our family relationship is not that individualized like in the US. So even though they accepted, and they are happy I'm here after I came here. But at first, they strongly disagreed with me because I'm going to leave for five

and six years and who knows what happens in these years.

Ema further explains that his culture is not individualized, and decision-making is more family oriented. In the end Ema's parents accepted his decision to enroll in the US. However, unlike Ema's parents, some discouraging family members never had a change of heart and continued to have more critical views of the benefits of pursuing international education.

In fact, female respondents expressed more difficulty with discouraging family members than male participants. Fernanda described her father as the only discourager in her life who was not supportive of her decision to study in the US. She explained that her father felt studying in the US was going to be "really expensive.". She explains, however, that her father did not have the same level of discouragement when her older brother studied in Germany and Canada. Honey explains her experience and personal thoughts about how gender impacts the varying type of support international students receive.

I feel it's very much influenced by gender, especially because people think at this age you have to get married. But once you are there [in the US], they can't find anybody for me, they can't do anything, so [they think] I'm wasting my time doing this. Many family members who don't want me to study here, and again I think that's got to do with gender, just want me to come back home and get married. That pressure is always there on us. Another thing it's the money factor of course. It's a lot of money so they'll be like, "oh, do you want to spend so much money, instead you could just work in India ... you're wasting your time there."

That's there, but mainly from family and not so much friends.

Honey emphasized the difficulty she had with some family members who were closed-

minded and refused to see any advantage to pursuing her graduate education in the US. She commented that some family members were critical of her decision and equated her decision to enroll in US higher education as running away from prescribed social responsibilities, such as caring for ailing family members, or getting married and having a family.

It's because they [my family members] are very closed-minded, the ones who discourage you are extremely closed-minded. There are some family members who are supportive, and I can talk to them. But there are ones who don't see the advantage of this [studying in the US] no matter what I say to them. It's completely pointless to even say anything [to them]. But for me, all I said was, "I want to do something for myself, that this is the kind of life that I want to live, and that's why I want to do it" ... One big thing that happens in these countries is that if you come to America, study, and then get a job, they [close-minded people] see you as running away from your responsibilities. You are supposed to take care of [family members] in their old age and ... this is their biggest fear. They do everything to discourage you from coming to the US because they don't want you to abandon them. So, they make you feel guilty— and at that point, honestly, that is something that you can't say anything because you are leaving. But at the same time, they don't really see you as an individual, I think that is the biggest issue over there.

When making the decision to study in the US, or not, Honey felt as if she were not being treated as an individual, but instead pressured to meet family and cultural expectations. In the end, she decided to pursue her own personal and educational freedom. This also

expressed her dislike for the cultural expectations for women in China by stating,

In Asian culture, women need to sacrifice more after they get married. You are not only directed by your own parents; you have your husband's parents directing you, which is totally insufferable for me. Yeah, insufferable for me. So, I like to make my own decision.

Thi emphasized that some women in Chinese society often do not have full autonomy in their life and education choices, especially after marriage. She explained that women experience parental pressures and expectations from both her own parents and her husband's parents. These external pressures and lack of control over a woman's life in China were motivators for Thi to continue her education abroad. Likewise, Fahim had similar experiences with her family especially her father who attempted to persuade her to not continue her education. She said,

My father wanted me to join the Bangladesh Bank, in the banking sector. Then I was like, "So, why the hell I did engineering?" He's like, "No, banking is easy for women." It's not about how easy, as I did [engineering] all my life. Why am I going to do a career shift now? So, I was like, "No, if I'm going to do continue my higher education it'll definitely be for a master's."

Like the other female participants, Fahim describes the gendered expectations for her. Indeed, Fahim's family members could not understand why she wanted to continue her education as a married woman with a child. She describes those conversations she had with family by stating,

My relatives and my parents-in-laws were not telling me directly, but they are saying to me, "Why do you need to study more?" In our country, a girl is only

studying for her marriage. Once you get married, then it's done. You don't need to carry on. It's not only about education, it's about being beautiful, being healthy, being anything good, up until marriage. If you get married, then just do the household chores, manage your husband, and manage your kids, just do that. You don't need to be you anymore. It's like stopping everything else. If you have some hobby, just forget it. Just like that, you just forget yourself after marriage. So, it's like, what are you going to do with higher education? What are you going to be? They [family members] are so discouraging. My father actually, commented one day that, "people don't do better after going abroad" ... I really feel like men over there don't even understand – it's not like they are trying to stop you from doing something but they just don't understand that women want to do something on their own. It is like why not? They just don't get it, they'd be like, "but why do you want to do it? You can have an easy life here." It's like they're not trying to be mean, but they just don't understand. Men still have that idea that everything is fine so why do you want to change it? ... Why do you have to go all the way to America to study, you can just stay here and – so this does exist for me.

Fahim's stories of being dissuaded by family members highlights additional challenges women can experience in their decision-making process. In her words, as a married woman with a child, Fahim is expected to give up her hobbies and dreams. Like many of the other participants, however, she discusses her strong will to pursue her goals despite her family not understanding her choices and even suggesting that she give up her dreams.

Overall, the stories shared by study volunteers reveal that family members were

usually supportive but sometimes discouraging. Female international learners described receiving more critical discouragement that generally related to expected female social responsibilities or cultural norms such as getting married. Although some male respondents described receiving minimal disagreement from family members, there was no mention of discouragement based on gender. The male respondents generally received respect for their decision whereas the female respondents did not. In the end, all respondents made the choice to enroll in US higher education programs, but their stories suggest that the decision can be harder for female participants to gain the respect or acceptance from family members.

Students already in the US. Additional influential people that impacted international graduate learners' decision-making experiences were friends or other students already in the US. Friends already studying in the US provided guidance to this study's learners on where to study and what the experience is like as an international student. Ema explained,

I had many of my friends from high school and university in the US, so I talked with them about how studies are here, how hard it is, what should I do, what are my responsibilities. But I have no family member here.

Ema shared that his friends helped influenced his decision by providing him with advice on what is was like to study in the US. His friends helped to enlighten his decision-making experience by providing more context on what he could expect. Ema gave more examples of conversations with friends by stating,

[They told me about] the method of education. How much should I study, how much work should I do, am I able to do that on average, what it costs to come to

the US, can I do the job there or not, what are the requirements, things like that. They told me that, “you can do your job, and the good thing here is that you're financially supported so you can focus on research and education.” So, it was positive.

Ema's friends in the US helped answer many of his concerns with how studies are in the US and the research expectations as a doctoral student. They described their personal experiences in the US which gave reassurance to Ema helping him feel that he was making the right decision. Raju explained that he also received advice from friends, already in the US, who helped gave tips for applying to graduate programs, understanding different majors, required documents, and how to navigate university admission and application procedures. In addition, friends could reveal specific and detailed information about programs of study especially with regards to classroom experiences, campus environment, and interactions with professors. Advice from friends in the US provided more than what participants could find browsing university websites. As well, Ema suggested that he chose to enroll in US higher education instead of another country because of friends from his home country who are now studying in the US. Fahim contacted the Bangladeshi Student Association on campus and communicated with Bangladeshi students through social media and email to learn more about the campus life. She explained that it is common for students abroad to reach out to students in the US to learn more about campus life. Fahim added that she knew students who were studying in the US before she arrived; “Bangladeshi students who are already here, I contacted them. I told them about my admission, and they really referred me [by saying], ‘yes, you come here. It's really a good university.’” Ema also recalls his decision-making experience was

influenced by his friends because, “a lot of my friends do that...I saw their situation was better than the people who were studying a PhD in Iran.” Similarly, the friend of Fernanda’s family was studying in the same program that Fernanda is currently in and provided Fernanda with assistance when looking for programs as well as learning about campus and community life. Fernanda recalled having a lot of difficulty finding a program in the US that focused on the specific area of clinical mental health counseling that she was interested in. Her family friend helped Fernanda by providing specific details about the program which ultimately helped influence her decision to enroll in her current program.

Respondents such as Ema, Raju, Fahim, and Fernanda received support from friends or fellow students who were enrolled at the university. This opportunity for study volunteers, who were not living in the US at the time, to engage and communicate with students enrolled in the US often assisted with their decision-making. They mentioned receiving advice regarding the campus and community life, interactions with professors, and quality of programs. Participants also revealed that these topics were not easily answered through university websites. For example, Fernanda shared her challenges with navigating US institutional websites by stating,

I didn’t understand what I was looking at, and I speak English ... but I didn’t understand even just navigating through the websites. It seemed so different, and there were terms that I didn’t really understand. The way everything was organized it was so different. So, it was just like navigating through, it was a puzzle, and I didn’t understand anything.

University websites are often difficult to navigate for prospective international students.

Fernanda was able to connect with a family friend who was living in the US to ask for help with identifying programs and searching for information through university websites. She questioned whether others from Southern Mexico would experience similar if not more challenges when US university websites, “I don't know how people that are from more south [Mexico] where it's not a thing to speak English.”

Many study volunteers sought and consulted with students already in the US after feeling dissatisfied with information available on US institution websites or wanting to learn more about the student experience. Overall, the human connection between peers, student to student, provided a strong reassurance to participants that ultimately and positively influenced their decisions to enroll in US higher education.

Professors. This study's international learners also sought guidance from professors with regards to future graduate studies. Professors served as influential people because they shared their personal experiences studying in the US and in some cases encouraged these international students to pursue similar international education. For instance, Honey's professor was very encouraging for students to seek international education.

The head of the department, which I used to study in, she was a master's [student] herself, and she wanted her students to go do a masters anywhere they wanted to, flourish in their lives. So, she actually gave me a recommendation.

Honey was positively influenced by her professor's encouragement and even received a letter of recommendation that Honey used in her graduate school applications. Moreover, some professors outside the US are engaged in international research collaborations and have developed partnerships with professors inside the US. Participants shared that

professors sometimes encourage their students to pursue graduate studies at an institution with which the professor had developed a relationship. For instance, Fernanda commented that she was initially interested in a graduate program in the Netherlands because of joint-research collaborations between her university in Mexico and a university in the Netherlands. José described being interested in a few institutions in the US and was strongly influenced by his professor back home. José shared that his professor had a connection with a US professor which resulted in José being invited by the department for a campus visit. He offers,

One of my professors, when I was doing my master's, had a connection with one of the professors here [in the US]. During that time, my professor [in the US] invited me to fly here to get to know the campus, to meet some of the faculty, and some of the other students that were in their second or third year.

José explained that his experience was positively shaped because of the interaction and warm welcoming he felt. The department covered all his expenses to visit the campus and created opportunities for José to meet other international students.

The chair of the department, he was at the airport waiting for me... We had lunch here in the department with the students ... it was quite diverse, the students, and they were also quite kind to me and – I had a good time. I had lunch with them and then I had the two nights I was here I had dinner with the chair of the department.

José mentioned that his decision was strongly impacted by his interaction with the professors during his campus visit. He mentions that, “those small things, I think that they helped a lot and definitely leaned my decision to study at this university.” His

experience highlights how influential personal contact by professors can be on the decision-making experience of international graduate learners.

Ismail was originally interested in graduate studies outside of Malaysia and had always dreamt of studying in the UK. However, after consulting with his undergraduate lecturer, Ismail changed his mind and decided to focus on enrolling in US higher education. Ismail mentioned that his lecturer explained the academic differences between the US and UK and suggested Ismail consider where he could have the most success both academically and professionally. Ismail commented on how he was influenced by his lecturer because the lecturer considered Ismail's learning style, and thought that Ismail would learn better from the US higher education system,

US education is something that I have been very fascinated for a long time because I had a lecturer who graduated from the US. In fact, before [coming to the US], I wanted to get into [a university in] the UK. It was a dream for a long time to be in the UK. But only a few months before I came here, I changed my decision to study in the US. It's because of this lecturer who shared with me about the education in the US.

One main thing is that the education in the US is not so much about memorizing, but it's more towards analyzing, evaluating to be able to understand, and to use it in your daily life. My lecturer back in Malaysia, who graduated from the US [felt]...there was no chance for him to get his education in Malaysia, but he came to the US where he found how helpful the professors and the education are. That's why he recommended me to come here. He was the one who shared a lot with me about the US and convinced me to come to the US...so I trusted him

because if I studied in the UK or in Malaysia, it's all about memorizing and it will not work for me at all. Simply because of one of my lecturers, from my undergraduate university, inspired me to go beyond my original target [of studying in the UK] ... that after talking to him, I changed my mind.

