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Masa Krsmanovic  
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THE STORIES OF TRANSITION: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION  
OF INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES  
IN FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR COURSES IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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at the University of Central Florida,  
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Major Professor: Thomas D. Cox

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to explore how international undergraduate students enrolled in a first-year seminar (FYS) course perceived and described their academic experiences in a large, public university in the southeastern region of the United States. Guided by Schlossberg's (1984) 4 S Transition Model, this qualitative investigation was conducted through in-depth interviews with 10 international undergraduate students representing different countries and academic majors. The participants' narratives revealed that the academic experiences of international first-year students enrolled in the FYS course can be described as challenging, especially in terms of a) understanding U.S. higher education, b) establishing relationships with American peers, c) navigating academic differences, and d) perceiving the lack of institutional understanding. At the same time, the stories of these 10 students demonstrated that participation in the FYS course had an overall positive impact on students' academic experiences during the first year, especially in terms of a) developing academic skills and competencies, b) developing transferable skills and competencies, c) increased use of campus resources, and d) overall adjustment within the first year. The findings are discussed in relation to the relevant literature and recommendations for practice and future research are provided.

*Keywords:* international students, first-year seminars, first-year experience, academic transition.

This dissertation is dedicated to my brother Miloš. I would not be where I am today if it wasn't for you. I owe it all to your unconditional love, understanding, and support. You were, and will always be my greatest motivation, role model, and a person

I aspire to be. Thank you for believing in me even when I didn't.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### Background

In the 2016-2017 academic year, the United States set a global record in the number of international students hosted in a single country. According to the Institute of International Education [IIE] (2018), 1,078,822 students from around the world chose to pursue their higher education degrees in America. After the last recorded decline in foreign student enrollments which took place during 2003-2006, the return to hosting global learners has again become a solid practice with the average annual growth of 6.1% over the past decade (IIE, 2018).

This phenomenon has benefited American higher education institutions (HEIs) by making them more attractive among global competitors, and it has provided support for the economy in numerous ways. The National Association of International Educators (2018) reported that the economic value of such record enrollment amounted to \$36.9 billion in the 2016-2017 academic year. Economic value is defined as “the amount of money that international students collectively bring into the United States to pay for their education and to support themselves while they (and in some cases, their families) are in the United States” (Baumgartner, 2017, p. 1). Such economic value is not surprising given that only 15% of these students were funded by U.S. colleges and universities, and 0.6% received support directly from the U.S. Government. The remaining 84.4% relied on personal and family resources, foreign government support, foreign private sponsors, current employment, or international organizations (IIE, 2018).

Although the financial benefits to the United States have been significant, the advantages of high international student enrollments extend far beyond economic value. Global learners bring immeasurable academic and cultural value to their host institutions and communities.

These students make significant contributions to under-enrolled programs and disciplines such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), thus supporting the national initiative of increasing enrollments in these fields (IIE, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Collaboration with international students has multiple positive outcomes for domestic students from other disciplines as well, as it can significantly increase their knowledge and expertise in various areas, from career and technical skills to language and cultural competencies (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). Academically, international students constitute an essential element of research universities and are considered to have a great impact on the United States' innovation and patent application as well as overall research development (Hegarty, 2014). Moreover, international students contribute to their institutions in many other, not easily measurable, but highly effective ways, (e.g., serving as teaching and research assistants, providing international connections, and making their institutions more attractive on the global market).

### Problem Statement

As a result of this phenomenon, scholars and educators have been investing increased efforts to better understand and support this student population, to ensure their smooth transition to new educational settings, and to facilitate their academic progress. The literature on international students has continued to expand. It includes a broad variety of factors contributing to educational experiences, challenges, and opportunities that international students encounter in their host institutions and cultures. With international students constituting a substantial portion of college students at the time of this study, the scholarship in this field was continuing to grow, focusing on different educational settings and student sub-populations.

However, with respect to differentiating international students according to their academic level, the extensive review of this contemporary literature conducted for this study revealed that researchers have mainly distinguished between undergraduate and graduate learners. As a result, the undergraduate population has often been perceived as a homogenous group, despite the fact that a number of researchers have already agreed that no generalizations should be made regarding international student experiences and adjustment (Kwon, 2009; Liu & Winder, 2014; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Wu, Garza & Guzman, 2015). Despite these findings, very little research has been conducted regarding first-year international students as a distinct sub-population.

This gap in the literature becomes even more evident in the context of the research on the first-year experience of domestic students and the effectiveness of first-year programs designed to make students' transitions smoother and successful. Researchers have identified the first-year experience of college students as a decisive factor in academic success, retention, and graduation (Connolly, Flynn, Jemmott, & Oestreicher, 2017; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Sidle & McReynolds, 2009; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Furthermore, the unique challenges and barriers pertaining specifically to first-year students have been documented in the literature as an international phenomenon (Chai & Gibson, 2015; Grebennikov & Shah, 2012; Smith, Therry, & Whale 2012; Whitehead, 2012). In their attempts to better understand this phenomenon, scholars have noted that the barriers that incoming students face are multi-faceted and context-specific. Consequently, the factors affecting student college transition, satisfaction, and success have been found to be very diverse and hard to predict, ranging from site-specific

institutional characteristics to student socio-cultural attributes (Chai & Gibson, 2015; Smith et al., 2012; Whitehead, 2012).

Among numerous and various programs introduced to support college transition of new undergraduate students over the past few decades, First-Year Seminar (FYS) courses became prominent as one of the most common and widespread interventions adopted by higher education institutions of different types, sizes, and classifications. Based on responses to the 2012-2013 National Survey of First-Year Seminars, 89.7% of American colleges and universities reported that they offered a course of this type (NRC, 2013). Over half of these institutions indicated that FYS courses counted for general education requirements, with approximately 40% offering the seminar as an elective.

The research evaluating the effectiveness of this intervention tool is rich and abundant. A substantial body of literature exists which has been focused on assessing the impact that FYS courses have on students' GPA, retention, and graduation; and numerous researchers have documented positive effects on all three variables simultaneously (Burgette & Magun-Jackson, 2009; Lang 2007; Noble, Flynn, Lee, & Hilton, 2007; Starke, Harth, & Sirianni, 2001; Williford, Chapman, & Kahrig, 2001). The research extending beyond these three outcomes has mainly been focused on student social and academic integration and campus engagement. For example, FYS course participants were found to more readily establish connections with faculty and staff, use campus resources, establish peer networks, and be more satisfied with overall first-year experiences than their peers (Hendel, 2007; Keup, 2005; Keup & Barefoot, 2005, Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006).



In addition, the majority of higher education institutions reported implementing at least one special section of FYS courses (National Resource Center, 2013). This is not surprising, given that more recent scholarly findings began documenting the impact of FYS courses on diverse student populations. In that regard, FYS courses seem to benefit various categories of students, with these positive effects being moderated by factors such as student gender, race, age, academic field, socioeconomic status (SES), or level of preparedness (Pascarella & Terenzini (2005). However, the investigation of the course effects on diverse students remains unequal, with certain groups being more frequently explored than others. These groups mainly include African-American students (Fidler & Godwin, 1994; Grunder & Hellmich; 1996), Latinx students (Barnes, 2012), and students on academic probation (McGrath & Burd, 2012; Weiss, Brock, Sommo, Rudd, & Turner, 2011).

A group, whose experiences with FYS courses remain understudied, is comprised of international students. They are, in fact, more vulnerable than their domestic peers in many aspects of their academic experiences. Such an inference is attributable to a number of unique challenges non-domestic students face such as: lack of English language proficiency, unfamiliarity with the American educational system, cultural assimilation, loneliness and isolation, and the resulting identity negotiation (Andrade, 2005; Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2014; Gautam, Lowery, Mays, & Durant, 2016; Mamiseishvili, 2012b; Wu et al., 2015). Despite the rich literature on international students' transition, adjustment, and integration, very little attention has been dedicated to the role that FYS courses have played in potentially addressing any of these challenges. As such, further examination in this area was necessary so that the

scholarship on FYS courses could be expanded to include the impact of these courses on international students.

Another limitation of the existing literature on FYS courses was based on a thorough research analysis of the studies in this field which revealed a lack of varied research designs, methodologies, and theoretical foundations. The effectiveness of FYS courses has been predominantly assessed utilizing quantitative, causal-comparative design with the purpose of comparing GPA, retention, and graduation rates between course participants and non-participants (Clark & Cundiff, 2011; Hendel, 2007; Keup, 2005; Lang, 2007; Noble et al, 2007; Potts & Schultz, 2008; Starke et al., 2001; Williford et al., 2001). Among the studies examined for this research, only a few authors employed qualitative approaches that would reveal deeper insights into students' perspectives about this intervention (Enke, 2011; Everett, 2013; Jessup-Anger, 2014).

In addition, the available literature reviewed in this domain exhibited the limitation of having analyzed course impacts mainly within the frameworks of Tinto's theory of student departure (1987), Tinto's student integration model (1975), and Astin's (1984) theory of involvement, all of which assumed that academic integration, success, and persistence are dependent on the fit between a student and the host institution, as well as the extent of student academic and social involvement. At the same time, however, these pivotal theories have also been heavily critiqued for failure to recognize cultural variables and include diverse educational contexts and student demographics (Guiffrida, 2006; Kuh & Love, 2000; McCubbin, 2003; Metz, 2005; Tierney 1992, 1999). In that regard, this research aimed to further advance the

existing literature by incorporating personal voices and perceptions of a less frequently explored student population--first-year international students.

### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore how international undergraduate students enrolled in a first-year seminar (FYS) course perceived and described their academic experiences in a large, public university in the southeastern region of the United States. The potential findings were aimed at bridging the literature on international undergraduate students and the scholarship on FYS courses. The researcher explored the academic experiences of international first-year students, the ways in which these experiences were shaped by participating in a research-oriented and academic-themed FYS course, and the underlying factors that mediated students' perceptions of these experiences. Simultaneously, the study yielded an expansion of the scholarship on FYS courses by examining the role and effectiveness of the seminar among the less frequently explored international undergraduate student population.

### Theoretical Framework

This qualitative investigation was guided by Schlossberg's (1984) 4 S Transition Model, with a transition being defined as "any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006, p. 33). Even though Schlossberg's theory has been frequently discussed in the context of adult learners' development, her theoretical framework was also highly applicable to traditionally aged college students (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). Moreover, Chickering and Schlossberg (2001) specifically applied transition theory to explain the transition process of college undergraduates

as moving in (e.g., a new educational environment), moving through (e.g., balancing new academic experiences with other parts of one's life), and moving out (preparing for the next stage of one's life).

To examine the transition process of a particular individual, one first needs to examine the type of transition occurring (anticipated, unanticipated, or nonevent), the context of such transition (underlying contextual factors), and the impact of the transition on the individual's life (Goodman et al., 2006). For example, though enrolling in college can be considered an anticipated transition, the context and impact of such a transition can vary greatly for individual students and may contribute to developing different coping mechanisms and strategies. Still, Schlossberg (1984, 2011) argued that certain common features can be recognized among transitions of all types, contexts, and impacts. These features represent the potential strengths or deficits individuals bring to their transitions (thus affecting the possible ways in which they can react during the process) and can be grouped into four major categories, traditionally defined as the Four S's: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) supports, and (d) strategies).

According to Schlossberg (1995), no matter where one is in the transition process and no matter what type of transition is taking place, one responds to it differently depending on these four S's. In other words, the 4 S system consists of the factors that determine how a person copes with a change. Consequently, these four sets of variables can be regarded as either potential assets facilitating a transition or liabilities impeding with a transition. To understand how these assets or liabilities work, Schlossberg (1995) argued, one needs first to examine their interrelationship and the ways in which individuals in transition encounter them.

situation. This factor refers to all contextual and situational characteristics of a transition and the ways in which these characteristics might influence an individual. Schlossberg (1984, 1995) identified several sub-factors that may affect any individual transition, such as trigger, (i.e., what caused the transition), timing, (i.e., how the transition relates to one's social clock), control, (i.e., the level of control that one has over the transition), role change, (i.e., did the transition cause a role change in one's life), duration, (i.e., is the transition temporary or permanent), past experiences, (i.e., has an individual experienced a similar transition before), stress, (i.e., the level of stress caused by a transition), and assessment, (i.e., an individual's perception of the transition).

self. The element of self includes all personal and psychological resources of an individual undergoing a transition. In other words, self includes all variables that an individual brings to a transition that may serve as either assets or liabilities during the process. Regarding personal resources, Schlossberg (1984, 1995) defined these demographic characteristics as a set of several sub-factors: socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, age, and health. In contrast, psychological resources incorporate all personality characteristics that an individual relies on while undergoing a transition. More specifically, these characteristics include three sub-factors: ego development, (i.e., one's level of maturity, such as impulsive, self-protective, autonomous, conformist, conscientious, etc.), personality, (i.e., personality type), outlook (e.g. self-esteem, self-efficacy, optimism, etc.), and commitment and values, (i.e., an individual's system of values and major commitments at the time of a transition).

support. There are several possible types of support available to an individual during the transition process. Schlossberg (1984, 1995) emphasized the importance of operationally

defining this factor in regards to its type, function, and measurement. The type of support refers to the source providing the support (e.g. family, friends, intimate partners, institutions, communities). The function of support denotes key elements and aims of a support system, (i.e., does the support system aim to stimulate affection, affirmation, aid, or feedback). Lastly, the measurement of support refers to the process of assessing and rating the effectiveness of provided support, (i.e., does the individual feel that a support system served as an effective or ineffective coping resource).

Strategies. Possible coping mechanisms that individuals can develop and apply to respond to a transition are referred to as strategies. Schlossberg (1995) explained coping strategies as behaviors aimed to prevent, alleviate, or respond to transitional challenges that can occur before, during, or after a transition process. The strategies factor comprises three sub-elements, each of which aims to facilitate a different type of coping response. First, the responses that modify a situation aim to alter the source of transitional stress and pressure (e.g. engaging in negotiation, reaching compromise, taking an optimistic action, seeking advice instead of self-reliance, or exercising assertiveness instead of hopeless resignation). Second, the responses that control the meaning of a problem aim to offset and neutralize the problem an individual in transition is facing (e.g. selective ignoring strategies, reward strategies, or positive comparison practices). Lastly, the responses that help manage transitional stress assist individuals in transition to avoid becoming overwhelmed by this type of stress (e.g. emotional discharge strategies, self-assertion, and forbearance).

Ultimately, this set of four factors influences the ability of an individual to cope with a transition. Due to all possible types, contexts, or impacts of transition processes, Schlossberg

(2011) argued that there is no single coping mechanism recommended for a person in transition. Rather, an individual who flexibly employs different strategies will be better able to cope with the transition.

### The Application of Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this research, the 4 S Transition Model served as a framework for understanding the stories of international undergraduate students experiencing an academic transition to the large, public, university in the United States. According to Schlossberg (1995), even though individuals in transition differ on many personal and situational characteristics, the structure for understanding their transitional narratives remains stable. This study examined how each of the four major sets of factors (situation, self, support, and Strategies) influenced the ability of study participants to cope with their academic transitions.

Situation. Applying the 4 S model to the context of this study allowed the researcher to examine the ways in which situational characteristics influenced the academic transition of each participant. For example, participants' situational characteristics were similar in some aspects (e.g. anticipated, planned, and timely transition). At the same time, however, students' academic experiences greatly differed regarding other characteristics, such as participants' role change, the control over the transition, or previous experiences with transitions of this kind. Thus, applying the situation factor to this study allowed the researcher to identify different characteristics of

international students' academic transition which served as potential assets or liabilities and, consequently, accelerated or inhibited the transition process.

Self. The application of the self factor provided the researcher with an opportunity to examine the ways in which international students' personal and psychological resources affected their academic transition. For example, participants' personal and demographic characteristics differed on a number of variables such as gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, or socio-economic status, to name a few. Consequently, the psychological resources these students relied on during their transition differed as well, especially in regards to students' commitment, values, personalities, and outlook toward the transition. Thus, the fundamental purpose of applying the self factor to this research was to investigate and describe how different personal characteristics that international undergraduate students' brought to the transition served as either assets or liabilities during the process.

Support. The factor of support was of particular relevance for this research as the FYS course examined in this study was designed to serve as a critical support available to all first-year students transitioning from high school to college. In that regard, the application of Schlossberg's model allowed the researcher to examine the function and role of the FYS course in international students' academic transition. Additionally, the researcher used this factor to measure the effectiveness of the FYS as a support strategy by portraying students' perceptions and narratives about the potency of the course to serve as a support during their academic transition. At the same time, however, the researcher expanded the exploration of the support factor beyond the FYS course, (i.e., institutional support). By seeking to explore and describe additional systems of support that participants in this study identified as beneficial for their



academic transition (e.g. family, friends, intimate relationships, or community), the researcher identified other types of support that may have served as assets for international undergraduate students transitioning to U.S. higher education.

Strategies. Schlossberg's transition theory is particularly applicable to this research, as the fundamental purpose of the examined FYS course is to assist undergraduate students in their academic transition. The very name of the FYS course (Strategies for Success) indicates its strong relationship with this factor of the 4 S model. Moreover, the course curriculum demonstrates a clear relationship between the strategies factor and various course elements designed to prevent and alleviate the challenges that undergraduate students may encounter before, during, or after the transition process.

The three-credit hour freshman seminar evaluated in this study met the classification of an academic-themed course with a uniform curriculum across all sections. According to the structure of the FYS program, for general, first-time in college (FTIC) students the seminar has been offered as an elective, and all special student populations (i.e., summer bridge program, out-of-state students, international students, teacher pre-professionals, and student-athletes) were required to enroll. The seminar was facilitated in a small classroom setting and enrolled up to 35 students. Main course topics have been developed with the goals of accelerating students' college transition and promoting their success and persistence through the first-year and beyond. The seminar outcomes included increased competencies in the areas of research-proven student success strategies (study skills), decision-making, time-management, career-exploration, and goal-setting, as well as increased academic self-efficacy and motivation. Table 1 illustrates the relationship of Schlossberg's 4 S model with the elements from the FYS course curriculum. The

influencing factors for each of the 4 S categories are presented along with the matching course components and learning outcomes as identified in the syllabus.

Table 1

*The Relationship of 4 S Model and the First-year Seminar (FYS) Course Curriculum*

4 S Categories/Influencing Factors <sup>a</sup>	FYS Course Components and Outcomes <sup>b</sup>
<b>SITUATION</b>	
Timing (Does transition relate to the social clock?)	Anticipated and planned transition. As per the course syllabus, the FYS course is “a 3-credit hour course designed to assist students in transitioning to the University and collegiate life.”
Control (Where does control lie?)	Locus of control, attribution theory, self-regulation, self-efficacy, grit and perseverance, resilience
Role change (Does the transition involve role change?)	College expectations, the purpose of academic tasks, creating an academic plan, understanding curriculum requirements, academic integrity, professionalism, work-life-school balance, time and project management, prioritizing and planning academic tasks, career exploration, financial planning and budgeting
<b>SELF</b>	
Personal and demographic characteristics (sex, SES, age, health)	Special course sections for each student population (general FTIC, summer bridge program, out-of-state students, international students, teacher pre-professionals, and student-athletes)
Psychological resources (ego development, personality, outlook, commitment, values)	self-assessment, self-reflection, self-determination, motivational theories, exploring personality, exploring interests, exploring abilities, exploring values
<b>SUPPORT</b>	
Types: intimate, family, friends, institutional	Networking, mentoring, family and social support, campus resources, campus involvement, co-curricular experiences, experiential learning (internships, study abroad, service learning)
Functions: affect, affirmation, aid, honest feedback	Interpersonal skills, soft skills, emotional intelligence, communication, conflict management, diversity and multicultural competence, teamwork and collaboration, summative and formative feedback, cognitive and outcome feedback, leadership skills
<b>STRATEGIES</b>	
Functions: modify situation, control meaning, manage stress	Stress management, the locus of control, attribution theory, self-regulation, self-determination, grit and perseverance, resilience
Coping responses: information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, intrapsychic behavior	Goal-setting, decision-making, critical thinking, evaluating resources, information literacy, financial literacy

<sup>a</sup>4 S Influencing factors adapted from “*Counseling Adults in Transition: Linking Practice With Theory*,” by N. K. Schlossberg, 1984.

<sup>b</sup>FYS Course Components and Outcomes adapted from the course syllabus and the course textbook “*Strategies for Student Success*”, C. Harrington, 2018.

### Research Questions

This inquiry addressed the following central research question: How do international undergraduate students enrolled in a first-year seminar (FYS) course at a large, public, research university describe their academic experiences?

The following two sub-questions were developed to elicit additional insights into the central phenomenon:

1. What academic challenges, if any, do international undergraduate students experience during their first year of college?
2. What impacts, if any, does the enrollment in the FYS course have on academic experiences of international undergraduate students during their first year of college?

### Significance of the Study

The main contribution of this study is reflected in bridging two disparate research areas-- the research regarding international undergraduate students and the research regarding FYS courses. The twofold significance of this research is reflected in (a) expanding the existing research regarding international undergraduate students by applying it to a different educational context and (b) expanding the existing research on first-year seminars by examining the experiences of international undergraduate students. Additionally, this study was designed to advance both the research and the practice in these two fields.

Regarding its practical value, the findings in this study can be applied in the work of HEIs, their faculty, student affairs professionals, and international student services. Building on existing research on first-year experience programs, this study produced a valuable research argument for all faculty and student affairs professionals working with new international students

to ameliorate their academic integration. Moreover, the findings can be utilized for designing new or redesigning existing FYS course curricula in a manner that can enhance the learning experiences of culturally diverse students, specifically international students. Similarly, the findings can be used by universities' international student services to diagnose the critical areas in international student transition. Consequently, relevant service units can apply these results in addressing early on any emerging critical areas such as the mandatory orientation programs for international students.

In addition, the value of this research is reflected in advancing the literature on culturally responsive teaching practices and promoting the awareness of cultural diversity in U.S. higher education. This contribution was achieved by examining and portraying the transition experiences of international undergraduate students in a less frequently explored context of FYS courses. Similarly, the impacts of this research are not limited to the literature on international students. The findings in the study advanced the existing scholarly knowledge in the area of first-year experience and FYS courses by addressing the needs of diverse student groups that were enrolling in HEIs at the time of the study.

#### Role of the Researcher

Every qualitative research study represents a space shared by a researcher and the participants. As such, the identities of both parties have the potential to impact the research process (Bourke, 2014). One of the main characteristics of qualitative research is the researcher-as-instrument (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Hatch, 2002), and the role of a qualitative researcher is to investigate and interpret the phenomenon as experienced by the participants and to reflect on all aspects of the study. The researcher's role is to gain a holistic overview of the study,

including its context and social arrangement (Miles et al., 2014). In order to achieve this goal, researchers need to remain conscious of any biases, values, and experiences they bring to the study. They need to explicitly position themselves, conveying their background, and disclosing how it can inform their interpretation of the data (Bourke, 2014, Creswell, 2013).

It is important to disclose that the author of this study was both an international student and a FYS course instructor when this research was conducted. Being an international student herself, researcher's norms, values, and beliefs provided the lens through which she viewed and researched this phenomenon. Identifying as an international student, the researcher experienced a number of factors that the literature identified as main barriers to international student adjustment and transition (e.g., homesickness, isolation, culture shock, and identity re-negotiation). At the same time, due to her extended stay in the host country, the researcher had developed a number of strategies for successfully overcoming these challenges, becoming more resilient and resistant to them.

For all those reasons, the researcher practiced bracketing or epoche by remaining intentional and conscious about recognizing the interplay of her own experiences and the experiences of the students she studied. According to Moustakas (1994), bracketing allowed the researcher to minimize all influences that originated from her personal assumptions and viewpoints and could have interfered with a fresh vision. In this study, the researcher achieved bracketing by maintaining a reflective research journal during the data collection and data analysis processes. This reflective journal was used as a tool for increasing the researcher's attention and concentration and allowed her to delimit the phenomenon in question from her own assumptions, beliefs, and biases (Moustakas, 1994).

Additionally, teaching a FYS course shaped the researcher's stance in relation to this study as well as her epistemological and ontological assumptions. Being deeply immersed in conducting the research on FYS courses, the researcher had risked attributing personal expectations or course outcomes to the experiences of her participants. In order to minimize such risk, the researcher sought to bracket her own understanding of the phenomenon and to revisit it, abstaining from any preconceived judgment. Moustakas (1994) emphasized that epoche is hard to achieve perfectly; however, actively practicing this type of reflection and dialogue with oneself can significantly reduce the influence of pre-determined thoughts, judgments, and biases.

In sum, the researcher's role provided an opportunity for deeper understanding of participants' perspectives and for reaching a more comprehensive interpretation of the findings (Creswell, 2013). The researcher's positionality increased the chance of unintentional bias in data collection and interpretation. By maintaining a reflective journal, the researcher sought to minimize such risk by constantly reflecting on her positionality. Additionally, the researcher ensured objective reporting of contrasting findings, employed member checking, and utilized inter-rater reliability or having the data coded by another researcher (Janesick, 2016). The purpose of these trustworthiness strategies was not to eliminate the researcher's assumptions, beliefs, and perceptual lens. It was to understand and openly disclose how they influenced the findings in this study and any resulting recommendations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### Delimitations and Limitations

This research study has several delimitations and limitations. According to Roberts (2010), delimitations clarify the boundaries of a research study and indicate how narrow is the scope of a study. In contrast, limitations are particular features of a research study that may

negatively affect its results or generalizability. Stipulating the distinction between the two, Mauch and Park, (2003) stated, "A limitation is a factor that may or will affect the study in an important way, but is *not under control* of the researcher; a delimitation differs, principally, in that it *is controlled* by the researcher" (p. 103).

Delimitations of this study were integral to this research as they formed the boundaries for what was included in and excluded from the investigation (Mauch & Park, 2003). In selecting the case for this study, the researcher delimited the inquiry to only: (a) undergraduate international students at one institution; (b) international undergraduate students who completed a three-credit hour FYS course at the institution; and (c) international undergraduate students who had completed the FYS course during the 2017-2018 academic year (either spring, summer, or fall term).

This study also has several types of limitations, mainly due to its research design. A general limitation of qualitative research design is reflected in studying a single research site, a small number of participants within that site, and a purposeful rather than a probability sample, all of which prevent researchers from making explicit inferences about the generalizability of their findings (Maxwell, 2013). However, qualitative researchers differentiate between internal and external generalizability. This distinction limits the applicability of their findings to the settings, groups, individuals, or times represented in the data collected. Accordingly, the findings in this study cannot be generalized to every international student, every FYS course, and every higher education institution.

Another characteristic of qualitative research is reflected in a greater possibility of researcher bias. According to Maxwell (2013), it is impossible to resolve the challenge of



researcher bias by completely eliminating the researcher's theories, beliefs, and perceptual lenses. In this study, the limitation of researcher bias was addressed by having increased awareness of any beliefs and perceptions guiding and shaping this qualitative inquiry and constantly reflecting on the researcher's positionality.

Third, this study used a phenomenological research design which required the researcher to bracket personal assumptions, viewpoints, and experiences. As Moustakas (1994) observed, bracketing requires sustained attention, concentration, and presence, and is rarely perfectly achieved. Creswell (2014) supported this stance by claiming that bracketing may be particularly difficult to achieve, as the interpretations of qualitative data are inevitably influenced by the assumptions researchers bring to their investigations. However, engaging in self-reflection and self-dialogue can significantly reduce the influence of a researcher's preconceived judgments in phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). By regularly practicing these two strategies and bracketing her own experience, the researcher in the present study placed sustained attention on suspending any assumptions or experiences that could have interfered with a fresh vision.

Fourth, an additional limitation for this study is reflected in the sample itself. Van Manen (2014) explained that in phenomenological research, the term, sample, relates back to the French root of the word, example. Therefore, the term, sampling, should be used in reference to gaining examples of experientially rich descriptions. Even though a small sample of participants can be perceived as a limitation of both qualitative and phenomenological research, the purpose of a limited sample in this study was to reveal information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). Due to the extensive data collection process in qualitative and phenomenological research, a vast amount of

rich data emerges. Consequently, a small sample can produce experientially rich accounts and examples of life as it is lived (Van Manen, 2014).

Lastly, the data collection instrument used in this study had certain limitations. All interview data are inevitably affected by the process of reactivity or the influence of researchers on the setting or individuals studied (Maxwell, 2013). Although reactivity is often described as a powerful and inescapable consequence of an interview process (Maxwell, 2013), its effects in this study were minimized by reducing the researcher's influence on the participants and the setting by ensuring objective reporting and avoiding leading questions.

This study had a number of limitations, all of which were recognized and addressed. As Roberts (2010) emphasized, even though all studies have some limitations, it is important for researchers to disclose them openly and honestly so that readers can determine for themselves the degree to which these factors affect the study.

#### Assumptions

Assumptions are defined as the beliefs that researchers take for granted relative to their study (Roberts, 2010). In this study, the researcher assumed that the sample of international undergraduate students who completed the FYS course during 2018 was representative of the general population of international undergraduate students in this institution. Additionally, it was assumed that the students who participated in this study provided honest, truthful, and unbiased responses.

### Definition of Terms

Academic-themed FYS course. A type of a FYS course designed to support student academic success. Two main learning outcomes include: improving academic/cognitive skills and improving critical thinking skills. It is usually contrasted with a transition-themed FYS course designed to increase out-of-class engagement and improve knowledge of academic services (Swing, 2002)

Domestic student. For the purpose of this study, all students who are the citizens or lawful permanent residents of the United States (and who are not international students).

First-year experience (FYE) program. A set of university-specific initiatives, services, and programs designed to support first-year student transition and academic success. The structure and purpose of FYE programs can vary greatly among HEIs in terms of their size, control (public or private), type (two or four year), and gender or racial composition. These programs commonly include innovative teaching strategies, varied first-year seminars, strategic academic advising, orientation programs, living-learning communities, and additional student support services (Upcraft et al., 2005).

First-year seminar (FYS) course. A course designed to assist students in their academic and social development and their transition to college (Hunter & Lindner, 2005). For the purpose of this study, the following terms were used interchangeably: first-year seminar course, first-year seminar, the course, and the seminar.

International student. A person with a residence in a foreign country who seeks to enter the United States temporarily and solely for the purpose of pursuing a course of study in an

approved program of an academic institution (USCIS, 2016). In this study, two terms were used interchangeably: international student and non-domestic student.

Transition. Any event (anticipated or unanticipated) or nonevent (a planned event that failed to take place) in the life of an individual which ultimately leads to changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Goodman et al., 2006).

### Organization of the Study

This dissertation has been organized into six chapters followed by a reference list and appendices. Chapter 1 provides the background of the phenomenon of international student first-year experience and the problem statement viewed through the lens of the selected theoretical framework. This chapter served to identify the research questions to be examined and the main delimitations, limitations, and assumptions of the study. Chapter 2 introduces the research foundations of this study by presenting the synthesis of the literature in the areas of international undergraduate student adjustment and first-year seminars. Main theoretical frameworks of college student development are also discussed. Chapter 3 describes the research design and research method used in this study. The chapter also defines the study's setting, population, and participants, as well as the methods of data collection and data analysis.

### Summary

Due to the global phenomenon of international student mobility, the academic transition of this student population has increasingly been meticulously explored to include various educational contexts and student sub-populations. The research in this direction is necessary not only because it constitutes a timely and much-needed foundation for American HEIs to better

assist their newly enrolled global learners. It also serves as a practical tool for maintaining the United States as a global leader in international student enrollments. However, despite scholarly efforts to better understand the academic experiences of non-domestic students, the research in this field has fallen behind the literature on domestic students in one very important area, that of first-year experience. More specifically, the perennial issue of international student academic transition needed to be further examined to determine how this phenomenon may be influenced by participation in a FYS course. Understanding how this educational practice can be utilized to accelerate the academic adjustment of international undergraduates can potentially lead to designing and applying this intervention tool more strategically to the benefit of international students and their host institutions.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

This chapter provides an overview of the relevant literature related to international undergraduate students and first-year experience programs. Specific attention is devoted to current trends in international student mobility, the impacts of internationalization on American higher education, and the most prevalent barriers to the successful recruitment and retention of international students. Next, this chapter provides a synthesis of the scholarship on international student academic transition and adjustment, including the main challenges to this process and the research-proven practices for alleviating them. The final section opens with an overview of theoretical foundations in the field of college student development and concludes with a discussion of the historical and current research related to first-year seminar (FYS) courses, an educational practice developed for supporting the transition and adjustment of the first-year student population.