Ismail's decision-making experience highlights how influential professors can be in motivating international students to study in the US. Often instructors in foreign institutions have had positive educational experiences in the US, and they are motivated to recommend US study to their students and mentees. Like Ismail's lecturer, faculty in international universities can explain the differences in teaching and learning approaches in the US, the focus on application of new knowledge in daily life, and opportunities for research, analysis, and evaluation.

Honey, José, and Ismail each were influenced by a professor who positively impacted their decision-making experiences. Professors provided encouragement to pursue US higher education by either sharing their personal experiences or suggesting what was best for the participants' educational future. Additionally, José was well treated and welcomed by the US professors, which helped reassure him that he was making the right decision to enroll in US higher education. Importantly, decision-making experiences for this study's international learners involved seeking advice, trusting, and having respect for their professors' guidance.

Other influencers. The final social influencer discussed by respondents was individuals in which respondents had close relationships. International graduate learners are adults who have rich and complex lives and relations. José explained that at the time he had a girlfriend and he knew that the sacrifice would be greater with missing his

girlfriend in comparison to his family. He explains his sacrifice by stating, “so, the sacrifice was personal in that way to lose the closeness to her. The closeness to my girlfriend was more ... a sacrifice bigger than the one I have with my parents.” During the interview José became emotional recalling the sadness of choosing to come to the US, while having a girlfriend back home. Although he met his girlfriend after he decided to study in the US, the two of them had agreed to make the relationship work despite the distance. José reported that in the end the relationship did not flourish and had ended.

On the other hand, Thi and Fernanda clarified that they intentionally avoided getting into relationships up to a year before coming to the US. The reason for avoiding close relationships was fear that being in a relationship would later alter their willingness to study in the US. The avoidance of a relationship was shared by female participants only, however. Thi shared her feelings regarding personal sacrifices and relationships by saying,

I made a lot of sacrifices. My marriage was first. I even didn't dare to have a boyfriend, because I thought if I had a boyfriend or get married, I might not have this freedom to go whenever I want to go. And I would have to save money for the family. So, right now, I save money only for myself, which feels super good.

Thi explains that she avoided getting into a close relationship because she did not want it to lead to something more serious such as marriage. Likewise, Fernanda expressed similar feelings as she made a conscientious decision to avoid relationships, too. She explains her decision-making by stating,

Before coming here for a whole year, I would like to have a [boyfriend] but what if that stops me from coming here? I'll see it like a self-sabotage kind of thing ...

If I really like him and long-distance that's a mess ... So, I was like, no, not right now. Walk away from it. It was sad because of course I want to go on a date and do corny, cheesy stuff but I guess I worked so hard to [study in the US] that ... I just didn't want it to happen ... but I guess I was just sad to be longing for something but at the same time for other things.

Fernanda expresses her struggle of longing for her master's degree but also wanting to be in a close relationship. In her words, she describes being fearful of self-sabotage by thinking a close relationship would dissuade her from achieving her academic goals of graduate education. The importance of Thi and Fernanda's experiences is to highlight how they felt it was necessary to intentionally avoid being in a relationship in order to stay committed to their plan to pursue graduate education in the US. This underscores the cultural gendered expectations expressed by this study's female international learners. Many female respondents expressed having to ignore cultural expectations and pressures from families who encouraged marriage and starting a family over the pursuit of higher education in the US. In fact, female participants most often experienced discouragement from family members not to pursue graduate education in the US. Women are often directed by their parents with pressures to get married and after marriage, some women are then directed by their husbands' parents. Therefore, the intentional avoidance of being in a close relationship highlights a deeper reality where women feel social pressures to get married and ultimately avoid relationships all together in order to pursue graduate education abroad.

Overall, respondents were influenced differently based on interactions with family, students in the US, professors, and close relationships. Conversations regarding

enrollment in US higher education were well received by professors and friends but not so often with parents or other family members. José, Ismail, and Honey shared that their decision was positively influenced by professors and friends. However, Ema, Zhou, Fahim, Thi, and Honey shared that their experience was not always positively influenced by parents or other family members. Moreover, study volunteers seeking advice from an influential person had a specific purpose that generally did not overlap. For instance, respondents engaging in conversations with family members were seeking acceptance and understanding of the desire to enroll in US higher education. In comparison, conversations with professors and friends were about the study volunteer seeking advice on where to study and what life was like in the US. Honey, Fahim, and Thi, shared that closed-minded family members were most often dissuasive of the decision to study in the US. The lack of acceptance from family members could be interpreted as having challenges with giving up control over the participant's life and well-being.

In general, family members were the only influential group that had discouragers. The discouragers presented more reluctance to understand or accept, especially with female respondents seeking to enroll in US higher education. Therefore, females in this study were presented with more difficult and challenging conversations with family members. These conversations usually resulted in the female study volunteers trying to persuade family members or having to ignore family members who refused to accept her decision. The difficulty with family member acceptance relates to prescribed social gendered expectations.

In comparison, male participants described fewer to no experiences with needing to persuade family members, but instead males in this study appeared to be more

respected for their decision by family members. In sum, influential people made a strong impact on the decision-making experiences of these nine international graduate learners. What these stories demonstrate is that the decision is multifaceted with many types of influential people all providing different and varying elements of advice to study, or not to study, in the US.

Career and Financial Considerations

The decision-making experience of international graduate learners extended beyond social sacrifices such as concerns for not being able to see one's family and friends, attending cultural festivals, eating home cooking, or saving money on a cheaper education in one's home country. Some participants discussed their home country currency value in relation to the US dollar, and that the cost of a US degree is at least four times more expensive than what a similar degree would cost in their home country. Therefore, many respondents gave strong consideration to career and finances when deciding to study in the US.

Four of the nine study volunteers were working at the time they began exploring the possibility to enroll in the US. This was an important discovery as it highlights that the decision-making process for some international graduate learners begins years in advance due to the necessity to save and prove they have financial stability to study in the US and will not become a public charge or burden on the US economy. The US government requires all international students to demonstrate what they call *sufficient funds* during the visa interview. Most, international students must obtain a visa prior to being determined admissible at the port of entry when entering the US. During the visa interview international students are required to present financial statements that prove the

student has sufficient funds to support their entire first year cost of enrollment or more. As a result, some of the respondents began their decision-making experience by engaging in the world of work in order to save money. In comparison, other study volunteers chose to enter the workforce without the goal of saving money to go back to school.

Decisions influenced by careers and educational goals. Thi, Ismail, Honey, and Zhou gave up their jobs and careers when choosing to enroll in graduate studies in the US. Thi was the only respondent who intentionally worked for years to save enough money to study in the US. Honey was working and saving money but did not have immediate plans to study in the US. Although Thi and Honey worked to save money others like Ismail and Zhou were working to advance their careers. Participants who were working also had to consider the uncertainty of giving up one's career in hopes of achieving a different future. The rationale provided by the respondents for quitting their jobs and coming to the US was fear of getting stuck in the home county working culture without being able to explore all options for a different future.

Zhou describes how he felt working in his company prior to studying in the US, From my point of view ... working in the company was just repeating the same work every day. I couldn't see the hope. I didn't learn anything new after I worked for a year. At about half a year I knew everything, and I knew there's something new I had to go through ... I decided to change.

Zhou's dissatisfaction with work prompted him to reconsider going back to further his education and pursue a PhD. His sentiment highlights that he wanted a different future from what his current level of knowledge and experience could provide working in the company. I emphasize the word *different* here because not all participants believed

studying in the US would provide a better future but rather a different future than what was expected if the respondents were to stay and continue working in their home country. Moreover, Ismail shared that despite his success at work he still chose to leave while he was at the top of his career. He explains at the time he knew that if he did not leave at that moment in his life, he would be too involved with work and perhaps never leave to pursue his international education goals. Ismail recalls his experience by saying,

Leaving my job was a very big sacrifice because during that time it was the best time in my career. It was the time where I just got promoted a few months ago, and I was hitting the highest KPI [key performance indicator: business sales measurement tool] among the whole group. It was the peak time of my life during and because of that, leaving the company to study in the US had been a very great sacrifice. It was not a time when my career was in decline, but it was the highest time that I needed to leave. Because of that, if I did not leave and grab this opportunity, I would not be able to meet my educational goal.

Ismail acknowledged the sacrifice he had to make but justifies his decision by recognizing the need to leave to meet his educational goals. Zhou's experience was similar in his own career, he submits, "I had a very great opportunity in my previous company. I've given it up. I earned a very high salary in China. Maybe higher than 80% of the people." Zhou also shared that he knew quitting his job could negatively impact his future to be hired again. Some participants lamented that it is not easy to quit a job or change careers. They clarified that in their countries, once accepting a position in a company, employees expect, and are expected, to work at their company until they retire. Zhou describes the conversations he had with his friends regarding his decision to quit by

saying,

They said [to me], “why do you want to go to the US? Because you have a good start over here and you are risking yourself if you just quit your job. It is almost impossible to get in this big company [again]. You won’t be lucky anymore to get into this position.” Yeah, he was telling the truth. It is true.

Zhou acknowledges the potential loss and sacrifice of not being able to secure another position with a company in China. His decision to study in the US was at the cost of not only giving up his job but his potential for advancement in that career. Zhou explained that he was working full-time, six days a week for ten hours a day earning a high salary. Despite his high salary, he expressed disappointment that he still could not afford a house in China for his family. Zhou explains that salary was not his only motivation to pursue a PhD but he hoped studying in the US would provide him with more opportunity back home.

Thi was intentional by having planned to work for a few years and save money prior to coming to the US. She proudly expressed her financial independence from her family by stating, “since I am financially independent, my parents cannot say anything about me. I am very strong mentally, like, ‘No, you have no say’. Financial independence is super important for you to choose this.” Thi explained that her goal was to enroll in a master’s degree in the US, and because of her financial independence her family could not influence her decision. Thi’s motivation to work in China prior to applying to graduate school in the US was so that she could save the necessary financial resources to support her. Thi’s employment situation differs from Ismail, Honey, and Zhou as Thi was the only participant who was intentionally working to save money needed to fund her US

education.

Honey explains that she was working nine hours a day and saving money in order to have enough to come to the US. She shared her experience by saying,

So, it's a huge amount and to save that much, I had worked three years so I could just afford my flight tickets, my visa, application fees, and probably one-fourth of the first semester. That's my three-year savings gone. So, you can imagine how I had to plan ahead for applying for colleges.

Honey commented on the difference in currency between the US and India. In her words, her three-years of savings would only enable her to pay for the flight ticket to the US, visa fees, university application fees, and a quarter of the first semester tuition.

Respondents shared that they needed to save money to prove during the visa interview but also need to save for the many immediate costs. Examples of immediate costs included not only the flight fee but also university application fees, exam fees, and the visa interview fee. Honey expressed that she had interest in applying to multiple programs in order to increase her chance of being admitted. Ultimately, she was dissuaded from applying to multiple programs due to the high cost of application fees. She explained that by just applying to ten universities it would cost over \$1,000 and with no guarantee of even being admitted. In review of one institution's graduate application fee it was determined that international graduates were paying more than twice the cost of a domestic student application fee.

Honey expressed her career and financial considerations by suggesting that she was taking a chance with pursuing education in the US because she was already working for a company and was saving money. She explains that, "since I started working, I

started my savings and...my mom and me started saving together, as well. Only for this reason, if I want to do something ... it's always good to have savings in case of emergencies." However, eventually Honey began to strongly consider the possibility of studying the US.

Given all the situations [with work] I still wanted to come [to the US]. I didn't want to back off from my plan because I worked for it, I did work hard for it, and I somehow had this positive self-motivation for myself that at least I could go through the education and then think about work. If worst case just come back and work [in India], it still makes sense, and I still have the degree. I have my knowledge; I have my experience in the college. So, it's not bad, it's just a little loss on the financial aspects, but we can cover that up in like two or three years extra maybe. Yeah, so I was fine with it [deciding to study in the US].