### International Students in the United States

#### International Student Mobility

Due to the fact that global competitors have been embracing more strategic and assertive approaches to the recruitment of international students, the mobility of this student population currently presents an uncertain and fluctuating phenomenon for most countries engaged in such efforts. The United States, however, remains among very few host countries that succeeds in maintaining a somewhat stable international student enrollment trajectory. Since the last decline that took place between 2003-2006 (1.27% annual decrease), the United States has achieved a

relatively stable growth in the number of international students it hosts, with an average annual increase of 6.1% over the past decade (IIE, 2018).

In the academic year 2016-2017, the United States welcomed 1,078,822 international students, of which 40.7% were undergraduates, 36.2% were graduate students, 16.3% enrolled in post-graduation training, and 6.8% were non-degree seekers (IIE, 2018). Consistent with previous years, the leading field of study was STEM (36.9%), and business and management came second (18.7%). The top 10 institutions that attracted global students were all classified as Research 1 (R1) institutions of the highest research activity and included six public, three private, and one Ivy League university. Consistent with the historical trend, China remained the leading country of student origin (32.5%), followed by India (17.3%), South Korea (5.4%), Saudi Arabia (4.9%), and Canada (2.5%).

Reasons why international applicants decide to pursue their higher education degree in the United States are multifold and complex. Exploring prospective students' attitudes about possible study abroad destinations, the Institute of International Education (2015) identified the main push factors that motivate global students to seek international education, the main pull factors that motivate these applicants to choose a particular destination, and the perceived obstacles to this process. In regard to participants' perceptions of the United States as a potential educational host, the majority of applicants (74%) identified America as their first choice. Further assessing the motives for such preference, IIE (2015) reported that 77% of prospective students believed that the quality of U.S. education was superior to that of global competitors, 78% were attracted by the variety of schools and educational programs in America, and 68% believed that the United States is welcoming toward international students.

However, international student enrollment rates in the United States are not comparable to the applicants' pre-departure preferences. As reported by NAFSA (2017), despite the record number of non-domestic students it hosted over the past decade, "the United States has lost nearly 10% of its market share of international students due to increased competition from other countries with friendlier immigration policies" (para. 2).

Furthermore, the annual enrollments of international students were most often reported as the sum total of international students present in U.S. postsecondary institutions in one academic year. Over the past decade, the total number of international students in the United States significantly exceeded that of any other global competitor, mainly due to the competitive capacities of American colleges and universities to host non-domestic students. However, measuring these enrollments as a share of overall student body reveals a different image. In 2013-2014, for example, international students in the United States constituted only 4.7% of the overall student body, a much smaller portion compared to the leading global competitors: 21.5% in the United Kingdom, 21% in Australia, 13.3% in Canada, 12.1% in France, or 11.5% in Germany (ITA, 2016). As discussed in the following sections of this chapter, the U.S. share of international students has been mainly affected by new and more rigorous visa and immigration policies (ITA, 2016), and the cost of higher education for non-domestic applicants (IIE, 2015).

### The Importance of International Student Mobility

Promoting and fostering the trend of enrolling international students has multiple positive implications for host countries and their higher education institutions (HEIs), including economic, political, cultural, and academic benefits. Given the self-sustaining nature of American public HEIs, declining state support, and increasing dependence on external funding



resources, (i.e., student tuition), it is not surprising that the benefits of international student recruitment are most often assessed in relation to their economic value.

According to the economic value tool developed by the National Association of International Educators (2018), non-domestic students contributed \$39.6 billion to the American economy during the 2016-2017 academic year. Such value was determined by calculating the total cost of students' educational and living expenses minus any financial support received from the United States. Such economic value was not surprising, given the fact that only 15% of all international students enrolled in U.S. institutions during 2016-2017 were funded by their host colleges and universities (including teaching or research assistantships and federal government research grants), and only 0.6% were supported directly by the U.S. Government. The remaining 84.4% of the global student body relied on some type of external financial resources such as personal and family support, foreign government support, foreign private sponsors, current employment, or international organizations (IIE, 2018).

Additionally, more than 450,000 direct or indirect jobs were created or supported as a result of this economic impact. NAFSA (2018) defined direct jobs as jobs created from the revenue directly generated by international students' spending in various industries (57% in higher education). Other examples included international students' financial contributions to the sectors of housing (17%), dining (11%), and retail (9%). Additionally, nearly 297,000 indirect jobs were created by a multiplier effect, as vacancies developed through the creation of direct jobs.

From a political standpoint, the most evident impact of international students' presence was certainly the fact that, upon return to their host countries, these global alumni served as

ambassadors of American culture and education (Hegarty, 2014). This practice contributed not only to promoting future enrollments by making the U.S. colleges and universities more attractive on the global market, but to establishing valuable international relations, professional connections, and research and scholarly collaborations. Individual host institutions recorded additional benefits, such as increased cultural diversity and multicultural competencies of their students, faculty, and staff, while faculty members identified a number of pedagogical advantages of having diverse classrooms, such as promoting culturally responsive teaching and learning practices (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Owens, Srivastava, & Feerasta, 2011).

Having a globally diverse student body can also be an effective tool for meeting a number of institutional strategic plan goals. Academically, international students directly contributed to filling traditionally under-enrolled disciplines, primarily STEM. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), “few American students pursue expertise in STEM fields – and we have an inadequate pipeline of teachers skilled in those subjects” (para. 2). Contrary to this phenomenon, STEM programs have historically been the leading choice of study for international students (Pandit, 2007). In 2016-2017 alone, almost 400,000 of non-domestic students were enrolled in engineering, math or computer science programs, which represented 11% increase from the previous year. Additionally, international learners were especially prominent in research universities where they supported institutional innovation and research agendas (Hegarty, 2014). Many of these emerging scholars further served their host institutions as teaching and research assistants.

On a micro-level, HEIs that enrolled high numbers of international students have often been perceived as more competitive by American applicants. Interacting with students of

different nationalities has been found to have a multitude of educational benefits for domestic students (Hegarty, 2014; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). For example, after establishing relationships with their international peers, domestic students reported significantly higher levels of skill development in a number of areas, some of which included foreign language competence, multicultural competence, independent learning, creative thinking, quantitative abilities, use of technology, and more complex knowledge in the field (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013).

It is clear that the research on international students has been rapidly expanding to include not only the factors related to educational and cultural experiences of this student group, but also the impact their presence on American campuses has on host institutions, cultural communities, and academic societies. The recurring patterns among the findings related to impact provide strong evidence of the economic, cultural, educational, and other benefits of hosting international students in U.S. higher education. However, in order for these gains to be maximized, the initiatives for increasing the global student body need to be supported by the corresponding strategies for minimizing the barriers to international students' educational mobility, access, and opportunity.

### The Challenges to International Student Mobility

Despite the fact that the number of international students in America has continuously grown over the past decade, during 2016-2017, the United States recorded a 3.7% decline in the average annual growth for the first time since 2009 recession (IIE, 2018). The roots of this crisis were certainly multifold and encompassed both the recruitment strategies adopted by the United States and those initiated by its leading competitors. American immigration and visa policies have usually been perceived as one of the major concerns of non-domestic students and their

families (Choudaha & Chang, 2012; Garcia & Villareal, 2014). The recruitment efforts of American HEIs have been primarily offset by rigorous visa and immigration policies, both during studies and after graduation (ITA, 2016).

Nevertheless, the most recent actions of the American government have further limited international students' access to higher education. In 2017, President Trump issued an executive order to suspend, for 90 days, the entry of foreign nationals from seven countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen (White House, 2017). This decision directly affected 16,216 international students enrolled in U.S. educational institutions at the time the order was activated. Even though the direct impact of the executive order was fairly marginal (it directly affected 1.6% of all international students or 0.08% of all student population), its most detrimental effect was indirect and was reflected in the message it sent to prospective students around the world. As evidenced by the 3.7% decline in the annual growth of international student enrollments recorded in 2016-2017 (IIE, 2018), the travel ban had very broad effects in both geographical and time limitations.

Simultaneously, global competitors, primarily Australia, United Kingdom, and Canada, implemented more deliberate recruitment efforts and increased their international student enrollment by being willing and able to accommodate the various needs of non-domestic applicants (Hegarty, 2014). Very often, such efforts were accompanied by additional incentives provided to international students, such as expediting visa approvals and offering work permits during studies or after graduation (Helms, 2015; Helms, Rumbley, Brajkovic, & Mihut, 2015).

At the same time, the challenges to achieving and maintaining high international student enrollment rates have extended beyond recruitment, including retention and retention of this

student group. Even if recruitment efforts are highly successful, American universities face important concerns related to international student satisfaction, success, and retention. In the National Survey of International Student Retention (NAFSA, 2014), educational professionals identified three main causes of international student attrition: (a) transfer to an institution with a better reputation (67%); (b) finances (64%); and (c) academic concerns (62%). Students, however, reported different reasons for leaving their host institutions, such as: (a) access to jobs or internships (37%); (b) affordability (36%); and (c) availability of scholarships (34%).

The decline in international student enrollments recorded in 2017 and the identified causes of attrition among the students who choose to enroll call for a more deliberate and methodical approach to understanding pre-arrival expectations of this student group and their experiences as they settle on American campuses. Even if recruitment efforts improve and the United States restores its global competitiveness, its HEIs would still face a crucial task of ensuring international student adjustment, academic success, and satisfaction. On that account, the researcher, in the present study sought to identify the factors that can assist global learners and their home institutions in achieving the common goal of students' successful transition, steady academic progress, and timely graduation.

### International Students' Academic Adjustment

#### Delimitation of Literature

Before providing the review of the relevant literature in the field of international student academic adjustment, several important delineations need to be made. First, the connection between second language competence and academic adjustment, (i.e., language barrier), was purposefully excluded from this review because: (a) it is not applicable to all international

students, (e.g., native English speakers or non-native speakers who are fluent in English may potentially constitute the sample of this study); (b) it does not represent the central focus of this study and the research questions employed; (c) it is too complex to be adequately addressed in this limited scholarly inquiry; and (d) it falls within the realm of sociolinguistic literature (Gomez, Urzua, & Glass, 2014).

Next, due to the nature of the central phenomenon being explored, (i.e., students' experiences in FYS courses), the synthesis of literature in this section was limited to international students in the United States. Given the very narrow focus of this scholarly inquiry and its particular emphasis on an educational practice unique to American higher education, the investigation of academic adjustment of international students in other countries was not suitable for the purpose of this review.

Lastly, the review in this section purposefully included only the studies concerned with the academic adjustment of international undergraduate students. Unlike the rich literature on international graduate students or overall international student population, the scholarship on undergraduate learners has been very limited, and the extensive review of research in this field produced a multitude of studies on international student academic transition. However, as asserted in the problem statement of this study, the vast majority of those empirical investigations utilized a sample consisting of both undergraduate and graduate learners. Moreover, these studies contained no delimitations in regards to the applicability of presented results to undergraduate and graduate participants or participants of different academic levels. For example, in assessing the psychological and sociocultural adjustment of first-year international students, Hirai, Fraizer, and Syed (2015) sampled both undergraduate and graduate

first-year students, presented adjustment trajectories as equally applicable to both student groups, and failed to reference the heterogeneity of the sample in the study limitations, implications, or recommendations for future research. Given the fact that the present research explored the impact of an educational intervention specific to first-year students, it was critical to limit this literature review to a small sample of studies that specifically explored the academic transition of international undergraduate students.

#### The Challenges to International Students' Academic Adjustment.

The social and cultural integration of international are important contributors to college success, but their successful progression in their academic careers are dependent on understanding academic, pedagogical, and instructional practices of their host institutions. This adaptation, however, may be particularly hard to achieve for international students as it requires them to make sense of and become accustomed to practices of their host institutions which, quite often, can be very different from those of their home countries.

Such an argument is supported by the scholarly evidence demonstrating that international and domestic undergraduate students significantly differed in their levels of satisfaction with their college experience, with international students being much less satisfied (Kim, Collins, Rennick, & Edens, 2017; Kim, Edens, Iorio, Curtis, & Romero, 2015; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). Moreover, the same findings illustrated that students' satisfaction with their academic experience served as an important predictor of their cognitive engagement and development. Due to these low levels of satisfaction and cognitive development, international undergraduate students displayed low levels of classroom engagement and invested their academic efforts outside the class. Additionally, these results confirmed the correlation between international

student academic self-efficacy and adjustment, already identified in prior research, according to which international students with lower levels of academic self-efficacy reported more adjustment problems (Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002).

It is also interesting to note that non-domestic undergraduate students identified similar barriers to their academic adjustment, regardless of their country of origin. These barriers mainly included faculty-student relations (communicating with professors or understanding instructors' expectations), classroom communication, familiarity with the U.S. postsecondary educational system, and understanding the institutional culture and academic resources (Andrade, 2005; Kim et al., 2017; Leong, 2015). Such findings were further advanced through the work of Mamiseishvili (2012a, 2012b) who highlighted that international student second-year persistence in community colleges was strongly related to students' degree plans, academic integration, academic advising, and faculty interactions. For example, international first-year students were much more likely to re-enroll if they had frequent meetings with their professors and advisors. However, it is alarming that the same findings also indicated that almost 40% of these students had never met with their academic advisor during their freshman year.

Next, international first-year students were found to be particularly challenged by engaging in a research process and developing information literacy skills (Avery, 2017), as well as being actively involved in critical reasoning classroom activities (Kim et al., 2017), all of which constitute an integral element of undergraduate student success. As documented by Kim et al. (2017), engaging in a research process with a faculty mentor served as a powerful predictor of cognitive skills development among international juniors and seniors. Similarly, connecting with faculty members early in one's academic journey and seeking mentorship was identified as one



of the most important factors in academic integration and success of non-domestic undergraduates (Kim et al., 2017; Mamiseishvili, 2012b). Despite all these findings, the recurring evidence continued to illustrate that international undergraduate students were much less likely than their domestic peers to establish relationships with faculty or seek support, mentorship, or feedback (Kim et al., 2015, 2017; Leong, 2015).

The importance of addressing these concerns early (preferably during the freshman year) was perhaps best supported by the finding that international students in their junior year not only reported lower mean scores than their American peers in domains of multiple learning outcomes, (e.g. cognitive skills, interpersonal skills, and civic attitudes), but also continued to record comparably lower scores throughout their senior year (Kim et al., 2017). The importance of early intervention was further demonstrated by the work of Heng (2018) who invited senior international students to aid the adjustment of incoming international freshman by providing them with pre-arrival advice. Three quarters of the senior students emphasized the need for new students to be adequately prepared before starting their first year of college and being immersed into the vastly different academic, social, and cultural settings. Yet, as this review of the contemporary literature illustrates, such need is not commensurate with institutional or, at least, scholarly efforts in the area of supporting the academic transition of international freshman.

#### Factors Contributing to International Students' Academic Adjustment.

On a positive note, the scarce literature on the academic adjustment of international undergraduate students identified several factors and practices that can alleviate their initial challenges. Most importantly, the research in this area supported the argument posited by numerous scholars that the first year of college plays a pivotal role in student success, retention,

and timely graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Sidle & McReynolds, 2009; Upcraft et al., 2005). In that regard, the literature demonstrated that international undergraduate students were no different than other student groups, as their early academic adjustment constituted a critical element of their overall college success (Kwai, 2009; Zhao et al., 2005).

For example, international undergraduates who successfully integrated into the academic system of their host campus were more likely to stay enrolled in the institution, especially if engaged in study groups and out-of-class peer interactions (Mamiseishvili, 2012a). The same findings also indicated that having clearly set degree plans and aspirations positively affected the persistence of this student group. In fact, this particular assumption had already been confirmed by previous scholarly work which revealed that having a strong commitment to academic goals served as a powerful motivator for international undergraduate students to persist in college (Andrade & Evans, 2009). Consequently, it is not surprising that first-year international students have been shown to dedicate significantly more time and effort to academics and curricular practices than their domestic peers and have purposefully sought educational activities in which to participate (Zhao et al. 2005).

According to the literature, academic advising and faculty interactions constituted another significant factor in the first-year success and persistence of international students (Mamiseishvili, 2012b), as well as their overall undergraduate success (Kim et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017). For instance, various types of academic engagement with faculty (in-class and out-of-class and face-to-face and online) positively affected the three previously indicated learning outcomes in which international students were found to be deficient: cognitive skills, interpersonal skills, and civic attitudes (Kim et al., 2017). Furthermore, research engagement

with faculty, satisfaction with advising experience, and extracurricular engagement were all recognized as important predictors of cognitive skills development among non-domestic undergraduates (Kim et al., 2015).

Undoubtedly, successful academic adjustment and integration are critical components of student success for both international and domestic learners. However, the previous findings presented in this chapter may allow one to argue that international undergraduates encounter an additional, and a very unique, set of challenges to their academic adjustment. Consequently, the role of institutional support during the first year of college becomes even more critical as these students attempt to transition to American higher education and succeed academically. As this review of the literature elucidated, international undergraduate students greatly benefited from additional guidance, support, and resources strategically developed to support their academic transition not only from high school to the first year of college but, more importantly, from one cultural setting to another. Thus, the national efforts for promoting the success of FTIC students need to be accompanied by additional empirical investigations addressing the needs of the international student population. Such research could contribute to increasing international student smooth academic transition, satisfaction with college experience, retention to the second year, and ultimately, graduation.

### Theoretical Foundations

A multitude of theories have been developed in attempts to understand and explain student development in college. Although some theoretical frameworks have been specifically focused on the elements of psychosocial development, others have laid the foundation for understanding the critical issues of social identity development, subject matter competence,

moral development, educational attainment and persistence, or career impacts of college. This literature review, however, incorporated only the set of theories specifically addressing the elements of student cognitive development, academic integration, and transition to college.

### Cognitive Development Theories

#### Perry's (1968, 1981) Theory of Intellectual and Cognitive Development

In the realm of cognitive-structural theories, the foundation was cemented by the work of Perry during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Examining how college students make meaning of teaching and learning process, Perry (1968) developed a staged model describing the development of students' thinking patterns (Patton et al., 2016). Similar to many other developmental theoretical concepts, Perry's theory of intellectual and cognitive development postulated that students move through different positions on their developmental continuums. In his framework, those positions ranged from duality to evolving commitments. Duality or dichotomy entailed an individual's interpretation of the world, (i.e., thinking and meaning-making), as either right or wrong, good or bad. The position of evolving commitments, however, represented a complex form of interpreting the world, (i.e., thinking), through the lenses of relative knowledge and values (Patton et al., 2016).

The entire development continuum, however, was described as characterized by nine positions that a learner moved through before progressing from dualistic to relativistic epistemologies. Perry (1981) grouped these positions into four clusters: dualism (viewing the world and knowledge dichotomously, as either right or wrong), multiplicity (honoring diverse views in the search for relevant answers), relativism (seeing the world and knowledge as

contextually defined and dependent on the reasoning behind it), and commitment to relativism (making choices and decisions in a contextual world from the point of relativism).

In the context of undergraduate learners, dualism can be exhibited in students' discomfort when having alternative opinions or perspectives, reluctance to express differing perspectives, or strong reliance on the teaching authority's expertise and knowledge. In contrast, reaching the end stage of the developmental continuum and becoming committed to relativism allows undergraduate students to position themselves in a pluralistic world by making informed decisions and continuously testing various assumptions and truths.

Revisiting the presented literature, it can be noted that the stage of dualism was often identified as the preferred position for international undergraduate in the U.S, and commitment to relativism was found to be particularly hard to achieve for this student group. For example, international students' low engagement in critical thinking activities and reluctance to ask questions, advance class discussions, or engage in a research process (Avery, 2017; Kim et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017) all illustrate dichotomous thinking and the lack of pluralistic perspective.

At the same time, the central premise of this study, that FYS courses can be used as a powerful tool for supporting international student academic adjustment, is further supported by research illustrating the effectiveness of these courses in helping students progress through Perry's developmental continuum. In this regard, researchers have demonstrated that FYS courses promote students' shift from a dualistic to a relativistic stage by, for example, fostering student-centered, contextualized, and applied learning (Karp, Raufman, Efthimou, & Ritze, 2017) or promoting students' critical thinking and intellectual curiosity (Kolb, Longest, & Barnett, 2014).

Comparable to many other student development theories originating from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the greatest limitation of Perry's work was reflected in his sample which predominantly consisted of white males at a prestigious institution (Patton et al., 2016). As such, his theory may not be equally applicable to non-traditional students, or ethically and racially diverse student groups. Nonetheless, his work remains a pivotal foundation for exploring and understanding the cognitive development of college students and for further advancing the research in this field by making it more pertinent for diverse student categories.

#### Magolda's (1992) Epistemological Reflection Model

Influenced by Perry's model of intellectual and cognitive development, Magolda (1992) critiqued the limitation of his sample and examined the ways of knowing among both male and female students. Developing the gender-inclusive model of epistemological reflection, Magolda identified four possible ways of college students' ways of knowing: absolute, transitional, independent, and contextual.

Comparable to Perry's dualistic stage, Magolda's (1992) way of absolute knowing implied that knowledge was certain and, as such, was transmitted from teaching authorities to learners. In the context of undergraduate students, this model implied that the student's role was to receive, understand, and reproduce the knowledge transmitted by professors. In the transitional knowing stage, however, knowledge was no longer perceived as certain in all contexts, but rather as absolute in some aspects and uncertain in others. This way of knowing could be demonstrated in college classrooms by students seeing their roles not just as receptors of information; rather, they could assume the roles of active learners, seeking to understand and apply acquired knowledge. The third stage, independent knowing, advanced the previous pattern

by assuming that knowledge was uncertain. As a result, teaching authority was perceived as a facilitator of independent thinking, intellectual inquiry, and open-mindedness, and the assessment of knowledge was grounded in rewarding independent thinking. Ultimately, in the contextual stage, learners became able to judge the nature of knowledge by examining the supporting evidence and comparing different perspectives. In a college setting, a professor was still an important source of knowledge, but so were peers and learners themselves. As a result, self-authorship, peer-learning, and the exchange of opinions all became highly valued and encouraged.

The model of epistemological reflection informed this research investigation in several important ways. In regard to international undergraduate students, Magolda's (1992) stage of absolute knowing can be used to understand a number of classroom challenges encountered by the international freshman. The examples of these challenges recorded in the literature include active learning and participation (Andrade, 2005), low development of interpersonal and communication skills (Kim et al., 2017), difficulties in adjusting to pedagogical differences in teaching methods (Leong, 2015), and low participation in teamwork learning activities (Valdez, 2015). In contrast, students' progression into transitional knowing or independent knowing stages, by seeking faculty interaction or academic advising, was accompanied by increased learning gains and academic progress (Mamiseishvili, 2012a, 2012b).

Simultaneously, the contextual way of knowing continuously emerged as the most recurring pattern in the realm of FYS literature. The development of contextual knowledge in first-year seminar courses was manifested by greater social engagement and self-discovery (Everett, 2013), as well as students' willingness to actively seek support and resources (Hoops &

Artrip, 2016). According to the literature, the concept of peer support was identified as the most prevalent pattern of contextual knowing in FYS courses. The seminars positively contributed to establishing strong peer networks and collaborations (Keup 2005; Keup & Barefoot, 2005), increasing students' preferences for active learning (Mills, 2010), and promoting collaboration with other students for the purpose of accomplishing academic tasks (Mills, 2010).

Even though Magolda's (1992) epistemological reflection model successfully resolved some of the limitations of Perry's work by presenting a gender-inclusive framework of student intellectual development, it did not provide a fully comprehensive foundation for future studies in this area. The sample remained composed of predominantly white students, thus making this model not equally applicable to students of color or other underrepresented groups.

### Academic Integration Theories

#### Tinto's (1975, 1987) Integration Model

The work of Tinto (1975, 1987) constituted an essential starting point of much empirical research in the area of student transition, integration, retention, and success. Despite the heavy critiques that had begun to emerge along with major changes and challenges in U.S. higher education, (i.e., student diversification), Tinto's work nonetheless has remained a pivotal foundation for attempting to understand students' intent to persist academically. In the present study, the researcher did not examine the issues of attrition and retention among international undergraduate students or the impacts of FYS courses on these outcomes. Incorporating Tinto's (1975, 1987) integration model in the theoretical foundations of this study was critical, however, in understanding the academic adjustment of the study's sample.



Tinto (1975, 1987) postulated that students entered educational institutions with a multitude of personal, background, and academic characteristics, all of which influenced their initial propensity for succeeding in college. However, these early dispositions were inevitably affected and, therefore, reshaped by the academic and social systems of educational institutions. Hence, the central focus of Tinto's (1975, 1987) integration model was grounded in the fit between an individual student and the host institution.

This institutional fit was measured by students' social and academic integration which Tinto (1993) described as a sense of belonging achieved through social and academic interactions and shared attitudes of peers and faculty at the institution. Tinto (1993) argued that as integration increased, students' initial dispositions toward college were modified and their commitment toward the institution and personal goals increased as well. As integration decreased, (e.g., by encountering negative interactions and experiences), students' commitment toward the institution weakened, thereby negatively affecting their persistence and eventually leading to marginality and withdrawal from the institution.

In addition to some of the criticism already addressed in this study, the cultural context was often identified as another variable excluded from Tinto's model. Tierney (1992) argued that accounting for students' departure from their cultural societies was critical in understanding their attrition, retention, and success. Student integration should not be examined as a universal concept, but as a cultural construct, dependent on the society from which students depart. It would appear that the main barrier to applying Tinto's model to diverse student groups, such as international students, was reflected in the fact that it did not conceptualize transition as a movement from one culture to another. By approaching the constructs of students' transition,

integration, and departure solely from an individualistic stance, Tinto rejected the important group differences stemming from categories such as culture, class, or race (Tierney, 1992).

It can be argued that this critique becomes particularly relevant in the context of international undergraduate students who often reported feeling marginalized and alienated from their academic and social systems for the most part of their college journeys (Andrade, 2005; Rabia, 2017; Starr-Glass, 2016). The challenge of applying Tinto's model to underrepresented, non-traditional, or culturally diverse student groups was perhaps best demonstrated by the findings that social integration had a negative effect on international students' persistence (Mamiseishvili 2012a) as well as the persistence of Latino students (Torres & Solberg, 2001).

Tinto (1982) acknowledged that his model was not meant to explain every possible case of student departure, and he agreed with the criticism that his framework did not account for cultural context and the underlying group differences. In particular, he recognized that his work did not devote sufficient attention to a variety of educational experiences that students bring or undergo due to their differences in sex, race, and social status (Tinto, 1982). In this aspect, Tinto agreed with the majority of his critics that his work needed to be advanced by creating separate models for each student subgroup.

#### Astin's (1984) Theory of Involvement

Astin's (1984) theory of involvement presents another perennial college impact model that has continued to influence higher education research to the present day. By involvement, Astin referred to "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). Explaining what prompted him to develop this model, Astin shared his nonconformity with the traditional perception of the student as a "black box" (p. 519).

In the black box concept, college programs represented input at one end of a continuum. At the other end of the continuum were standardized tests and achievement measures such as GPA representing outputs. What was missing from this historical model, Astin argued, was a linking mechanism that would explain how the input, (i.e., college programs), led to the output, (i.e., student achievement).

According to Astin's (1984) theory of involvement, students' college outcomes were directly dependent on three critical elements: input (demographic characteristics, background, and academic or social experiences), environment (a range of college experiences, whether on or off campus), and outcomes (students' characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors as they exist after college). Two critical assumptions in Astin's model were: (a) students learn by being involved, and (b) students' development is directly proportional to the scope of their involvement.

Of particular importance in this research study is Astin's (1984) construct of "academic involvement" (p. 525). He defined academic involvement as a complex set of behaviors including students' commitment to studies measured by the hours invested in academic tasks, the degree of interest in coursework, or the formation of study habits, to name a few. For the context of this study, especially relevant are the following two postulations: (a) academic involvement is a powerful predictor of college satisfaction and (b) college satisfaction is directly dependent on the successful establishment of student-faculty interactions (Astin, 1984).

As Astin (1984) claimed, the principal advantage of his construct of academic involvement over traditional pedagogical approaches was that it placed a higher value on students' motivation and behavior than on the subject matter. This shift in focus had a direct

impact on higher education practices as well as the role of faculty and staff. From the standpoint of assessing the impact of a specific educational tool, such as in this study, the theory of involvement would be used to hypothesize that the effectiveness of an educational practice should be determined by the capacity of that practice to increase student involvement. Similarly, the activities of college personnel should be assessed according to how successful they were in encouraging students to become more involved in the college experience.

Even though Astin's (1984) theory has not encountered the same volume of criticism as Tinto's, his model of involvement inspired the identical commentary on the lack of consideration for the unique aspects of the involvement among underrepresented students. As Tierney (1992) argued, in assessing the cost and impact of involvement, Astin overlooked the institutional responsibility in providing a multiculturally affirming environment. As a result, the involvement of culturally diverse groups in institutions of higher education has presented a particular concern. As a remedy, Tierney (1992) proposed a shift in the way involvement was perceived. Rather than viewing student participation from a social integration perspective, an alternative model is needed to perceive universities as multicultural entities. Despite this enduring critique of Astin's model, his work continued to serve as the theoretical and conceptual underpinning of an extraordinary volume of research on college student development, involvement, and success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

#### Application of Tinto's and Astin's Models to International Students.

Unlike the research on FYS courses where Tinto's (1975, 1987) and Astin's (1984) models have served as the most commonly employed theoretical lenses, these frameworks have been used less frequently in the research about international students. Still, as supported by a

number of studies reviewed in this section, Tinto's model of academic integration and Astin's model of involvement constitute critical components for investigating the main questions of this study.

A body of literature documented that international undergraduates represented a student category for whom academic integration can be particularly hard to accomplish. As a result, it was not uncommon for these students to experience feelings of marginality, especially during their first year of college (Andrade, 2005). For example, examining the academic adjustment of undergraduate Arab students in the United States, Rabia (2017) found that participants' transition process was mainly characterized by voluntary isolation. These students purposefully distanced themselves from support systems as they perceived them as a distraction and possible barrier to their academic successes. This phenomenon had previously emerged in the work of Kim et al. (2015) who found that international undergraduate students were less engaged in classroom activities than their domestic peers and invested increased time in their academics outside of class. As a result of investing very little time in their social integration, international freshmen reported lower levels of satisfaction with their overall college experience. All these findings are consistent with Tinto's (1987) belief about the interdependence of students' academic integration and commitment, as well as Astin's (1984) belief about the correlation between academic involvement and college satisfaction.

Investigating the phenomenon of international student social and academic isolation, Starr-Glass (2016) redefined this concept as "strangerhood" (p. 315), a widespread occurrence among international students and a common element of their educational experience.

Strangerhood was defined as fundamentally different from isolation because it did not imply that

students failed to adjust to their new environments. On the contrary, even when they did adjust, students did not integrate, as they still felt like strangers in a strange territory and believed they were viewed as such by others. This feeling was what ultimately led students to distance and separation comparable to Tinto's concepts of marginality and withdrawal. Another similarity with Tinto's model was reflected in Starr-Glass' (2016) conclusion that even though feelings of strangerhood remained present throughout the participants' entire educational experience, this phenomenon was most prevalent among first-year students.

A number of studies on international students' adjustment confirmed the hypotheses of Tinto and Astin that academic integration and academic involvement are strong predictors of a successful academic career. For example, international students' academic integration during the first year of college was a significant contributor to their second-year retention (Mamisiavelli 2012b). Next, international students who sought academic advising and established relationships with their professors were more likely to re-enroll than their peers who did not make such efforts (Mamisiavelli 2012b). Lastly, international students reported a strong correlation between the support received from academic advisors and the development of their academic self-concept (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013). As these rich findings illustrate, even though academic integration and academic involvement of international students have not traditionally been explored through the lenses of Tinto's and Astin's frameworks, these models have influenced the understanding of critical factors that shape the academic transition of this student group.

## Theories of Transition

### Sanford's (1962, 1966) Theory of Challenge and Support.

Sanford was one of the first theorists to explore the association between the college environment and students' psychological development during the transition from late adolescence to young adulthood. The basic premise of Sanford's (1962) theory was that development occurred upon successfully achieving the balance between the challenges that students encountered while transitioning to a new environment and the support provided by that environment. In this hypothesis, a challenge denoted any situation for which a student did not have the necessary coping skill or knowledge. support was indicated by any tool provided by the environment to assist the student in overcoming these challenges and being successful (Sanford, 1966).

The concept of reciprocity is essential for understanding and applying the theory of challenge and support. To Sanford (1962), the student's developmental change could not occur in a setting that carried too much challenge and not enough support or in a setting that provided too much support but not enough challenge. Shortly after developing his model, Sanford added a third developmental condition, readiness, to his theory: a student must be biologically and physiologically ready. In this context, readiness was defined and perceived as the outcome of both natural maturation and beneficial environmental factors (Sanford, 1966).