Honey explains that she contemplated continue working in India but ultimately, she was not satisfied with her life. Like others in the study, she continued working to save money and eventually would use her savings to fund her US education. Ema shared his concern with the high cost for admission requirements such as the GRE and TOEFL by explaining how long it would take to save money to sit for one of these exams,

TOEFL and GRE exam cost our currency, Iranian rial, right now an exam costs a lot to people, for example you should work for six months just to pass a single TOEFL exam. ... in Iran when you decide to choose to study in the US it's six months of working to pay for just GRE exam.

Ema's statement summarizes many international graduate learners' reality of the cost of taking the required examinations, and often the re-testing necessary to achieve expected

scores. Unsuccessful GRE, GMAT, and TOEFL scores, for example, not only cost tremendous amounts in time and effort in preparation, but multiple registrations can be expensive and result in setbacks to educational timelines and goals. The knowledge of personal and financial risks weighs heavily on potential international graduate learners and must be taken into consideration when understanding their decision-making processes.

Financial considerations. Fortunately, Fernanda, Fahim, and Raju were supported by their families, which included extended family members. In fact, nearly all participants except for one received some financial support from a family member for their graduate studies. Although this support helped the study volunteer to achieve the goal of enrolling in the US, conversations with family members in advance of enrollment were not always easy. For instance, Fernanda explains she had to try multiple times to persuade her father into financially supporting her study in the US. She recalls,

I started asking [my family] if it was economically possible. It's extremely expensive, and I talked to my mom, and she said that she had been saving forever. I did have a sort of arrangement with my dad, since my brother had been going to Germany and to Canada, he was studying in a really prestigious private school that's incredibly expensive in comparison to mine. I was like, hey, you gave that to him, can it be my turn? ... And I had to just prove that we had [money], I had to present my dad with everything [about the costs of studying in the US] before he said yes. So, he's saying that I'm going to spend this [much money] in books, and [I told him] there's a scanner in the library so [I don't have to buy my books].

Fernanda shared conversations she had with her father where she attempted to persuade

him into helping her pay for her US education. Similarly, Fahim had challenges with her husband and financing her education abroad. Her husband was uncomfortable with spending the family savings in her educational pursuit. Instead she requested money from her father who also did not see value in her educational goals. Ultimately, Fahim explained that she sold gold ornaments to make cash and eventually secured some of her family's savings to support her goal. She submits,

I got some gold ornaments and sold them to make cash. We also had some savings from my husband's income and combining all of these that was enough to pursue my aims. My husband was not comfortable with giving away all the savings and he was like, "we'll be again in zero." So, I asked him, "you don't want to invest in our future?" It's like investing. He was a little bit uncomfortable, so I didn't really like taking his money. So, I just asked my father. Last year when I asked [my father] for money to study in Sweden he told me, "I'm not help you in any way to go abroad. You can't go with this little child. I'm not helping with any of the thing." Then, this time I said, "Can you loan me some money? I'll return it to you." It's not a very big amount because my father was a government service holder, he retired, and he got a lot of money after retirement, and as a pension or something ... Yeah, he has a lot of money.

Fahim shared her experience with wanting to use her husband's money to help fund her master's degree. However, because her husband did not agree to help invest in her education, she ultimately had to persuade her father to help financially support her.

Raju discussed the need to secure educational loans while relying on family financial support, too. He expressed the cultural support in India by stating,

It's a collective [society] ... as far as Indian students are concerned, this is just my observation. I have noticed that the whole family gets involved in getting you educated. It's like when I first went for my visa interview and you have to show your financial support documents. This [family] member is contributing this much, this member this much, and this is their bank document. There were six bank documents that I was showing [to the visa officer]. So, I feel either students [apply for] loans from India or [use] family support and savings as the way to prepare.

Raju highlighted how common it is for Indian families to come together collectively and support a student's educational costs. Similarly, Honey explained that when she decided she wanted to study in the US, she began saving money with her mother. She stated, "my savings entirely weren't enough obviously. So, my mom and me started saving together." She further explained that together with her mother they could not save enough money to cover all of her educational expenses; therefore, they decided to use a commercial property Honey's dad bought and leased before he died.

... it's always good to have savings in case of emergencies ... we knew that the saving wouldn't last more than a year, so we had a house and my dad had bought this commercial place, he used to run his business in that place. So, after he died that place was rented and my mom couldn't manage all of those because she worked too so we sold off and saved that money for my education. Someday I hope to repay everything back.

This underscores not only a strong family supportive structure, but also the challenges entire families have with meeting the financial requirements for a US visa and cost of a

US education.

Overall, the decision-making experience included many career and financial considerations. Not unlike domestic students, international graduate learners must secure financial support for their studies. However, for international students, the preparation and planning for this support is often more complex with cultural expectations, global economics and currency inequities, and US immigration regulations, all of which influence where, when, and how potential students decide to study internationally. Seven of the nine participants had to navigate careers, saving money, or negotiating and persuading family members to help sponsor their US education. The remaining two respondents, Ema and José, received full funding doctoral fellowships from their departments. Because of the high cost of higher education in the US each study volunteer recognized that without sufficient funds they could not study in the US. This theme underscores how important financial resources are for international learners who come from countries where in order to pay for a single GRE exam one must work six months. Also, this theme highlights the career sacrifice some respondents were willing to make in pursuit of US higher education.

Immigration Challenges

Eight of the nine international graduate students in this study shared challenges with complex immigration processes from visiting the US embassy or consulate office, consular officer visa interview, and real fears of being in the US after the Trump presidential election. The importance of sharing these participants' stories is to help emphasize their decision-making experience during a seeming unwelcoming time in US politics, presidential rhetoric, and immigration policy. A collective experience describing

what these study volunteers felt can be summarized into *stress* and *fear*. Navigating the immigration steps to becoming an international student in the US was stressful for these respondents. However, the fear many respondents articulated resulted from not knowing or not having full control of the immigration outcome. Moreover, although all felt confident in their choice to study in the US, many faced extenuating barriers that presented additional burdens on their potential to enroll in US higher education. This theme presents examples of participants' experiences navigating immigration processing.

The visa interview. Prior to arriving in the US all international students on an F-1 visa know they must visit a US embassy or consulate office around the world in order to sit for a visa interview. In order to schedule a visa interview, all international students are required to pay a visa interview fee known as the DS-160. Although this fee can be paid online Ema explains that he was unable to pay due to Iranian government sanctions. Instead, he had to trust a third-party payer to submit payment on his behalf. Ema explained that this made him nervous stating, "they are some people outside of Iran, they receive rial [Iranian currency], they call their people outside and they pay [for the visa interview fee]. For example, I guess someone paid for me. You don't know who pays for you." Ema is explaining that governmental politics created additional burden on his ability to become an international student in the US. During the visa interview each international student must demonstrate having sufficient funds, which are financial means to support all costs while in the US. In addition to having sufficient funds, international students must also demonstrate a strong intent to return home after the completion of their course of study. All international students on F-1 visas are considered nonimmigrants and thus are required by law to demonstrate they do not have intention to

immigrate to the US. In my experience as a Designated School Official working with international students, the most common reason for international students denied an F-1 visa is the denial reason *Immigration and Nationality Act Section 214(b)* which means the applicant did not overcome the presumption of immigrant intent.

Most international students will visit the nearest US embassy in their home country. José recalls his visa interview experience being quick and simple but noting how the atmosphere is meant to intimidate visa applicants.

It was pretty fast, and it was like three questions, where are you going to study, what is the PhD about ... yeah, it was less than 10 minutes. I suppose that in a way the buildings of the US consulate are made in that way to control people because they have the aisles and the checkpoints and that part where people [officers] are watching. They make you sit in line and wait, and there's no sign that says you can't talk, but all the people are quiet. I don't know what they're thinking but they are quiet, quiet. Because that's the sensation they transmit. But the two officials from the tourist visa and for the F-1 were pretty mean.

Although José observed consulate officials being mean to other visa applicants through aggressive questioning or denying visas, his interview experience was short and without issue. His experience helps portray, for many international learners, their first experience with a US government building, process, and immigration official.

Honey shared her visa interview experience by recalling what she was thinking as she was in line for her visa interview. She recalled thinking, "I was like, dude, I'm going to get this. You [consular officer] are going to say, 'yes'." She explains her experience receiving her visa at the US embassy in India:

I was literally not concentrating on what I'm supposed to talk about [with the visa officer] ... I was just observing, this is my experience, I've never been here [at the US consulate], so I was looking at everything and how everything works. There were guards standing ... and you have to stand just before the yellow line starts, you're not supposed to go ahead of it. I had to wait, and wait, and wait before – in line, because there were so many people, so many. I had to wait for at least about an hour outside and then in the office and then 15 minutes in the line. I could really see what's going on, what's happening inside, what's happening outside. Yes. That's the scary part actually [see other students during their visa appointments]. But then it doesn't really matter because you are not that person, you are someone different ... it's about how you portray yourself or how you answer.

She shared having to wait in long lines inside and outside of the consulate building. From her spot in line she was able to see other people being denied their visas. She described feeling scared but then reminding herself, while remaining confident, that her situation is different from those being denied. Honey's experience shows her resilience to remain confident in her pursuit despite the unfamiliar and scary environment that is the US consulate building. She further explains what her interview experience was like by stating,

It's random, you just give your application to them and they start asking questions, they're just typing in information and then they have your information on the computer. So, it was my turn, I was standing at the yellow line, and I was hoping to get the lady, but I didn't, I got the rude guy, oh my god, and he was

rude. He was rude to me, too. I mean he didn't even want to listen to me, he wouldn't let me finish my sentences. And it was like, if you don't want to listen why are you asking me this? ... that was an experience. It was like he was asking me and trying to grill me, but I was confident on giving answers. He could look into my eyes and see that I'm nervous, but I was answering so he was alright...I don't know what happened in that interview, but I just got it [the visa], and I just ran out, it was like, "okay, thank you, have a good day" and I just ran out.

Her experience highlights her need and ability to remain confident with her educational objectives despite engaging with a rude visa officer. Honey's experience illustrates a portion of the decision-making experience where she had to prove to the visa officer her desire to study in the US and intent to not immigrate to the US. Part of the process of progressing toward her goal of studying in the US was to prepare for her visa interview by meeting with her counselor who provided her with a visa interview resources.

My counselor gave me a blank questionnaire and told me to type in all the answers in my own words. Then we had a session where I had printed all of the answers. She told me what the answers are expected to be ... not to just blabber something but be honest ... they'll just grill you on that question if you talk too much because you never know who is going to ask you questions. So, you don't talk much, you just stick to whatever you want them to know and that's it. So that's how she actually trained me— otherwise I would keep talking.

Honey's counselor coached her in answering visa interview questions. This experience demonstrates the complexities international learners encounter as they prepare for the visa interview. If an international student is denied a visa the student will have to

reschedule a new visa interview, pay fees, and likely miss the chance to enroll in the US. Therefore, Honey's experience signifies how important the visa interview can be and the lengths international students will go to ensure a successful interview. Unfortunately, not all participants could fully prepare for the visa interview. Thi shared her shocking experience when the visa officer told her, "You are too old to come here." Although Thi was only 34 years old she was surprised to be told that was too old. She further explains her visa interview experience by mentioning,

I even prepared my study plan, but he didn't check on that. He only asked me several question, like, "Why would you want to study in this program?" and, "What's your career plan?" I told him, "I'm a single child, so I will definitely go back to China."

Thi's experience shows her external challenges to her decision-making experience and how others viewed her as too old to go back to school. Despite negative pressures Thi expressed determination to the visa officer and argued for her visa approval. Raju added that the US visa is the hardest to obtain and is expensive. He described his experience at the visa office by saying, "everyone is rude" and the whole experience was, "unpleasant overall." He further laments that the officers, "make you feel like a thief, they make you feel inferior." Raju's comments about the visa interview officer are commonly shared among prospective international students which can make preparing for the visa interview more stressful.

All but one participant had access to a US embassy or consulate office in their home country. Ema was the only learner who did not have equal access to a US embassy or consulate office in Iran. He explains his challenges with obtaining a US visa by

stating,

The problem is directly related back to the Iranian government because of the hostage situation [1979 Iran hostage crisis] ... we have to travel to another country to get our visa, and we don't have passports because we have a mandatory military training...this is a hard and long process.

As Ema explained, due to the 1979 Iran hostage crisis the US embassy in Tehran was closed. Therefore, all Iranian students seeking a US visa must travel to a neighboring country such as Iraq, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Armenia, or Turkey to sit for a visa interview. However, as Ema explains, there is a mandatory military service requirement for males before being eligible to receive a passport. After obtaining a passport, Iranian students must then consider which neighboring country to visit to request a US visa. Based on visa reciprocity between Iran and other countries, Iranian students may also need to request a visitor visa just to enter the neighboring country and request a US student visa at a US consulate office. However, visiting a different country presents new challenges. Ema further explains his experience with trying to find a country that had a shorter visa appointment wait time. Finding visa interview times was difficult in other countries and navigating to other countries to find the US consulate was not easy because, "in Armenia...they cannot speak English that well and our language is different." Having to visit another country to request a US visa presents a different level of challenge that was not shared by all participants. It is important to mention the varying degree of complexity this one step can be for international students, particularly those living in countries where no US embassy or consulate office exists. Overall Ema expressed his understanding and critique of the complicated visa process for Iranian

students by stating,

I guess, from every single step, there is no single procedure for a student coming from Iran or maybe from another country ... the good thing for the US is they filter the students with a long, complicated [immigration] process. But the bad thing is they also, maybe if it is their goal to gather talents from around the world, these situations [complicated immigration processes] I saw a lot of my friends that I thought was very good and perfect but couldn't come to the US.

Ema's sentiments express the unfortunate side of a strict immigration policy where highly talented and recruited international students are unable to successfully pass immigration processing and the visa interview. Ema expressed his sadness thinking about his friends who are back home in Iran because they were denied their visas. He explained that his friends were equally, if not more, talented than he but were ultimately denied their visas to study in the US. Ema suggests that he and other Iranian students must have alternative plans by stating,

One big challenge is that when you choose the US you always should have a plan B because you don't know whether your visa status [will be approved]. We have an unfair process, so we don't know at the end whether they will give out a visa or not. So, when you choose US you should always have a plan B.

Ema explained his plan B by stating, "I passed another exam for studying a PhD in Iran as a backup." He also mentioned that studying in Europe or Australia were alternatives, too. Overall, Ema shared that because of the complex immigration regulations that international students often consider having a backup plan. His experience illustrates the multilayers of extenuating barriers that can inhibit a talented and highly recruited

international learner from studying in the US.

For these nine respondents their immigration challenges began with the F-1 visa interview. For Ismail, José, and Raju the experience was short and positive, despite the intimidating physical appearance of the US consulate building. For Thi and Honey, the visa interview was a persuasive exchange where the study volunteers attempted to prove to the visa officer why they deserve to study in the US. During the visa interview, the consular office holds full discretion to deny an international student the visa to study in the US. Consequently, this is the most common reason why international students end up not enrolling after being admitted to US institutions. As Ema mentioned, the interview is often where many talented international students are denied their dream of studying in the US. Prior to the interview, some participants such as Honey, Thi, Fahim, and José prepared by reviewing interview questions and preparing a study plan. However, no amount of preparation could prepare Thi, at 34 years old, when she was told by the visa officer that she was too old to study in the US. Lastly, the most compelling immigration experience was described by Ema who had to travel to a different country in order to request a visa interview. The stories and experiences in this chapter help shed light on how motivated these study volunteers must have been to overcome immigration challenges. Additionally, these participants' decision-making experiences navigating the visa interview illustrate how strong-willed and confident they were in their choice to pursue US higher education.

Influences of the 2016 US presidential election. In addition to the visa interview, eight out of nine respondents expressed concerns with the 2016 US presidential election and how they thought it would negatively affect their ability to come

to the US or their studying experience in the US. Ema explained he began considering studying in Canada by saying, “at first day when Trump happened, I saw that everything is gone, and I'm done with US, so I should consider Canada, and that time I was already applied for this university.” Fernanda said she also thought about her decision but felt she was too far along in the process to cancel her plans.

Trump won the day of my birthday and...I was like, “I know my [application] is already there but are you sure you want to go?” ... it was a shock, I didn't expect [him to win]. And even though I knew that there were people [in the US] that thought like him [Trump], seeing the map blue and red, and seeing half of it was red I was [thinking], “oh, I don't know how welcomed I'm going to be in there.” You start hearing a lot of stories of, people in Mexico. But my aunt that's living [in the US] and my friend that's living [in the US], they got bullied, or they got kicked out of somewhere, or a friend told me that her friend was beat up...and they pushed all of her groceries to the floor and started yelling at her. And I'm like, what the hell?

Fernanda strongly considered whether she wanted to continue with her application to enroll in US higher education after the 2016 election. She recalls how Trump portrayed Mexicans in his news conferences, and she was troubled by the stories she heard from friends and family living in the US who were harassed. Ultimately, however, Fernanda felt hopeful and decided to take a chance and continue with her plan to study in the US.

It was okay, let's hope for the best ... The Trump thing kind of made me doubt [thinking], are you sure. But ... I really don't know what was pulling me to just

keep going [with my plan to study in the US] and come here anyway. I guess it was that I just had already started all the process.

Trump becoming president of the US critically challenged Fernanda's decision to study so much that she began to doubt her choice. Despite her hesitation to enroll in US higher education, she explained that was already too far along in the process of becoming an international student to change her plan. Thi also expressed her feelings of sadness and fear of the Trump election by stating,

Yeah. I cried; you know. I really don't like Trump. Sorry to say that. I really hoped Hillary would be [elected] ... Because I really want a woman ... I don't like Trump because I believe Trump really hates the Chinese. When he constantly referred to that. Now he's starting the trade war, making my first year here really tough.

Trump's rhetoric towards China and Chinese people personally and emotionally affected Thi, and she worried about her academic success and potential employability in the US,

I really got very, very fearful ... Then, I was thinking, "Oh my God, there is something going on there." ... So, I don't know how people will judge my writing ... After graduation, I don't think I can find a job here.

Thi recalled Trump negatively discussing US – China relations and was concerned that domestic peers in her class would view her and her writing with adverse bias. Her experience illustrates fear as a result of changing political views and the potential for unfair academic and professional prejudice.

Zhou remembered the exact time of day he read the news about Trump by stating,

I remember it was noon when I heard the news. President Trump is in the house.

And oh, oh my god! I am down. I was sitting there and thinking, oh my goodness, oh, I don't know if this will influence my visa because I know they have very strict immigrations policies for immigration. But I cannot do anything about it, right? So, you ... you just accept it. I think if Hillary is the winner, I think it's going to be better.

Zhou worried that stricter visa scrutiny would be an outcome of Trump's election. Fahim expressed strong worry about coming to the US after the 2016 US presidential election, and as a result began applying to universities in different countries. She recalls what she felt during that time by saying,

We were really angered from news that said Trump is going to kick out all the Muslim students or the Bangladeshi students. Especially the Muslims, and we are a Muslim country. So, there's an issue. We were really uncomfortable, and I actually tried to apply again for [universities in] Sweden ... and I wanted to apply to Canadian universities, but I didn't have the time. When I applied for [universities in] Sweden I was thinking of not coming to U.S. because of the political situation. It might get worse, I might get killed, just because I am a Muslim.

Fahim's fears of being killed as a Muslim woman in the US underscores how she believed the Trump presidency would fundamentally change social and moral values in the US. Consequently, Trump was the singular factor that motivated Fahim to reconsider her decision to enroll in the US.

Last year, I decided not to apply for the U.S., and I was only applying to [schools in] Sweden. But at that time my husband said, 'Aren't you applying? Just apply to

some US universities. Just do it, so that you don't [regret it]'. So, I was thinking, okay, if I get time I'll apply.

Fahim shared that not only was she concerned for her safety but also the safety of her daughter who was going to accompany her to the US. She explains that in the end she decided to continue with her plan to study in the US because she believed her daughter would receive better childcare in the US than back in Bangladesh.

While, six international learners expressed doubt with their decision to study in the US, one learner provided a more critical view of what he thought the election meant and how it could legitimize social tensions in the US. José explains his thoughts by saying,

Some people in the US can sense this [Trump's presidency] as an opportunity to express a desire to harm ... I mean in a way Trump was given legitimacy to some acts, it hasn't been violent acts, but in [his] speech, in discourse. It's also a type of violence and the objective was, in that time, Mexican immigration, but also then they changed to Muslims and then he would slam some specific country.

In José's perspective, he underscores how Trump's discourse could cause people who possess a desire to harm others to feel justified in carrying out acts of violence.

Moreover, José worried that Trump becoming elected would cause a change in how specific groups of people, who were targeted by Trump, would be treated in the US.

In sum, the 2016 presidential election sparked fear with all but one respondent causing them to reconsider their decision to enroll in US higher education. Only one participant from Malaysia did not see the election as a personal threat. Ismail explains his feelings by stating,

It's not something that is in my mind when I chose the US. Because of the fact that I can just come and go changes everything. It's not something that is prominent so it's not in my consideration ... I think simply because of the travel ban that Malaysia is not in that category as of now. So, somehow, I don't really have a feeling of being affected.

For Ismail, because Malaysia was not a target country for a travel ban, he did not feel any negative pressure or hesitation with his decision to enroll in US higher education. Also, he explains that if something did happen, he could always return home. He suggests that other students may not have a luxury to return home if conditions were unwelcoming in the US.

Reflecting on his immigration experience Ema expressed a lonely perspective by stating, "I guess it's a PhD for yourself." By saying this, he explains that enduring the immigration challenges he needed to be very determined and solely focused on his goal of obtaining a PhD regardless of the sacrifice to his current social and future life. As Ema says, "I cannot see them [my family] for at least five years because my visa is single entry, I cannot come back." A single-entry visa means that after arriving in the US the visa is no longer valid and cannot be used to reenter the US. Therefore, grantees of single-entry visas will have to sit for a new visa interview, including long potential visa appointment wait times, before returning to the US. Ema feels that because of the immigration scrutiny his country is under from the US government that his doctoral journey may only be for himself because of the inability to see his family. The immigration challenges theme emphasizes the sacrifices participants knew about and were willing to take in pursuit of US higher education.

Overall, the common experience for these study volunteers regarding complex immigration processes and political climate in the US signifies the diversity in experiences which may be dictated by the student's country of citizenship. Immigration challenges can range from emotional fear based on misconceptions or negative perceptions of the US to physical distress with visa interviews and geopolitical barriers. The stories shared by these participants help emphasize the persistence they needed to have in order to be granted a US visa and permission to study in the US. What their stories also underscore is the unfortunate experience of many other qualified students who were unable to pass US immigration screening, have the personal determination and persistence of overcoming initial fears regarding immigration processes, or have the resources to overcome other immigration challenges.

These participants shared vivid detail of their experiences navigating the visa interview, interactions with a consulate officer, and self-doubt as a result of president Trump's election and rhetoric. Therefore, for these students, their decision-making processes were strongly influenced by external political factors. As Ema mentioned, students interested in studying in the US must have a plan B in case their visa is denied. Thi shared how the visa officer believed she was too old go back to school. Regardless of how talented and qualified an international student may be, he or she is still subject to strict politically motivated immigration scrutiny. If the individual is not successful with navigating immigration processing then she/he may not be enrolled in US higher education. Indeed, the decision-making experience for these study volunteers is not entirely in their control. Regardless of how motivated and determined an international student may be, their opportunity to study in the US will always be at the discretion of the

US government. Although many respondents expressed hesitation upon hearing the results of the 2016 presidential election, some were too far invested in preparing to come to the US to change their plans. In comparison, other respondents were hopeful that the initial fears of Trump overhauling immigration policies in the US were simply exaggerated. Zhou was initially doubtful with his decision but then commented on US politics by stating, “America is a country based on laws.” He further explained that because of the different branches of government he was not worried about sudden and radical changes that would negatively impact him as an international student in the US. He stated, “This is why new government policies for international students tend to really delay [and are not implemented immediately].” Zhou believed immigration policies, affecting international students in the US, take time to develop due to different levels of government approval. Therefore, he perceived that regardless of Trump and his rhetoric and policies, the entire US government, and social climate in the US, were not likely to dramatically change.