Sanford's theory of challenge and support has numerous applications to the research on international undergraduate students as well as to the work of personnel providing support for this student population. As already discussed, the transition of international undergraduate students, especially freshman, is accompanied by a multitude of very diverse challenges,

especially in domains of cognitive, social, and interpersonal development (Andrade, 2005; Kim et al., 2017; Leong, 2015; Zhao et al., 2005). Therefore, to ensure a successful transition and development of these learners, the magnitude of their challenges needs to be balanced with the scope of available support. Should that balance and reciprocity fail to be achieved, Sanford (1996) argued, students would likely resort to one of the following behaviors: regress to earlier and less adaptive models of behavior, remain in current modes of behavior, or avoid and ignore the challenge. As all these behaviors represent developmental stagnation and regression, it is critical to identify and address the broad variety of challenges that college students may encounter so that a balanced support can be provided and regressive behaviors avoided.

However, the challenges that college students encounter may significantly vary among different groups. Therefore, one critical condition needs to be fulfilled before applying Sanford's theory across educational environments of different sizes, profiles, and types. In order to provide a balanced and effective support, HEIs first need to identify the types of challenges that each diverse student population encounters. Failure to do so can result in the imbalance between the student's challenges and the available support. This imbalance, in turn, can cause negative college outcomes or the student's ultimate withdrawal from the environment (Patton et al., 2016).

#### Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Mattering and Marginality.

The work of Schlossberg has served as the theoretical underpinnings for much of the research on life transitions. In addition to her transition theory, used as the central framework guiding this research, Schlossberg's (1989) model of mattering and marginality also requires a



discussion due to its frequent applicability in the research among marginalized groups and first-year students (Patton et al., 2016).

Schlossberg (1989) proposed that life transitions and embodiment of new roles and responsibilities were often accompanied by feelings of marginality or a sense of not fitting in. For some individuals, such as those from underrepresented groups, the feelings of marginality often became a permanent condition. For others, such as first-year students, these feelings were usually experienced only temporarily. In each case, the feelings of marginality were inextricably related to the concept of mattering, which Schlossberg defined as a belief that “we matter to someone else” (p. 5).

Applying this model in higher education settings implies that student development and success are dependent on an institution’s ability to help students reduce feelings of marginality and develop a sense of mattering. According to Schlossberg’s (1989) model, a sense of mattering can be manifested and achieved through five constructs: attention (being noticed by another person), importance (being cared about), ego-extension (feeling that someone else is proud of one’s successes or sad for one’s failures), dependence (feeling that one is needed), and appreciation (feeling that one’s efforts are appreciated).

It is interesting to note that in 1989, Schlossberg made specific reference to the application of her theory in the context of international students. Using the example of college freshman, she made a distinction between a temporary and permanent marginality, describing temporary marginality as a condition that may repeatedly occur in one’s life but was never permanent, (e.g., graduating high school, graduating college, starting a new job, moving to a new city). For some students, however, marginality may become a permanent condition and a way of

life. Schlossberg further argued that many bicultural individuals,, (i.e., international students), believed they were permanently locked in the transition process and the condition of marginality by identifying with two cultures simultaneously. In the case of these individuals, marginality was the outcome of students' attempts to relate to American culture while maintaining their own cultural and national identity.

This segment of Schlossberg's theory, also critical for the context of the present study, has been strongly supported by a number of studies on international student adjustment, all of which recognized identity development as a key element in understanding the transition process of this student group. The most common findings in this complex area revealed that international student transition into new educational and cultural settings was most often accompanied by identity conflict (Valdez, 2015), identity negotiation (Hsieh, 2006) identity change and refinement (Liu & Winter, 2014), or the existence of multiple identities (Gautam et al., 2016).

As Schlossberg (1989) concluded, only by carefully examining all diverse backgrounds present on college campuses can higher education personnel begin to understand students' experiences and plan activities, practices, and strategies to help them build a sense of mattering. Based on this premise, the next section of this chapter presents and supports the argument that FYS courses represent an enduring example of an educational practice with direct positive impacts on students' sense of mattering, sense of belonging, and reduced feelings of marginality.

### First-year Seminar (FYS) Courses

#### Historical Overview

The history of orienting first-year students is almost as old as the history of higher education in the United States, but only received increased scholarly attention in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>

century when the frequency and scope of issues specific to first-year students significantly increased (Strumpf & Sharer, 1993). As the demographics of incoming students expanded after World War II, American colleges and universities encountered numerous challenges in providing a holistic educational experience to learners with a multitude of backgrounds and needs, such as women, people of color, non-traditional students and veterans, international students, or students with disabilities (Strumpf & Sharer, 1993). Prior to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, such challenges had only been addressed through orientation programs. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, these practices started to change.

Even though first-year seminar (FYS) courses emerged from orientation programs, they were never meant to replace traditional orientation experiences (Barefoot & Gardner, 1993). Rather, they were intended to extend these programs by addressing students' needs as they arose. Historically, American campuses were typically populated by elite, white, male, and traditionally-aged students. In the 1970s, however, U.S. higher education shifted from a highly selective to a universal access model, thereby allowing for a changing profile of students to enter college classrooms (Thelin, 2011). The advent of an increasingly diverse student population containing first-generation, non-traditional, and underrepresented students did not allow for orientation programs to remain uniform for much longer.

The modern history of FYS courses can be traced to the year 1972 when the University of South Carolina's then president, Thomas Jones, created the University 101 program with the aim of providing a more personalized experience to incoming students. Specific learning outcomes of University 101 included: (a) encouraging students to develop positive attitudes toward university, (b) helping them understand the purpose of higher education, (c) increasing their

second-year retention and graduation, and (d) facilitating faculty development and improving teaching in other courses.

As the profile of college students rapidly changed, many students arrived on campuses lacking the necessary skills to succeed academically and needed additional support. As a result, FYS courses began not only to expand, but also to diversify in terms of content, design, and curricular focus. By the 1980s, over 75% of American institutions of higher education offered some type of a freshman seminar course (Gordon, 1991).

It is interesting to note that many of the issues that emerged when FYS courses were first introduced remained present for a long time. These issues included questions about what goals should be accomplished, who should teach the courses, what content should be taught, what credit value should be assigned, and what delivery format should be used (Gordon, 1991). Consequently, the institutions offering FYS courses began to empirically examine the most preferred objectives of this intervention, as well as to measure its effectiveness. Ultimately, the direction of the FYS course design in terms of its type and curricula became dependent on empirical data demonstrating the linkage between course participation and student success. Thus, a new chapter of the scholarship began in the higher education field (Barefoot & Gardner, 1993).

### Current Trends

The popularity of first-year seminar courses in modern higher education has been evidenced by the continuous increase in the number of institutions incorporating FYS courses in their educational practices. Compared to the 1980s, when 75% of American HEIs offered these courses (Gordon, 1991), in 2012-2013, 89.7% of surveyed HEIs reported introducing a seminar of this kind (NRC, 2013). Among these institutions, the three most common course outcomes

included: (a) connecting new students with the institution, (b) familiarizing students with campus services and resources, and (c) developing students' academic skills. In terms of the FYS course type, approximately 40% of institutions introduced an extended orientation seminar format, and nearly 40% offered an academic-themed seminar. More than 50% of these courses counted as a general education requirement and approximately 40% were electives. In terms of institutional type, 61.7% of courses were offered at four-year colleges and universities and 38.3% at two-year institutions. Private institutions indicated a much stronger preference for hosting FYS courses (62%) than did public colleges and universities (38%) [NRC, 2013].

Synthesizing three decades of research on FYS courses, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded that, despite the considerable variations in terms of seminar content, duration, structure, and credit value, FYS courses have served as a highly effective tool for promoting student academic performance, persistence, and degree attainment. Even after controlling for a variety of students' precollege characteristics, scholars have agreed that participation in FYS courses promotes persistence to the second year, higher GPAs, and the attainment of a bachelor's degree (Lang, 2007; McGrath & Burd, 2012; Miller & Lesik, 2014; Sidle & McReynolds, 2009). A wide array of other positive and significant effects was identified for FYS course participants including more frequent interactions with faculty members and with other students, more active involvement in extracurricular activities, positive perceptions of self as learner, and satisfaction with the college experience (Andrade, 2006; Hendel, 2007; Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Pittendrigh, Borkowski, Swinford, & Plumb, 2016).

The research on FYS courses has resulted in highly contrasting and inconsistent results in terms of the seminar effects, attributable to a number of variables affecting the seminar impacts,

(e.g., course format or student individual characteristics). There is also an argument to be made that the uniform research design of the studies in this field is a strong contributor to this phenomenon. Traditionally, the effectiveness of FYS courses has predominantly been assessed using quantitative, causal-comparative research design with the aim of comparing the course participants' retention rates, graduation rates, and GPAs to those of non-participants. Even though this design yielded the differences between the two groups in terms of the course impacts, it has not explained the causes of these differences or the nature of inconsistent findings in this domain.

For example, the most pronounced positive effects of FYS courses were recorded in relation to students' GPA, both in four-year research universities (Burgette & Magun-Jackson, 2009; Lang, 2007; Williford et al., 2001) and in four-year liberal arts colleges (Starke et al., 2001). However, some studies produced contrary evidence finding no correlation between FYS courses and students' GPA (Clark & Cundiff, 2011; Friedman & Marsh, 2009; Keup, 2005; Potts & Schultz, 2008).

Equally prevalent is the quantitative evidence supporting the positive impacts of FYS courses on students second-year retention. Some researchers documented the short-term effects of FYS courses by recording their impact on students' persistence to second semester (Lang 2007), and others illustrated the course potency to produce long-term impacts and help institutions retain students to second year (Burgette & Magun-Jackson 2009; Clark & Cundiff 2011; Williford et al., 2001), or senior year of college (McGrath & Burd 2012; Starke et al., 2001). However, a number of these quantitative investigations did not identify any positive effects on students' intention to persist (Friedman & Marsh, 2009; Hendel, 2007; Keup, 2005;

Potts & Schultz, 2008). The only area where the findings have remained consistent is in the positive relationship between the enrollment in FYS courses and graduation rates, whether within four-years (Lang, 2007; McGrath & Burd, 2012; Starke et al., 2001), five years (Cambridge-Williams, Wisler, Kostanay, & Bernard, 2013; Lang, 2007), or six years (Lang, 2007; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011).

The second limitation of the research on FYS courses is reflected in its theoretical foundations. In the majority of the studies referenced in this review, the impacts of FYS interventions were assessed within the framework of Tinto's theory of student departure (1987), Tinto's student integration model (1975, 1993), and Astin's (1984) theory of involvement. As previously discussed, these models have been frequently critiqued for excluding diverse educational contexts and student demographics (Metz, 2005; McCubbin, 2003, Tierney 1992, 1999). Therefore, proposing an alternative research design that would focus on experiences, perceptions, and narratives of international FYS course participants, examined through the lenses of less commonly explored theoretical foundations, represents a much-needed scholarly alternative.

### Diverse Student Populations

The recent expansion of FYS courses, along with their underlying diversification, has resulted in purposefully designing these seminars to better meet the needs of diverse student groups, such as underrepresented, first-generation, international, or academically underprepared students. According to the National Resource Center (2013), the majority of institutions offering FYS courses reported having at least one special section of the seminar. Similarly, scholarly

inquiries began to clearly differentiate the effect that FYS courses have on general FTIC students from those on special student populations.

In this regard, scholarly evidence exists that participation in FYS courses has been positively related to academic performance of African-American students (Fidler & Godwin, 1994; Grunder, & Hellmich, 1996), retention rates of Latino students (Barnes, 2012), and the academic performance and retention of underrepresented student groups (Swanson, Vaughan & Wilkinson, 2017). Assessing the seminar impacts on first-generation students, Vaughan, Parra, and Lalonde (2014) found positive effects in terms of increased GPA and second-semester retention. Among other groups who also benefited from FYS courses were students on academic probation, for whom the enrollment in the course resulted in higher second-year retention and graduation rates (McGrath & Burd, 2012). Lastly, several studies were conducted to assess whether the effects of FYS courses were moderated by gender. In this regard, Schrader and Brown (2008) found that females reported higher ratings of learning outcomes than males. Swanson et al. (2017) reported that male participants recorded higher first-semester GPA and first-year retention rates than females.

The scarcity of research in the FYS field is most evident in regard to the international student population. With the exception of Andrade (2005, 2006), who extensively explored the need for and benefits of first-year programming for international students, very few studies produced empirical evidence of the impacts of FYS courses on the academic success of non-domestic learners. Given the timeliness and urgency of addressing the issues pertaining to this student population, additional knowledge needs to be generated in order to understand the extent to which this student group can benefit from participation in FYS courses. Simultaneously, the



findings in this area could potentially help identify possible ways in which these courses can be better utilized to benefit not only international students, but also their host institutions.

#### First-year Seminars and International Students

The extensive review of the literature in the area of international student academic adjustment did not produce any studies that were specifically focused on the role of FYS courses in this regard. A cross-examination of the presented findings in both domains, however, strongly supported the main argument of this research, that FYS courses can be used as a powerful tool for promoting international student academic transition. Table 2 provides scholarly evidence that a number of the most critical academic deficiencies shared by international undergraduate students were simultaneously recognized as common learning gains of participating in FYS courses.

Table 2

*International Students' Academic Challenges and First-year Seminar (FYS) Learning Gains*

International Students' Academic Challenges	FYS Learning Gains
Low class participation (Kim et al, 2015; Valdez, 2015)	Increased class participation (Bender, 2001; Mills, 2010)
Active learning (Andrade, 2005; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005)	Active learning (Mills, 2010) Contextualized and applied learning (Karp et al., 2017) self-regulated learning (Hoops & Artrip, 2016) Learning initiative (Bender, 2001)
Unfamiliarity with U.S. higher education (Andrade, 2005)	Increased knowledge of the college setting and improved adjustment (Dunn, Hain's, & Epps, 2013)
Low satisfaction with academic experience (Kim et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017)	Improved quality of undergraduate experience (Everett, 2013) Increased student satisfaction (Hendel, 2007)
Low engagement in and satisfaction with academic advising (Kim et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017)	Increased willingness to seek academic advising and more frequent use of advising services (Hoops & Artrip, 2016; Mills, 2010)
Low interaction with faculty in class, outside of class, and online (Kim et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017)	Increased interaction with faculty (Kuh et al., 2006; Mills, 2010) Increased contact with faculty outside the class (Bender, 2001) Establishment of meaningful connections with faculty and staff (Keup & Barefoot, 2005)
Low engagement in teamwork and collaborative learning (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005)	Establishment of peer networks (Keup & Barefoot, 2005) Collaborative learning (Kuh et al., 2006; Mills, 2010)
Strong feelings of marginalization and isolation (Andrade, 2005; Starr-Glass, 2016)	Increased sense of belonging and reduced feelings of isolation from campus life (Keup, 2015)
Use of technology (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005)	Improved technology skills and increased use of technology (Mills 2010)

For example, the previously cited low levels of satisfaction with undergraduate experience expressed by international students (Kim et al., 2015, 2017) could potentially be remediated by utilizing the findings that FYS courses can significantly increase FTIC student satisfaction with academics, their overall adjustment to college, and the quality of their

undergraduate experience (Everett, 2013; Hendel, 2007). Next, researchers have documented that that low levels of satisfaction with college experience can negatively affect international students' self-efficacy which, in turn, can create an additional barrier to their successful adjustment (Poyrazli, et al., 2002). At the same time, FYS course participants have been shown to continue to benefit from increased academic self-efficacy and self-regulated learning skills and competencies (Hoops & Artrip, 2016, Hoops, Burrridge, & Wolters, 2015).

Similarly, classroom engagement and participation have been frequently expressed as leading obstacles to the academic transition of international undergraduate students (Kim et al., 2015; Valdez, 2015). For domestic undergraduates, however, active class engagement and interaction with other students for the purpose of accomplishing learning tasks have been identified as FYS learning outcomes (Bender, 2010; Mills, 2010). Additionally, positive effects that FYS courses can have on freshman students' academic writing and argumentation skills (Berol, Han, Welsh & Fox, 2013) have become even more relevant in the context of international students' initial struggles with undergraduate research, critical reasoning, and development of information literacy skills (Avery, 2017; Kim et al., 2017).

Most importantly, the literature has repeatedly supported the argument that international undergraduate students remain highly reluctant toward initiating out-of-class communication with professors, establishing relationships with faculty members, or seeking academic advising, mentorship or support (Kim et al., 2015, 2017; Leong, 2015; Mamiseishvili, 2012a, 2012b). Interestingly, all of these practices present commonly cited FYS outcomes among general FTIC student population (Bender, 2001; Hoops & Artrip, 2016).

Despite all of these findings, the review of the studies presented in this chapter has illustrated that the majority of empirical investigations in the domain of FYS courses have not yet been replicated in the international student setting. Consequently, a gap in the literature remains as to the role that this intervention tool can have on the academic adjustment of international undergraduate students transitioning to U.S. campuses. Even though this synthesis of contemporary research addressed a number of critical issues in the academic transition of international undergraduates, it can be concluded that students' testimonies of how these transitional experiences can be affected by participation in FYS courses are still largely missing from the literature.

#### First-year Seminar Course Redesign

As Barefoot and Gardner (1993) suggested during early stages of FYS course development, any curriculum change must be preceded with the evaluation of course outcomes. As they advocated, FYS courses “must repeatedly prove themselves effective in order to survive” (p. 157). This perennial recommendation is still frequently adopted as nearly 60% of HEIs reported formally assessing the effectiveness of seminars they offered (NRC, 2013). These institutions further shared that student evaluations represented the most common assessment tool for evaluating the course outcomes, which was followed by the use of institutional data.

Building on Barefoot and Gardner's (1993) recommendation for FYS course redesign, a number of scholars empirically compared the impacts of the seminars before and after implementing a major curriculum change (Everett, 2013; Olson, 2017; Rogerson & Pock, 2013; Ryan, 2013; Tempe & Durotomy, 2013, Zero & Bjerke, 2016). In that regard, the literature

provided ample evidence that intentionally redesigning FYS courses to meet specific learning goals can lead to strong positive impacts on student outcomes.

Several studies documented the positive effects of redesigning a FYS curriculum by introducing assignments intentionally designed to help students accomplish shared learning outcomes. For example, Everett (2013) demonstrated that incorporating a reflective journal writing in the course curriculum can result in improved well-being, self-reflection, time-management, and social engagement of course participants. The benefits of introducing intentional assignments in FYS courses were further confirmed by Olson (2017) who examined the role of this intervention on the development of students' grit, tenacity, and perseverance. The results indicated that such a change had a favorable outcome for nearly half of the course participants who recorded significantly higher levels of perseverance upon completing the seminar.

Regarding FYS course redesign, curriculum interventions were not the only change found to cause improved learning outcomes. Several studies illustrated that modifications in the course delivery method can be equally powerful. For instance, according to McBeth, Richardson, Crueler, and Meyer (2000), students who participated in a FYS course taught by purposefully selected academic advisors were much more likely to seek academic support after completing the seminar. Moreover, these students recorded a slightly higher GPA and significantly higher satisfaction with the seminar than their peers from other class sections. These findings were further confirmed by Ryan (2013) who assessed the benefits of a FYS course taught by specially trained instructors who served as the students' academic advisors during their first semester. The

results demonstrated that such a change in the course delivery method resulted in participants' increased GPA, as well as second-semester and second-year retention.

Additional scholarly evidence exists to support the premise that other types of course redesign can be equally beneficial, such as clustering the seminar with other courses (Crossman, 2001), implementing the seminar within living and/or learning communities (Friedman & Alexander, 2007; Tempe & Durotomy, 2013), modifying the seminar population method (Rogerson & Pock, 2013), or changing the seminar focus from orientation to academics and vice versa (Ryan & Glenn, 2004; Zero & Bjerke, 2016). Following Barefoot and Garner's (2013) enduring recommendation for continuous assessment and improvement of FYS courses, this research study aimed to advance the existing scholarship by providing new insights on the possible ways in which the FYS course curriculum, design, and delivery can be further advanced. By examining the course impacts on less frequently explored student population, this study developed the recommendations for improving the potency of an academic-themed FYS course to facilitate the academic transition of international undergraduate students to U.S. higher education.

### Summary

This review of the literature provided the synthesis of key factors related to international student mobility, the academic adjustment of international undergraduate learners, the most relevant theoretical foundations in the domain of student development, and the role of FYS courses in student transition to college. This chapter began by discussing the current trends in international student mobility as well as the benefits of enrolling international students in U.S.

colleges and universities. Major barriers to attracting and retaining international students and the need for resolving these challenges were also discussed.

Next, this chapter presented an overview of contemporary literature related to academic adjustment and transition of international undergraduate students along with the need for developing practices and strategies that would aid this process. Specific attention was dedicated to academic challenges unique to international first-year students as well as the research-proven strategies for fostering their academic success.

The last section of this chapter presented the most relevant theoretical foundations in the fields of student cognitive development, academic integration, and college transition, with specific attention to FYS courses and their role in these processes. Along with discussing the most pertinent theoretical models of college student development, FYS programs were evaluated as a means to achieving a smooth transition of diverse student groups, including international learners. Lastly, each section of the chapter included a brief summary identifying the most significant gaps in each area of the literature and proposing the ways in which the current study aims to reduce those scholarly limitations.

## CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHOD

### Overview

Chapter 3 serves to explain and justify the methodology used in this study. It serves as a foundation for the remaining chapters which present the profiles of the participants and the study findings.

The overall purpose of this research was to explore and describe the experiences of international undergraduate students enrolled in the academic-themed FYS course. Specifically, the study was conducted to explore (a) the main challenges that international undergraduate students encountered in navigating their academic experiences during their first year of college and (b) the ways in which FYS courses can be designed and implemented to support the college transition for this student group.

In this chapter, the researcher describes the rationale for using a qualitative phenomenological design as the most appropriate method for exploring the research questions. Next, the researcher describes how the research was conducted and how the data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted. The study site and participants are discussed, along with the data collection and data analysis procedures. The important questions pertaining to ensuring the validity and trustworthiness of the study are also addressed.

### Research Questions

The selection of research design for this study was guided by its central question and two underlying sub-questions. In this study, the central phenomenon was examined by exploring the following overarching research question: How do international undergraduate students enrolled



in a first-year seminar (FYS) course at a large, public, research university describe their academic experiences?

Two additional sub-questions were developed to elicit additional insights into the central phenomenon:

1. What academic challenges, if any, do international undergraduate students experience during their first year of college?
2. What impacts, if any, does the enrollment in the FYS course have on academic experiences of international undergraduate students during their first year of college?

### Research Design

The identified research questions, designed to explore the experiences and personal narratives of participants, required the use of a qualitative research design for this study. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) noted, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 6). Additionally, this study met the main characteristics of qualitative research design as defined by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) in that (a) it focuses on participants’ meaning and understanding; (b) it employs the researcher as a primary instrument; (c) it involves inductive reasoning and interpretation; and (d) it aims to provide a rich, thick, and comprehensive description.

Similarly, Maxwell (2013) stipulated that qualitative research is the most suitable design when researchers aim to explore the meanings that participants ascribe to events, situations, actions, and experiences in which they are engaged. In a qualitative research setting, participants

are an inseparable part of the reality the researcher is trying to understand. As a result, qualitative researchers typically study a small and selected number of individuals in order to preserve their individuality in data collection, analysis, and reporting. This approach does not mean that qualitative researchers are not interested in outcomes. It simply implies that the main focus of a qualitative investigation is directed toward uncovering and understanding the processes that lead to certain outcomes.

Another advantage of using the qualitative research design in this study was reflected in its potential to uncover the meanings people ascribe to the events and processes they experience daily as well as to reveal the connections between those meanings and the social world around them (Miles et al., 2014). Such an advantage can primarily be achieved by collecting the data in naturally occurring and ordinary settings which can truly depict and portray participants' lives. The researcher in this study sought to uncover and portray participants' lives in a natural academic setting and their daily experiences in the process of transitioning to such a setting; thus, qualitative research was the most appropriate design for attaining this goal.

The design of this study was also strongly influenced by its theoretical framework. The framework provided the boundaries for the study, helped the researcher limit the scope of the study, and served as the guiding focus for making decisions about the study design (Roberts, 2010). Consequently, applying Schlosberg's 4S (situation, self, support, Strategies) model to the context of this study allowed the researcher to achieve the complex goal of portraying participants' experiences in the process of academic transition by (a) accounting for the unique situation that each student encounters, (b) acknowledging the self or students' individual characteristics and psychological resources, (c) examining the effectiveness of the FYS course in

supporting the students' academic transition, and (d) examining the strategies from the FYS course that may serve as assets in students' academic transition.

### Research Method

The specific research method guiding this study was descriptive phenomenology. As presented in the next section, there were several contributors to choosing phenomenological research method over other qualitative traditions. Designing this study as a phenomenological inquiry allowed the researcher to investigate the main and underlying research questions by exploring and describing participants' experiences in relation to the central phenomenon.

### Phenomenology

Qualitative research designs have been classified and categorized in various ways, with some scholars identifying as many as 16 different traditions (Patton, 2012). Unlike many other qualitative traditions which emerged as innovative approaches to conducting qualitative research, phenomenology is described as both a 20th-century school of philosophy associated with Husserl (1970) and a qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The philosophy of phenomenology influenced the purpose of the phenomenological research design by directing its main focus toward the exploration of one's experience and the process of transforming that experience into consciousness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The central purpose of phenomenology as a qualitative research design is to explore participants' experiences and the shared commonalities as they experience a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The main assumption in such an exploration is the existence of an essence to a shared experience (Patton, 2015). Thus, the purpose of this study was to portray the essence of

international students' experiences with a phenomenon of academic transition to a U.S. institution of higher education.

Next, phenomenology is primarily a method of questioning, not a method of answering and drawing factual conclusions (Van Manen, 2014). As such, phenomenology is not a diagnostic or prognostic tool for establishing the causes and effects of a phenomenon. Instead, phenomenological research provides meaning structures for understanding the phenomenon. As a result, in this study, the researcher did not aim to predict if international students would be more likely to have positive or negative academic experiences during their first year, or the ways in which FYS courses might influence these experiences. Rather, the researcher investigated the meanings that international undergraduate students ascribe to the construct of their academic transition and the ways in which these meanings correlate with students' experiences.

Third, participants' experiences with a phenomenon are considered the starting and ending points of every phenomenological research study (Vagal, 2016). Even though other research designs may use the word phenomenon in reference to the focus of an investigation, this construct becomes the sole and ultimate purpose of a phenomenological investigation. Heidegger (2010) defined phenomenon as a manifestation of one's experience through everyday life and actions in the world. As such, a phenomenon cannot be constructed or described apart from the world, settings, or events in which it manifests itself. Rather, a phenomenon can only truly present itself in relation to the world and one's everyday life.

Consequently, every phenomenological analysis is guided by a proper phenomenological question which remains central to all phases of the inquiry. Van Manen (2014) defined the phenomenological question as "a question that comprises an element of wonder: discovering the

extraordinary in the ordinary, the strange in the taken for granted” (p. 298). Such a question seeks to reveal the essence of an immediate experience and the ways in which that experience appears to participants. Vagal (2016) identified a phenomenological question as the only aspect of phenomenological research that can be planned in advance and described it as an overarching question that guides one’s sensitivity for and consideration of the phenomenon and its context. The centrality of a phenomenological question in this study was reflected in its intention to capture international students’ experiences as lived through without inquiring into students’ beliefs, opinions, or interpretations of these experiences.

### Descriptive Phenomenology

Moustakas (1994) believed that, at its very core, any phenomenological inquiry implies revisiting one’s experience in order to obtain its comprehensive description. This description, he argued, serves as the basis for phenomenological analysis that depicts the essence of the experience. Portraying the essence of the experience with a phenomenon implies understanding the experiences that participants undergo, pre-reflectively, before engaging in any interpretations (Husserl, 1970). Accordingly, in this study, the researcher described the experiences of international student academic transition by exploring their immediate and pre-reflective consciousness of these experiences. Heidegger (2010), in stipulating what exactly could be interpreted as an intentional and pre-reflective experience, noted that phenomenological description can be constructed only from the content described as experienced by the participants.

Husserl (1970) grounded descriptive phenomenology in the concept of intentionality or one’s intentional awareness of the construct being explored. Simply stated, intentionality means

going to the phenomenon itself by describing what is immediately and directly presented to one's consciousness. Consequently, a descriptive phenomenology, according to Husserl, involves describing one's conscious experiences while putting aside any preconceived beliefs and judgments.

The necessity of carefully exploring one's own experiences before engaging in phenomenological inquiry has received scholarly attention since the inception of this research design. As the phenomenological evidence is obtained from first-person reports of life experience, Husserl (1970) emphasized that increased scholarly considerations need to be directed toward refraining from any empirical interpretations of the experiences, portraying only what is inwardly experienced by the participants. Husserl called this absence of suppositions, assumptions, and biases "epoche" due to its origin from a Greek word meaning to refrain from or to abstain.

By practicing epoche, Moustakas (1994) explained, individuals invalidate and negate their previous knowledge of and experience with the phenomenon. In the epoche, no position is taken a priori and every possible interpretation of the phenomenon has an equal value. As such, epoche serves as the foundation for deriving new knowledge by allowing the participants to describe their experience with a phenomenon using a fresh, clear, and objective vision. Thus, epoche ultimately allows for an objective vantage point and seeing the experience as it presents itself to the participants.

However, Moustakas also argued that epoche is rarely perfectly achieved, and the extent to which individuals can suspend their biases varies greatly. As such, epoche requires sustained attention, concentration, and focus. By constantly engaging in self-reflection and self-dialogue,

epoche can be practiced and improved, thus allowing one to remain open to the true manifestation of the phenomenon to the consciousness. By practicing epoche and maintaining a detailed research journal, the researcher in this study remained consciously aware of her preconceptions, was transparent to herself, approached her research participants with a clear mind, and regarded each of the participants' responses as having equal value for her study.

In addition to practicing intentionality and epoche, Husserl (1970) suggested applying the concept of phenomenological reduction or reducing one's world to a world of a pure phenomenon. Similar to intentionality, reduction or bracketing can be practiced and ultimately achieved. This can be accomplished by allowing the mind and senses to perceive the phenomenon from within, in its basic and original form and in its immediate representation to one's consciousness. Achieving the phenomenological reduction, Husserl claimed, would allow individuals to successfully portray the phenomenological essence. Similarly, Miles et al. (2014) further described bracketing as the researchers' attempt to portray the data from participants' perception by engaging in increased attentiveness, empathetic understanding, and suspension of existing assumptions about the phenomenon.

It is important to note, according to Giorgi (1997) that phenomenological reduction or bracketing does not imply removing one's prior knowledge of the phenomenon or its essence. Instead, it only implies rendering this knowledge non-influential and seeing it as independent from the current investigation of the phenomenon. This practice of reduction or bracketing in descriptive phenomenology begins the moment one starts considering the phenomenon to be studied and remains a non-negotiable commitment throughout the entire research process (Vagal, 2016).

As illustrated, the seemingly simple task of engaging in descriptive phenomenological research requires sustained attention, focus, and consciousness. By practicing intentionality, epoche, and phenomenological reduction, the researcher in this study sought to describe international students' experiences of their participation in the FYS course and overall academic transition. Students' reflective thoughts manifested through judging, interpreting, and assessing these experiences were excluded from this phenomenological inquiry. Additionally, phenomenological reduction allowed the researcher to observe and describe the phenomenon objectively by bracketing all preconceived ideas and beliefs and by describing how the explored academic experiences presented themselves to the participants of this study.

### Setting

This study was conducted at a large, public university in the southeastern United States, with total enrollment greater than 50,000. The institution was classified as a Research 1 (R1) doctoral university with the highest research activity and offered bachelor's, master's, doctoral, and specialist degree programs. The university served a diverse population of learners. During the 2017-2018 academic year, 49.2% of all enrolled students were White, 24.9% were Hispanic/Latino, 11.1% were Black, 6.2% were Asian, and 3.7% were international students.

International undergraduate students have enrolled in the institution through a Global Institute Program, (i.e., Institute) designed to support their transition to a new educational and cultural setting. The name of the program has been pseudonymized to protect its identity. The Institute's purpose has been to ensure the integration of international students into American cultural and university settings by providing the support that these students need to succeed in an academically challenging environment. The Institute has been structured as a two-semester



program consisting of courses designed exclusively for international students, general education courses, and major courses. The majority of the courses have been designated as “closed” (include international students only) and few courses have been offered as “open” (include domestic students). Accepted applicants start the program in spring, summer, or fall semesters. While enrolled in the Institute, the students have been required to live on-campus. Upon successfully completing the first two semesters in the Institute, international students start the sophomore year of their undergraduate education with general FTIC student population.

International students have constituted a fairly small percentage of students enrolled in the FYS course offered at the institution. As an illustration, in the academic year 2017-2018, international students comprised less than 10% of all course participants. The majority of class sections were opened for general FTIC students (60%) and students in summer bridge programs (23%). Out-of-state students, teacher pre-professionals, and student-athletes constituted the remaining portion of the course enrollments.

### Participants

In terms of selecting the study participants, an important distinction needs to be made. The objective of qualitative studies is not to generalize findings to the overall population, but to elucidate the particular and the specific. As all qualitative investigators aim to discover, understand, and make sense of the research problem to be investigated, they must select a sample from which such insights can be gained (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Consequently, a general guideline in selecting participants for qualitative research is not to study as many individuals or settings as possible but to collect extensive data and rich findings about the selected individuals or settings. Van Manen (2014) further supported this argument by stating that in qualitative

research, the word, sample, should be perceived as synonymous with example. Therefore, the participant selection in a qualitative study should aim to provide examples of rich descriptions of selected cases.

As Miles et al. (2014) recommended, the first step in selecting the participants for a qualitative research study is setting boundaries or defining the aspects of the target case. The case of this study was defined using criterion-based selection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The specific criteria used in this study were derived from its purpose and guiding research questions. Only the participants who met these pre-defined criteria were recruited for the study.

The sample of this study was drawn from the general population of first-year international students who were selected and recruited through the Office of International Student Services. As the data collection took place during the spring 2019 term, the sample of this study included only those international students who successfully completed the FYS course up to one academic year prior to data collection--during either spring, summer, or fall, 2018. Students who were still enrolled in the FYS course when the data collection began or the students who had completed the seminar more than one academic year prior to data collection were not included in the study. This criterion was applied for two reasons: (a) the students who successfully completed a FYS course were more likely to provide rich and comprehensive descriptions of their experiences in the seminar, and (b) students' memories, recollections, and impressions needed to be relatively recent and fresh at the time of data collection so that they could accurately portray these experiences.

Regarding a number of participants needed for a qualitative study, Van Manen (2014) suggested that the general aim of qualitative research is to gather enough experientially rich

accounts that will allow one to construct powerful examples of a participant's life as it was lived. Patton (2012) suggested selecting information-rich cases or the individuals who are accessible and willing to share their narratives, whose experiences are distinctive, and who can provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon being explored. Consequently, in qualitative and phenomenological studies, the researcher is more focused on whom to sample, than on how many cases to sample, as all selected participants need to have narratives to share about their experiences.

The researcher in the present study applied a frequently adopted recommendation for participant selection in phenomenological research and aimed to recruit up to 10 participants (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000; Colaizzi, 1978; Dukes, 1984). Additionally, the researcher followed a general guideline of qualitative research according to which participants were interviewed until reaching a point of saturation or redundancy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Saturation or redundancy was determined once the researcher started hearing the same responses, reading the same documents, or observing the same behaviors. In qualitative and phenomenological research, it is impossible to know in advance when saturation or redundancy might occur; thus, in this study, such a conclusion was reached only after adequate engagement in the data collection process.

Lastly, several steps provided by Creswell (2014) were followed to ensure the data for this study were collected in an ethical manner. First, no participants were contacted before obtaining an approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The copy of IRB approval letter is provided in Appendix A. Next, the researcher explained to all participants the purpose of the study, the level and type of their involvement, the potential risks and benefits, and the

guarantees for protecting their confidentiality. The researcher also provided all participants with an IRB research explanation to inform them that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time (Appendix B). Additionally, the researcher avoided collecting any information not needed for the purpose of this study. Lastly, the researcher built a relationship of honesty and trust with the participants by respecting not their privacy and their attitudes toward the data collection, analysis, and reporting. The specific strategies for achieving these goals are discussed in detail in the following section of this chapter.

### Data Gathering Procedures

The purpose of data gathering in qualitative research is to “borrow” other people’s experiences so that one can become more experienced (Van Manen, 2014, p. 313). In phenomenological research, participants’ experiences are typically borrowed through the use of interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Regarding the use of interviews in qualitative research, a number of scholars specifically used the term phenomenological interview, thus differentiating between interviews used in a phenomenological study and in other qualitative traditions (Creswell, 2013; Dukes, 1984; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 2014). The data for this study were gathered by conducting phenomenological interviews with the selected number of international undergraduate students.

### Phenomenological Interview

Moustakas (1994) defined a phenomenological interview as an intentional, conversational, and interactive interview consisting of open-ended questions designed to elicit participants’ experiences. Similarly, Siedman (2012) described it as the interview approach

adaptable to a wide range of topics and composed of unstructured and open-ended questions designed to explore and build upon participants' responses to those questions. Dukes (1984) suggested using broad questions that may lead to rich and substantiated descriptions of the experience of the phenomenon. The ultimate aim of such an approach, according to Dukes (1984) is to conduct extensive, open-ended interviews with participants over a period of time, for the purpose of capturing all or most phases of their experience.

Van Manen (2014) emphasized the unique nature of the phenomenological interview by discussing its distinctive purpose, design, and implementation. Namely, he believed that the phenomenological interview “serves the very specific purpose of exploring and gathering experiential narrative material, stories, or anecdotes that may serve as a resource for phenomenological reflection and thus develop a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” (p. 313). This goal, Van Manen argued, is much more difficult to achieve than it initially seems, as the phenomenological interview seeks to reveal only pre-reflective experiential narratives, reduced of any personal opinions, views, and interpretations.

In order to overcome this challenge, Van Manen (2014) proposed several interview strategies that could assist the researcher and participants in revealing lived-through experiences. First, when designing a phenomenological interview, it is important to keep the main research question in mind. This centrality of the phenomenological question is critical for maintaining the focus on the experience that one wishes to investigate. Second, when conducting a phenomenological interview, the main purpose of the conversation should be to gain experientially rich and detailed accounts by portraying the participants' experience as closely as possible (Van Manen, 2014).

Another strategy proposed by Siedman (2012) was to follow a three-stage, cyclical process with each phenomenological interview. The first step in this process is to explore participants' experiences in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them. Without context, Siedman believed, one cannot uncover the true meaning or essence of one's experience. After understanding the context of participants' experiences by asking them to briefly reconstruct their life history prior to the phenomenon, the next step is to elicit specific details of their experiences with the phenomenon. In doing so, researchers should not ask for opinions or interpretations, Rather, they should aim for rich and in-depth descriptions of experience which can be used for extrapolating opinions and interpretations. Finally, the last step involves asking participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience. Participants should be prompted to look closer at the experience with the phenomenon and the interrelationship of such experience in the context in which it occurs (Siedman, 2012).

What remains critical for successful implementation of all these strategies, as well as the phenomenological interview process itself, is the intentional semi-structured format and the use of open-ended questions (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Siedman 2012; Van Manen, 2014). Only the interview that has a flexible structure and only the questions that allow for additional prompt and elicitation can lead to a thorough examination of a complex research problem and the portrayal of participants' experiences with that problem (Siedman, 2012).

### Semi-structured Interview

The first step in selecting the interview format for a qualitative study is deciding on the interview structure, and this can range from highly structured to unstructured. Merriam and

Tisdell (2015) argued that for the most part, data in qualitative research are gathered through semi-structured interviews.

The main characteristic of a semi-structured interview is the formulation of questions as open-ended. Similar to the other two formats, structured and unstructured, semi-structured interviews are also developed for the purpose of obtaining specific information from the participants. What makes this format unique is the fact that the interview is guided by the list of questions to be explored, but the exact wording of these questions and their order are not determined in advance. Such a structure allows the researcher to adjust to the context of each interview, to the insights of participants, and to any emerging ideas or perceptions regarding the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Open-ended questions are a central prerequisite for successfully designing a semi-structured interview as they create an opportunity for exploring the central phenomenon from any direction the participants choose (Siedman, 2012). Moreover, open-ended questions are especially beneficial for conducting in-depth interviews aiming to portray the thick description of participants' experiences. The wide applicability of open-ended questions in phenomenological interviewing was further documented by Rubin and Rubin (2012) who concluded that open-ended questions assume less, and by doing so, encourage participants to describe their experiences exactly as lived. As a result, these types of questions have a particular potency for allowing participants to ascribe meanings to their experiences with the phenomenon. Such questions encourage them to navigate the topics, themes, and issues that are important to them.

In order to maintain the focus of data collection on the central phenomenon, the open-ended questions in the present study were developed with the purpose of eliciting participants'

perceptions about the research questions developed for this study. To accomplish this goal, Patton (2015) recommended using probing questions that would encourage additional responses needed for the rich and thick description of the phenomenon. In this study, the researcher used probing questions in either the situations when participants needed additional clarification or when the researcher sought additional responses. Such prompts occurred in the form of asking participants for more details, explanations, or examples about something they previously shared. According to Patton (2015), probing questions represent a true advantage of being the key instrument of qualitative data collection by allowing for a unique opportunity to evoke additional responses and participants' narratives.

### Interview Guide

In outlining the steps for designing a qualitative interview, several scholars emphasized the importance of developing an interview guide before engaging in the data collection process (Moustakas, 1994; Siedman, 2012; Vagal, 2016). Even though an interview guide influences the path a researcher takes when gathering data, researchers also have the latitude to modify their guides in ways that would make the questions more relevant for different participants encountered in the field (Miles et al., 2014).

Moustakas (1994) suggested developing a general interview guide by introducing broad questions that can allow participants to maximize the richness and scope of their experiential accounts. The interview guide used in this study is presented in Table 3. Even though the researcher developed a series of guiding questions in advance, the open-ended format of these questions offered an opportunity for evoking a comprehensive account of participants' experience by taking any direction they chose. In order for this goal to be accomplished,



however, the researcher needed to remain open toward modifying her questions, either by abandoning some of them or adding additional ones. Probing questions were of particular use in this regard, as they helped the researcher evoke additional responses from the participants or stimulate the conversation further (Patton, 2015).

The final interview guide, presented in Table 3, was designed based on the feedback obtained in the feasibility study. The first column includes the data that the researcher sought to elicit with each interview question. The second column lists the open-ended questions used in this phenomenological interview, and the third column provides follow-up questions and prompts used to encourage participants' additional responses.

Table 3

*First-year Seminar (FYS) Interview Guide: Data Questions, and Prompts*

Target Data	Interview Questions	Prompts
Participant profile: demographic and other background information	Background questions (BQ) BQ1: Country of origin and/or prior places of residence BQ2: Age BQ3: Degree program and academic level BQ3: Previous visits to the United States BQ4: Family relatives in the United States BQ5: Reasons for pursuing higher education in the United States BQ6: Reasons for choosing this institution and/or academic program	
Educational background and experience	IQ1: Would you please describe your academic experience prior to coming to the university in the U.S.?	Academic achievement Local/international school Familiarity with U.S. education
Overall first-year experience	IQ2: Would you please describe your first-year at the university in the U.S.?	Positive experiences Negative experiences
Transition to U.S. higher education	IQ3: Was it hard for you to adjust to American education and campus? Would you please explain?	Transitional challenges Transitional successes
Academic experiences	IQ4: What was your academic experience like during your first year of college in the U.S.?	Positive experiences Negative experiences Involvement/isolation
Academic challenges	IQ5: Did you encounter any academic challenges during this time? Would you please explain?	U.S. educational system Academic advising Interactions with peers Interactions with professors
Coping mechanisms for academic challenges	IQ5a: What were some ways that you coped with these challenges?	Family support Peer support Faculty/staff support Campus resources
First-year seminar experience	IQ6: Could you please tell me about your experience in the FYS class?	Positive experiences Negative experiences
FYS overall impact	IQ7: Did the FYS class impact your first-year of college in any way? Would you please explain?	Academic performance Campus involvement Transition to college

Target Data	Interview Questions	Prompts
FYS academic impact	IQ8: Did the FYS class have effect on your performance in other classes? Would you please explain?	Student success strategies Academic integration
FYS academic impact	IQ8a: Are there any strategies from the FYS class that you applied to your other classes? Would you please explain?	Student success strategies
Recommendations	IQ8b: Are there any strategies from the FYS class that you did not apply to your other classes? Would you please explain?	Content to be revised or added
Recommendations	IQ9: Is there any improvement that is needed to the FYS class? Would you please explain?	Content to be revised or removed

Another rationale for using an interview guide was to ensure that the researcher maximized the use of limited interview time. According to Siedman (2012), the interview guide assists the researcher in prioritizing interview questions that need to be answered for the purpose of examining the main research questions. Therefore, an interview guide is a wise choice in assisting to identify the areas of interest and elicit the responses in those areas. As Siedman (2012) concluded, this added flexibility of semi-structured and open-ended interviews also poses the necessity for using the interview guide carefully and with increased caution so that the responses needed for investigating the research question(s) are obtained without eliciting any unnecessary information from the participants.

### Feasibility Study

Once developed, every interview guide needs to be refined through field testing (Vagal, 2016). By conducting a small-scale feasibility study and remaining open to the adjustments of their interview guides, researchers can achieve several valuable goals. They can test various

data-collection (i.e., interview) techniques and approaches, practice the interview process, more precisely define the existing questions or add additional ones, and determine how much data to collect and in what context (Vagal, 2016).

Before developing the interview guide for this study, the researcher field tested the interview questions by conducting a feasibility study in spring 2018. After interviewing 10 international undergraduate students for the purpose of examining their academic and social experiences in the FYS course, the researcher revised the initially developed interview guide to better serve the purpose of this study.

Field testing the interview guide was beneficial for several reasons. First, it helped the researcher limit the case of the study and develop the criteria for participant selection. The researcher learned that the interviews with international students still enrolled in the FYS course and the students who completed the course two or more years prior to the feasibility study did not lead to “experiential narrative material, stories, or anecdotes... and a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 313). These impressions ultimately guided the researcher to set boundaries for the case and to revise the criteria for participant inclusion by limiting the sample to international undergraduate students who had completed the FYS course up to one year prior to the data collection.

Next, by conducting the feasibility study, the researcher concluded that examining both academic and social experiences in their relation to the enrollment in the FYS course could not be accomplished in one study if one was aiming for rich, detailed, and comprehensive narratives of participants’ experiences. Consequently, the researcher examined only the academic

experiences of international undergraduate students and the ways these experiences were (or were not) shaped by participation in the FYS course.

Additionally, field testing the interviews helped the researcher to identify a few ambiguities in the research guide and to clarify them by revising the associated questions. The researcher also recognized unnecessary questions which did not lead to the responses useful for examining the central phenomenon. As a result, the researcher developed a few additional questions aimed to elicit responses to more adequately examine the central research question. In addition, the researcher revised some of the questions to be better aligned with the operational concepts adapted from the theoretical framework and the course syllabus. Lastly, the researcher gained invaluable practical experience by further refining her interviewing techniques.

It is also important to note that, as a part of the phenomenological bracketing process, the researcher remained increasingly aware of any possible ways in which the feasibility study might have affected her current research. Using a reflective journal, the researcher bracketed her experiences with the previous study and approached the current data collection and data analysis with a fresh vision. Minimizing the influence of her prior study, the researcher was able to approach each piece of the collected data as equally important for constructing a comprehensive description of the central phenomenon.

Table 4 illustrates the alignment of research questions, theoretical framework, and data collection items. More specifically, this table demonstrates the relationship between each of the 4 S influencing factors adapted from Schlossberg's (1894) transition model with research questions and data collection items designed for this study. Additionally, the theoretical framework informed the data analysis process and served as a central tool for mapping and

examining the interview transcripts and extracting significant statements, themes, and theme clusters. This process is thoroughly described in the data analysis section of this chapter.

Table 4

*The Alignment of Research Questions, Theoretical Framework, and Data Collection Items*

Research Questions	Theoretical Framework	Framework Attributes	Data Collection Items
Research Question 1 What academic challenges, if any, do international undergraduate students experience during their first year of college?	SELF	Personal and demographic characteristics Psychological resources	IQ1: Would you please describe your academic experience prior to coming to the university in the U.S.?
	SITUATION	Past experiences	
	SITUATION	Assessment Role change Stress	IQ2: Would you please describe your first-year at the university in the U.S.?
	SITUATION	Assessment Control Stress	IQ3: Was it hard for you to adjust to American education and campus? Would you please explain?
	SELF	Psychological resources Personal and demographic characteristics	
	SUPPORT	Type Function	
	SITUATION	Assessment Role change Past experiences	IQ4: What was your academic experience like during your first year of college in the U.S.?
	SITUATION	Role change Stress	IQ5: Did you encounter any academic challenges during this time? Would you please explain?
	SELF	Psychological resources	
	SUPPORT	Type Function	
STRATEGIES	Coping responses	IQ5a: What were some ways that you coped with these challenges?	
SELF	Psychological resources		

Research Questions	Theoretical Framework	Framework Attributes	Data Collection Items
Research Question 2: What impacts, if any, does the enrollment in the FYS course have on academic experiences of international undergraduate students during their first year of college?	SUPPORT	Institutional type	IQ6: Could you please tell me about your experience in the FYS class?
	SUPPORT	Institutional type Aid function Measurement	IQ7: Did the FYS class impact your first-year of college in any way? Would you please explain?
	STRATEGIES SITUATION	Manage transition Assessment	
	SUPPORT	Institutional type Aid function	IQ8: Did the FYS class have effect on your performance in other classes? Would you please explain?
	STRATEGIES	Manage transition	
	SUPPORT	Aid function Feedback function Manage transition	IQ8a: Are there any strategies from the FYS class that you applied to your other classes? Would you please explain?
	STRATEGIES	Control situation Modify situation Measurement	IQ8b: Are there any strategies from the FYS class that you did not apply to your other classes? Would you please explain?
	STRATEGIES	Control situation Modify situation Manage transition	IQ9: Is there any improvement that is needed to the FYS class? Would you please explain?

### Implementation Procedures

Upon obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher contacted the Academic Director of the Institute and obtained email addresses of all international students who completed the course within the specified timeframe. The Academic Director also provided the researcher with the descriptive demographic data of all international undergraduate students enrolled in the Institute program during the 2017-2018 academic year, the population from which the sample for this study was drawn. These data are presented and explained in



Chapter 4. An email invitation (Appendix C), which included a detailed explanation of research and the consent form, was distributed to all students from this population.

The first email invitation resulted in five participants volunteering to take part in the research. All five students were included in the study. The second email invitation was sent one week later. This invitation, however, was not sent to all students who did not respond to the first email. Instead, the researcher conducted a second level of sampling. In order to maximize the diversity of the sample and the heterogeneity of participants' experiences, the researcher carefully examined the demographic information of students' who had volunteered to participate. Then, the researcher attempted to increase the heterogeneity of her sample by sending the second invitation only to students from countries and academic majors that were not yet represented in the sample. After selecting five more participants from the students who responded to the second invitation, the researcher attained a highly diverse sample represented by students from ten countries and ten academic majors. Lastly, due to the slight differences in the duration and structure of the FYS course in the three semesters, the researcher included at least one representative from fall, summer, and spring course cohorts.

### Interview Implementation

Once the interview participants were selected, the researcher sent a request to schedule an individual interview meeting to each student. In considering the time and place for the interviews, the researcher applied Siedman's (2012) recommendation for achieving equity by being flexible so as to accommodate participants' preferences while maintaining the desired interview outcomes. The interviews for this study were scheduled at the time most convenient to participants and took place in the researcher's office where participants' privacy was ensured and

conversations were not interrupted. The researcher used the time between the meetings with participants to reflect on the previously conducted interview and consider if additional strategies needed to be developed for the subsequent interviews. Individual interviews lasted from 21 minutes to 1 hour and 22 minutes.

While conducting interviews, the researcher implemented Rubin and Rubin's (2012) recommendations for establishing "conversational partnerships" (p. 29) with participants. First, by practicing reciprocity and self-revelation, the researcher showed her concern with the emotional impact of the interview on participants and attempted to make them feel more comfortable by sharing her own feelings about the experience in question. Additionally, the researcher sought to encourage participation by acknowledging the importance of participants' experiences, as well as their ability to help solve the research problem and make a positive change for others who were experiencing the same phenomenon.

All interviews were audio recorded and participants were informed of this fact in advance. Also, in the member checking process, participants were allowed to review the written transcripts of their interviews. All audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher immediately after the interview. According to Siedman (2012), by transcribing their own audio materials, interviewers become more familiar with the content of their interviews.

### Data Management

Several steps were followed to protect the collected data and to ensure participants' confidentiality. First, to protect students' identities, all names of participants and other persons mentioned in the interviews, as well as the names of students' previous educational institutions, were pseudonymized in the transcripts. The researcher offered participants the opportunity to

select their own pseudonyms. For those who chose not to do so, the researcher carefully considered participants' nationality, ethnicity, race, and other identities and assigned a pseudonym that would not make them vulnerable by disclosing any unnecessary details of their personal lives.

As per the university IRB requirements, all audio recordings were deleted immediately after transcription in order to minimize the possibility of breaching participants' confidentiality. De-identifiable transcripts were safely secured in the researcher's password-protected computer and will remain there for a period of five years. Hard copies of de-identified transcripts were also secured in a locked cabinet and will remain for the same period of time. During this timeframe, the data may potentially be used as the basis for one or more peer-reviewed research publication and conference publications. No complete transcripts will be published in order to protect participants' privacy and identity.

### Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is perceived as a highly inductive process which involves not only consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what participants said or did, but also what researchers observed, inferred, and deduced. This intricate process of making meaning requires a researcher to engage in an intentional and constant shift between induction and deduction, description and interpretation, sensing and reasoning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thus, the data collected in this study required the researcher to not only portray what participants said, but also what she, as the instrument, observed and perceived. For that reason, a research journal was kept for the entire duration of the study. All these meanings and inferences, when combined, ultimately constituted the findings in this study.

## Research Journals

While conducting this study, the researcher initiated and completed two journals, a reflective journal and an operational journal. The purpose of the reflective research journal was to increase awareness of the researcher's role in the data analysis process by bracketing her own experiences with the phenomenon. According to Janesick (2016), understanding the self and positionality of qualitative researchers is essential for recognizing their investment in the research process as well as the effects of their role.

As all qualitative researchers tacitly agree to become a part of their research settings, the full immersion in the research field requires them to use all their senses, as well as their intuition. However, Janesick (2016) argued that only good qualitative researchers truly embrace this subjectivity by becoming increasingly aware of their own self and their impact on the research setting. Only by bracketing this subjectivity and disclosing it openly in a reflective journal can the researcher minimize the influence of their personal biases and allow for an unclouded portrayal of true participants' experiences.

Along with the reflective journal, the researcher maintained an operational journal for the purpose of recording detailed notes of all the steps in data collection and data analysis. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) described, every qualitative researcher needs to keep a detailed audit trail illustrating how the data were collected, how the categories and themes were derived, and how the important decisions were made throughout the investigation. A detailed, comprehensive, and exhaustive journal includes a trail of analytic memos that record each step of conducting the research as it is being undertaken.

In this study, the researcher applied the suggestion of Miles et al. (2014) for keeping a detailed operation journal. First, the researcher took rough notes of her observations during the data collection process. These raw notes included the accounts of the physical context and the participants, as well as their behavior and nonverbal communication. Next, as she prepared for the data analysis, the researcher took methodological notes, logging in all the procedural steps as well as decisions and rules applied in the data analysis process. Lastly, once the analysis was complete, the researcher produced a detailed account of the approach that led to the formation of study findings.

### Analysis

In this study, the data analysis process was guided by its research questions and theoretical framework. In qualitative data analysis, the theoretical framework serves as the guiding map for the territory to be explored. This leads researchers to be selective in deciding which constructs to identify as worthy of their attention and which relationships to designate as most relevant for describing the phenomenon (Miles et al., 2014). In this study, the theoretical framework informed the data analysis process and served as a tool for identifying the main themes and theme clusters to be extracted from the data, as well as for uncovering the underlying interrelationships among them.

When analyzing the data, the researcher in this study mapped and examined the interview transcripts using Schlossberg's (1984) 4 S model. Even though the researcher actively searched for the patterns of the theoretical framework to emerge from participants' responses, she also remained open to identifying new patterns that deviated from the framework, or even disconfirmed it. In doing so, the researcher produced a matrix display of the themes developed

from the data aligned with the underlying research questions and confirming or disconfirming evidence from the theoretical framework.

In analyzing the interview data and making meaning of participants' descriptions of their experiences, the researcher applied Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step data analysis. The application of a structured framework in the data analysis was intended to help the researcher demonstrate and justify the interpretation of the data and the integration of the theoretical framework in the study findings. Specifically, the framework followed the following seven steps identified by Colaizzi (1978):

1. Acquiring a sense of each transcript
2. Extracting significant statements
3. Formulating meanings
4. Organizing formulated meanings into clusters of themes
5. Exhaustively describing the investigated phenomenon
6. Describing the fundamental structure of the phenomenon
7. Returning to the participants

Step 1: Acquiring a sense of each transcript. As already described in the previous section of this chapter, the researcher first transcribed all interviews verbatim to become more familiar with their content. This first step also included prolonged engagement with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts or listening to the recordings for the purpose of acquiring a sense of each transcript. During this step, the researcher also spent ample time engaging in self-reflection and practicing bracketing or phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994).

Step 2: Extracting significant statements. After reading each transcript and listening to the audio recordings several times, the researcher identified the responses which described participants' experiences with the phenomenon and their views of these experiences. As the researcher used both electronic and hard copies of interview transcripts, the statements deemed as information-rich, illustrative, and significant were first highlighted on hard copies of the documents. Next, each of the highlighted sentences was copied from an electronic document and pasted into a separate word processing file and assigned the page and line number from the original transcript.

Step 3: Formulating meanings. This step involved grouping significant statements into larger units of meaning. Specifically, the researcher sought to assign meanings to each of the units or themes describing different aspects of students' academic experiences and enrollment in the FYS course. To facilitate this step of data analysis, the researcher developed a table of formulated meanings and the associated significant statements. During this step, the researcher increased her emphasis on bracketing any presuppositions about the participants' narratives and making them explicit.

Step 4: Organizing formulated meanings into clusters of themes. During this step, the identified unit of meanings (i.e., themes) were organized into theme clusters. This objective was achieved by carefully examining emerging themes common to all participants as they experienced the phenomenon and the ways in which these themes could be grouped. During this step, the researcher implemented an inter-rater reliability technique by asking another researcher to independently code the data and identify emerging themes (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, & Marteau, 1997). In addition to searching for the codes and themes developed from the research

questions and theoretical framework, both researchers remained open to allowing additional codes and themes to emerge from the data.

Step 5: Exhaustively describing the investigated phenomenon. After both coders agreed on the units of meaning and clustered the developed themes, the main researcher meticulously described the phenomenon. By incorporating all descriptions of students' academic experiences, she provided a rich, thick, and comprehensive description of the phenomenon. In addition to including all formulated meanings, themes, and theme clusters, the exhaustive description also comprised the meanings derived from the theoretical framework.

Step 6: Describing the fundamental structure of the phenomenon. In describing the essence or fundamental structure of the phenomenon, the researcher reduced the extensive description of the phenomenon by eliminating redundant statements, meanings, themes, and theme clusters. Doing so allowed the researcher to portray the essence of the phenomenon.

Step 7: Returning to the participants. Lastly, the researcher returned to the transcripts in order to validate the description and the foundational structure of the phenomenon. Even though Colaizzi (1978) suggested that the final step of data analysis should involve returning to the participants for a further interview, the researcher in this study modified this step by using member checking and allowing participants the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and provide feedback. After obtaining participants' feedback, the researcher carefully examined the revealed insights and incorporated them into the descriptions of the essence of the phenomenon.

### Trustworthiness

The constructs of trustworthiness and validity have inspired much debate in qualitative



research. As Maxwell (2013) explained, many qualitative scholars abandoned the term validity entirely because they saw it as more appropriate for quantitative research design. In contrast, others completely rejected the notion that there were any objective standards for determining validity in qualitative research. Consequently, a number of other constructs emerged as more appropriate for qualitative research, primarily trustworthiness, authenticity, and quality.

Regardless of the term used, the key purpose of the constructs remained the same-- minimizing validity threats or the ways that one may be wrong in understanding, interpreting, or reporting study findings (Maxwell, 2013). In other words, validity threats are perceived as any alternative explanations of one's data or any alternative ways of interpreting findings.

Creswell (2013, 2014) interpreted trustworthiness in qualitative research as the process of determining whether the presented findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, and the reader. He further acknowledged that every researcher has many different types of trustworthiness strategies from which to choose but recommended that only those strategies that the researcher can effectively implement should be used. Creswell (2013, 2014) identified eight primary trustworthiness strategies aimed to enhance the researcher's ability to assess the accuracy of their findings. These strategies include: triangulation, member checking, rich and thick description, researcher's bias, negative or discrepant information, prolonged engagement, external auditor, and peer debriefing. In order to minimize validity threats in this study, the researcher increased the trustworthiness of her findings by employing seven of the trustworthiness strategies recommended by Creswell (2013, 2014).

#### Researcher's Bias

Clarifying researcher bias at the very beginning of any qualitative research is essential for

providing the reader with the understanding of the researcher's stance toward the study, as well as any underlying assumptions that may guide the research (Creswell, 2013). As researcher's bias and reactivity were most often identified in the literature as the main threats to trustworthiness of qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2012), the researcher in this study remained constantly aware of the effects of her positionality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Miles et al., 2014). Bracketing her own assumptions about the phenomenon through reflective journaling allowed the researcher to minimize the influences that originated from her personal experience. Otherwise, these issues could have potentially interfered with an objective description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

By maintaining a reflective journal, the researcher addressed any emerging personal bias by making it explicit (Janesick, 2016). This strategy minimized the validity threat or the ways in which the researcher's bias may have weakened or invalidated the study findings. As a result, the practice of bracketing researcher's presuppositions through reflective journaling increased her ability to present the data in a trustworthy manner.

### Prolonged Engagement

Spending prolonged time in the field can help the researcher reach in-depth understanding of the central phenomenon, as increased experience with participants in their natural setting leads to increased accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). In this study, the prolonged engagement in data collection and exhaustive description were achieved by sampling the participants until the data and emerging findings became saturated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Instead of determining in advance the exact number of participants to be included in the study, the researcher engaged in an extensive data collection process and

interviewed as many participants as needed for reaching an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. Additionally, personal and close contact with the participants through extensive, one-on-one interviews, as well as the relationship of trust, further reduced the risk of validity threat by ensuring that the data were represented in a way that closely and accurately portrayed participants' lived-through experiences.

### Negative Cases

The researcher further increased the trustworthiness of the findings by being attentive to the emergence of any negative, extreme, or discrepant cases (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Miles et al., 2014). This strategy allowed for the inclusion of data that provided alternative descriptions or explanations of the phenomenon.

During the data analysis process, both coders remained open to recognizing the patterns of the theoretical framework and to any evidence that deviated from or disconfirmed the main constructs identified in the framework. By being open to the possibility that not all emerging evidence would fit the pattern of a pre-determined codes and themes, the researcher provided an objective investigation and representation of the studied phenomenon.

### Triangulation

Even though phenomenological interview was the primary data gathering instrument, the researcher triangulated interview responses with additional data resources (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2012). As previously described, the researcher engaged in extensive journaling and took field notes. These documents were compared to the interview

responses and served as a detailed trail of all the steps in the data collection and data analysis processes.

### Member Checking

Immediately after transcribing the interview responses, all transcripts were sent to participants for member checking. Even though member checking is most often described as an attempt to solicit participants' views of the credibility of findings and interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Miles et al., 2014), in this study it had a slightly different function. Given the complexity of the research problem investigated in this study and the fact that the participants in this research were first-year international students, it was not realistic to expect them to provide deep and meaningful insights on the credibility of researcher's interpretations of the phenomenon.

Instead, in this study, member checking included providing all participants with an opportunity to review their interview transcripts, examine their recorded responses, and provide feedback about the accuracy of these accounts. Reviewing transcripts of their interviews allowed the participants to add any additional insights which might have been omitted during the interview process and, more importantly, to remove any parts of their narratives that they no longer were comfortable sharing.

### Inter-rater Reliability

The final trustworthiness strategy in this study was inter-rater reliability or having another researcher independently code the data and identify emerging themes (Armstrong et al., 1997). Although Creswell (2013, 2014) used the term, external audit, to describe this dimension,

the purpose of the strategy remained the same, allowing a third party to examine the process and product of data collection and analysis.

Applying inter-rater reliability to semi-structured interview data represents a particular challenge (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013). Unlike highly structured interview data characterized by short and direct responses (i.e., single codes), semi-structured interviews often result in open-ended and exhaustive responses (i.e., multiple codes). For this reason, the implementation of this trustworthiness strategy to semi-structured interview data must be performed by knowledgeable coders who have sufficient background knowledge to help them understand and interpret complex responses (Campbell et al., 2013).