Chapter Summary

The stories shared in this study suggest that these international graduate learners face unique challenges when navigating their decision-making experience when deciding to enroll in US higher education. The challenges are often presented as barriers to which each participant maintained a strong level of self-motivation and resiliency to navigate the difficult road to enrollment in US higher education. All international learners in this study were impacted by an influential person at some point in their decision-making experience. Most influential people were supportive but those who were not often judged or misunderstood the value of international education. Female international graduate

learners appeared to have less familial and academic support, while balancing stronger social expectations and negative pressures from others. In sum, the six emergent themes described are intended to provide readers with a deeper understanding of the overall experiences of international graduate learners who are deciding to enroll in US higher education. Their experiences are surrounded by goals, choices, and sacrifices - choices to leave behind a world, one's family, and career, in order to embark on a new adventure with hopes of securing new perspectives, new interactions, and more importantly the education of their choice.

V. DISCUSSION, IMPLEMENTATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The US remains the number one destination of all international students worldwide, and the 2018 *Open Doors Report* shows that 22% of international students choose the US as their host country destination for higher education. Previous international student mobility research has a limiting vantage point by the over-emphasis on identifying motivational factors as reasons for international student enrollment in US higher education. Also, past research focuses on isolating the *what* with regards to motivational factors, rather than understanding *why* international students become motivated and *how* they navigate enrolling in US higher education. Unfortunately, much of the previous research has overlooked the cognitive process and social experiences international learners encounter as they decide to pursue graduate education in the US.

Adult education researchers Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback (2002) show that adult learners choosing to enroll in higher education do so while balancing family obligations, career development, community or civic duty, sociocultural roles, financial independence, and personal needs. The absence of international student research that examines the decision-making experience in its totality was the motivation for this study. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the holistic motivations and decision-making experiences of new international graduate learners who made conscious decisions to engage in US higher education. As international student enrollment continues to increase in the US, this study took aim to address the following research questions:

1. Why do international graduate learners choose to enroll in US higher education?

2. What is the decision-making experience of international graduate learners who chose to enroll in US higher education?

Discussion of Findings

This study asked nine newly enrolled international graduate learners to share their journeys navigating the decision-making process of choosing to enroll in US higher education. Their lived experiences provided vivid details of the many complex decisions and unexpected challenges they experienced in pursuit of graduate studies in the US. This chapter discusses how this study's findings compare, contribute, and challenge the larger body of research examining international student enrollment in US higher education.

The two research questions guiding this study enabled me to move beyond identifying *what* motivates international students, but instead provide an understanding as to *why* and *how* international adult learners choose to enroll in US graduate studies. In responding to the first research question, I report why this study's international learners chose to enroll in US higher education, whereas in answering the second research question, I explain how learners described their decision-making experiences. The following section will examine each research questions and associated themes as they relate to current body of research on international student mobility and decision-making.

How do International Adult Learners Choose a Program Location?

Participants' navigation of the decision-making process were consistent with Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) findings, which used the push-pull model to suggest international students first make choices to pursue higher education internationally, then choose a host country, and finally choose the host institution. After respondents decided to pursue higher education outside their home country, they then explore program

locations beginning with the host country. Adult learners in this study focused on countries where the language of instruction is in English. In addition, study volunteers were also motivated to choose a country that could provide opportunities to gain new perspectives, have equitable access to education, and enhance employment and economic opportunities. Although the US was not the first-choice country for many participants, they were all generally motivated to study in the US because of positive perceptions they acquired about the US and US higher education. These positive perceptions were often influenced by personal recommendations from friends, family, and faculty who had traveled, worked, or studied in the US.

Respondents first described contemplations for language of instruction, social benefits, and enrichment for employment and economic opportunities as criteria when choosing a host country. Their considerations for employment and economic opportunities when deciding to study in the US are well documented in other international student mobility research. For instance, Han, Stocking, Gebbie, and Applebaum (2015) who used the push-pull framework to investigate reasons international students choose to study in the US and found,

Students strongly believed that their US education will provide them with a strong advantage in their careers. Large percentages of respondents believed that in comparison with their home country, a US education provides better education/knowledge of their chosen field (83%), better professional network (73%), better advisors/mentorship (70%), and better job opportunities (69%).

However, in choosing a host country, considerations for language of instruction has not been found in previous research. Moreover, international student mobility research,

conducted in English, neglects to ask the question why international students pursue degree programs in English. Lee (2008), who conducted a multiple methods case study investigating college access for international students in US higher education, provided a critical review of research gaps by addressing how strongly international student mobility research is focused on international students who are already decided on studying in the US. Lee states, “such studies do not account for those who chose to not study in the institution. Thus, the reasons international students do not access college in the US remains unknown” (p. 317). For many of this study’s adult learners the US was not their first-choice country for graduate studies. In fact, many commented on being interested and even applying to other English-speaking countries such as Australia, the UK, and Canada or places where the language of instruction can be in English such as Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands. This discovery warrants further review of why international students still choose to enroll in US higher education, or perhaps why other international students choose not to study in the US. As more countries compete for global leadership in the international education market, it is imperative to further our understanding as to why international learners seek degree programs taught in English. Some participants in this study were motivated to pursue graduate education in English because of their familiarity with English. In comparison, others believed that education in English would provide greater economic and employment opportunities not only in the US but around the world. Lastly, when searching for host countries one participant’s decision-making experience revolved around identifying locations that had strong childcare for her daughter. Although this participant was the only parent in this study, it is worth mentioning as international adult learners often balance family obligations when

choosing to enroll in graduate education. More research will be needed to understand how international adult learners, who are parents, make decisions to study internationally. Adult learners with children may not act independently but rather make decisions that are inclusive of their child's best interest.

Previous research such as Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), Lee (2008), and Daily, Farewell, and Kumar (2010) have suggested that international students seek enrollment based on the reputation, accreditation, or prestige of the institution. However, this study found that most of the adult learners in this study were not motivated to choose an institution based on the institution's reputation or ranking. With regard to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, the institutions included in this study were ranked R2 – high research activity. Only one participant was interested in attending an R1 – very high research activity institution. However due to English proficiency admission requirements the participant was unable to attend his first-choice institution. Overall, for these study participants attending R2 classified institutions demonstrated that institutional ranking was not a significant factor in their decision-making. However, international students seeking to enroll in R1 institutions may exhibit more awareness and concern for institutional ranking and prestige. Also, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) found that the availability of a degree program is not a significant factor influencing international student choice in the selection of an institution. However, in this study, two respondents specifically chose their institution based on the availability of a particular degree program. In comparison, all other participants were motivated to choose the institution for other reasons. When choosing a host institution, Lee (2008) reports that unlike domestic students, very few international students have ever visited a college

campus and that in choosing where to study, international students, “had very limited information about the campus setting, student culture, and institutional resources” (p. 322). Similarly, all but one of the present study’s volunteers did not visit the US university prior to enrolling. Respondents relied on information sources such as other students, already enrolled in the US, to learn more about the institution. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) also examined the importance of personal recommendations from influential people as factors motivating international students to choose a program location. They found that personal recommendations were among the key influencing factors.

The reputation the institution enjoys is greatly affected by the number of people who are willing to refer others to it. Word-of-mouth referral is one of the most powerful forms of promotion that international education institutions can use.

This factor is likely to become more important the more students study in a host country or have family who visit that country for other reasons.

Much like Mazzarol and Soutar’s findings, this study confirms when choosing a host country and institution that personal recommendations were highly regarded from family members, faculty, friends, as well as students already enrolled in the US. Karuppan and Barai (2011) conducted an empirical investigation on perceived discrimination and international students’ learning and discovered how influential students in the US can be for potential international students abroad by stating, “Satisfied international students are often heralded as the best ambassadors for their host institutions in particular, and host countries in general” (p. 68). In other words, students enrolled in the US can positively influence international students abroad by sharing the study and living experience in the

US. This was the case for participants in this study who were influenced by personal recommendations from students already enrolled in the US and family either living here or who had visited the US.

Overall, this study contributes to the current body of research by reiterating the importance of personal recommendations. These recommendations can positively influence international students especially when interacting with other learners already in the US. In this study, personal recommendations were more important than the influence of institutional ranking. This finding may be explained by Lee's (2008) work that suggests students who enroll in programs without high institutional rankings may not be concerned with rankings.

Additionally, the present study challenges previous research by emphasizing that not all international learners have a predisposition toward studying in the US. Much international student mobility research conducted in the US neglects to identify whether or not the US was the first-choice country for international students. This current study found that a majority of respondents were initially interested in countries other than the US. Understanding international students' first choice-countries may aid in further understanding their decision-making experiences. Verbik and Lasanowski (2007) examined international student mobility patterns and trends through an analysis of national data contributed by government sources. The authors suggested that the US is a leader in the international student market not just because of the opportunity to study in English, world-class facilities, or even offers substantial financial incentives to students, but rather the US strategically recruits international students from high-yield markets. This strategic recruiting has resulted in the Institution of International Education

reporting in 2018 that 22% of international students worldwide are studying in the US which is more than double the number of students studying in the countries ranked second and third in hosting international students. Although the US is the number one destination of international students globally, there are still roughly 75% of international students studying in countries other than the US. Therefore, the positive perceptions and potential return on invest when studying in the US are not held by a majority of international students.

Why are International Adult Learners Motivated to Enroll in US Higher Education?

The first key findings of this study reveal two main themes, *positive perception of US higher education* and *new perspectives and access to education*. These findings are consistent with Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) who identified key influences affecting international student decision-making: the student's perception of the host country, educational quality, and whether the degree would be recognized when the student returned home. Similar to Mazzarol and Soutar, the current study's international adult learners reiterated the choice to pursue US higher education resulted from the perceptions they held regarding US academic quality and the global value of a US degree. However, the current study contributes additional insight to the current body of research by providing a deeper understanding through my analysis of deconstructing attraction factors such as *academic quality* and *perceived value of a US degree*.

Attraction to US academic quality. With regards to US academic quality, respondents shared that they were attracted because of the hands-on experience, opportunity to feel validated through classroom participation, and the ability to work

directly with US professors. Graduate learners were conscientiously aware of these academic quality components and shared these as motivators to seek US higher education. Participants comparing the US to their home country education system identified these components as valuable tools to enhance their graduate learning. Surprisingly, despite having had little to no previous interaction with US professors, study volunteers shared that they were eager to learn from them. Respondents believed US faculty had flexibility to individualize their teaching by incorporating their own expertise. Additionally, learners understood that the university education in the US can be dialogic where professors encourage students to engage in intellectual sharing of knowledge and experience, in order to enhance the overall learning environment. Female participants, in particular, desired the opportunity to share their opinions in class because in their home countries, female students' voices are silenced or belittled by some professors.

Seeking a US degree for economic and employment benefit. This study reiterates previous research that suggested international students are motivated to enroll in US higher education due to a perceived value of the US degree. Study volunteers discussed seeking a US degree as a potential pathway to gaining employment in the US. Similarly, Daily, Farewell, and Kumar (2010) conducted a quantitative analysis with 50 international students from 27 different countries and examined push-pull factors influencing international student choice in choosing a business school. The authors found that international students in their study were motivated to study in the US for post-graduation employment opportunities. Additionally, the current study's international learners mentioned that a US degree would not only provide a means to gain employment

in the US or in the learner's home country, but rather a US degree could expand employment opportunities in other parts of the world. Some participants suggested that if they were unable to secure employment in the US after graduation then a US degree would increase their chances of securing employment in other countries due to the value a US degree has worldwide. Therefore, the perception of a US degree holding global value was confirmed in this study. However, one participant provided a critical review for the impact of international students receiving their degrees in the US. He mentioned that, at least in his home country of Mexico, despite the US degree maintaining strong value, his employability is weakened by the larger number of Mexican students receiving their graduate degrees in the US. Further research will need to explore how these trends may, if at all, dissuade international students from seeking US higher education due to an oversaturation of US-educated international students.