The two researchers in this study conducted and produced a separate analysis of the data, after which they met to discuss any discrepancies. To comply with Campbell et al. (2013) and to further increase the effectiveness of this trustworthiness approach, the second researcher was experienced in conducting qualitative research and had a professional background in higher education. Additionally, the second researcher was also a FYS instructor and an American. Given the fact that the main researcher was an international student and, as such, subject to a researcher's bias, the unique positionality of the second researcher was highly beneficial for increasing the trustworthiness of the findings. After both researchers conducted their data analyses, formulated meanings, and developed themes, their conclusions were compared. Intercoder agreement was reached when both coders reconciled the coding discrepancies that emerged during the process (Campbell et al., 2013).

### Delimitations and Limitations

As presented in Chapter 1, this phenomenological investigation had clearly defined boundaries and a limited scope. Main delimitations of this study included the time (i.e., the academic year 2018), location (i.e., institution in the southeast United States), sample (i.e., international FYS course participants), and selected aspect of the problem (i.e., academic integration).

As common to all qualitative research, the applicability of the findings in this study is limited to only those settings, groups, individuals, or times represented in the collected data. Increased potential for researcher's bias presents another limitation common to qualitative research. This particular limitation required the researcher to employ additional trustworthiness strategies. A small sample of participants is also generally perceived as another limitation of both qualitative and phenomenological research. The extensive data collection process, prolonged engagement in the field, rich and thick data, and exhaustive descriptions were some of the strategies employed to address this limitation.

Even though this research was characterized by certain limitations, all of them have been explicitly recognized and addressed in this chapter. As noted, the implementation of this study incorporated a number of trustworthiness strategies to minimize the ways in which these limitations can affect the validity of the study and the applicability of its findings.

### Timeline

This research was conducted beginning in January 2019, immediately after obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. The study was completed in May 2019. The detailed

list of tasks performed in each research stage and the timeline for these tasks are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

*Study Timeline*

Timeline	Research Stages
Nov 2018	Dissertation proposal defense
Dec 2018	IRB application IRB approval
Jan 2019	Participant recruitment (email invitations) Data collection (interviews) Interview transcriptions
Feb-Mar 2019	Data analysis
Apr 2019	Dissertation chair review Necessary edits and revisions
May 2019	Committee reviews Necessary edits and revisions Dissertation defense

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has provided a comprehensive overview of the study design, research methodology, and proposed implementation. The opening sections presented the rationale for selecting phenomenology as the most appropriate method for examining the research problem and the justification for using phenomenological interview as the main instrument of data collection. The study setting was described in detail to include the population and participant selection, the sampling procedure, and underlying ethical considerations.

Substantial attention in this chapter was dedicated to discussing the data analysis procedure and the unique role of the researcher in this process. Even though the limitations of the



study were presented and discussed in Chapter 2, they were restated and reconsidered in this chapter, as most of them stem from the selected research design. The final section of the chapter was dedicated to discussing trustworthiness strategies used to minimize the validity threat. The chapter concluded with the timeline for study completion.

## CHAPTER 4 PARTICIPANT PROFILES

### Introduction

This chapter contains the profiles of international undergraduate students who participated in this study. The portrayed descriptions were derived from participants' demographic data, their personal narratives, and the observations that the researcher made during the interviews. The chapter opens with the demographic description of the study population, students in the Institute program. The purpose of this description was to provide a context for the reader and to illustrate participants' academic setting. The purpose of individual student profiles was to portray the personal stories and backgrounds, so that the reader can better relate to and understand students' experiences as described in this study.

### Context

Participation in this study was open to all students (N = 197) in the Institute who completed the 3-credit hour FYS course during spring, summer, and fall 2018. To provide the reader with the context of participants' first-year academic setting, this section contains a comprehensive demographic description of the freshman students in the Institute.

Table 6 provides demographic data about the study population. As can be seen, the study population consisted of students from 34 nationalities, with Oman, Brazil, and Pakistan being the most represented. The students in the program declared 37 different majors, with highest enrollments recorded for computer science, hospitality management, and management programs. The majority of students started the program in fall (59%), followed by spring (30%), and summer enrollments (11%). Male to female student ratio was 61% to 39%.

Table 6

*Demographic Description: International Student Population*

Nationality	n	Major	n	Cohort	n	Gender	n
Oman	29	Computer Science	27	Spring 18	59	Male	121
Brazil	22	Hospitality Management	24	Summer 18	21	Female	76
Pakistan	19	Management	19	Fall 18	117		
China	18	Biomedical Sciences	14				
Russia	13	Mechanical Engineering	11				
Vietnam	12	Aerospace Engineering	9				
Nigeria	9	Finance	9				
Venezuela	9	Psychology	8				
India	8	Economics	7				
Kazakhstan	8	Digital Media	6				
Ukraine	7	Electrical Engineering	6				
Azerbaijan	5	Integrated Business	5				
Indonesia	4	Civil Engineering	4				
Myanmar	4	Event Management	4				
South Korea	4	Industrial Engineering	4				
Colombia	3	Information Technology	4				
Jordan	3	Marketing	4				
Mexico	2	Art	3				
Panama	2	Architecture	3				
UAE	2	Computer Engineering	3				
Bolivia	1	Film	3				
Chile	1	Theatre	3				
Costa Rica	1	Criminal Justice	2				
Ecuador	1	Forensic Science	2				
Egypt	1	Accounting	1				
El Salvador	1	Chemistry	1				
Georgia	1	Construction Engineering	1				
Guatemala	1	Health Services Admin.	1				
Ireland	1	International Studies	1				
Kenya	1	Journalism	1				
Kyrgyzstan	1	Nursing	1				
Macau	1	Physics 1	1				
Qatar	1	Restaurant/food	1				
Trinidad & Tobago	1	Spanish	1				
		Sport and exercise science	1				
		Statistics	1				
		Pre-veterinary	1				

As the focal points of this study were students’ academic transition and first-year academic experience, Table 7 presents the data on the Global Institute Program participants’ academic performance illustrated through their cumulative GPAs at the time of the study. As shown in the table, 12.5% of the students performed exceptionally well academically and earned a GPA of 4.0 at the time of the study. More than 62% of the population displayed good academic achievement, with their cumulative GPAs ranging from 3.0 to 4.0. Satisfactory academic performance was documented for almost 17% of the population, whose overall GPAs ranged from 2.0 to 3.0. Lastly, 8.3% of the population struggled academically as indicated by their unsatisfactory academic performance and cumulative GPAs below 2.0.

Table 7

*Academic and Course Performance of the Study Population*

Grade Point Average (GPA)	Percentage	FYS Grade	Percentage
4.0	12.5	A	53.3
4.0 – 3.5	36.0	A-	11.8
3.5 – 3.0	26.6	B+	9.3
3.0 – 2.5	11.4	B	7.7
2.5 – 2.0	5.2	B-	5.1
2.0 and below	8.3	C+	3.6
		C	3.1
		C-	1.5
		D and below	4.6

Additionally, as this study was conducted to examine the role of the First-Year Seminar (FYS) course in participants’ academic transition, the presented data include students’ final grades in this course. In this regard, it can be observed that the majority of the students, more

than 65%, performed exceptionally well in their FYS course and earned an A or A-. Of the remaining population, 22% of the population earned a B+, B, or B- in the class, demonstrating good performance in their FYS course. Satisfactory performance was documented for 8.2% of the population whose grade in the FYS was C+, C, or C-. Lastly, 4.6% of the students demonstrated poor or unsatisfactory class performance by earning a D or below.

### Participant Profiles

In total, 10 international undergraduate students participated in this study. All 10 participants were recruited within the first two weeks of study implementation. Several students who volunteered to take part in the research could not be included as they were 17 years of age at the time of the study. The researcher thanked these students for their willingness to participate and explained the reason why they could not be included. The first email invitation resulted in only five students volunteering to participate; fortunately, the response rate to the second invitation was much higher.

The researcher carefully selected the remaining participants in a way that would maximize the diversity of the sample and explained to all other students that the capacity for participating in the research had been reached. When choosing which participants to include in the study, the researcher sought to achieve the diversity of her sample in terms of students' nationalities, academic majors, gender, and the semester when the FYS course was completed. The personal demographics of participants are displayed in Table 8. As illustrated, the sample was comprised of 10 students from 10 countries, nine academic majors, three cohorts (spring, summer, fall, 2018), with a male to female ratio of 6 to 4.

Table 8

*Participant Personal Demographics*

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Country / Nationality	Academic Major	Cohort 2018	GPA	FYS Grade
Liam	Male	Oman	Computer Science	Spring	3.16	A
Ash	Male	Iran/UAE	Mechanical Engineering	Spring	3.87	A
Nathan	Male	Pakistan	Marketing	Summer	3.12	B+
Tony	Male	India	Electrical Engineering	Fall	4.00	A
Jennifer	Female	Brazil	Forensic Science	Fall	4.00	A
Alicia	Female	Ukraine	Psychology	Fall	4.00	A
Derek	Male	Macao/China	Hospitality Management	Fall	3.75	A
Emma	Female	Mexico	Theatre	Fall	3.69	A
Dominique	Female	Bolivia	Architecture	Fall	4.00	A
Colin	Male	Russia	Computer Science	Fall	4.00	A

*Note.* FYS = First-Year Seminar.

The following sections present the personal narratives of each international student who participated in this study. Their stories paint a picture of their personal and family backgrounds, educational experiences prior to coming to the United States, reasons for pursuing higher education abroad, their choice of institution and academic major, prior experiences with transitions of this kind, and any other narratives that participants deemed as momentous and critical for their successful transition to a new educational setting.

#### The Story of Liam

Born and raised in Oman, Liam first came to the United States in Spring 2018, when he enrolled in the university through the Institute. After graduating from a public high school in his home country, he received a government scholarship to study in America. He felt relieved and

lucky that his government agreed to fully fund his undergraduate education for five years, during which time he will also be receiving a monthly stipend. Liam revealed that he was awarded such an opportunity due to being among the top performing students in his country: “The scholarship is all about the grade percentage. The people with a higher percentage get the scholarship. They can choose a country and their major. The government will be responsible for everything.”

Talking about his education back home, Liam explained that secondary schooling in Oman consists of two types of schools – private or coeducational schools and public or single-gender schools. Attending a single private school from Grade 1-12, Liam never interacted with female students: “I had only one mindset there – how to deal with boys. That’s it.” This experience, he believes, made him feel like he was put in a box and limited to only one perspective in life. Coming to the U.S., however, changed that mindset. Such a change is something that Liam particularly enjoys as he considers himself to be a quick learner, smart student, and a person who likes to try new things in life.

Liam’s perception of himself as a quick learner did not come as a surprise given the fact that he speaks five languages – Balochi, (i.e., the native language of Oman), Arabic, English, Hindi, and Urdu. “I never thought it’s something unique that I have. But when I came to America, I realized that it is.” He considers his English language fluency to be the outcome of his prior education. Even though the language of instruction in public schools in Oman is Arabic, English classes are taught from Grade 1.

Liam further disclosed that he came to the U.S. to study computer science, but shortly after beginning his first semester, he realized that marketing or finance would be a better fit. Despite his extensive experience with computer programming in Oman, his intense passion for

business prevailed. He also discussed his intentions to minor in IT or psychology: “If I take Marketing with IT, then I’ll be good in digital marketing. On the other hand, marketing is about people and selling things, and psychology is about learning about people, so that would be a perfect combination too.”

Once he obtains his degree, Liam plans to return home and start his own business. He considers America to be the country of smart people with a lot of competition in every field. In Oman, however, his newly gained knowledge and expertise would provide him with more opportunities as, in Liam’s words, Oman is a young and developing country. Moreover, upon moving to the U.S., Liam discovered his sense of purpose in making a YouTube channel with motivational videos in Arabic. As he explained, Oman does not have any famous motivational speakers and the people from his country rarely watch this type of video in English. In addition to his current academic responsibilities, Liam is working diligently and patiently on this goal as well.

Lastly, Liam is strongly motivated to be successful during his time in America so that, one day, he can make his country better. In that regard, he revealed that during his first semester in college, he would often go to bed feeling like something was missing. Despite the day having gone perfectly well, he was still not satisfied at the end of the day. A desolate feeling that something else could have been accomplished was on Liam’s mind every evening when he went to bed. One day, however, he was finally able to resolve this conundrum: “I realized that the missing thing was that I have to do something for my country. First of all, I have to do it for myself, but indirectly it will affect my country. And that thing was shooting motivational videos for my people.”



Liam concluded his personal story by acknowledging that, for his dreams to come true, he has to work hard, and that college is the time to start: “I have five years here and I have my own 24 hours in a day. I have every resource here to achieve my dreams, and I think it would be only my fault if I don’t use these resources in order to achieve something great.”

### The Story of Ash

Ash and his family moved from Iran to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) when he was in first grade. Even though he was born in Iran and his native language is Farsi, Ash does not consider himself Iranian. “I don’t want to have anything to do with that place,” Ash said. He revealed that he is working hard on getting rid of his Iranian accent as, he believes people sometimes make fun of him because of it: “It’s not in person. It’s usually indirectly, like when they’re not face to face, they do it. It’s not a big deal. I don’t want to make a big deal out of it.”

Ash’s narrative consisted of many reminiscences about his growing up in Dubai. Even though he does not speak Arabic, he is firmly attached to the UAE, its people, culture, customs, and heritage. Unfortunately, due to the strict immigration laws in UAE, Ash and his family are still only residents, not the citizens, of this country. He feels disheartened about the fact that even though his parents are role model citizens who contribute to UAE’s society and economy, he was not eligible for any of the scholarship opportunities that this country offers to its citizens. Consequently, he is burdened by the cost of his education in America and constantly thinks about the expenses his parents incur.

Talking about his education back home, Ash explained that he went to a private school from Grades 1-12. Even though the official language in his school was English, students mainly

spoke Arabic because the majority of them were locals: “The school was following American curriculum, so the books and everything was in English. But the conversations... not the teachers’ conversations, but students’ conversations were in Arabic. Everyone spoke Arabic.” However, living in Dubai, a metropolitan city where English is the official language, aided Ash’s language acquisition and allowed him to become fully fluent in English.

Upon finishing high school, Ash took two years off to reflect on his future education and career path. He described these two years as the most unremarkable time of his life during which he was utterly without goals:

Everyone in my high school was planning universities in Grade 11. But even after grade 12, I had no idea where I wanted to go. Because it’s not easy. You don’t just go to Google and search – Oh... which university I want to go to. Oh... I’ll just pick this one. Let’s go there. That’s not how it works. People make it so simple (Ash, personal communication, January 12, 2019).

To help with his college exploration process, Ash’s parents contacted a study abroad agency in Dubai which invited Ash to different college fairs. He applied to three universities and was accepted by his current institution where he started the program in the Institute in Spring 2018. As this was Ash’s first trip to the United States, he did not know a single person in America or his new educational setting.

Upon enrolling at the university, Ash declared mechanical engineering as a major. He then went on to say that, even though satisfied with his choice of major, he still feels limited by his inability to change it if he decides to do so. Liam explained that, for him, changing a major would be “an immigration nightmare,” as the major is tied to his immigration documents and

visa. He further clarified that if he wanted to change his major, he would have to go through the process of getting a new immigration document (I-20). In his case, Liam shared, getting an I-20 would be a nightmare: “I would need all the documents from the beginning. I would need a bank statement, a bank letter, a letter from university... And how am I supposed to do that? That is impossible to do” [emphasizes “impossible”].

Ash concluded his personal narrative by saying that, on a positive note, pursuing mechanical engineering would allow him to accomplish his long-term goal. Upon graduation, Ash would like to go back home to Dubai and become self-employed: “I just want to buy a workshop in the middle of the desert and start repairing stuff. Just build stuff and repair. I just want to be able to fix everything. Honestly, that’s my goal.”

### The Story of Nathan

As a child of Pakistani doctors and educated business owners, Nathan’s pursuit of higher education has always been a natural path for him. His grandfather earned his Ph.D. from the prestigious University of Michigan. Similarly, having earned his Doctor of Medicine and Master of Business Administration degrees at top universities in Pakistan, Nathan’s father established himself as a well-known doctor in his home country. After working with many national and international pharmaceutical companies for years, Nathan’s father eventually decided to start his own pharmaceutical business in Pakistan. Even though Nathan has a secure job in the family company, his grandfather and father always wanted him to go to college. After his grandfather passed away, Nathan’s dedication to academics became even stronger.

Nathan completed his elementary, middle, and high school education at a Cambridge International School in Pakistan. Nathan explained that his school was following the British curriculum and that from day one of his education, the language of instruction was English. He further attributed his English fluency to the fact that, along with Urdu, English is the official language in Pakistan. After completing high school, Nathan took a gap year which he spent traveling the world with his father and helping with the family business.

Nathan's intense dedication to the family business is what led him to choose marketing as his major. Currently, his older brother is looking after the business at home, but Nathan shares an equally strong passion for it: "I love doing pharmaceutical job... marketing and pharmaceutical. That's what I've been trained in as a young child." Nathan has not yet decided what his exact career path will be, but he aims to pursue international endeavors in the field of pharmaceutical marketing. For now, Nathan enjoys his time in the U.S. as he has a lot of relatives in America and is happy to have more opportunities to visit them. At the same time, he is working hard to acquire the credentials, as well as the skills and competencies, needed to make his career and professional dreams come true.

### The Story of Tony

Coming from the capital of India, New Delhi, Tony moved to the U.S. worried about his ability to successfully acclimate to a new culture and a new country. Having always stayed in one country, one city, and one school, Tony initially wondered what it would be like to start a life in a country with a completely different culture and people. However, his concerns turned

out to be unjustified, as his adjustment to new educational and cultural setting has been going smoothly thus far.

Tony spent a lot of time talking about the education system in India which he seemed to understand very well. He first explained that the language of instruction in most schools in India is English. Even though Hindi is the most spoken language, all the official work, such as government work and education, is conducted in English: “People are taught in English. English is actually our first language. It’s not our mother tongue, but it’s our first language.”

He then continued to explain the difference between public and private education in India by saying that private schools and colleges are perceived as superior to public institutions. For that reason, he went to a private school. Additionally, the curriculum in his school, as in many other schools in India, was modeled on the British system of education. Tony described this type of education as too theoretical with very little practice. This factor was also one of the main reasons to continue his education in America:

I wanted to get hands-on experience. I always knew I wanted to be an engineer. From the beginning, I was building bikes, and engines, and stuff. But that was totally out of the curriculum of the school. And I couldn’t find any encouragement in India for those things and for practical education (Tony, personal communication, January 16, 2019).

Tony conducted the college exploration process on his own, as his father passed away when he was in high school. He started searching for educational opportunities around the world and, whenever he did so, the U.S. was always in the top in his search suggestions. He recognized America as the best place to pursue his dreams as its higher education was usually described as practical, flexible, and independent—everything he was missing from his education back home.

Tony's initial goal to attend an Ivy League university did not come true as he had to withdraw his application from Berkley for administrative reasons. His educational agent in India then recommended his current institution, where he started his first year in Fall 2018, majoring in electrical engineering with robotics and computer science. Tony's long term goals, are not yet finalized. His ultimate goal is to become an entrepreneur and start a technology conglomerate. Still, he is not yet sure if he wants to return home or stay in the U.S. to follow that dream. He summed up his aspirations by saying: "I believe that the U.S. is the best place to start. But I also want to represent my country. According to my immigration status, I have to go back after I graduate, but the U.S. always wants people who can develop America."

### The Story of Jennifer

Jennifer's story of coming to the United States differs from those of her peers. Even though she followed the path of many international students and first came to America as a tourist to explore what this country has to offer, the circumstances of Jennifer's relocation to the U.S. were unique. After being accepted to her current educational institution, Jennifer moved to the U.S. with her entire family – mother, father, and two sisters. Jennifer's mother obtained a student visa and enrolled in an English Language school, and her father and sister came as her dependents.

However, Jennifer made it very clear that, even though she is very attached to her parents, her family fully understands that she needs to gain independence. Therefore, her parents are giving her space to achieve that goal: "I live on campus and they live off campus. Even

though my family is here, I'm trying to live my life on my own because, at some point, I'll have to. So I'm trying to learn this now."

Like several other participants, Jennifer's choice to study in the U.S. was guided by her prior educational experiences. By her own account, Jennifer went to a private school because public schools in Brazil are "really bad." She justified this claim by explaining that students in public schools are not motivated to learn because they are not paying for their education. Similarly, teachers are not compensated the way they should be, so they are not motivated to teach, or, in some instances, to even come to class. Consequently, Jennifer's parents decided to send her to a private school and to enroll her in an English Language school where she mastered her language skills.

Jennifer proceeded to explain that the main reason why she decided to pursue a bachelor's degree in the U.S. was the fact that universities in Brazil did not offer her intended major, forensic science: "In Brazil, that's only a minor. We have to go to law school in order to study forensics. So when I heard that this university has forensic science, I got super excited and applied. And I got in."

Jennifer is still undecided about what she wants to do after she graduates. One thing she is certain about is that she does not want to return to Brazil: "I lived my whole life there, so I already know what Brazil has. I want to explore more. I want to explore other places with new cultures and people." At the moment, some of her post-graduation aspirations include moving to Europe or California to explore internship opportunities and gain work experience. But she would not mind considering additional paths that may open over the next four years.

## The Story of Alicia

Alicia began her story by talking about growing up in Ukraine. She described herself as “a rebellious child who always tried to prove something to somebody.” She attributed such an attitude to her education in Ukraine and the public school she attended at the time. In Alicia’s words, her school did not have any “straight A” students. In her class, in particular, students were not performing or behaving well; their academic motivation faded away with each semester, and their academic performance rapidly deteriorated: “The girls and boys there started abruptly losing interest in not only the educational perspective, but also in their ideas about life.” As a result, teachers started giving up on their students. They would simply not teach during class time or would not even come to class. Surprisingly, being a part of such a disheartened and demoralized learning environment had a positive impact on Alicia. Instead of giving up on school and society, she recognized how much she actually needed education: “At that point, I started realizing how much I actually want to study. I wanted to change my role in the world because when you give up on society, it kind of gives up on you.”

In her attempt to improve her educational prospects, Alicia changed schools in the ninth grade. She enrolled in one of the best schools in her city which specializes in language programs. She acknowledged that such a transition was initially very hard, especially in terms of social integration. But at the same time, she admitted that distancing herself from peers in her old school was a positive change. It was a harsh, but a much-needed beginning for Alicia: “I know that if I didn’t give them up then, I wouldn’t be where I am now. I know it was a good decision to distance myself and switch schools because the education I got was so much better.”



Changing schools had many more positive consequences for Alicia than she initially hoped. She not only made a lot of new friends but she “opened up fully to the world”. She joined the school government and got involved in numerous project and activities: “It was perfect. These were amazing years.” Three years went by and Alicia graduated as one of the top students in her school, receiving a special type of diploma and serving as a role model to her friends and peers.

Switching to a language-intensive school further kindled Alicia’s interest in languages so, by the time she graduated, she was fluent in Russian, Ukrainian, English, and Polish, and semi-fluent in German. Moreover, after transferring to the new school, she spent one summer attending a language school in Canada and one winter in England. These experiences aided not only her language competence but also allowed her to explore educational opportunities outside Ukraine. Looking back, Alicia is confident that it was her study abroad experience that shaped her decision to study in the United States:

It’s funny. When I was in Canada, I realized that I want to study in the States [laughs]. I mean... if you’re in Canada, you normally want to study in Canada, right? But I kind of got the feeling that what I saw in American movies during my childhood, that there was something these movies were based on. That the world can actually look as it is in the movies. And I got a proof of that in Canada (Alicia, personal communication, January 21, 2019).

After deciding to pursue her higher education in America, Alicia started applying to colleges and enrolled in her current institution in Fall 2018. She intends to major in psychology, as she has a true passion for understanding people, their values and perspectives, and the way they think and

perceive the world around them. She still does not know what her path will be after she graduates, but she firmly believes that America or Ukraine are not her only options: “It’s not only black and white. America or Ukraine. It could be wherever. It depends on how my relationships with people turn out and how I start feeling, but also on the education and other opportunities.”

### The Story of Derek

Even though Derek was born and raised in Macau and has never been to the People’s Republic of China, he considers a part of himself to be Chinese. He explained this identity by the fact that Macao represents a part of China and that Chinese language, customs, traditions, and values are deeply important to him. He described Macau as “Eastern Las Vegas” because it is mainly famous for its luxury casinos and hotels.

Derek started his narrative by talking about his prior education in Macau. He first explained that he went to a public school because private schools are rare in his hometown and are usually reserved for native English speakers. However, he considers Macau public education to be very comprehensive and diverse as it consists of two types of class sessions, those taught in Chinese and those taught in English. Additionally, once students reaches Grade 6, they choose to either study science subjects, such as chemistry and physics, or to study economics and accounting. Derek chose the latter option because the instruction for these subjects was in English.

His post-high school path was unique compared to that of other participants. After he graduated from high school, he moved to Canada where he enrolled in a large public university

to study Psychology. Although he described his experience of living in Canada and being immersed in its culture as “very good,” Derek was not equally satisfied with his academics. He believes that one of the main reasons for such discontent was his choice of major: “Psychology is a very tough subject. You have to memorize everything. It’s a science class. After one year, I felt overwhelmed because of the homework and the scientific research I had to do, which I hated [laughs].”

Derek further clarified that the rigor of classes was not the only reason why he needed a change in his academic path. He added that the university he attended in Canada was a very famous and prestigious institution, so the financial costs, academic standards, and the overall learning environment was very harsh. After being utterly overwhelmed by the college cost and his effort, Derek decided to return to Macau and reevaluate his career choice: “I tried to think if there’s any job that I’m interested in and I realized that I prefer business. I just love earning money [laughs]. So I choose to study hospitality.”

After consulting with a study abroad educational agent, Derek learned that his current institution offered plenty of opportunities for students to not only learn about hospitality, but to get practical experience in the luxury industry: “So I thought – Why not give it a try? Just go and finish as fast as possible. And then I can go back and find a job that I love to do.”

Unlike the majority of participants who were still exploring their post-graduation options, Derek already knew that he will be returning to Macau after obtaining his bachelor’s degree. He again emphasized how important Chinese culture is for him and concluded his personal narrative by saying: “To throw away all your culture... and values... and your parents... and to just move to a new place... I can’t do that. I just can’t do that. My heart doesn’t want to do that.”

## The Story of Emma

Emma moved from Mexico City to the United States in Fall 2018 when she started the program in the Institute. Even though she had never been to America, she proudly shared that she has family all over the world, including the state in which she currently resides. Having an uncle and aunt in a city nearby was a great relief for Emma and she uses every opportunity to visit them: “Whenever I’m feeling sad or homesick, my aunt tells me – Grab the bus and come now. And I just go [cheerful voice].”

Discussing her education in Mexico City, Emma portrayed a strong sense of sadness and disappointment: “The [public] education system in Mexico is really bad. It’s really, really bad. Public schools don’t really teach much. So if you want to have a good education, you have to go to a private school.” And Emma did just that. She attended a private bilingual school. One-half of her classes were taught in Spanish and the other half were taught in English. Even though she completed her secondary education in one institution, Emma explained that for the final three years, her school followed an Australian program called Global Assessment Certificate (GAC) which was entirely in English and allowed students to earn college credit.

Emma’s decision to study abroad was mainly influenced by her career interests as she always wanted to study musical theatre. However, as Emma explained, the arts are not perceived so highly in Mexico and, consequently, there is not much support for students in that career path. Her first choice for study abroad was the United States because she believes that America offers more opportunities for students pursuing an arts degree. Emma further revealed that she had been accepted into the school of her dreams in New York and was offered a scholarship. Unfortunately, even with the financial support, the amount of money she would have to provide

was beyond her financial capabilities. However, she did not give up. She continued searching for other opportunities until she was accepted by her current institution.

Emma has many goals she wants to follow after she graduates. The first one is to work for any of America's largest entertainment industries. Another goal, of course, includes trying her luck on Broadway and in Hollywood to see where her degree in musical theatre might take her.

### The Story of Dominique

A daughter of an Italian father and a Spanish mother, Dominique was born in Bolivia where she grew up and spent her childhood and adolescence. Her decision to move to the United States and enroll in her current institution was an easy one because her family often vacationed in this metropolitan city. Over the years, Dominique fell in love with the city's attractions and its people. Even though she moved on her own and did not have any family or here, she has been very pleased with her choice.

For Emma, continuing her education in America was a natural extension of her education back home. In Bolivia, she attended a private international school called Cambridge College in which all instruction was in English. Her parents wanted her to have private education because Bolivia is still a developing country, and good public education is hard to find. Even though she attended one of the best schools in her city, Dominique's standards for what constitutes good education drastically changed when she first visited the United States: "You know, you think you are in one of the best schools in your city, but then you come here and you say – Wow! This is

education!” After getting a glimpse of American education, Dominique had no doubt that this was where she wanted to go to college.

When asked to share a little bit more about her background, Dominique immediately disclosed that she is the first in her family to go to college. She proceeded to explain that this factor is often the cause of many challenging as well as humorous situations. On the one hand, she believes, her parents were never fully able to understand the pressure involved with choosing a university and a major: “They were so relaxed. We would be having lunch and they would just say – So, you picked your major yet? [laughs]. You picked what you’ll be doing for the rest of your life? [laughs].” This air of serenity and composure her parents often displayed put additional weight on Dominique’s shoulders, as she was trying to decide on her future educational and career path. At the same time, however, Dominique finds it amusing that her mom lives her own college experience through her: “She would talk to me on Snapchat and say – ‘Are you ok? I saw there was a fire in this building on campus.’ And I’m like – ‘Mom, what are you talking about? I don’t even know that’ [laughs].”

As every segment of Dominique’s background is narrated through storytelling, she explained her choice of major in the same manner: “It’s actually a very funny story” – she began. Since she was a small child, Dominique always dreamed of studying medicine. Fortunately, her school back home provided students with the opportunity to take pre-college classes in the duration of a couple of weeks. After attending her major classes for only three days, Dominique realized that medicine was not a career she wants to commit to: “It was chaos because I got home and I was like – I don’t like it [crying voice]. And I was supposed to be a doctor. I had no plan B. I had no backup. I had no idea what I was going to do.” While Dominique was undergoing a

career, educational, and identity crisis, her father proposed an idea. As he owns a construction company, he asked Dominique if she would like to study architecture so that she can work with him in the future. Dominique was immediately delighted with that proposition. After a very brief exploration phase, Dominique realized that architecture is a perfect major for her: “I absolutely love it [emphasizes “love”]. I am so happy with that choice. I love drawing. I don’t know why I didn’t think about that before.”.

### The Story of Colin

Colin moved to the U.S. from a small city in Russia to study computer science. He comes from a family of doctors and his mother also holds a Ph.D. degree. It has always been Colin’s dream to study and live in America. Before moving to the U.S., he visited California where he traveled to San Diego and Los Angeles. Upon his visit, he immediately realized that the U.S. was the country for him: “It introduces many job opportunities, many career opportunities. And the quality of life here is stable. I can live here, work, study, and nobody will stop it. It is very stable here”. Additionally, Colin believes America to be the most international country, one where he can become a part of a diverse society populated by people from many different countries and backgrounds.

Despite his enthusiasm and eagerness, Colin’s decision to come to the U.S. was not an easy one because he did not have any friends, family, or relatives here. He heard about a distant cousin of his who lives in a city nearby, but never had a chance to meet her. Colin did not hesitate to disclose that this cousin initially came to the U.S. as a tourist and then illegally extended her stay. He shared this fact so that he could voice his opinion that illegal immigration

is a wrong and unwise path to choose. A path he would never pursue: “When you come here and follow the rules... when you study... when you become a good specialist... you become a part of this big society and you’re treated like an American”. On the other hand, Colin is assured, people who come to America with expectations of a good life and easy money will live an even harder life than they did in their countries.

When asked about his education in Russia, Collin started his narrative by explaining that he went to a public school for several reasons. First, his hometown had only two private schools which were not very popular. More importantly, his parents thought it would be better for Colin to attend a public school so that he would “not be surrounded with the guys whose parents are very rich... and with such... such men”. His parents saw value in Colin interacting and communicating with ordinary people. Lastly, they believed his public school could offer a better education than a private one, because it was specialized in the English language. Even though his school had an intensive English program, Colin also attended additional language courses from Grades 8-11, so that he would best prepare for TOEFL and SAT exams, as well as his education in America.