A desire for new perspectives and educational freedom. Many of this study's international adult learners expressed motivation to study in the US in order to experience diverse cultures, broaden worldly perspectives, and gain a stronger sense of self-awareness. Their motivations related to Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory and provided clarification of extrinsic motivation, which described people personally taking value in an action or goal. Therefore, participants sought new knowledge for personal gain from which they could grow and development new ways of thinking, and not external pressure. However, female participants discussed being motivated by negative social views or gendered expectations of women, and disapproval from male relatives when seeking enrollment in US higher education. These findings aligned with Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, and Lynch's (2007) work which utilized the push-pull

model to analyze student motivation and found that international students were motivated to study in the US because of a desire to *avoid social conditions in one's home country* and *wanting to have more freedom*. More specifically, some adult learners shared that they were motivated to quit their jobs in pursuit of US higher education, hoping to acquire new knowledge and perspectives in life. Respondents shared that they wanted to study in the US to gain more self-awareness through having increased personal freedom to explore likes and dislikes. The desire for self-awareness related to Chirkov et al.'s discussion on self-development where international learners internalize their choices to pursue higher education. Also, this study confirms Han, Stocking, Gebbie, and Applebaum's (2015) study that found students were motivated to study in the US because they had intentions to bring skills and knowledge back home for the betterment of their home societies. Similarly, some participants in this study mentioned wanting to gain new knowledge in order help serve people in their communities or in their field of study.

Overall, this study contributes to the current body of research by highlighting distinct decision-making experiential differences between male and female international adult learners. Although there are similarities in motivations, female respondents were more marginalized and faced less supportive family members than the male participants in this study. Female study volunteers expressed challenges with navigating the decision-making experience by encountering negative influencers in family, academia, society, and even immigration officers. Despite these external factors, female international students continue to enroll in US higher education at increasing rates. According to the 2018 *Open Doors Report*, 44% of international students are female in the US. The report shows that female international student enrollment has fluctuated over the years but

overall has continued to increase since 1981 where the population was only 29% female in comparison to 71% male.

What Challenges do International Adult Learners Experience in Decision-Making to Enrolling in US Higher Education?

The second key finding explains how this study's international graduate learners described their decision-making experiences while balancing life roles and overcoming a variety of challenges. The contribution of this study to the body of research regarding international student mobility underscores the complexity of the decision-making experience. Unlike previous research that focused on motivational factors that influence decision-making, this study's data provided a narrative of how international adult learners navigate the decision-making process while being guided by numerous influences. Moreover, this study's international adult learners' experience encompassed difficult choices that were often affected by academic, personal, social, occupational, financial, and political influences. There are four primary themes that address research question two. This section will discuss how these themes relate to the current body of research.

Language challenges. After choosing to enroll in US higher education some study volunteers began taking action to improve their English ability. They recognized that not only do US graduate programs have strong English proficiency requirements, but the daily interactions in the US would require constant use of English. Moreover, in preparation for enrollment in graduate programs with instruction in English, some invested resources to take formal English lessons. Learners' willingness to improve their English ability prior to enrolling in the US demonstrates an attraction for courses taught in English. Kubota (2009) who investigated internationalization of universities

highlighted the growing popularity of English instruction in the global higher education market suggesting, “English, as an international language, is increasingly becoming the medium of instruction for many, if not all, courses” (p. 614). Kubota also provides a critical review of the, “sink-or-swim situation” that international students experience in academia and the lack of recognition for the challenges international students experience in preparation for US higher education. Kubota states,

There is an elitist assumption that international students should already come with perfect English language proficiency and that the university has little obligation to further support their academic development in their second language.

Many of this study’s volunteers expressed English language development was a key component in their preparation for studying in the US. They engaged in formal English study in preparation for university entrance requirements, such as English proficiency exams, and used informal language training to prepare for social and daily life in the US.

Karuppan and Barai (2011) investigated international student success in US higher education balancing perceptions of discrimination and English proficiency ability.

Perceptions of discrimination have a negative effect on student learning outcomes ... there is convincing evidence that discrimination can ‘spoil’ one’s educational experience ... Students who do not feel discriminated against are more confident to express themselves in the classroom and work jointly with other students inside and outside the classroom. This confidence is enabled by a higher proficiency in English, which insulates international students from the harming effects of discrimination.

Karuppan and Barai's findings help us understand why international learners take measures, prior to arriving in the US, to improve their English proficiency. This step in the decision-making process is important to highlight as some learners contemplate not only their ability to be academically successful, but also their overall potential well-being while living in the US. Regarding the current body of research, this study's findings confirm that international students are conscientiously aware of the impact their English proficiency may have on their stay and academic success in the US.

Gender differences with encouragers and discouragers. Respondents in this study discussed four key social influencers that affected their decision-making experience including: family, students in the US, faculty, and close relationships. These findings reiterate that most participants are positively and notably influenced by people in their lives to pursue US higher education. Similar to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) who found international learners were motivated by *social links* or personal recommendations from friends. However, unlike Mazzarol and Soutar, participants in this study were not pressured to follow parental preference in choosing a host country or host institution. Mazzarol and Soutar's work included both undergraduate and post-graduate students and found that, "parental influence is particularly strong among undergraduate students when they are choosing a destination country" (p. 88). The age of an international student may directly impact the type of familial pressure the student receives to choose one country over another. Additionally, unlike Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, and Lynch (2007) none of the study volunteers expressed feeling parental pressure, or a desire to meet the expectations of others when choosing to enroll in US higher education. All adult learners expressed a level of self-determination and autonomy with their decision to enroll in US

higher education. These findings challenge the current body of research because they provide a deeper narrative into how these international graduate students encountered encouragers and discouragers when deciding to enroll in US higher education. This study challenges the current body of literature because research to date does not differentiate motivational or experiential differences between male and female learners or undergraduate and graduate students. Also, current research discusses parental pressure in pursuit of international higher education; however, this study uncovered parental and spousal discouragement to enrolling in US higher education as well as discrimination based on gender and age. Specifically, this study discusses the marginalization of female adult learners who experienced more difficulty in pursuing education and interacting with family members. Moreover, research that continues to explore the motivational differences between male and female learners will further our understanding of gendered decision-making.

Encouragers were supportive family members, faculty, friends, and sometimes students in the US who provided positive advice and encouragement to pursue US higher education to the study volunteer. According to Lee (2008), international students sought advice from common information sources such as family members (13%), friends (36%), and school counselor/teachers (14%). Much like Lee's research, this study confirms that participants consulted with people in their lives when making decisions to pursue US higher education. These interactions with social influencers had strong impacts in the decision-making experiences of this study's adult learners.

However, some respondents shared that their interactions with others, particularly family members, were not always positive. In comparison, discouragers were family

members who disapproved or were unsupportive of the adult learner's decision to study in the US. Female respondents encountered more discouragers, and as a result had to engage in persuasive conversations with family members. These persuasive conversations were attempts to gain acceptance or approval from male family members in order to secure financial support to study in the US. As well, family members had social and cultural expectations of the female participant, believing she should be fulfilling social responsibilities such as getting married instead of continuing her education. Female participants were more likely to encounter disapproving parents or male relatives, more challenges with securing financial support, more discrimination in academia, and more avoidance of close relationships. In comparison, male respondents were more likely to encounter understanding parents, fewer discouragers, less difficulty with securing financial support, strong academic support, and no avoidance of close relationships. Female respondents explicitly described avoiding close relationships in fear that the relationship could dissuade the female participant from pursuing US higher education in order to satisfy gendered expectations. Overall, female study volunteers described more gendered differences when choosing to enroll in US higher education. The marginalization of female international students seeking to enroll in US higher education warrants further research to fully understand their choices, challenges, and overall desire to seek international higher education. This enhances the current body of research because presently research does not often differentiate the sociocultural differences between males and females in their decision-making, their challenges, and their motivations to pursue US higher education. This study's findings indicate that there are distinct differences in the way male and female adult learners navigate the decision-

making experience especially when discussing US higher education with family members.

Career continuation versus pursuit of US higher education. The international adult learners in this study contemplated giving up their careers in order to pursue US higher education. The career and economic sacrifice was a strong decision for participants because of the risks and potential challenges with reentering the workforce back home. Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback (2002) who identified three initial motivators for adult entry into higher education, explained that adult learners are motivated to pursue higher education in order to seek a promotion or obtain a new job. Similarly, Han, Stocking, Gebbie, and Applebaum (2015) found that 74% of international students in their study enrolled in US higher education because of perceived future career opportunities.

Much like Han et al., the potential to gain skills and knowledge from studying in the US was a strong motivator for international learners in this study. However, often not stated in previous research is whether or not students enroll in the US at the expense of established careers in their home country. This study provided evidence that international adult learners were willing to quit their jobs in pursuit of US higher education; this finding assists with understanding how and why these graduate students choose to cease employment. We know now that some learners can be dissatisfied or feel stagnated with their home country employment. To date, much of the international student mobility research has focused on undergraduate international students whom often are not employed full-time when choosing to enroll in US higher education. Consequently, little research has been conducted on how international adult learners justify and navigate

giving up established careers to enroll in US higher education. Overall, international graduate learners felt that a US graduate education would provide exciting learning endeavors and opportunity for more satisfying future employment.

Final stability: Access or believed access to sufficient funds. Per visa requirements, international students must present evidence of sufficient funds during the visa interview to the consular officer before being granted a US visa. This demonstration of sufficient funds is necessary in order to ensure the international student will not become a burden on the US economy, as could be the case if the international student arrived in the US without any source of funding. Consequently, international learners in this study each overcame the challenge of securing and demonstrating sufficient funds as required in order to obtain a US visa. Therefore, with regards to the decision-making process, international students must consider whether or not they have or will have the sufficient funds necessary to not only secure a visa, but also provide a means to live and study in the US. As a result, a strong consideration for the pursuit of US higher education is financial stability. Some of the participants in this study explained having to work a number of years in order to save enough money to study in the US, while others had families who could also provide financial support. Overall, financial stability is a strong influencer to the decision-making process because students who are unable to secure funding, despite being admitted to an institution, may not be able to attend.

The final step: Overcoming immigration barriers. When navigating the decision-making process, many study volunteers expressed frustration and fear with complex immigration processes. Presently, research has focused little attention on the immigration barriers that often prohibit qualified and talented international students from

ever enrolling in US higher education. Therefore, the experiences shared in this study contribute and challenge the current body of research by highlighting immigration processes as external factors to international student decision-making. Previous researchers seem to suggest that the amount of motivation will cause behavior and action to enroll in US higher education. However, the findings in this study indicate an international student who is highly motivated and surpasses all academic qualifications can still be prevented from enrolling in US higher education simply due to immigration barriers. Consequently, solely examining international student motivational factors neglects understanding the entire decision-making process that include potentially inhibiting external factors. Alberts (2007) investigated changing patterns in international student enrollment in the US and explained that since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the US government has implemented many immigration reforms in hopes of preventing future security threats to the US. As a result, international students endure rigorous screenings through online applications, electronic tracking, expensive fees, and long waits for visa interviews in hopes of being approved to study in the US. Alberts further asserted,

Procedures such as these are annoying for the students as well as for the staff of the international offices at the universities admitting them, and contribute little to improving the security of the United States ... In many cases, those implementing the new regulations now tend to err on the side of caution leading to claims that they have become overly strict.

The security measures are intended to determine legitimate admissibility for qualified international students to study in the US; however, Zakaria (2004) posited, "Every visa

officer lives in fear that he will let in the next Mohamad Atta. As a result, he is probably keeping out the next Bill Gates." The unintentional consequences of stricter security measures are talented students being denied opportunities to study in the US.

This present study provided further insight into how international students must navigate immigration challenges. Students from different countries experience varying levels of difficulty. All graduate learners in this study were fully aware of the risks they were taking when applying to US institutions. Some may need a plan B in anticipation of being denied a US visa. As international learners make career, financial, and family sacrifices to study in the US, all of their plans can be halted by an unsuccessful visa interview.

How does Adult Education Contribute to Understanding International Student Decision-making to Enroll in US Higher Education?

Adult education emphasizes the importance of understanding learners' situations and the meaning they associate with their personal experiences. Elias and Merriam (2005) proposed that adulthood was not only defined by one's age but rather one's psychological maturity and social roles. Similarly, Merriam and Bierema (2014) described adults as those who have greater life experiences and thus make more complicated choices. All of the participants in this study are considered adults not only because of their age, but also their psychological maturity, as defined by their social roles and responsibilities, and their ability to make complex life choices such as enrolling in US higher education. This section discusses the connections of the findings to adult motivation theories.