Although he has not yet started attending his major classes, Colin is very excited about majoring in computer science. He revealed that he has always been fascinated with computers and started learning about IT when he was eight years old. It has always been his dream to become a specialist in this field. His passion for computer science is perhaps best evidenced by Colin’s intent to pursue a master’s degree in the same field. His post-graduation plans include finding a job in the field, getting more knowledge and experience, and then seeking a scholarship for his master’s studies. Colin has no doubt that he would like to accomplish these goals in



America: “I would like to stay here because, for my specialization, the U.S. is introducing a much better quality of work and much more work. It is much better than Russia or any other post-Soviet country.”

### Summary

This chapter presented the detailed context of the study including the design of the Global Institute Program and the demographics of students enrolled. Additionally, personal profiles were shared for each of the 10 international students selected to participate in this study: Liam, Ash, Nathan, Tony, Jennifer, Alicia, Derek, Emma, Dominique, and Colin. The personal stories of each participant were reported in a narrative form which included the accounts of participants’ family background, prior educational experiences, the reasons for pursuing higher education in the U.S., and any other aspects of their lives that participants deemed necessary to share.

Through hearing these stories as presented through rich accounts of participants’ personal narratives, the foundation was laid for portraying the academic experiences of these students during their first year of college in the United States. The 10 stories presented in this chapter provide a blueprint for understanding and interpreting the academic transition of participants in the present study. These introductory stories unveiled the personal, family, and educational accounts of these students, paving the way for developing Chapter 5 and reporting participants’ most challenging experiences during their first year in college and the ways in which the First-Year Seminar course affected these experiences.

## CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### Overview

This chapter presents the findings in the study organized by the responses to sub-questions 1 and 2. The chapter opens by revisiting the central research question and underlying sub-questions and reviewing the processes of data analysis and theme development are reviewed:

1. The findings are introduced by illustrating the alignment of each sub-question with the corresponding interview questions.
2. The themes and sub-themes developed for each sub-question are presented using data excerpts, (i.e., verbatim quotes) and tables.
3. The alignment of each theme with the theoretical framework is illustrated through tabular displays.

The chapter concludes with a presentation of the findings for the central question which emerged from responses to sub-questions 1 and 2.

### Central Question and Sub-questions

This phenomenological inquiry was conducted to advance the scholarship on international student college transition and the research on First-Year Seminar course benefits for diverse student populations. As such, this study was guided by the following central question:

*How do international undergraduate students enrolled in a first-year seminar (FYS) course at a large, public, research university describe their academic experiences?*

This question was investigated by examining the following two sub-questions:

1. What academic challenges, if any, do international undergraduate students experience

during their first year of college?

2. What impacts, if any, does the enrollment in the FYS course have on academic experiences of international undergraduate students during their first year of college?

The process of investigating the central question and the two-sub questions involved several stages. First, two researchers independently coded the data and identified themes that emerged from participants' responses to interview questions. In doing so, the primary researcher also used her journal reflections and field notes. After independently coding the data, the researchers convened to present and discuss their findings. During the process, the researchers provided justification for their analyses, but also remained open to discussing and reconciling the coding discrepancies that emerged during the process. After extensive collaboration, the researchers reached an intercoder agreement and made the final selection of themes for each sub-question. The visual illustration of the theme development process is provided in Appendix D.

Next, the findings for each sub-question are presented in this chapter by first displaying the themes that emerged from the data analysis and illustrating the alignment of these themes with the theoretical framework. A clear relationship between students' narratives and extrapolated themes is demonstrated by supporting each theme with significant verbatim quotes from participants. Given that some participants were non-native English speakers, the direct quotes may include some grammatical errors. However, students' narratives are presented verbatim to maintain their genuineness and authenticity.

Additionally, each theme was nested within the corresponding element of Schlossberg's (1984) 4S transition model: situation, self, support, and strategies. The theoretical framework served as a lens for understanding how each of the 4S influencing factors shaped participants'

academic experiences. The evidence for aligning the theoretical framework with the established themes is presented using tabular displays.

#### Results: Sub-question 1

*What academic challenges, if any, do international undergraduate students experience during their first year of college?*

This question was examined using interview questions 1-5, which specifically focused on participants' academic experiences during the first year of their undergraduate studies. In particular, these five interview questions were designed to elicit participants' narratives about their transition to American education, any underlying barriers that shaped this transition, and the coping mechanisms these students used to overcome such challenges.

After examining students' responses to these questions, four themes emerged in connection to participants' academic challenges: (a) understanding U.S. higher education, (b) establishing relationships with American peers, (c) academic differences, and (d) lack of institutional understanding and/or opportunities denied. Table 9 illustrates the common themes from all 10 participants regarding the academic challenges they experienced during the first year of college.

Table 9

*Thematic Results for Sub-question 1*

Theme	Participants									
	Liam	Ash	Nathan	Tony	Jennifer	Alicia	Derek	Emma	Dominique	Colin
1. Understanding U.S. higher education	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓
2. Establishing relationships with American peers	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
3. Academic differences		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓
4. Lack of institutional understanding and/or opportunities denied		✓				✓		✓		

Additionally, each of the four themes that emerged from the participants' responses was aligned with the corresponding elements of the theoretical framework: situation, self, support, and strategies. Table 10 illustrates the relationship between the thematic representation of participants' academic challenges and 4S influencing factors for sub-question 1.

Table 10

*Theoretical Framework Relationship to Sub-question 1*

Theme	4S Influencing Factor
1. Understanding U.S. higher education	situation: Previous experience with a similar transition
2. Establishing relationships with American peers	support: Type (Friends)
3. Academic differences	situation: Previous experience with a similar transition  self: Personal and demographic characteristics (Culture)  self: Psychological resources (Values, self-efficacy)
4. Lack of institutional understanding and/or opportunities denied	support: Type (Institution) & Function (Aid)

Theme 1: Understanding U.S. Higher Education

Of the 10 participants interviewed for this study, seven shared that it was hard for them to understand the educational system in America, thus making this theme one of the most common challenges they experienced during the first year of college. This particular theme was characterized by four specific difficulties or sub-themes that participants experienced: (a) understanding and exploring academic majors, (b) understanding general education requirements, (c) understanding institutional resources and opportunities, and (d) understanding the concept of a syllabus.

Sub-theme 1: Understanding and Exploring Academic Majors

Three participants shared that their first-year of college was characterized by difficulties in not only understanding the academic requirements of a particular major, but also navigating

the process of major exploration. Speaking on his own behalf and that of his international peers, Liam explained that many of them were confused about their choice of major which, due to immigration requirements, all international students need to declare before starting the program:

Sometimes I think that we, as international students, get confused a lot about our major. Sometimes you cannot discover your major by yourself. Why? Because in high school there's not such a subject which would teach us which major is good for you or not. You are just studying subjects. If you find it by yourself, that's good. But, in most cases, you cannot find it by yourself. Because sometimes I don't know what I'm good at (Liam, personal communication, January 9, 2019).

Jennifer supported this stance by saying that she would have benefited greatly during her first year if someone had explained what her particular major entailed. She added that reading the major description online was only somewhat useful as she did not know whom to ask for further clarification. Additionally, not having any major classes during the first year further elevated her concerns about the choice she made. Having known how to learn more about her intended major, she said, would have alleviated this anxiety and given her much needed peace of mind.

For Colin, coming to the U.S. with a clearly defined choice of major did not reduce his feelings of distress as he did not fully understand what his major entailed or what his academic path would look like over the next four years:

So, the thing that we should learn in the first semester is the whole route in the university and how it will be from the very beginning to the very end, but also right after the university. Because many of us don't know. For an international student, it is important to talk about these things in their first semester to make the way. Like, I came here and I

just knew that I want Computer Science, but I didn't even know how, what the classes were, and how to choose them (Colin, personal communication, January 30, 2019).

### Sub-theme 2: Understanding General Education Requirements

For two participants, understanding the requirements of general education, or the concept of general education itself, was particularly challenging during their first year. Ash and Nathan both ascribed this challenge to the fact that in their respective home countries, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, general education is a foreign concept. As Nathan explained:

The start was not so easy. We had to work really hard. Some subjects were really tough for me because back home I never studied Anthropology or some science classes. Back home, from our middle school, they start teaching us subjects toward our majors. If we are business major, they just teach us business class, no science class. Over here, I have to take science classes (Nathan, personal communication, January 13, 2019).

Similarly, Ash was stunned to learn that American students can enter college having already met many of the general education requirements: "American curriculum was completely new to me. High schools in America are really high level, so I heard that lot of people already took their general education classes in their high schools. But I didn't even know what that is."

### Sub-theme 3: Understanding Institutional Resources and Opportunities

For Alicia and Colin, one of the most challenging aspects of their first year was learning about campus resources and opportunities, as well as identifying the opportunities in which they, as international students, could participate. As Alicia explained:



We don't know how the university works here. The community, the university, the facilities we have. We don't know about any of that. Someone should teach us the ways how to research things. I asked the professor about experiential learning and internships, but he explained it really briefly. I felt that he didn't even understand it either. It would be great if someone actually explained this information; not only where to go, but to give us some follow-up about what we could or couldn't do as international students (Alicia, personal communication, January 21, 2019).

It is interesting to note that Colin reiterated this exact experience by explaining that, since the day he entered college, everyone was telling him that he should participate in an internship, that the university offers plenty opportunities of that kind, and that having an internship would be very important for his success during and beyond college. What remained missing from these recommendations, however, was more precise guidance on how such opportunities could be pursued: "No one even told us how we should get it, where should we go. Right now, I'm searching that information on my own."

#### Sub-theme 4: Understanding the Concept of a Syllabus

Understanding a seemingly straightforward and familiar concept, such as a course syllabus, emerged as an academic challenge for some participants. When asked to describe her academic experiences during the first year of college, the primary influencing factor that Emma mentioned was a syllabus and the lack of familiarity with this concept. Not understanding what a syllabus is and how it should be used resulted in Emma's academic transition not being as smooth as she hoped:

At first, it was very hard to understand how the syllabus worked. Because I never used syllabus before. I was used to having more one-on-one contact with my professors. So whenever I had a question, they would answer. And here, whenever I had a question, professors would be like – “It’s in the syllabus” (Emma, personal communication, January 25, 2019).

Emma added that she perceived this newly gained independence from professors as a good thing. However, being adequately prepared for such a transition would have spared her from unnecessary pressure and frustration. Colin’s experience with understanding the purpose of a syllabus was similar to that of Emma. However, instead of frustration, he expressed a somewhat different emotion: “I was disappointed that I didn’t know what that is and that no one explained it to me. I didn’t know what the syllabus is and that everything is in there.”

#### Relationship of Theme 1 to the Theoretical Framework

Situating the first theme within the framework of 4S transition theory reflected its clear relationship with the factor of situation (Table 10). According to Schlossberg (1984), the situation factor denotes all contextual and situational characteristics of a transition and the ways in which these characteristics might influence an individual. Within the situation factor, a specific sub-factor or situational attribute that corresponded to participants’ narratives was past experience or, in the context of this study, the lack of experience with a similar transition.

As Schlossberg (1984) postulated, individuals who have successfully undergone a particular type of transition in the past will be more likely to successfully navigate another transition of a similar nature. Participants’ responses corroborated this premise by providing evidence that, due to their lack of familiarity with the American educational system, their first

year of college was characterized by difficulties in navigating such a system and achieving a smooth academic transition.

## Theme 2: Establishing Relationships with American Peers

Equally common as the challenge of understanding American education was the challenge of establishing relationships with American peers. Seven of the 10 study participants expressed that their first year of college was marked by their inability to make American friends. Some participants immediately reported this factor as the dominant transitional challenge. For others, however, this theme emerged as they spoke about their social support system and disappointedly revealed that it consisted only of other international students.

This theme was further characterized by two types of sub-challenges, leading to the emergence of two sub-themes. Although five participants admitted not being able to establish any contact with American peers, the remaining two participants revealed that even upon establishing contact with domestic students, they were not successful in sustaining these relationships.

### Sub-theme 1: Establishing Contact with American Peers

Even though Jennifer and Dominique both expressed their disappointment in not having been able to establish contact with American students, neither had any explanation why that may have been the case: “I don’t really talk to them. I don’t know why.” – Jennifer said shyly.

On the other hand, Liam had very clear perceptions of this matter. He started by saying that, after spending his first semester talking only to Omani students, he realized that he had to

move on and interact with other international and American students. However, he accomplished this goal only partially:

Now I have a lot of international friends, but I don't have someone I can call a friend from America. Now that I left the Institute, I am studying with 250-350 students. But everyone comes with headphones and everyone leaves with headphones. No one wants to make friends in classes (Liam, personal communication, January 9, 2019).

Liam further explained that international students' inability to make American friends only seemingly appears to be a social barrier. In his opinion, this phenomenon should be perceived as an academic challenge, as it can directly affect student success: "When people come alone, and they go to their dorms, and they study alone, and do everything alone, they may not give their 100%."

Tony also dedicated considerable attention to this particular issue. His narrative supported Liam's perspective on the importance of social support in the academic success of any student, especially international students:

When you are tired of everything, friends are the only people that can help you recover from almost anything. If you are suffering through any kind of problem, they will help you. Now I have some friends from Russia, India, and China. I am good friends with all people from the Institute. But I don't have any American friends in that inner circle (Tony, personal communication, January 16, 2019).

As a former psychology major, Derek spent considerable time discussing the importance of having a strong social support system in college. His success, Derek believes, greatly depends on his ability to nurture relationships with others: "Your life success does not depend only on

academics. Academics are important, but so is building friendships with others or maybe looking for some interest outside the academics or thinking about any other ways you can build your career in your future.”

When asked about the possible cause of his inability to establish contact with American peers, Derek ascribed it to cultural differences. In elaborating on this answer, Derek was very careful and hesitant while choosing his words, making it very clear that he had no intention to offend anyone:

For example, the local students that I met here, they’re usually not very... you know... I can’t say that they can’t accept international students, but they are more introverted in a way that they don’t want to... I’m not saying they don’t want to but... they don’t have that kind of intention to start a conversation with an international student. I’m not sure if that’s some kind of a stereotype or ideology, but I kind of feel they are not willing to start a conversation with an international student. So I just stopped talking to them, because when I talk to them they are sort of not willing to say something (Derek, personal communication, January 24, 2019).

### Sub-theme 2: Maintaining Contact with American Peers

Unlike their peers who struggled even to establish contact with American students, Ash’s and Alicia’s challenges were somewhat different. For them, this phenomenon was reflected in their inability to maintain contact with American peers with whom they successfully interacted. After encountering this challenge repeatedly during his first year, Ash developed a coping mechanism of not giving too much consideration to it and passively accepting the situation: “I

try to hang out with people here, but after they spend some time with me, they kind of quietly stay away. I don't know why. I guess I'm just not really fun to hang out with.”

Alicia, on the other hand, was determined not to resort to passive forbearance. She is adamant in her intention to understand why her contacts with domestic students never grow into something more. As a psychology major, Alicia has a strong passion for truly understanding this phenomenon:

My main goal before coming here was to adapt to the society and make friends with Americans. But when I came, I realized that I am too far from understanding how their mind works. Americans, they can share, but they are not completely eager to ... I mean, communication and sharing is ok for them, but keeping in touch, keeping in close touch, becoming friends [emphasizes “becoming”]... And not even being friends, but becoming [emphasizes “becoming”] ... I cannot even imagine how it's like being friends with people (Alicia, personal communication, January 21, 2019).

Alicia further explained that, in her case, establishing relationships with domestic students never extended beyond initial interactions which she described as warm, friendly, and personal. At the same time, she added, the warmth and kindness that characterized these interactions are exactly what leaves her bewildered when this contact suddenly stops:

You share the stories, you get into personal stuff, and then they would be just be like – “Bye.” And you're good together... and you're talking to each other. But when they say they would like to see you again... you feel that... and they feel that there's nothing. It's odd for me. It's like they don't have a natural desire to get closer to somebody. And I know that's not true because I see everywhere the Americans who are friends, who

behave as friends. I just cannot understand what's the algorithm, what that is (Alicia, personal communication, January 21, 2019).

### Relationship of Theme 2 to the Theoretical Framework

The alignment of research findings related to Theme 2 with the elements of the 4S transition model demonstrates that participants' inability to establish relationships with their domestic peers most closely corresponds to the factor of support (Table 10). Within this particular factor, four different types of support should be distinguished: intimate relationships, family, friends, and institutions or communities (Schlossberg, 1984). From these four types of support, the findings demonstrate that the participants in this study were most challenged with establishing the network of friends, in particular, American friends.

Creating a strong network of friends constitutes a critical support factor for individuals in transition. The adequacy and stability of this type of support are essential for not only achieving a smooth transition, but also for successfully performing one's newly gained roles (Schlossberg, 1984). As a result, having a strong network of friends can cushion a transition shock. Or, as corroborated by the presented findings, the absence of a strong network of friends can lead to challenges in achieving a smooth transition and managing the roles that such transition entails.

### Theme 3: Academic Differences

The third theme that emerged from participant's narratives about their academic experiences was understanding and navigating the differences between U.S. higher education and the educational systems of their home countries. From the sample of 10 students, six participants identified academic differences as a factor that impeded their successful transition to

the new educational setting. As the manifestation of this particular challenge differed among the participants, the following three sub-themes were developed: (a) differences in content terminology; (b) differences in content delivery; and (c) differences in demonstrating content mastery.

### Sub-theme 1: Differences in Content Terminology

Of the participants who shared that they were challenged by unforeseen academic differences, five students defined these experiences as difficulties in understanding course terminology. As many of them clarified, these difficulties did not stem from studying in another language, as they consider themselves fluent in English. From their perspectives, this particular challenge was the outcome of different terms, formulas, and measurement systems, to name a few, that were foreign to the education in their home countries. As Nathan explained:

The Anthropology class was really tough for me, but I managed to score C in it. The terminology was really difficult. And not only Anthropology. College Algebra as well. It was a very tough class for me because the system of math that we are taught back home is different. Like, it gives you the same answer but the way of doing it is totally different. So we had to learn the way they do it here. Cause if we did it using the method taught at home, then we wouldn't be able to get the full marks (Nathan, personal communication, January 13, 2019).

Jennifer's narrative further supported this stance. She shared that, despite having a strong background in science classes, she still struggled with chemistry and mathematics. As she explained, performing well in these classes was particularly challenging due to the differences in course terminology of which she had no prior knowledge:



Right now, I'm so lost. Because studying in America it's very different from other countries. And also the American way to do things. Like some measurements we use in chemistry, they only have in America. And I didn't know them because we don't have them in Brazil, so it would be good to know that. Not to teach us all that, but it would be just good to know about it. For someone to show us the differences in America; in general, anything that is so different in America (Jennifer, personal communication, January 18, 2019).

For some participants, such as Colin, unforeseen differences had a substantial negative impact on their academic self-efficacy and made them doubt their ability to successfully perform in a particular class. For example, before coming to the U.S., Colin passed his mathematics placement test with an excellent score. Unlike many of his international peers in the Institute, he was placed in an advanced mathematics class. However, Colin did not perceive this as an accomplishment. Instead, he was overwhelmed with fear, anxiety, and self-doubt:

I was very scared of American math. I came to my advisor and I said – No, I will not take this math. I cannot do it. But after talking to the director [of the Institute], I said OK. And I had A for that class. But I was really scared at first. I was scared that it's going to be different. Because American math is way more different than in Russia. It's completely different. For example, the names of the formulas, some definitions, and the way how they write it (Colin, personal communication, January 30, 2019).

### Sub-theme 2: Differences in Content Delivery

This sub-theme emerged from students' narratives about their experiences with different lecture styles. In particular, Colin shared that his first semester was characterized by difficulties in understanding his professors in both small and large classes:

The speech of some professors was very fast. And it's not about the language. I understand them, but I didn't like that in Russia either, that type of speech. For example my Sociology professor. Her speech is very fast and she didn't use the microphone in the lecture and I couldn't even hear her. Then I asked her to use it and she started doing it, but it almost didn't make any difference because her speech was still so fast (Colin, personal communication, January 30, 2019).

Conversely, Colin felt that he learned more in classes where professors were mindful of the fact that they had international students in the audience and allowed for additional time for students to take notes or ask questions. However, in the classes with no such opportunities, Colin admitted resorting to passive acceptance of the situation: "When I have fast talking professors, umm... I can't really do anything. I just read the book".

### Sub-theme 3: Differences in Demonstrating Content Mastery

The third sub-theme was extrapolated from the narratives of two participants who experienced difficulties in demonstrating content mastery through written assignments. As both students explained, these difficulties were not the outcome of language barriers, but the result of either cultural differences or the lack of prior academic experiences of that kind.

For Derek, writing papers constituted the greatest challenge during his first year of college. As he explained, despite fully mastering the course content, the actual writing process was particularly difficult due to his deeply rooted Chinese values, customs, and habits:

The biggest challenge for me would be writing because I cannot think in a Western culture way, to write something in a Western style. My thinking style, my process of thought, is mainly in Chinese. The values are different, so I have to adjust my way, and learn how to write here (Derek, personal communication, January 24, 2019).

Even though her cultural heritage did not impede with her ability to successfully express herself in writing, Jennifer shared the same challenge. In her case, however, this challenge was reflected in the lack of familiarity with the variety of structures, types, and styles of written work expected of students in America. Realizing how much of her academic success depended on mastering academic writing, Jennifer admitted: “I wish someone talked more about the types of the essays and showed us how the writing works.”

### Relationship of Theme 3 to the Theoretical Framework

Even though the comparison of the first two themes and 4S transition model revealed a clear relationship of each theme with a corresponding factor from the framework, Theme 3 embodied two factors simultaneously: situation and self (Table 10). Additionally, the evidence of several sub-factors for each of the two factors was identified in relation to this theme.

Comparable to Theme 1, the specific evidence of the situation factor, prior experience, was also identified in participants’ narratives related to Theme 3. As the previously discussed findings demonstrate, the majority of academic differences reported by participants were attributed to their lack of experience with a similar transition. Examples of this sub-factor

include students' challenges in understanding new terminology or difficulties in demonstrating content mastery through a modality with which they were not familiar.

At the same time, however, the presented evidence demonstrates that the self factor had an equally powerful impact on students' attempts to reconcile the academic differences they encountered. As Schlossberg (1984) stated, the self factor encompasses all personal and demographic characteristics of an individual in transition, (e.g., socioeconomic status, gender, age, health, ethnicity), as well as any psychological resources these individuals rely on during the transition, (e.g., personality, ego, self-efficacy, commitment, values, outlook toward a transition).

The evidence of psychological resources is clearly illustrated in the narratives of participants whose challenges stemmed from their outlook toward transition, self-efficacy, commitment, and values. At the same time, however, students' responses did not reveal clear evidence for any of the personal and demographic characteristics identified by the 4S transition model (socioeconomic status, gender, age, health, or ethnicity). For this reason, when coding the interview data and developing themes, the researchers agreed to establish a separate sub-category within the realm of personal and demographic characteristics that would most accurately correspond to students' narratives. Students' narratives revealed that, for some of them, reconciling academic differences was particularly hard due to the strong influence of their home cultures. This approach resulted in developing a sub-factor of culture. The researchers determined that a culture sub-factor would serve as the most genuine representation of the self factor.

#### Theme 4: Lack of Institutional Understanding and/or Opportunities Denied

The final theme was developed from students' accounts of either limited institutional understanding of their academic challenges or institutional opportunities in which they, as international students, could not participate. Before presenting the findings, it is important to disclose that, while narrating their experiences related to this particular theme, several participants became very emotional. The observation notes that the researcher took during the interview process described these emotions as disappointment, sadness, frustration, and, in some cases, aggravation. Even though the researcher was not able to portray the entire spectrum of participants' feelings related to this theme in the following examples, she attempted to depict students' emotional state through verbatim quotes.

##### Sub-theme 1: Lack of Institutional Understanding

For some participants in this study, the most prominent challenge in their first year was perceiving college staff as either not willing or not able to understand the academic challenges they were experiencing. The evidence of this theme was the most prevalent in the experiences of Ash, who reported encountering the lack of institutional understanding each semester during his time in his current institution:

The whole separation where you were completely separated from the university because you were in the Institute was really bad. Whenever I went to student government to get a green book, my ID card wouldn't work because they didn't have my ID in the system. That's how bad it got. So the whole separation thing kind of really ticked me off because nobody understood what we're going through. Like – why am I not the part of the

university yet? What makes me different? (Ash, personal communication, January 12, 2019).

Ash revealed that during his first year he was not able to entirely focus on his academics due to many administrative issues he was experiencing regarding his tuition payments. As one example, he had a hold placed on his student account, and this prevented him from registering for his classes in the fall. The reason for this hold, Ash explained, was his lack of familiarity with a particular money transfer service that the university required him to use. Ash was not aware of the time needed for the money to be transferred through this service, resulting in his payment being late. Additionally, the conversion rates and the fees for the service were much higher than he anticipated. This culminated in his funds being insufficient to cover the cost he initially planned for:

And I just wanted to pay my tuition fees through a bank transfer. Just like everybody else. But no matter how much I talked to student accounts, they just wouldn't understand. I talked to the chair of student accounts, that's how much I annoyed them. I went there every day. They got annoyed. But I got annoyed too. That really made me... like... you know... The university is supposed to have my back, but they didn't even help me with a bank transfer (Ash, personal communication, January 12, 2019).

As Ash continued describing his experiences with this theme, he became very emotional. This happened when he revealed that instead of assisting with his problems, the university staff recommended that he seek counseling:

I was talking to one of the advisors about the issues I was having with being waitlisted for all of my classes because of my tuition payment. And she said something that got me

just go overboard. She shouldn't have said that. She said – “Well, why get a hold in the first place? Why not just pay your tuition?” And I was like – Oh my God, do you not understand that something happened? How could you say that? And I kind of overacted and she sent me an email with the link to counseling services. She didn't even want to understand why I had a hold. She just assumed that I was being lazy with it (Ash, personal communication, January 12, 2019).

Even though Emma's experiences with institutional support were not accompanied by such strong sentiments as Ash's, her multiple challenges in this regard were still complex. In particular, Emma described her feelings toward her first year of college as “conflicted” due to the many administrative issues she experienced. As she explained, during high school, she completed a program called Global Assessment Certificate which allowed her to earn college credits. However, upon entering her current institution, Emma learned that she would not be able to transfer any of those credits:

I got really frustrated because I had to start from zero. I just kept arguing with the director of the Institute. I told her – I did all this work and now you're telling me that it doesn't count. How can you help me? And she was not willing to help me in any way so I got really frustrated. I was mad all the time. I told them – You should've told me this before I came here. Because if they had taken my credits into account, I would have only had to do two or three GEPs. So I could've skipped a whole year of college. But she said that most of the credits I had would interfere with me being in the Institute, so sometimes I had to do these things because they didn't want me to go straight out of the Institute [i.e.

start her sophomore year with FTIC students] (Emma, personal communication, January 25, 2019).

Along with trying to navigate her feelings about not being able to transfer any of her college credits, Emma encountered another challenge. As she explained, she was one of the very few students in the Institute who intended to major in arts and humanities. As a result, many of her questions regarding the academic requirements of that major remained unanswered:

They [the Institute] had no clue how to help me or no clue what I had to do. So they took a lot of time to figure out how they could help me. I think they should be a bit more prepared knowing that this is a campus that offers literally every career, including that one. And knowing that there's people from all over the world who are going to want to come and study different things. So they should be a bit more prepared in that way (Emma, personal communication, January 25, 2019).

### Sub-theme 2: Opportunities Denied

For two participants, the experiences related to this theme were manifested in them becoming discouraged from investing their full efforts into academic tasks, due to knowing that many opportunities available to their domestic peers would not be available to them. For Ash, this challenge was directly related to the lack of financial aid opportunities for international students:

I was thinking that if I get straight As, I will get some kind of support from the university. But that's apparently not the case. The university is completely ignoring international students. In their eyes, every international student is getting financial aid from their government. But we don't. And it's not even about the money. For us, there is no



difference between someone who gets As or Cs. So what's the point of studying if there is no difference? (Ash, personal communication, January 12, 2019).

When asked if his academic motivation could perhaps stem from internal rewards such as personal development or future career prospects, Ash just shrugged his shoulders and said: "If there is no value to trying – why even try? If an Olympic runner got banned from participating in Olympics, why would he run like he used to before? He would just run casually. That's the case with me now."

In contrast, For Alicia, this particular theme was not manifested through any particular barrier she encountered, but through the fact that international students, through classes and advising, appear to be encouraged to engage in the programs in which they are not eligible to participate:

It would be good to tell us more about what we could do as international students.

Something especially for us. Because it was, for example, weird for us to learn about the Federal Aid and Merit Aid in our classes. Because many students were getting excited about those, but then they learned that these opportunities are for domestic students only (Alicia, personal communication, January 21, 2019).

#### Relationship of Theme 4 to the Theoretical Framework

Analyzed through the framework of 4S transition model, the previously stated results provide evidence for the alignment of this theme with the factor of support (Table 10). As already noted within the discussion of Theme 2, the support factor consists of both support type, (e.g., intimate relationships, family, friends, and institutions or communities) and support function, (e.g., providing affection, affirmation, aid, or feedback). The findings related to Theme

4 demonstrate its alignment with both components of the support factor simultaneously: type, (i.e., institution); and function, (i.e., aid).

As Schlossberg emphasized, the need for institutional agencies from which a person in transition can seek support has become widely recognized. Regarding the type of support, the Theme 4 findings are aligned with Schlossberg's (1984) postulation that, in most cases, individuals in transition seek two kinds of institutional support: the provision of concrete services and the provision of support and guidance.

Regarding the function of support, the Theme 4 findings most closely related to the sub-factor of aid or the assistance available to individuals in transition. Among various factors that can be provided to assist a person in transition, Schlossberg (1984) also included the exchange of information. As the results in this section revealed, the exchange of information emerged as a critical factor in the narratives of participants who experienced a lack of institutional support in their current academic setting.

#### Results: Sub-question 2

*What impacts, if any, does the enrollment in the FYS course have on academic experiences of international undergraduate students during their first year of college?*

This question was examined using interview questions 6-9 which were designed to evoke participants' overall experiences with the course as well as their perceptions of the course potency to assist their academic transition. After examining students' responses to these questions, four themes emerged in connection to participants' experiences with the FYS course: (a) development of academic skills and competencies; (b) development of transferable skills and competencies; (c) increased knowledge of campus resources and more frequent use of campus

services; and (d) positive impact on student adjustment within the first year. Table 11 illustrates the common themes from all 10 participants regarding the reported effects of the course on their academic experiences.

Table 11

*Thematic Results for Sub-question 2*

Theme	Participants									
	Liam	Ash	Nathan	Tony	Jennifer	Alicia	Derek	Emma	Dominique	Colin
1. Development of academic skills and competencies	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
2. Development of transferable skills and competencies	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3. Increased knowledge of campus resources and more frequent use of campus services		✓	✓	✓		✓				✓
4. Positive impact on student adjustment within the first year	✓	✓	✓			✓				✓

In alignment with the representation of themes for sub-question 1, each theme that emerged from the participant’s responses regarding sub-question 2 was aligned with the corresponding elements of the theoretical framework: situation, self, support, and strategies. Table 12 illustrates the relationship between the thematic representation of participants’ perceived impacts of the FYS course and 4S influencing factors for sub-question 2.



Table 12

*Theoretical Framework Relationship to Sub-question 2*

Theme	4S Influencing Factor
1. Development of academic skills and competencies	4S: situation – Assessment 4S: self – Outlook (self-efficacy, self-esteem, mastery)
2. Development of transferable skills and competencies	4S: situation – Assessment 4S: self – Outlook (self-efficacy, self-esteem, mastery)
3. Increased knowledge of campus resources and more frequent use of campus services	4S: support: Type (Institution) & Function (Aid)
4. Positive impact on student adjustment within the first-year	4S: self – Outlook (optimism, commitment, values) 4S: strategies: Responses that modify the situation (Optimistic action, self-reliance, exercise of potency)

Theme 1: Development of Academic Skills and Competencies

Students’ narratives about the role of the FYS course in their academic transition conveyed that the seminar had a wide effect in helping them develop a number of academic skills and competencies. Eight participants reported that, after completing the course, they believed they were more competent in performing specific academic tasks. In particular, course participation positively impacted students’ academic self-efficacy in the following three domains: (a) development of study skills; (b) increased understanding of and engagement in the research process; and (c) improved academic writing.