To start, adult education recognizes that adults have autonomy in their decision-making, as was the case for all study volunteers who made conscious decisions to pursue US higher education. Houle (1961) described adults being motivated by three motivational orientations which were goal-oriented, activity-oriented, and learning-oriented. This study's volunteers' motivations relate to Houle's goal and learning orientations because some learners wanted to solve problems while others were seeking new knowledge. Moreover, none of the participants expressed external regulation, which defined by Ryan and Deci (2000) suggests individuals who are externally regulated are the least autonomous and act to satisfy external demands. As mentioned, Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) study found possible differences between postgraduate and undergraduate students who were externally regulated by their parents to choose particular destination countries.

Overall, this study's participants' behaviors were in line with Cross's (1981) chain-of-response model which examined the decision-making process of adults participating in learning. Cross explained that adults engage in self-evaluation by examining their ability to be successful in education, while considering their attitudes about that education. Chen's (2007) synthesis model identified this period of contemplation as the predisposition stage. This stage and representative behaviors were evident when participants described their own potential of wanting an international graduate education and contemplated their ability to be successful in English-only instruction. Similarly, participants discussed their perspectives of being successful both personally and academically in a new foreign environment. Also, learners shared their positive attitudes and desires for US higher education because of strong positive

perceptions of US higher education. For some respondents their attitudes for US higher education were more positive than of their own domestic higher education. In addition, some participants felt unsatisfied with their occupations and sought life changes through enrolling in US higher education. The desire for life changes connect with Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback's (2002) three motivators for adult entry into higher education: 1) personal transition and changes, 2) proactive life planning, or 3) a mixture of both. Participants who chose to stop their employment and enroll in US higher education were examples of *seeking personal transition or change*. In comparison, participants who desired new knowledge and access to equitable higher education engaged in *proactive life planning*. This was especially true for female participants who felt their home country education was not equitable in teaching female and male students. Cross also shared that learners normally use strong motivation to overcome barriers to participate in learning. Similarly, Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback discussed six essential decision-making forces which include work, family, finances, community, student, and self. In relation to Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback's findings, examples of these international graduate learners overcoming barriers include quitting successful or stagnant careers (work), persuading family members (family), saving money (finances), consulting with influencers – friends and professors (community), improving English proficiency (student), and balancing the mental and emotional stress of becoming an international student in the US (self).

Overall, adult education and adult motivational theories provide a broader lens through which international adult learners' motivations and decision-making experiences can be holistically examined. Previous international student motivational research often neglected international students' unique sociocultural backgrounds and personal

experiences as adults. Therefore, the contribution of adult education, to understanding international student decision-making, is the recognition and value placed on the interaction between international adult learners and their sociocultural environments. In sum, this interaction demonstrates an important relationship that must be examined when seeking to understand how and why international adult learners make decisions to in pursue US higher education.

Implications

Based on the findings of this study the following sections discusses implications that may aid in understanding and supporting international graduate learners chose to enroll in US higher education.

Implications for Theory

The theoretical framework that guided this study was developed by Chen (2007) who investigate international graduate students pursuing higher education. Chen's synthesis model incorporates three stages (predisposition, search/selection/application, and choice) and five factors affecting international student decision-making (student characteristics, personal motivations, career-related factors, academic-related factors, and significant others). The choice to use Chen's synthesis model was made because the model provides the most comprehensive view of international student decision-making by expanding on previous push-pull frameworks.

Overall, most findings in this study are consistent with Chen in regard to how international students navigated the decision-making process and the various factors they encountered. However, this study builds on Chen's model by uncovering additional student characteristic factors that affect decision-making. For instance, Chen's model is

absent of gender, age, parenthood, level of study, and field of study. In the current research, these student characteristic factors influenced how adult learners navigated the decision-making experience, how they interacted with friends and family, and how these factors affected selection of host country and host institution. Additionally, this study's international learners provided more clarity on complex immigration procedures, and how immigration challenges may inhibit students from enrolling in US higher education. Chen's model discusses immigration policy and visa processing as motivators to choosing a host country and institution. However, the current study shows that immigration processes can differ in degree of difficulty and processing time depending on the student's country of citizenship. Consequently, immigration processes in may serve as a deterrent rather than a motivator to select a host country. Moreover, if students are denied a US visa then they are not simply more motivated to choose a country other than the US, but rather they are forced to consider a different country. Therefore, students' country of citizenship must be considered when examining international student characteristics and decision-making in the current era of immigration complexities. Overall, Chen's synthesis model guided this study and enabled me to uncover key details that help us, as well as further researchers, to further understand the holistic decision-making experiences of graduate students seeking enrollment in US higher education.

Implications for Policy and Education Practice

This study can be used to inform institutional policies aimed at international student recruitment and engagement. The findings indicate that international adult learners are motivated to enroll in US higher education; however, learners experience varying levels of difficulty with familial support, career development, financial stability,

gendered expectations, and immigration processes that may be different from younger undergraduate learners. Indeed, graduate learners are often in different stages of life and have more responsibilities when compared to undergraduate students. As a result, international adult learners have several needs and concerns with enrolling in US higher education that can best be addressed by structured communication outreach and action from US institutions.

Institutions of higher education should review recruitment strategies that provide information directed toward prospective students and their families. Unlike many domestic students, most prospective international students do not have the ability to visit US institutions for a campus tour or attend an on-site program open house. Therefore, . Websites serve as an important information source that international students use when making decisions about host institutions. Quality websites can educate prospective international students about their desired academic program as well as campus and community resources that are specifically geared to international students. One participant was a parent, and her concern was finding a host country that provided quality childcare. Institutions looking to cater to graduate learners can provide resources that extend beyond the classroom. For instance, information on community resources including childcare, and personal needs such as housing, banking, transportation, insurance, and dietary needs, can ease the concerns international students often have when choosing a host institution. Some study volunteers described relying on personal recommendations from their peers due to the lack of information on institutional websites. As a result, respondents described the benefits and reassurance they felt after receiving personal recommendations for host institutions. Thus, institutions should

mobilize enrolled international and domestic students who are willing to share perspectives of the campus life, academic quality, and safety to prospective students and their families. Gaining familial support may be valuable to international learners interacting with discouragers who do not support international education. Institutions can assist families in their decision making by developing multilingual websites and other information resources such as campus and city brochures or viewbooks. These sources will help introduce families to the academic department, institutional resources, campus environment, and surrounding city. Additionally, institutions may utilize on-site domestic student family and parent orientations to design online resources, specifically designed for international families abroad, that showcases the campus environment. Moreover, many institutions have developed robust orientations geared for domestic students and their parents. Adopting the same resources to develop international student and parent specific orientations may provide international families with more awareness of the institution, and more reassurance of the international learner's decision to study in the US. Additionally, online resources for parents and families abroad can include suggestions on how to stay involved with the learner's education as well as suggestions on how to provide optimal continued support to the learner despite the long distance. Federal policy allows international learners to bring their dependents, spouse and children, to the US for the entire duration of stay of the program of study. Therefore, institutions may consider developing international family orientations for learners and family members who accompany them to the US. During these orientations, spouses and children can learn about available campus and community resources. These resources

may help keep dependents connected to their new communities and encourage more support for the learner.

Furthermore, many respondents expressed a desire to learn from and develop sound relationships with US faculty. Faculty participation may be essential in recruitment efforts as professors are more versed in discipline-specific content, research, and teaching approaches in comparison to general university recruiters. To illustrate, faculty can engage with prospective international students by answering inquires, developing online prospective student workshops, and participating in global recruitment fairs aimed at meeting international students in their home countries. Highlighting current enrolled international students, and their stories in particular programs in videos or written vignettes can also provide a space for international learners to see themselves in a program and university. Encouraging stronger faculty participation earlier in the international student decision-making experience may help international students with choosing the right institution for them. Learners in this study expressed difficulty with accessing and navigating information on institutional websites. Therefore, faculty can serve as a resource to provide more specific information about program curriculum, ongoing research, available facilities, and student expectations.

Lastly, institutions need to proactively guide newly admitted international students with suggestions and expectations on how to navigate complex immigration processes. US institutions of higher education have investigated on-campus challenges for international students for many years. However, further investigation and support needs to be developed for prospective and newly admitted students who face equal challenges before ever arriving in the US. Institutions can proactively prepare

international students by offering best practice suggestions for navigating immigration steps such as becoming an international student (see Appendix A), tips for a successful visa interview, and awareness of immigration fees and deadlines. Institutions can also be prepared to draft letters of support for international students who encounter difficult visa interview situations such as arriving late to the US after the start of classes, delayed consular administrative processing, or visa denial appeals. Program specific letters of support from academic departments may provide more evidence than simply the institution admission letter. These letters convey to consular officers that the student is pursuing a legitimate academic purpose and that the student is highly desired to enroll at the institution. The risk for not supporting international students before they arrive may result in deteriorating perceptions of US higher education, more institutional denials for incomplete applications, and overall declining international student enrollment. As more countries enter the international student mobility market, US policymakers must continue to holistically support international adult learners especially those seeking enrollment in US higher education.

Delimitations and Limitations of this Study

Roberts (2010) defines delimitations as the boundaries of the study and the steps the researcher takes to narrow the research focus by intentionally controlling what is included or not. In comparison, Roberts defines limitations as particular features of the study that may negatively affect the results, and generally the researcher has no control over. In this sections I identify the delimitations and limitations of this study.

This study included the following delimitations:

1. Participants who were not full-time degree-seeking international graduate students

were not asked to participate in this study. Students who were not degree-seeking such as graduate students on certificate, non-degree, visiting, or exchange programs were considered short term students and may have varying motivations that differ from those seeking to complete a full degree.

2. Participants with prior educational experience in the US were not asked to participate in this study. Students who have engaged in US higher education prior to enrolling in a graduate program may have different motivations for continuing their education in the US in comparison to a new international graduate student enrolling in US higher education for the first time.

3. International graduate students who enrolled in US higher education more than one year prior to participating in the study. This study asked students to recall past decision-making experiences and thus this study aimed to interview new students who have a greater chance to recall and articulate past memories and experiences.

4. This study did not utilize questionnaires or surveys when ascertaining motivational factors. Research to date has well documented motivational factors through questionnaires. This study was focused on personal narratives of international students' entire decision-making experience.

5. The setting of this study served as a delimitation because the focus was on large public higher education institutions in Central Texas. Decision-making experiences of international graduate students attending private or smaller institutions may differ.

This study included the following limitations:

1. According to the Institute of International Education, the percentage and demographic of international students differs from state to state. Therefore, the availability of

international students for this study was influenced by where this study was conducted. For instance, Texas is the third largest recipient of international students in the United States behind California and New York. In 2018, the Institute of International Education reports that the top three places of origin for international students in Texas were students from India (25%), China (18%), and Mexico (8%). This differs from California (China 41%, India 12%, and South Korea 6%) and New York (China 39%, India 17%, and South Korea 7%). Overall, this study was limited to only higher education institutions in Texas which, due to a multitude of reasons including geography and politics, may be limiting to international students from certain countries.

2. The participants were international students whose second or third language was not English. Therefore, despite a high level of English proficiency there may have existed miscommunication or misarticulation of desired meaning. In order to compensate for this, participants were provided interview questions in advance and a copy of their transcripts to allow participants time to comprehend and reflect on their responses.
3. Given the criterion-based sampling of the population, this study was limited to only focusing on international graduate students with no prior educational experience in the US. Some readers may find the results difficult to transfer to other international student populations with previous international education experience in the US or any other country.

Future Research Recommendations

International student mobility research has long relied upon quantitative data in order to identify motivational factors in an effort to understand international student

motivation. However, much like college access research, a large focus of international student mobility research has been on undergraduate international students. I assert that additional studies should focus on the decision-making experiences of graduate learners seeking US higher education. This study specifically examined the decision-making experiences of graduate students with the understanding that adult learners have more complex lives. Adult education research underscores how adult learners contemplate family obligations, career development, financial stability, and personal fulfillment when deciding to enroll in higher education. This study helps emphasize a variety of considerations and challenges international adult learners encounter when choosing to enroll in US higher education. I propose that additional research is needed to further understand how various groups of international adult learners navigate the decision-making process when choosing to enroll in US higher education.

- This study uncovered differences in how female and male respondents navigated the decision-making process. Future studies should consider and investigate gendered sociocultural challenges that specifically affect female adults' decision-making and motivation to pursue international higher education. In addition, research needs to be conducted to identify support structures that can be offered to prospective international female students as they engage in these decision-making processes.
- This study showed that international learners were conscientious of the financial stability necessary when applying for a US visa and attending US higher education. The 2018 IIE *Open Doors Report* showed 34% of international graduate students identified their primary funding source was from US

universities in the form of assistantships and scholarships, in comparison 58% of students identified their primary source of funding was from personal or family funds. Without financial stability or support international learners may not have the opportunity to enroll in US higher education. Therefore, future research should examine how institutional funding can further the advancement of providing more international learners the funding and opportunity to study in the US.

- One participant in this study was a parent and she disclosed that a strong motivator for her was choosing a host country that provided quality childcare. Future studies might examine how international learners who are parents make decisions to enroll in US higher education. Additionally, research should examine how learners make decisions to travel to the US alone, with their spouse only, with children only, or travel as an entire family.
- This study found that many students were dissatisfied with the availability of information on institutional websites and relied on personal recommendations from friends or peers enrolled in the US. Future studies may examine how institutions can better address information gaps and accessibility as well as establishing peer mentoring or ambassador programs for prospective and incoming international students.
- Few studies have inspected immigration barriers which can thwart international student enrollment. Also, respondents shared unfamiliarity with the process of becoming an international student in the US. These barriers should be further

investigated so that US institutions can help coach international students on how to successfully navigate immigration barriers.

- This study explored the international adult learners' experiences and uncovered many components of their decision-making and motivation. Future studies may focus on the juxtaposition of factors to understand the holistic experience rather than using one factor to define a person's entire experience. More research is needed to further discuss how those multiple motivational factors interact.
- Much research to date has examined motivational factors for why students choose the US, however, future studies may investigate why students do not choose the US.
- This study uncovered that international learners were motivated to pursue higher education in English and gave examples of countries other than the US. Future studies may examine how some international students are attracted to international higher education in English versus other languages.

Chapter Summary

While this study's findings are not intended to be generalizable to larger international student populations in the US, they do provide much needed attention to a growing population that faces increasing barriers when seeking US higher education. The contributions of international graduate students to US higher education are immeasurable. As such, research should continue to advance and identify ways to best support prospective students navigating the decision-making process as well as those enrolled in the US.

To date, few studies have examined international students through the lens of adult education. Lindeman (1926) describes the approach to adult education by stating, In conventional education the student is required to adjust himself to an established curriculum; in adult education the curriculum is built around the student's needs and interests. Every adult person finds himself in specific situations with respect to his work, his recreation, his family-life, his community-life et cetera—situations which call for adjustments.

Lindeman emphasized that adult education begins with understanding the learner's situation, respecting the learner's experience, and valuing the meaning that learners assign to their lives. With this in mind, I propose that research investigating international student mobility, decision-making, and motivation need to be adjusted. Adjustments are needed by refocusing research away from the long-standing view of strategically identifying singular motives that have long defined international student mobility. Moving forward, research should consider understanding international adult learners' social situations, personal experiences, and the meaning they make by expressing their truths. Understanding the holistic decision-making experience allows stakeholders to better address international adult learners' needs, particularly those who are engaging in the decision-making process and have yet to arrive in the US.

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX A

Becoming a Nonimmigrant Student on F-1 Status

The following steps are derived by the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) which, on behalf of the Department of Homeland Security, manages schools that are SEVP-certified in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) and students and their dependents on F or M visa classifications. These steps are adapted from the following:

- SEVP Designated School Official (DSO) Training Guide
(https://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/SEVP_DSO_Training.pdf)
- Department of Homeland Security Study in the States Guide
(<https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/guides/studyguidetothestates>)

The process of becoming a nonimmigrant student involves the following:

1. The prospective student determines the level of education and degree then applies to one or more SEVP-certified schools.
2. Each school determines if the prospective student fully meets its admission requirements and has the financial ability to pay for the education and living expenses.
3. If admission and financial requirements are met, each school that admits the student creates an Initial SEVIS record and issues a Form I-20 - *Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Status* for the student.
4. Each school sends a copy of its Form I-20, signed by a Designated School Official, to the prospective student.

5. The prospective student chooses a school and pays the SEVIS I-901 fee. (See the SEVP Web site at www.ice.gov/sevis for a full list of questions and answers regarding the SEVIS I-901 fee.)
 - The prospective student then applies to the local US consulate or embassy for a visa or the US port of entry directly, if the student is a citizen of a visa exempt country (i.e. students from Canada).
6. Upon arrival to the US the student presents Form I-20 to the Customs and Border Protection agent to be granted permission to enter the US. F-1 students are not permitted to enter the US earlier than 30 days prior to the program start date.

APPENDIX B

Email to Recruitment Participants

This email message is an approved request for participation in research that has been approved or declared exempt by the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Dear International Graduate Student,

I am a graduate student working on a dissertation on the holistic decision-making experiences of new international graduate students enrolled in US higher education.

You have been selected for participation in this research study because you are an international graduate student currently enrolled full-time at an institution of higher education. The study is intended to better understand the decision-making experiences of newly enrolled international graduate students. If you are not an international graduate student, please disregard this email.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study is to ascertain (a) why do international graduate students choose to enroll in US higher education and (b) what is the decision-making experience of international graduate students who chose to enroll in US higher education. The intended benefit from the study is to help institutions of higher education with implementing international recruitment and support strategies that aim to better international student enrollment and achievement.

Confidentiality

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed.

Procedure

Participation is voluntary. If you agree to be part of this research, we will ask you to complete a short demographic survey. This survey should take 2-5 minutes to finish. At the end of the survey you have the option to leave your contact information which can be used to invited you to participate in two 60-minute one-on-one interviews. Participants who complete both one-on-one interviews will receive a \$25 gift card.

Follow this link to the Survey:

To ask questions about this research please contact me Jonathan Tyner, at (...)-(...)-(....) or jwt43@txstate.edu.

APPENDIX C

International Graduate Students Enrolled in US Higher Education

Demographic Questionnaire

Jonathan Tyner, a graduate student at Texas State University, is conducting a research study to investigate the holistic decision-making experience of new international graduate students enrolled in US higher education. You are being asked to complete this survey because you have been identified as a new international graduate student on an F-1 visa status enrolled in an institution of higher education in Texas.

Participation is voluntary. The survey will take approximately 30 minutes or less to complete. You must be at least 18 years old to take this survey.

This study involves no foreseeable serious risks. We ask that you try to answer all questions; however, if there are any items that make you uncomfortable or that you would prefer to skip, please leave the answer blank. Your responses are anonymous.

If you have any questions or concerns feel free to contact Jonathan Tyner or his faculty advisor:

1 How old are you?

2 What is your gender?

3 What is your country of citizenship?

4 What is your academic level?

- Undergraduate
- Master's Certificate
- Master's
- Doctoral
- Other

5 When was your first semester enrolled in university? (example: Fall 2018)

6 What is your major?

7 What is or will be your enrollment status for Fall 2018?

- Part-time
- Full-time
- Thesis/dissertation only

8 What is your immigration or visa status?

- F-1 Student
- J-1 Student/scholar
- Other

9 How long have you lived in the US?

- 0-6 months
- 7-12 months
- more than 1 year

10 What languages do you speak? List your native language first.

11 How long have you studied English?

- Less than 5 years
- more than 5 but less than 10 years
- more than 10 years

12 Where (city/country) did you complete your high school education?

13 If applicable, where (city/country) did you complete your bachelor's degree?

14 If applicable, where (city/country) did you complete your master's degree?

15 If you would like to participate in the follow up study and become eligible for a \$25 gift card please leave your contact information below (pseudonym name, phone number, and email).

APPENDIX D
Interview Protocol

Interview One

Demographic questions:

1. What is your name and a pseudonym you would like to be called?
2. Where are you from? (city and country?)
3. How old are you?
4. What is your visa classification?
5. What is the highest degree you have earned?
6. What program are you currently enrolled in?
7. Are you currently employed on campus? If so, where and what do you do?
8. Where did you receive your previous education/degrees?
9. What is your marital status? Do you have any children? Did you bring your spouse of children with you?
10. What socioeconomic class would you consider yourself to be?
11. What are your parents' educational background?
12. What languages other than English do you speak?
13. Describe your experiences learning English.

Predisposition Stage

1. (personal motivations) Please tell me your story for choosing to enroll in university in the US. How do you explain your decision to study in the US?
 - a. Describe what you thought it would be like to study in the US compared to studying in your home country.
 - b. Were there any social or political issues in your own country that influenced

your decisions that you'd like to discuss? If so, please explain.

- c. Are there any societal or political factors in the US that influenced you to consider a US education? If so, please explain.
2. (student characteristics) What, if any, sacrifices from your home country do you think you made to study in the US?
 - a. Describe any challenges you had when deciding to study in the US.
 - b. How did you financially prepare for studying in the US?
 - c. What were you most looking forward to about studying in the US?
3. (career-related factor) Explain your thoughts on how studying in the US would impact your future career.
 - a. How do you believe the society in your home country values, or not, earning a degree in the US?
 - b. Describe any occupational benefit you imagined after earning a US degree.
4. (academic-related factors) Describe your educational goals for studying in the US?
 - a. Explain what, if any, benefits you expected from studying outside your home country?
 - b. What, if any, positive or negative factors about US higher education attracted you the most? Please elaborate.
 - c. What, if any, positive or negative factors about your home country's higher education influenced your decision to pursue a degree abroad? Please elaborate.
5. (significant others) Were you influenced by any people (friends, family members, spouse, children, sponsor, professors, employer, supervisor, etc.) in deciding to study

in the US. If so, please elaborate.

- a. Did you have anyone encouraged or discouraged your decision to study in the US? If so, please elaborate.
- b. How did you explain your decision to study in the US to your friends or family?

6. Is there anything other information you would like to add or elaborate on?

Interview Two

Search/selection/application Stage

1. Did you consider studying in any other countries? If so, what other countries did you consider and why did you choose the US? If not, why not?
2. Talk with me about how you found information about schools in the US. What, if any, processes/resources/people did you use?
 - a. Describe what, if any, marketing material (journals, books, magazines, brochures, university viewbooks, calendars, etc.) you interacted with while searching for US institutions.
 - b. Did you have personal contact with someone (professors, administrators, students) at the university when you were searching for schools? If so, please explain your interaction with this individual.
 - c. Where you in contact with educational agents (private or governmental)? If so, explain how working with an agent influenced your search process.
 - d. Describe any interaction you had with people (family, peers, conference presenter, guest speaker, representative at education/college fair, exchange faculty/student, supervisor, etc.) from the US that influenced your search.

3. Many universities offer student, academic, and personal support services. Did you do any research of existing services on your campus? If so, how did this impact your decision?
4. How important were factors such as institutional ranking, tuition cost, or university environment and location in your search for institutions? Please explain.

Choice Stage

1. Please describe how you decided to choose the university you are enrolled at.
 - a. Describe what about studying at your university was most attractive to you. How, if at all, did the university's location (city/state) impact your decision?
 - b. Describe any incentives from the university, if any, that influenced your decision (i.e. financial assistance or employment through research/instructional/teaching assistantships, etc.).
 - c. Explain how, if at all, university ranking or reputation influenced your choice.
2. Did the recent US presidential election influence your thoughts and decision to pursue higher education in the US? If so, please describe how.
 - a. In what ways did immigration policies such as the travel bans, changes to visa restrictions, changes in work authorization, or other changes in US politics affect your decision to study in the US?
 - b. Did you every worry about racial, cultural, or religious discrimination? If so, explain how you processed the potential for discrimination.
 - c. Were there any other social or political issues in the US or your home country that you were aware of that you'd like to discuss with regard to your decision to enroll in US higher education? If so, please explain.

3. Describe how you felt navigating requesting your I-20, paying the SEVIS fee and meeting with a consulate officer for your visa interview.
 - a. How did you prepare for your visa interview?
4. Knowing that I am interested in understanding your entire decision-making experience to study in the US, what else should I know to really understand?

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