### Sub-theme 1: Development of Study Skills

For four participants, the development of academic skills and competencies was manifested through the formation of new study skills, such as note-taking, highlighting, and active reading. Liam particularly emphasized the importance of developing proper academic skills during the first year of college and identified this factor as a limitation of his education in Oman:

What I really liked about the subject which I'm still using is the 3R and SQ3R method – survey, question, read, recite, review. That's the thing I cannot forget. In Middle East and Asian regions, they don't teach us these things in high school. And they should have. I learned this when I took the class. And this is the thing that attracted my attention in the subject. And when I went to the final exam, I felt that it was easy. Because I am just revising everything I learned (Liam, personal communication, January 9, 2019).

In addition to developing new study skills, these four participants shared another common experience, the effective transfer of these competencies to their other classes, especially the courses they were challenged by during their first year. As Dominique shared, “The studying techniques really helped me. I use them to this day. For example, they taught us about annotations and underlighting and highlighting. And I used that for my anthropology class. And it helped me.”

### Sub-theme 2: Increased Understanding of and Engagement in the Research Process

Four students particularly emphasized the value of the course in gaining a deeper understanding of the research process and feeling more confident in conducting research. In most cases, these perceived benefits were manifested through developing information literacy skills or

effectively searching for and evaluating resources. The participants' perceived value of these skills and competencies was perhaps best illustrated in the narrative of Ash:

The homework about the peer-reviewed research articles was perfect [emphasizes "perfect"]. You have no idea how useful that was. And the library. When the library staff talked about it. I had no idea that the library can do all those things. That was, like, perfect [emphasizes "perfect"]. You have no idea how much that opens your eyes to how much you can do. I used that for my other classes (Ash, personal communication, January 12, 2019).

Tony elaborated on this aspect by sharing his perceptions of the importance of research skills for not only students' first-year adjustment, but also their overall academic success. It is interesting to note that, in Tony's words, students' perceptions of the course effects were often delayed, leading some of them to question the purpose of research assignments in the seminar:

The research that we did was really interesting and useful. Students hated that [laughs], but it's important. Because with the research part, the students learn how this course can help them, how the research is constructed, how they will conduct the research in future, how they can develop grounds for their basic research, and how they can use those techniques that were provided to them in that project (Tony, personal communication, January 16, 2019).

### Sub-theme 3: Improved Academic Writing

Closely related to sub-theme 2 is the concept of academic writing which, for many participants, represented a natural outcome of a successful research process. For five

participants, the course was particularly useful in helping them hone their writing skills, especially in terms of proper citation use and APA writing style. As Liam acknowledged:

The course helped me with my other classes a lot. First, of all the research that we have done. And the second thing are the citations. And I still use that. These two things are very important. How to do the research, how to search for it, how to look for it, and how to write it. That was really good. I did not enjoy it, but I learned a lot from it [laughs] (Liam, personal communication, January 9, 2019).

Another shared experience among these students was their ability to transfer this newly gained skill to other classes in their first year and beyond. For some participants, such as Derek, acquiring this skill was of particular importance because academic writing constituted one of the greatest barriers to his successful academic transition.

#### Relationship of Theme 1 to the Theoretical Framework

During the coding process, each researcher identified one influencing factor from the 4S transition model as it related to Theme 1. This resulted in agreement that this theme simultaneously pertained to two 4S factors: self and situation (Table 12). The main researcher associated this theme with the self factor, (i.e., outlook sub-factor) or the way in which individuals perceive and cope with the transition. Schlossberg's (1984) premise that optimism and self-efficacy represent critical aspects of one's outlook toward transition was illustrated through participants' optimistic and positive perceptions of their academic transition. For eight students in the sample, the self factor, (i.e., outlook sub-factor) was manifested through their reported increase of academic self-efficacy or their belief in the ability to successfully apply the newly gained academic skills.



At the same time, the intercoder associated Theme 2 with the situation factor, (i.e., assessment sub-factor) or the individual's assessment of the transition as either positive, negative, or benign (Schlossberg's, 1984). In that regard, the presented findings illustrate that the majority of participants perceived the course impact on their academic transition as positive. The three types of academic skills and competencies that participants directly attributed to their participation in the FYS course were study skills, research and information literacy skills, and academic writing skills.

#### Theme 2: Development of Transferable Skills and Competencies

The second theme emerged from the narratives of eight participants who reported that enrollment in the FYS course contributed to the development of skills and competencies that can be transferred to different areas of their academic, personal, and professional lives. Among the aptitudes that these students identified as the outcomes of the seminar, three sub-themes were extrapolated: (a) time-management, (b) intrapersonal skills, and (c) interpersonal skills.

##### Sub-theme 1: Time-management

The ability to use their time more effectively, and in accordance with their academic goals, surfaced from the narrated experiences of four participants. For these students, specific course activities and assignments related to time-management were highly effective in helping them learn how to organize, plan, and balance their time between not only required academic activities, but also numerous co-curricular and personal interests. Some students, such as Nathan, identified time-management skills as the most powerful impact of the seminar:

The most important thing which the FYS class made me do was time-management. We learned things like time-management and planning and we implemented it in our daily life. And not only to classes. Also how we spend our time after classes. Another thing what they taught us was never to procrastinate. So I try to do things before they are due. I have a schedule and I follow it. I learned that from the FYS class. I put all my hours there – classes, gym, studying. And I follow it. That really helps me a lot (Nathan, personal communication, January 13, 2019).

For other participants, the development of time-management skills was manifested through the adoption of various strategies for effective time use. Some examples included more productive use of break times between classes, keeping time logs and time diaries, imposing time limits for distractions, using time traps as rewards for completed activities, or increased awareness of procrastination.

### Sub-theme 2: Intrapersonal Skills

The ability to engage in the process of self-reflection, as well as to understand one's thoughts, feelings, personality, and interests emerged as transferable skills gained by four participants. The evidence of increased self-awareness was manifested differently among these four participants. For Jennifer, as an example, the course effects were the most pronounced in the area of exploring one's personality, skills, and interests:

I think the class was good for me because when I came here, I was kind of lost and then the class helped me to organize my life and to focus on important things, like to guide me. It helped me in my studies and also in my life. It helped me focus on what I really want to do. And what are the good sides of me and the bad sides. What I'm good at or

not. In that class we did activities on different types of jobs and our personalities. That was really good for me (Jennifer, personal communication, January 18, 2019).

For other participants, the development of intrapersonal skills was exhibited through their improved critical thinking and increased tendency to ask questions, examine presented evidence, consider alternative interpretations of a situation, and accept multiple perspectives. For Derek, the enrollment in the FYS course had a significant effect on his critical thinking and decision-making :

I remember that we learned about critical thinking or something like that [ethical decision-making]. How you choose, how you prioritize your activities or your behavior in life. For me, that was really helpful. Because after I finished that class, I was thinking – What if I was in that situation, for example, if I had to sacrifice some for the sake of saving more. I learned that you have to think more deeply about whether your choice can make impact on others. I think that this kind of topic is very useful and it had a great impact for me. A huge impact (Derek, personal communication, January 24, 2019).

### Sub-theme 3: Interpersonal Skills

Lastly, for two participants in the study, the benefits of participating in the seminar were reflected in their increased ability to effectively interact and collaborate with others, both in their current academic setting and in life. Developing this skill was particularly critical for Tony who shared having a strong preference for independent work. At the same time, however, he acknowledged that strong interpersonal and collaboration skills constitute a critical prerequisite for a successful academic and professional career. For that reason, he was glad that the course assisted him in overcoming this deeply-rooted inclination:

The chapter on group projects was very useful. The class helped me think critically in a team. Because I prefer working alone. I just don't prefer working in teams. I don't like listening to the problems they're facing because I usually try to solve problems on my own. So even if I'm working in a group, I just prefer to do all of their work on my own. But in this class, I actually did the teamwork for the first time (Tony, personal communication, January 16, 2019).

### Relationship of Theme 2 to the Theoretical Framework

The relationship between the theoretical framework and Theme 2 is equivalent to the relationship between the framework and Theme 1 as both themes refer to the development of participants' skills and competencies. Moreover, both themes illustrate the impact of respective skill acquisition processes on students' academic transition. Consequently, Theme 2 corresponds to two 4S factors simultaneously: self and situation (Table 12). The evidence of the self factor, (i.e., outlook sub-factor) is recorded in the students' narratives of the acquisition of new transferable skills and of their ability to successfully apply time-management, intrapersonal, and interpersonal competencies. The evidence of the situation factor, (i.e., assessment) is demonstrated in students' perceptions of these transferable skills being directly attributable to their participation in the FYS course.

### Theme 3: Increased Knowledge of Campus Resources and More Frequent Use of Campus Services

Describing their experiences in the FYS course, five participants offered evidence of how participation in the class either helped them learn about different institutional resources or promoted the use of the resources they already knew. Among these students, the course impacts

were documented in the following three areas: (a) increased knowledge of campus resources; (b) increased use of academic support services; and (c) increased use of career services.

### Sub-theme 1: Increased Knowledge of Campus Resources

As several participants disclosed, their limited use of campus resources during the first semester did not occur for the lack of willingness to seek additional support, but for the lack of knowledge about the resources available. As reported in the discussion of participants' academic challenges in the previous section of this chapter, many students openly acknowledged their need for additional support and resources in the first semester. However, a common experience among these students was the lack of awareness of campus resources and the lack of understanding about how additional support should be sought. As the findings presented in this section illustrate, the FYS course had an invaluable impact in this regard. As Ash noted:

This lady came to class and explained every single place on campus. I actually still have and carry that list since the last year. I wrote everything down. When she talked about this stuff, I didn't know what she meant, but I still wrote them down. Let me just find the list really quick [pulls up his phone]. This is it! This is the full list she was talking about, all of these stuff, like where this is, where that is... She came and she explained all of these stuff. And I was like – Hey, that's pretty useful! Math lab, places to study... These things are really good (Ash, personal communication, January 12, 2019).

The evidence provided by other participants included online resources, (e.g., library databases), study tools and other equipment available to students, (e.g., cameras, calculators, tablets, laptops), and student facilities, (e.g., labs, study rooms). It is interesting to note that some participants, such as Colin, perceived that learning about campus resources and actively using

these resources was not only crucial for their academic transition, but also for achieving the ultimate college experience comparable to that of their American peers.

The class helped me learn about campus opportunities. Many of them. I discovered that I can go to the library, that I can borrow a laptop or anything I need from technology, that I can study there, that I can go to some events, that there are many events, and how to search them. Um... what else... That I can go to counseling. That I can go to an advisor in my department that would really help me. Now, I'm almost as an ordinary student. As an American one (Colin, personal communication, January 30, 2019).

### Sub-theme 2: Increased Use of Academic Support Services

For Ash and Colin, the participation in the FYS was especially beneficial for engaging in positive academic practices, such as utilization of academic services, enhanced communication with faculty, or seeking additional guidance from academic advisors. Ash still remembers the advice his FYS instructor gave him: “She said – ‘Make sure that your professors know who you are in the class.’ And that sticks with you. You remember that.”

Similarly, Colin revealed that, in addition to a limited understanding of U.S. higher education, his first semester was characterized by limited knowledge of academic advising services and their purpose. Taking the FYS course helped him become more familiar with this concept and utilize it more frequently:

Now I know how to manage the catalog and how to choose classes, how to rate my professors. I also went to my major advisor and she told me – “You are non-degree seeking student so I'm not your advisor, but I will still help you.” That was very useful because I didn't even know that for some higher level classes I have to pass foundation

exams. But now I know much more about my education (Colin, personal communication, January 30, 2019).

### Sub-theme 3: Increased use of Career Services

As discussed in Chapter 3, career readiness represents an area of critical emphasis within the FYS curriculum. For one of the course assignments, students are required to visit career services and attend a resume workshop. For four participants, this assignment was particularly useful for their overall first-year transition. Ash was particularly pleased his institution provided this type of service:

I think that the career project was really good. If I didn't have to do it for the class, I wouldn't even know that there was a resume workshop and that you can go any time you want. I feel like that was really good. I wrote down two pages of everything they said in the workshop. That is priceless information. In Dubai, people take thousands of dirhams just to write your resume. The information I got from that workshop is, like, priceless. I think that workshop is perfect. It's good. It's really good (Ash, personal communication, January 12, 2019).

Even though the majority of participants who reported the increased use of career services listed resume workshop as an example of such practice, some participants shared different reasons visiting this service. For some students, career advising consisted of taking personality or skills tests, learning more about a particular major, or inquiring about practical opportunities related to their field of study.

### Relationship of Theme 3 to the Theoretical Framework

The relationship of the theoretical framework is comparable to the relationship of the framework to students' narratives on the perceived lack of institutional support discussed within Research Question 1. In the previous section, students' perceived lack of institutional understanding and opportunities denied were associated with the factor of support. Comparably, students' perceptions of the course impacts on increased use of campus resources presented in this section serve as the evidence of the alignment of this theme with the support factor (Table 12). In particular, the presented findings demonstrate the alignment of Theme 3 with two sub-factors within the support factor: type (institution) and function (aid).

#### Theme 4: Positive Impact on Student Adjustment within the First Year

The last theme that was developed from participants' narratives was the course impact on various aspects of student adjustment within their first-year. Five participants reported that attending the seminar in their first semester led them to develop more positive attitudes toward their new academic setting and achieve a smoother transition to the new environment. Before discussing the particular benefits of the course, it is important to disclose that several participants shared that they had observed the negative attitudes of their peers toward the course at the beginning of the semester. Some of them even described this phenomenon as peer pressure where even those students who saw the value of the course felt pressured by their classmates to label the seminar as useless, easy, and unnecessary. As Tony explained:

There are a lot of people who don't know these things and who need these resources. But it's a peer pressure. Because of the peer pressure, the people who think that the class is necessary for them eventually start saying – "Yes, this class is not good, I don't need this



class”. Because of the peer pressure, the people who need this class start thinking that they also don’t need that class. And they stop putting effort in the class. And that’s where the problem is (Tony, personal communication, January 16, 2019).

Alicia attested to this perception by adding that many students who initially questioned the purpose of the course were the first to apply the strategies taught in the seminar:

First couple of weeks our class had a common opinion that the class was totally useless, but in the end, I realized that the people who were screaming the loudest, how useless the class was, are the one who needed it most. Right now I’m talking to them and I’m seeing that it actually affected them. They are using the methods introduced in the class right now. For example, there were some theoretical expressions that we heard in the FYS and just yesterday my friend repeated that in a conversational manner and I was like – Oh, really, so you just quoted that? (Alicia, personal communication, January 21, 2019).

At the same time, many participants expressed the belief that, once students overcame their initial preconceptions about the course, they became more capable of successfully applying the recommended success strategies. Expanding on the specific course impacts on the first-year adjustment, participants shared different examples. For Ash, the seminar was especially beneficial for promoting his cultural integration within the first year:

It was useful because the instructor would just give random tips that you would learn about maybe three months later. It was the stuff that internationals don’t know. She taught us personal experiences that we should know as international students in America. So she wasn’t teaching that class to us like she would teach it to American students. And

that was a really good thing. She put more emphasis on what she thought was useful to us. And it was really useful (Ash, personal communication, January 12, 2019).

Nathan believed that the seminar was especially useful for understanding the importance of social support during the first year of college. He justified this stance by sharing that, after completing his research project in the FYS course, he started seeking additional peer and social support:

My research project was on the success of international students. I read about the roommate pairing program and I learned it helps us adjust better. I was lucky that my roommates were second-year local American students. I learned that I was matched with them for a reason. They were already there and they could help me to merge into the university and help me with those things that I didn't know. Small things like opening a bank account, getting my carrier network. And they helped me a lot (Nathan, personal communication, January 13, 2019).

Several students particularly emphasized that their first-year adjustment was not so much promoted by the course content as by the commitment of their FYS instructors. In that regard, Ash provided an illustrative metaphor:

You know those tools that have everything in them, like a knife and scissors? My instructor was like the ultimate version of that tool, with all the stuff she told us. It wasn't just about the book. She was a universal teacher. She would teach about everything. You see, I'm having so much fun just talking about that class because she was so dynamic and everything was different (Ash, personal communication, January 12, 2019).

Another common theme among the participants who shared a positive experience from the course was their perception that their FYS faculty were mindful of the fact that they were teaching to international students and were willing to adjust course content and their delivery style to their audience. As Nathan concluded, “The class really helped me adapting to university. Frankly speaking, I cannot recall anything that was totally useless. Everything we were taught in that class, we used somehow.”

#### Relationship of Theme 4 to the Theoretical Framework

After carefully examining students’ narratives of course impacts on their first-year adjustment, the coders agreed that this theme corresponded to two factors of the 4S transition model: self and strategies (Table 12). First, the findings provided the evidence for aligning Theme 2 with the factor of self and its outlook subfactor, (i.e., the way in which individuals perceive the transition). Five students from the sample regarded their FYS course participation as a positive experience which significantly contributed to their first-year adjustment. Simultaneously, the presented findings were used to associate Theme 2 with the factor or strategies and its responses sub-factor, (i.e., coping responses during the transition process). As the factor of self has already been discussed in connection to several themes, more emphasis in this section was dedicated to the factor of situation and its responses sub-factor.

According to Schlossberg (1984), individuals in transition can develop three different coping responses: (a) responses that modify the situation, (e.g., negotiation, optimistic action, self-reliance vs. advice seeking, exercise of potency vs. helpless resignation); (b) responses that control the meaning of the problem, (e.g., positive comparisons, selective ignoring, substitution of rewards); and (c) responses that help the individual manage the stress caused by transition,

(e.g., emotional discharge, self-assertion, passive forbearance). Both coders concluded that the findings presented in this section most closely corresponded to the sub-factor of responses that modify the situation. As students' narratives illustrated, their coping mechanisms for responding to academic transition included exercising optimistic action, advice seeking, and potency. Namely, the participants whose narratives were presented in this section shared the collective experience of actively seeking and applying the recommendations provided in their FYS course to achieve a smoother adjustment to their new educational setting.

#### Results: Central Question

The themes developed from responses to sub-question 1 and sub-question 2 served as the foundation for investigating the central research question: How do international undergraduate students enrolled in a first-year seminar (FYS) course at a large, public, research university describe their academic experiences?

The synthesis of the previously-presented findings resulted in the intercoder agreement that academic experiences of international first-year students enrolled in the FYS course can be described as challenging, especially in terms of understanding U.S. higher education, establishing relationships with American peers, navigating academic differences, and perceiving the lack of institutional understanding (Table 9). At the same time, the evidence presented in this chapter demonstrated that participation in the FYS course had an overall positive impact on students' academic experiences during the first year, especially in terms of developing academic skills and competencies, developing transferable skills and competencies, increased use of campus resources, and overall adjustment within the first year (Table 11).

After situating these findings within the framework of the 4S transition model, it was

agreed that the academic challenges that participants experienced during their first year most closely corresponded to the following three S factors: situation, (i.e., previous experience with a similar transition); self, (i.e., personal and demographic characteristics); and support, (i.e., type and function). Lastly, analyzing the perceived course impacts through the lenses of the theoretical framework resulted in the agreement that benefits of the seminar were recorded for all four S factors. The most prominent course effects were identified for the following sub-factors of each factor: assessment, (i.e., situation); outlook, (i.e., self); type and function, (i.e., support); and responses, (i.e., strategies).

### Summary

Chapter 5 portrayed the findings from this study of international students' academic experiences during the first year of college. Additionally, the themes and sub-themes presented in this chapter reflected the participants' perceptions of the FYS impacts on these experiences. The derived findings were organized using Schlossberg's (1984) transition model which served as the theoretical framework for this study. The chapter concluded with providing an encompassing perspective of all established themes and the corresponding constructs of the theoretical framework.

## CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Overview

The concluding chapter presents the discussion of study findings which emerged from a complex process of data analysis. The findings obtained through the interviews with 10 participants and researchers' journals have been organized around each sub-question and are discussed within the context of the theoretical framework and the relevant contemporary literature. Additionally, this chapter outlines the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the findings. Limitations and delimitations of the study are recognized, and recommendations for future research are proposed. The chapter concludes with the study summary.

### Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to describe the academic experiences of international students enrolled in the First-Year Seminar (FYS) course in a large, public institution of higher education in the United States.

An examination was conducted of the essence of participants' academic experiences and the influence of the FYS course on their overall college transition. A qualitative phenomenological method of inquiry was employed to extensively explore students' academic experiences during their first year of college. To achieve this purpose, two sub-questions were formulated:

1. What challenges, if any, do international undergraduate students experience during their first year of college?

2. What impacts, if any, does the enrollment in the FYS course have on academic experiences of international undergraduate students during their first year of college?

Due to the complexity of participants' experiences during the first year of college, the various facets of their academic transition, and the multifold roles of the FYS course in this process, particular attention in this chapter has been dedicated to ensuring the clarity and coherence of the discussion. Thus, the discussion of study findings has been organized around the two sub-questions. For each of the questions, the discussion is presented in connection to the prior literature and the 4S transition model: situation, self, support, and strategies.

#### Sub-question 1: Discussion of International Students' Academic Challenges

The findings related to the first sub-question revealed that all 10 participants experienced some academic challenges during their first year of college. The analysis of the data pertaining to this sub-question demonstrated that the nature of these challenges was context-related and characterized by several differences in students' academic experiences. Consequently, under the overarching theme of academic challenges, four sub-themes were derived: (a) understanding U.S. higher education; (b) establishing relationships with American peers; (c) navigating academic differences; and d) perceived lack of institutional understanding and/or opportunities denied. Regarding these four themes, special consideration was given to their relationship to the four factors of Schlossberg's (1984) transition model: situation, self, support, and strategies. In particular, the four themes of students' academic challenges were interpreted as the manifestation of the following three S factors: situation, (i.e., previous experience with a similar transition); self, (i.e., personal and demographic characteristics and/or psychological resources); and support, (i.e., type and function).

### Sub-question 1: Relationship of Findings to the Literature

As discussed in Chapter 2, the challenges of international students transitioning to a new cultural and educational setting have been explored from varied standpoints in contemporary literature. At the same time, however, the research efforts to identify and respond to the academic challenges of this student population have not been commensurate with the efforts to explore the issues of their social, cultural, or linguistic adjustment. In that regard, the findings related to sub-question 1, which focused solely on international students' academic transition, represent a much-needed contribution to the field. Additionally, although some findings in this study validated the existing knowledge in the area of international students' college transition, this research simultaneously produced new findings regarding the academic factors that hinder the successful adjustment of this student group.

The evidence illustrating participants' challenges in understanding U.S. higher education simultaneously corroborated and advanced the conclusions of prior studies in several important ways. First, Andrade (2005), in particular, identified unfamiliarity with the American educational system as one of the main factors that characterized international students' first-year of college. However, the sub-factors of this challenge remained broadly defined as the lack of knowledge of American culture and English proficiency. In contrast, the present study provided a much narrower focus on the specific aspects of international students' difficulties in understanding American education, such as exploring academic majors, navigating through general education requirements, and even grasping and successfully applying a seemingly familiar concept such as a course syllabus.



Additionally, a number of scholars reiterated that international students were, on average, less satisfied than their domestic peers with the use of campus services, mainly academic advising (Kim et al., 2015; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2015). The evidence presented in this study generated much-needed knowledge regarding the possible reasons for such dissatisfaction. As the participants in this study revealed, their limited use of institutional services was directly related to their limited understanding of the resources available, lack of guidance on how, when, or why such resources should be utilized, or the difficulties in identifying the opportunities in which they, as international students, could participate.

Second, the sub-theme of understanding academic differences between American education and that of international students' home countries has also obtained considerable attention in the literature. In that regard, this study validated some of the prior findings while also proposing new insights. For example, several researchers have already postulated that international students' academic transitions were dependent on successfully navigating the pedagogical differences in teaching methods (Kim et al., 2015, 2017; Leong, 2015). Similarly, the participants in this study also shared that their first year of college was characterized by understanding the variety of teaching modalities employed in their new educational setting. At the same time, however, the presented evidence demonstrated that international students' challenges in navigating academic differences extended beyond teaching methods and also included the differences in content/course terminology and differences in demonstrating content mastery.

Although the literature in this area usually associated international students' challenges in understanding content terminology to language barriers (Andrade, 2005; Leong, 2015), the

participants' narratives portrayed in this study provided an alternative interpretation. Namely, for the students in this study, these difficulties did not emerge due to the language barriers. Rather, they were a result of either cultural differences or the lack of prior academic experiences of a similar kind. Of particular importance is the finding that, for some participants in this study, the inability to successfully navigate these types of academic differences had a negative impact on their academic self-efficacy.

Third, the sub-theme of international students' perceived lack of institutional understanding was usually discussed in the literature within the context of their low satisfaction with campus services. In that regard, several researchers described this phenomenon as either dissatisfaction with academic services (Kim et al., 2015, 2017) or overall campus environment (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). Building on these findings, the researcher in the present study proposed evidence to associate the causes of such dissatisfaction with the students' perception of either limited institutional understanding of their academic challenges or limited opportunities in which they, as international students, could participate. For some participants in this study, the most prominent challenge in their first year was perceiving college staff as either not willing or not able to understand the academic challenges they were experiencing. For others, this theme was manifested through feeling discouraged from investing their full efforts into academic tasks due to knowing that many opportunities available to their domestic peers were not available to them. These two findings provide prime lenses for interpreting and understanding the frequently reported phenomenon of international students' low levels of satisfaction with campus services and resources.

Lastly, the sub-theme of difficulties in establishing relationships with American peers represented a recurring concept in the literature on international students. This study substantiated the existing knowledge on international students' social concerns, particularly in connection with their lack of interpersonal skills (Kim et al., 2017), difficulties in establishing friendships during the freshman year (Heng, 2018), and frequently adopted pattern of resorting to voluntary isolation (Rabia, 2017). The findings in this study, however, broadened the understanding of this phenomenon in one critical aspect. Even though several participants confirmed the recurring literature pattern by disclosing their inability to establish contact with American peers, some students revealed that upon making contact with domestic students, they were not successful in maintaining these relationships over time. Knowing that the establishment of cross-cultural relationships on campus is not a guarantee of their successful continuation represents a valuable research novelty in this field.

The findings in this study were also unique in demonstrating that international students' inability to establish relationships with their American peers should no longer be perceived simply as a social challenge. As several participants emphasized, this phenomenon needs to be recognized as an academic challenge due to its strong potency to affect international student success. As these students explained, the academic achievement of students, especially international students, greatly depends on their ability to secure a stable and long-lasting social support system.

#### Sub-question 1: Relationship of the Theoretical Framework to the Literature

As illustrated in Chapter 5, the alignment of research findings related to sub-question 1 with the elements of 4S transition model demonstrates that international students' academic

challenges most closely correspond to the factors of situation, (i.e., previous experience with a similar transition); self, (i.e., personal and demographic characteristics or psychological resources); and support, (i.e., type and function). Within the factor of situation, or context-specific characteristics of a transition, the participants' experiences exhibited most evidence of past experience or the lack of experience with a similar transition. For the students in this study, the factor of self denoted both demographic characteristics, such as national origin or culture, and psychological resources utilized during the transition, namely commitment, values, outlook, and self-efficacy. Regarding the factor of support, the findings illustrated that the participants were most challenged by establishing the network of American friends, gaining institutional understanding, (i.e., support type), and pursuing campus opportunities, (i.e., support function).

Strategies were the only factor that did not emerge from participants responses in connection to the research question one. A possible explanation for such result can be sought in Schlosberg's (1984) definition of strategies as coping mechanisms aimed to prevent or alleviate transitional challenges. Examining students' responses through the lenses of this definition revealed participants' inability to develop strategies that would prevent or alleviate the occurrence of academic challenges during their first-year transition.

Regarding the factors that have emerged from participants' responses (situation, self, and support), all three have been of great interest to scholars exploring international student transition and adjustment. For instance, the literature positively associated both the support type, (i.e., friends or institution) and the support function, (i.e., aid) with multiple aspects of international students' adjustment. Social support, in particular, was found to be positively related to international students' cross-cultural adjustment (Baba & Hosoda, 2014), and university support

and aid were proven to have a positive effect on students' psychological well-being, school-life satisfaction, and reduced psychological stress (Cho & Yu, 2015).

Additionally, the factor of self, and particularly its sub-factor of culture identified in this study, represents frequently cited characteristics of international students' academic, social, and cultural transition. According to Leong (2015), even though a variety of self sub-factors, such as language proficiency or coping ability, were found to affect international students' experiences and satisfaction with U.S. education, the sub-factor of culture surfaced as the most influential in shaping these experiences for better or worse. Some studies even provided evidence of the association between the factor of self, (i.e., culture) and the factor of support, (i.e., social support) in the experiences of international students. In that regard, cultural barriers were identified among the most influential factors affecting international students' inability to accomplish successful social adjustment and establish an adequate social support system in their new setting (Li & Zizzi, 2018).

What has remained consistent across these studies has been their dedicated focus on students' social and cultural adjustment, with little to no discussion on the potential interrelationship of these types of adjustment with participants' academic transition. In connection with that limitation, this study provided a unique approach to exploring the role of support, self, and situation factors in international students' academic transition, as well as the ways in which the deficit of these elements can lead to various academic challenges among these students. In particular, the presented findings offer various examples of the manifestation of support, self, and situation factors in students' academic experiences, whether through the lack of

prior experience with similar situations, the lack of necessary support, or the impact of participants' demographic and psychological characteristics.

#### Sub-question 2: Discussion of First-Year Seminar (FYS) Course Impacts

The findings related to the sub-question 2 revealed that all participants in this study reported some type of FYS course impact on their academic experiences during the first year of college. The students' narratives related to this sub-question illustrated that the nature of course impacts was varied and multidimensional. Thus, the overarching theme of FYS course impacts was presented in relation to the following four sub-themes or specific course effects: (a) development of academic skills and competencies; (b) development of transferrable skills and competencies; (c) increased knowledge of campus resources and use of campus services; and (d) improved adjustment within the first year. Additionally, each theme was examined in connection to its relationship to the four factors of Schlossberg's (1984) transition model: situation, self, support, and strategies. As a result, the four themes of FYS course impacts were associated with the following factors and sub-factors of the transition model: situation, (i.e., assessment), self, (i.e., outlook), support, (i.e., type and function), and strategies, (i.e., responses that control the situation).

#### Sub-question 2: Relationship of Findings to the Literature

Comparable to the discussion of sub-question 1, the examination of findings related to sub-question 2 in connection to the literature revealed that this study validated the existing knowledge in several critical aspects while also generating further evidence for understanding the phenomenon. As presented in Chapter 2, a considerable body of literature has been amassed

to record FYS course impacts on students' academic transition, integration, and success.

However, the evidence discussed in Chapter 2 also allowed for the conclusion that the seminar impacts remained less frequently examined for the international student population. Therefore, the summative findings related to sub-question 2 constitute a timely and valuable contribution to both the scholarship on FYS courses and the research on international students. Each of the four themes related to sub-question 2 corroborated the existing knowledge about course effects on diverse student populations, revealing new insights regarding the extent to which these impacts can be extended to international students.

First, it is not surprising that the development of academic skills and competencies represented one of the most frequent themes in the literature on FYS courses. Among the institutions offering a course of this kind, the most common learning outcomes included connecting students with the institution, helping them familiarize with campus resources, or developing students' academic skills. In fact, approximately 40% of higher education institutions implementing a FYS course reported offering an academic-themed seminar (NRC, 2013). The purpose of an academic FYS course, according to Swing (2002) has been to promote students' academic success by improving their cognitive skills and critical thinking, promoting positive academic behaviors, and improving the knowledge of academic services. Additionally, considering the fact that the FYS course examined in this study was classified as an academic-themed seminar, the emergence of this theme from the research findings is consistent with the majority of prior researchers in this area.

For example, the evidence presented in this study regarding the course impacts on international students' development of study skills paralleled that of the seminar effectiveness for

improving study strategies among FTIC student populations (Cambridge-Williams et al., 2016; Hoops & Artrip, 2016). The development of students' writing and analytical skills represents another commonality between the findings in this study and those of prior researchers. For international students in this study, the FYS course was especially useful in helping them adjust to the APA writing style and strengthening their information literacy skills, an effect that has also been demonstrated for the course participants in other studies, mainly FTIC students (Birol et al., 2013; Jessup-Anger, 2011). The unique contribution of this research, however, is reflected in documenting that this particular seminar's impacts can extend beyond the FTIC student population to diverse student groups such as international students.

Second, the seminar impact on the development of transferable skills and competencies illustrates another parallel between the existing literature and the findings in this study. For instance, the international students in this study especially benefited from the course in terms of developing new or improving their existing time-management practices, an effect that has already been documented for FTIC students (Hoops & Artrip, 2016). Of specific interest in this study was the prior literature evidence of the seminar's impact on the development of social skills and increased engagement in teamwork and collaboration (Kuh et al., 2006, Mills, 2010). The corresponding finding from this research becomes even more critical after discovering that, for participants in this study, social integration and peer interactions represented one of the leading academic challenges discussed within sub-question 1. Consequently, the findings from this study not only advanced the existing research in this domain by making it pertinent to international students, but it also provided the direct evidence of the seminar's potency to address the academic challenges experienced by the participants.



Third, the increased familiarity with or use of campus resources emerged as another common theme in the literature on FYS courses. This finding did not come as a surprise, given that introducing students to campus resources represents one of the common objectives for institutions offering the course. Among the colleges and universities implementing FYS classes, more than 40% reported introducing an extended orientation seminar which specially focused on familiarizing students with campus services and resources. Consequently, given such a wide prevalence of college transition seminars, the scholarly evidence in this domain is rich and multifaceted.

Comparable to the findings in this study is the scholarly evidence documenting FYS participants' increased use of academic support services (Bender, 2011, Mills, 2010), more frequent use of career advising (Mills, 2010), and increased campus involvement (Keup, 2005; Schrader & Brown, 2008). However, for all these studies, the findings were derived by examining the course effectiveness among FTIC students. Thus, the distinctive contribution of the present study to the field is reflected in extending the existing literature findings to the international student population. Moreover, the findings related to this theme become particularly important when examined in connection with the results related to sub-question 1 whereby the familiarity with and utilization of campus resources was identified as one of the leading academic challenges for participants in this study. Thus, the findings pertaining to sub-question 2 provide a rationale for using the seminar as a tool to alleviate this type of challenge among international first-year students and to further promote students' campus involvement.

Lastly, the seminar impacts students' overall adjustment within the first year, representing another critical focus of the literature of FYS and student transition. Such attention

is to be expected, knowing that students' connection with their new institutions was identified as one of the primary intended outcomes among the institutions implementing first-year seminars (NRC, 2013). Similar to the sub-themes discussed here, the findings from this study related to the course potency to promote students' first-year adjustment reflected a number of prior scholarly conclusions, while also generating new ones.

For example, it is especially interesting to mention that the phenomenon of initial negative perceptions toward the seminar that emerged in this study had been present in the reviewed literature. For international participants in this research, this phenomenon was manifested as peer pressure to perceive the seminar as useless, easy, and unnecessary or the students' resistance to admit the need for the course and recognize their academic deficiencies. This finding validated the research of Gordon (2014) who examined the perceptions of non-traditional students in a community college toward participation in a FYS class. Comparable to the findings in the present study, Gordon (2014) concluded that students' negative perceptions of the course significantly changed over time. Particularly significant was the fact that the change in students' perceptions of the course remained consistent not only between two different populations, non-traditional and international students, but also between two different types of institutions – community colleges and research universities.

Also comparable to the literature on FYS classes was the finding that, for the participants in this study, the seminar had a significant influence on improved social and cultural integration, seeking social support, and being more satisfied with their academic experience. These findings confirmed the prior research which showed that, for FTIC students, course participation improved overall adjustment to college (Dunn et al., 2013), social engagement (Enke, 2011;

Keup, 2005), and the development of positive perceptions of college education (Pittendrigh et al., 2016). In addition to extending these findings beyond the FTIC population, the researcher, through this study, has made another notable contribution. As demonstrated in Chapter 2 and Chapter 5, these particular factors (college satisfaction, social integration, and social support) constitute not only a recurrent theme in the literature on international student adjustment, but represent the main academic challenges of participants in this study. Therefore, the findings in this research simultaneously advanced the scholarship on the FYS courses, including their effectiveness for supporting diverse student groups, and the literature on international student adjustment to U.S. higher education.

#### Sub-question 2: Relationship of Theoretical Framework to the Literature

As presented in Chapter 5, the findings related to the 2 corresponded to all four elements of the transition model simultaneously. The four elements of the framework were manifested through their following sub-factors: (a) situation – assessment of the situation as positive, negative, or benign; (b) self – psychological resources, namely outlook, self-efficacy, optimism, and commitment; (c) support – type and function; and (d) strategies – responses that modify the situation, namely optimistic action, self-reliance, and exercise of potency.

Regarding the factor of situation, the findings in this study demonstrated that international students assessed the seminar impacts on their academic experiences as positive. Students' assessment of their experiences in the FYS seminar course as positive validated the findings of prior researchers, especially in terms of assessing course participation as beneficial for students' college satisfaction (Hendel, 2007) or assessing the campus environment as more supportive after completing the course (Mills, 2010).

In terms of the self factor, the psychological resources, especially self-efficacy, employed by students in transition constitute a critical focus of the literature on first-year students, both domestic and international. For eight students in this study, this factor was manifested through their reported increase of academic self-efficacy or their belief in the ability to successfully apply the skills they obtained by participating in the course. This finding is consistent with that of Cabridge-Williams (2013) who demonstrated that the enrollment in FYS courses had a positive impact on the increase of academic self-efficacy among FTIC students.

In the context of this study, the factor of support was exhibited through the students' reports about the course impacts on their increased use of campus services and resources. As already discussed, this finding corroborated the existing evidence on the impact of FYS courses on FTIC students' willingness to seek institutional support, (i.e., support type) through utilization of campus resources and services (Hoops & Artrip, 2016) or to seek help, (i.e., support function) from college faculty, staff, and academic or career advisors (Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Mills, 2010).

Lastly, the factor of strategies or one's coping responses during the transition was manifested among the participants in this study through their application of responses aimed to modify the situation. As evidenced by students' narratives, course participation led them to respond to the challenges of their academic transition by exercising optimistic action, advice seeking, and self-assertion. The significance of this finding is reflected in the fact that the strategies employed by the participants in this study challenged the dominant findings in the literature addressing the coping responses of international students.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the academic experiences of international students transitioning to a new educational setting were, in most cases, characterized by responses opposite to those reported in this research. In contrast to the international students who reported resorting to responses aimed to control the situation in the present study, prior researchers found most evidence of students' helpless resignation (Kim et al, 2015; Rabia, 2017; Zhao et al., 2005). Given that the strategies and coping responses of the participants in this study were reported as directly related to their course participation, these findings provide a revolutionary insight into the less frequently explored role of the seminar. According to the findings presented in this study and explored through the lenses of the existing literature, the seminar displayed a potency to be effectively used as a tool for overcoming the deeply ingrained and adverse coping mechanisms historically adopted by international students in transition.

### Implications and Recommendations

The findings in this study reveal several implications for First-Year Seminar (FYS) programs, International Student Services (ISS), and the hosting higher education institutions (HEIs). These implications are discussed in the following sections, along with the recommendations for each group.

#### Recommendations: First-Year Seminar (FYS) Programs

Several suggestions for the development, design, and implementation of FYS programs arise from this study. These recommendations can be applied by all stakeholders in the FYS programs hierarchy chain – the leadership of First-Year Experience (FYE), the directors or program coordinators of First-Year Seminars (FYS), and the course faculty.

First, based on this study, FYS courses should represent a required First-Year Experience tool aimed to develop and secure pathways for international students' successful transition to U.S. education. Additionally, the study findings illustrate the necessity for first-year programs to provide sections of FYS for their international student population, as well as to identify how the seminar curriculum can be redesigned for these class sections. In that regard, the data from this study provide First-Year Experience programs with the direction for seeking further knowledge and insights necessary to consider relevant changes to their FYS curricula for international student sections.

As documented by this research, there are several focus areas in which the FYS course curricula needs to be improved to better meet the academic needs of international students. First, increased attention needs to be added to introducing course participants to U.S. higher education, especially in regard to providing a detailed overview of general education requirements and engaging students in the major exploration process. Second, the curriculum for international student sections needs to actively promote campus services and resources and to identify the opportunities that pertain to international students. Consequently, the discussion of opportunities in which international students are not eligible to participate should be removed from the curriculum in these class sections and supplemented with the resources and opportunities that are more appropriate for this student group. As Colin recommended:

I don't think that all of these definitions from the textbook should be learned. I guess that for making a good transition you should just know about the U.S. system of education and that's all. I think that you should tell more about internships, about campus

opportunities. After that one semester in the class, an international student should know all about the campus (Colin, personal communication, January 30, 2019).

Beyond the course curriculum, another important recommendation emerged concerning course faculty. As documented by the findings in this study, FYS faculty play a pivotal role in the academic transition of international students. The overall recommendation in this regard reflects a critical need for training FYS faculty in a way that would advance their cultural competence and ensure culturally responsive teaching practices. At the time of this study, the FYS program did not offer any separate training for the faculty working with international students other than the standard training program required of all course instructors. Additionally, for the majority of these instructors, teaching the seminar constituted a peripheral duty in addition to their regular student affairs or faculty appointments.

The importance of culturally responsive teaching practices is best emphasized in the narratives of several participants for whom the satisfaction with the course (or the lack thereof), was directly related to the perceptions of course instructors as willing (or unwilling) to adapt to the academic needs of their international students. As illustrated in the previous chapter, several participants attributed their satisfaction with college transition directly to the efforts made by their FYS faculty to adjust their teaching methods and course content to the needs of this student group. In contrast, some participants admitted that their first-year transition was further challenged by their FYS faculty teaching approaches. As Alicia admitted:

The professor was less than motivated. He was under-motivated to teach. Literally. His body language, his attitude. He made a lot of excuses. It was really an easy A, but I didn't like that. Professor should explain everything in the presentation but also have some

additional information for us specifically. It's a necessity. Because it's clear – we are international students. He could do some research about what we actually need (Alicia, personal communication, January 21, 2019).

Lastly, the findings in this study imply that additional focus in the seminar needs to be dedicated to international students' social integration. Even though the FYS course examined in this study was designed to strengthen students' academic skills and competencies, study participants agreed that their social integration, especially with their domestic peers, constituted a critical aspect of a successful academic transition. Therefore, regardless of the approach that FYS programs choose to promote participants' social integration, these approaches need to be purposefully targeted toward stimulating social connections of international students with their American peers, as well as toward ensuring that these connections are continuously maintained and preserved. As Derek proposed:

The class should have more activities for international students to experience the U.S. and the local people. I was always thinking that if the FYS could improve in some way, it should be half academic and half outgoing activities. And outgoing activity is not just going somewhere. It's also learning something. For example, going to some kind of place which has a huge American culture. When you talk to a local, maybe some of them share similar interests and they can be a friend. FYS class could include this kind of thing instead of just learning how to be a student. It should also be about learning how to be a person that maintains a piece of this society (Derek, personal communication, January 24, 2019).



According to the literature in this area, integrating Derek's recommendation into future FYS planning has the potential of benefiting both international students and their domestic peers. As Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2013) documented, local students record numerous educational benefits from interacting with international peers such as learning a foreign language, improving cultural competency, formulating creative ideas or solutions, advancing quantitative abilities, or mastering the use of technology. Consequently, developing course activities aimed to promote the connection of international and domestic students should not only assist in addressing the academic challenges demonstrated by the participants in this study but should support the academic success of American students as well. As Colin explained:

I think that the class should include some kind of meeting or conversation with local students. That can help the local student learn more about other cultures but also the international student to learn more about the U.S. If you're doing that, it's not just a benefit for international student, but also the local student. Because we, humans, learn things from conversation, interaction, and not just knowledge (Colin, personal communication, January 30, 2019).

On a positive note, the findings that emerged in connection to sub-question 2 demonstrated that the current design of the FYS curriculum includes several components proven as effective in alleviating students' academic challenges during the first year. As participants' revealed, these components involved an increased focus on the development of academic and transferable skills and increased familiarity with academic and career services. Consequently, FYS programs offering class sections for international students could apply these findings to strengthen their course curricula by increasing the emphasis on educating participants about

campus resources, thereby potentially improving their academic transition. For the institutions aiming to introduce special course sections for international students, these findings imply that the seminar design for this student group needs to be modified compared to that of FTIC students by incorporating the previously noted strategies proven as effective for participants' academic adjustment.

#### Recommendations: International Student Services (ISS)

There are several ways in which the findings in this study can assist student affairs practitioners working with the international student population. The presented results can serve as an analytical model for approaching the complex practice of supporting international students who arrive on campuses with diverse backgrounds and varied academic experiences. Overall, the participants' intercultural and inter-educational experiences portrayed in this study generate several suggestions for student affairs practitioners working with international first-year students, all of which emphasize the need for a culturally responsive and proactive model of international student support.

First, International Student Services (ISS) needs to have an increased awareness of the invisible consequences of isolating international students from their American peers through first-year programming. As the findings in this study illustrated, hosting separate first-year programs for international students can be both beneficial and disadvantageous for this student group. For instance, introducing a FYS section for international students can allow for an increased focus on the elements which emerged as critical for their academic integration, the elements that most domestic first-year students are already familiar with, (e.g., the characteristics of U.S. education, general education requirements, academic terminology).

At the same time, however, the findings in this study revealed that, in some cases, providing separate first-year programming for international students can have adverse consequences on their overall college transition. As illustrated by the experiences of the participants, such adverse effects primarily included difficulties in establishing relationships with domestic peers and limited opportunities for participating in the programming designed for FTIC students. Even though separate first-year programming provided many international undergraduates with a chance to receive additional guidance unique to their adjustment needs, ISS failed to recognize the underlying adverse effects of such practices.

International students in this study clearly expressed a desire to integrate with Americans and feel a sense of community in the U.S. university. However, many found themselves in environments that limited such opportunities. Therefore, both FYS programs and ISS share the responsibility of developing cross-cultural programs that would facilitate interaction between domestic and international students. More importantly, as perceived by several participants in this study and supported by the literature, the practice of involving local students in cross-cultural programming also benefits their learning and academic adjustment.

The first step in this direction should be introducing new, or redesigning the existing ISS, programs in a way that would promote cross-cultural relationships and connections between domestic and international students. Assisting international students in establishing a strong social support system requires ISS practitioners to be aware of the resources that can facilitate international students' contact with domestic students who are actively seeking to learn more about different cultures and establish cross-cultural relationships. The fact that all participants in

this study expressed a desire for additional culture-oriented activities serves as the best indicator of the urgency to address this particular deficiency of the ISS programming.

Lastly, it needs to be acknowledged that the extent to which the recommended practices can be included in a FYS course depends on many factors, such as the purpose of the class, (e.g., academic, transitional, pre-professional), its classification, (i.e., course topic, credit value), and overall learning outcomes. As a result, not every FYS course will allow for the opportunity to incorporate all of the recommended practices. Thus, the recommendations that cannot be addressed by the FYS programs should remain the responsibility of ISS services. The two programs need to work in partnership to ensure that all critical aspects of international students' academic transition are addressed through shared efforts and that the students' challenges that cannot be resolved by either of the two offices are entrusted to other relevant units on campus.

#### Recommendations: Higher Education Institutions (HEI)

The critical aspects of international students' academic transition that cannot be addressed by either FYS programs or ISS should remain the responsibility of higher education institutions and their respective campus units. The findings in this study provide several recommendations for improving campus practices aimed to support the academic transition of international students.

First, American colleges and universities can use the findings in this research to evaluate their current practices and programs for international students. Institutions that have no specific programs designed to guide international student academic transition can use this study to develop such programming. In that regard, this study presents valuable evidence of both international students' academic needs during the first year of college and the practices proven as

effective in responding to some of these needs. Therefore, this research has contributed to both higher education theory and practice by proposing some of the mechanisms that universities can adopt to positively influence the academic transition of their international students. A variety of different entities working to improve international students' experiences, primarily faculty, administrators, and student affairs professionals, can benefit from the insights and thoughts shared by the participants.

Additionally, this study particularly emphasized the necessity for higher education faculty, staff, and administrators to develop a better understanding of their international students, accommodate their needs, and facilitate their transition. For this goal to be achieved, all parties involved need to strengthen their multicultural competence and awareness of campus opportunities and resources available to this group of students. Some examples of such practices include cross-cultural workshops for university staff or separate training for FYS faculty (or other faculty) teaching class sections composed of international students.

The overall recommendation for higher education institutions that can be inferred from this study is the necessity for establishing open communication among all campus units involved in the international student academic transition and success. Just as FYS programs and ISS need to work together to share their insights on students' needs and direct their combined efforts and resources toward meeting these needs, other relevant campus units need to be included as well. The extent of their involvement and the type of entities to be utilized in the process will undoubtedly depend on the institutional type and size, as well as the characteristics of the overall international student body. What emerges as a joint recommendation for all HEIs is the need for engaging the university community as a whole to contribute to the academic transition of its

international students. Also presented in this research is the crucial finding that such an effort and the collaboration of campus units toward this common goal would be equally beneficial for all parties involved – the international student, the domestic student, and the institution.

### Limitations and Delimitations

The findings in this study are characterized by several limitations which, even though not under the control of the researcher, may affect the applicability of the results (Mauch & Park, (2003). First, this research was conducted at one large public university in the southeast. Therefore, its findings may be unique to this institution and not comparable to colleges and universities of different types and sizes. Before applying these results to other institutional settings, higher education professionals must examine the context and circumstances of this study and the extent to which these circumstances are comparable to those of other institutions.

Second, this research was conducted to examine the impacts of one type of First-Year Seminar (FYS) course – an academic-themed seminar with standardized content across all course sections, including the international one. Therefore, the investigation of different course types, even in a similar institutional context, may yield different findings in terms of course impacts and their potency to support international students' academic transition. Nationally, more than 40% of HEIs reported offering a transitional or extended-orientation seminar; nearly 40% implemented an academic FYS course; and the remaining 20% opted for other seminar types (NRC, 2013). Consequently, the examination of different course models may produce either more pronounced or weaker effects for some learning outcomes reported in this study.

Third, the participation in this study was open to FYS course participants who completed the seminar during 2017 (fall, spring, and summer terms). Nationally, nearly six in 10 institutions

reported formally assessing their First-Year Seminars for the purpose of program enhancement (NRC, 2013). The seminar examined in this study follows this national practice. The course is formally assessed every year and its curriculum is constantly revised and improved. Thus, the findings in this study are limited to the characteristics of the course curriculum implemented in 2017. Conducting this research at a different point in time and after additional curricular improvements may yield different findings.

The fourth group of limitations common to all qualitative and phenomenological studies is that the findings in such research cannot be generalized from a sample to the population (Maxwell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Accordingly, the results of this study cannot be generalized to all international first-year students enrolled in the institution.

Lastly, the influence of the researcher may also lend itself to certain limitations. As already disclosed, the researcher is also an international graduate student at the institution where the study was conducted. Additionally, as a seminar instructor for FTIC class sections, the researcher had been an active participant in the development of the course curriculum and the associated learning outcomes. Although this positionality provided several advantages, such as connecting with participants, being able to deeply reflect on their experiences, and having valuable insider knowledge of FYS program attributes, it is still a limitation.

The researcher, however, took several precautions to avoid such bias, such as relying on another coder, triangulating multiple sources of data, verifying interview transcripts with participants, and including negative cases, (i.e., the findings illustrating the course inadequacy in supporting some aspects of participants' academic transition). Considering the richness and

scope of the research findings presented in this study, this limitation can be considered as minimal.

In addition to these limitations, the findings in this research were also delimited by the boundaries of the study (Robers, 2010) or factors that were controlled by the researcher when this study was designed (Mauch & Park, 2003). First, the international student population from which the participants were selected consisted of students who enrolled in the university through the Global Institute Program. As previously explained, the Institute was designed as a two-semester preparation or conditional admission program after which international students progress into the sophomore year of their undergraduate education with the FTIC population. As many HEIs offer direct admission for international first-year students without requiring the enrollment in similar preparatory programs, the findings in this study may have limited applicability across such institutional contexts.

Second, this study was delimited to the sample of 10 international students. Even though the sample was highly diverse, with all 10 participants representing different countries, cultures, and nationalities, the findings cannot be generalized to all international students in this or other institutions. As an illustration, the population of this study consisted of students from 34 nationalities. Consequently, not all countries and cultures were represented. As such, the findings in this research are limited only to the views of international students included in the sample. Selecting a larger and more diverse sample of cultures and nationalities may lead to additional insights about international students' academic experiences.

Still, it is important to note that the researcher purposefully selected a limited number of participants that would exhaustively describe their experiences with the investigated



phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). In other words, the researcher purposefully decided not to employ a random sampling or select a large number of participants but, instead, to delimit the study to 10 participants who would provide a comprehensive description of their experiences.

### Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations for further research emerged from the review of the examined literature, the study findings, and the limitations of this qualitative inquiry. The overall guidance for researchers exploring the issue of international student academic transition is to continue to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the educational experiences of this student group. In that regard, scholars need to engage in developing comprehensive models of international student academic adjustment during the first year of college. In turn, faculty and college student personnel need to stay abreast of current research in this domain and use it to develop appropriate first-year programming for international students. For this goal to be accomplished, future research needs to expand in four specific directions: (a) institutional settings, (b) first-year seminar types, (c) first-year programs, and (d) research design.

First, future researchers need to examine the academic experiences of international first-year students in different types of American higher education institutions. As this study was limited to one large-sized, urban institution in the southeast, future research should be conducted in institutions of varying sizes and student populations, such as two-year colleges, private colleges and universities, highly selective institutions, or small and mid-sized rural colleges and universities. Moreover, to gain a holistic insight into international students' educational experiences during the first year of college, scholars need to engage in research collaborations

that would facilitate the dissemination of the data regarding the most prominent academic challenges encountered by this student group and the institutional practices proven as effective in reducing barriers.

Second, additional research is needed to provide more insight into how other institutions structure their first-year seminars for international students, as well as to investigate the effectiveness of these alternative course designs. This study was conducted to examine the effects of only one seminar type. Specific efforts need to be devoted to exploring the impacts of extended-orientation and pre-professional seminar courses and their capacities to support international student academic success.

As the findings in this study emphasized the centrality of FYS faculty in the phenomenon of international student academic transition, it is recommended that future studies be conducted to examine the effectiveness of FYS instructor trainings. The research in this direction should seek to identify the best practices for preparing seminar instructors assigned to teach international student sections. An initial step toward examining the best practices in this domain may be utilizing the findings in this research study. Alternatively, institutions of other types and FYS programs of different designs may consider analyzing international student course evaluations for both the FYS seminars and other courses taught during the first year.

The positive effects of instructors' passion for teaching international students, their increased understanding of this student population, and their willingness to adapt course content and teaching methods to the needs of international students emerged as significant findings in this study. Therefore, it is recommended that future researchers include an analysis of FYS instructor selection processes to ensure that instructors who are enthusiastic about teaching the

seminar to international students are at the forefront of the selection. In-depth studies considering the factors motivating faculty to teach first-year seminar sections for international students are also recommended.

Third, this research focused on only one First-Year Experience (FYE) program. Therefore, future research should be conducted to explore the role of other types of FYS programming in international student academic transition. The effects of different FYE programs in shaping international students' educational experiences need to be investigated. Programs that could be explored include: international student orientations, first-year advising, tutoring, supplemental instruction, or English language/TESOL programs. This approach would allow for subsequent comprehensive studies measuring the interaction of these programs and producing holistic insights into the role of FYE intervention programs on international student success.

The fourth recommendation for future research would be to conduct studies utilizing different research designs, such as quantitative or mixed methods. The findings in this qualitative study provided rich insights into the academic experiences of international seminar participants. Though it is essential that HEIs continue to broaden the understanding of student experiences with FYS courses, quantitative studies are needed so that the seminar impacts can be generalized beyond the participants of one study. For instance, future research should examine the correlation between FYS course participation and international student retention or academic performance as measured by GPA. Research of this kind would not only allow for generalizing the course effects beyond the 10 participants in this study, but would overcome the limitation of current research where FYS course effects have been mainly examined among the FTIC student

population. Such research findings could also be used to compare the impact of different types of FYS courses on international student learning outcomes.

The fifth and last recommendation proposed is a longitudinal investigation of the participants in this study that would be conducted to explore their perceptions of course impacts over time. This direction is particularly important when considered in connection to the findings in the study. As already discussed, for many participants in this research, the initial negative perceptions toward the course significantly changed after completing the seminar. Revisiting the participants' perceptions of the seminar value at a different point in time would be valuable in not only exploring the changes in their attitudes toward the course but, more importantly, in identifying the potential course impacts on participants' academic transition beyond the first year.

### Concluding Remarks

This qualitative phenomenological study gave voice to 10 international students transitioning to their first-year of undergraduate study at a large university in the United States. The researcher undertook this study with the belief that the stories of these students matter and that hearing them would provide valuable insights for faculty and higher education practitioners navigating the educational journeys of international students in America. The voices were recorded through participant interviews and researcher's journal notes and captured students' perceptions of the role of one institutional program, a First-Year Seminar course, in their educational experiences.

The researcher's comfort after completing this study comes from the finding that starting undergraduate education in a U.S. university was a challenging, but rewarding journey for these

10 participants. Despite the commonalities among their first-year challenges, whether in connection to their academic or social experiences, these students had a positive learning experience due to their participation in the FYS course. As these 10 stories revealed, all participants encountered academic challenges during their first year. At the same time, however, the support provided through the FYS course constituted a critical element in helping these students overcome some of these difficulties by acquiring new skills, becoming more comfortable with navigating and using campus resources, and developing more positive emotions toward their education.

It is the researcher's hope that this study will pave the way for colleges and universities to better understand the needs of their incoming international students and to develop the most appropriate mechanisms for ensuring that these needs are considered. This study is the beginning of what the researcher hopes to be a long scholarly journey of unfolding the stories of international students in the United States. Only by dedicating continued effort in this direction can American higher education institutions truly reflect the richness of global diversity and internationalize their academic communities.

APPENDIX A  
IRB APPROVAL LETTER



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Determination of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Masa Krsmanovic**

Date: **November 16, 2018**

Dear Researcher:

On 11/16/2018, the IRB reviewed the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination, Category 2  
Project Title: The Stories of Transition: A Qualitative Exploration of International Undergraduate Students' Academic Experiences in First-Year Seminar Courses in the United States  
Investigator: Masa Krsmanovic  
IRB Number: SBE-18-14532  
Funding Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

This letter is signed by:

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Renea C Carver".

Signature applied by Renea C Carver on 11/16/2018 02:47:36 PM EST

Designated Reviewer

APPENDIX B  
SUMMARY EXPLANATION FOR EXEMPT RESEARCH





### **EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH**

**Title of Project:** The Stories of Transition: A Qualitative Exploration of International Undergraduate Students' Academic Experiences in First-Year Seminar Courses in the United States

**Principal Investigator:** Masa (Masha) Krsmanovic

**Faculty Supervisor:** Dr. Kathleen P. King

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Whether you take part is up to you.

- The purpose of this study is to explore academic experiences of international undergraduate students at the University of Central Florida and the ways in which these experiences may be shaped by participating in a first-year seminar course SLS 1501.
- You will be asked to participate in one face-to-face interview with the researcher where you will share your experience of being an international student at the University of Central Florida, as well as your experience in SLS 1501 course. The interview will last between 30 minutes and one hour and will take place on UCF Main Campus. Your interview will be audio recorded and the researcher is the only person who will have access to this recording. If you do not want to be audio recorded, you cannot participate in this study. When transcribing your interview recording, the researcher will remove your personal information. No personal identifiers will be shared in this study and your confidentiality and privacy will be maintained at all times.
- If you choose to participate in this study and change your mind, you can withdraw at any time. If you decide to withdraw, any information you shared will be excluded from the research.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study.

**Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem:** If you have questions, concerns, or complaints Masha Krsmanovic, Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education and Policy Studies, College of Community Innovation and Education, (407) 881-3520, Masha.Krsmanovic@ucf.edu or Dr. Kathleen P. King, Professor and Program Coordinator, Higher Education and Policy Studies, College of Community Innovation and Education (407) 823-4751, Kathleen.King@ucf.edu

**IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint:** Research at the University of Central Florida involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (UCF IRB). This research has been determined to be exempted from IRB review unless changes are made. For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board, University of Central Florida, Office of Research & Commercialization, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901.

APPENDIX C  
EMAIL STUDY PARTICIPATION INVITATION

Subject: Understanding our International Students - Research for Doctoral Dissertation

Dear X,

My name is Masha Krsmanovic and I am an international student pursuing my Ph.D. degree in Higher Education at the University of Central Florida. I am also an instructor for SLS 1501 course. I have a great passion for conducting research on international students, serving as an advocate for this student population, and helping improve their academic experience in the United States.

I am contacting you because I am working on my doctoral dissertation that investigates the impacts of the SLS 1501 course on international student success. I kindly wanted to ask if you would be willing and able to participate in my dissertation research. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to join me for a 30-60 minute face-to-face interview, where you will share your experience of being a first-year student at the University of Central Florida. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

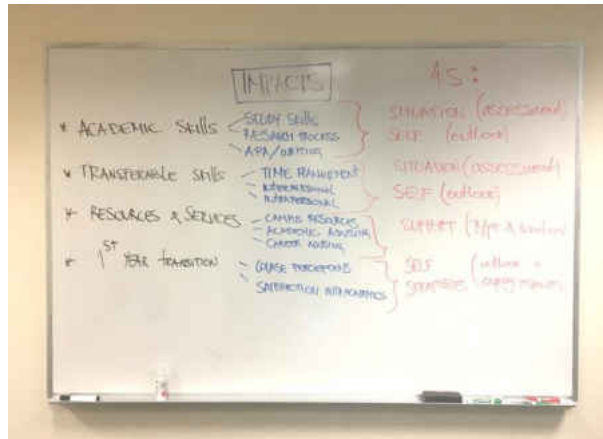
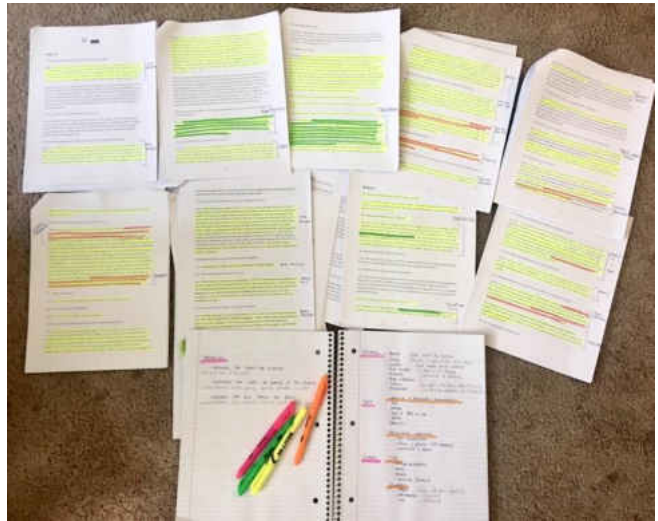
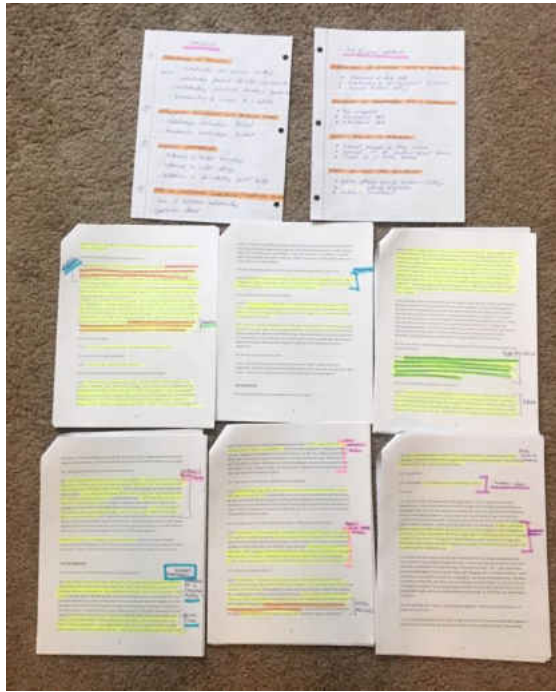
This study is confidential. Our interview will be audio recorded and all audio files will be destroyed immediately after transcription. The interview transcripts will not contain any personal identifiers, such as your name or any other personal information.

As appreciation of your willingness to participate, you will receive a small giveaway item. Additionally, I would be more than happy to share my experience as an international student in the U.S. and my personal and professional development path.

I greatly appreciate you considering this request. I look forward to hearing back from you by phone 407-881-3520 or email [Masha.Krsmanovic@ucf.edu](mailto:Masha.Krsmanovic@ucf.edu)

Thank you, gracias, obrigado, 谢谢, شكرا, شكرا جزيلًا, dankie, спасибо, дзякуй, благодаря, спасибі, дякую, dhanyavād, grazi, merci, asante, dhanya, धन्यवाद, ありがとう, 고맙습니다, cām on bāndanke, рахмат сара, ကျေးဇူးတင်ပါတယ်, გმადლობთ, go raibh maith agat, рақмет сизге, na gode, çox sağ ol, terima kasih, selamat, hvala!

APPENDIX D  
VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THEME DEVELOPMENT



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