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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING AT A RURAL, MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' SENSE OF
BELONGING AT A RURAL, MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY

by

Danielle Smith
Master of Science, Saint Cloud State University

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Minnesota State University Moorhead

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May 2023

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      Dean, College of Education and Human Services

DEDICATION

The following is dedicated to those who have courageously traveled outside of their comfort zones. May each new experience welcome opportunity for personal growth and create meaningful connections with those around you.

 "Bringing people together is what I call 'ubuntu,' which means, 'I am because we are.' Far too often people think of themselves as individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity"

-Archbishop Desmond Tutu

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ABSTRACT

Each year, hundreds of thousands of international students seek academic opportunities in the United States (U.S.). For international students, studying abroad can provide opportunities to build or enhance their English language skills, experience new cultures, study under different education models, and create long lasting friendships. However, if institutions lack appropriate services and resources, these opportunities can quickly become barriers. If campuses do not take the necessary measures to create inclusive and supportive learning environments which enhance opportunities for a sense of belonging, they are at risk of losing these valuable student populations.

Research around the experiences of international students is limited. This phenomenological qualitative study uncovered experiences of international students at a rural, Midwestern university to explore experiences that are beneficial to or detract from sense of belonging. Rural areas can pose unique challenges such as limited transportation, access to culturally diverse services and resources, and social events. Using semi-structured interviews, 11 participants were asked about their experiences of sense of belonging as international students. Data were analyzed using open and axial coding processes to identify themes.

Keywords: international students, sense of belonging, studying abroad, campus resources, learning environment, higher education.

CHAPTER 1.   INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Take a moment to recall or imagine a situation where you felt unfamiliar with your surroundings. What reactions does this elicit? Perhaps responses of excitement, discomfort, anxiety, anticipation, and/or curiosity. Now, picture living in a place where you are less familiar with the language, customs, expectations, laws, and surroundings. How do you feel about this scenario? Students interested in studying abroad have explored these very thoughts. The growth and development of international education relies heavily on learners who have a desire to be immersed in a new environment. Once a student is committed to embarking on this experiential endeavor, it is then the responsibility of host countries, communities, and institutions to ensure the student is prepared, supported, and welcomed.

Students have pursued international academic opportunities for hundreds of years (De Wit & Merkx, 2022). In Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, international education was developed by ways of research, student mobility, and the export of education (De Wit & Merkx, 2022). The emergence of international education in the U.S. could be seen with the promotion of fellowships for students and scholars (De Wit & Merkx, 2022). Early data on educational international relations can be found in the *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Education* ranging from 1868-1917 (NCES, 2021). Yet, aggregate data on international student enrollment were minimal. Capen (1915) remarked, "The extent to which citizens of foreign nations are taking advantage of the educational opportunities in the United States is not generally realized" (p. 57). Capen reported 4,222 international students were enrolled at post-secondary institutions in 1913, noting an increase of nearly 16% from 1911.

As international education became more widespread, so did the inception of international student advocacy groups. The creation of the Institute of International Education (IIE) in 1919 and the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs (NAFSA) in 1948 paved the way for international student advocacy and support (IIE, 2021; NAFSA, 1998-2021). One of the earliest records of international student enrollment within higher education was conducted by the IIE in 1949, which reported a total of 25,564 international students or approximately 1.1% of the total U.S. enrollment (IIE, 2021). With the support of IIE's lobbying efforts, Congress introduced the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. According to the Immigration and Nationality Act (2021) an international student was referenced as

> An alien having a residence in a foreign country which he has no intention of abandoning, who is a bona fide student qualified to pursue a full course of study and who seeks to enter the United States temporarily and solely for the purpose of pursuing such a course of study consistent with section 1184(l) 1 of this title at an established college, university, seminary, conservatory, academic high school, elementary school, or other academic institution or in an accredited language training program in the United States. (§1101.15F)

This act provided the foundation for the creation of the F-1 visa. According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2020), an F-1 visa

> …allows you to enter the United States as a full-time student at an accredited college, university, seminary, conservatory, academic high school, elementary school, or other academic institution or in a language training program. You must be enrolled in a program or course of study that culminates in a degree, diploma, or certificate and

your school must be authorized by the U.S. government to accept international

students. (F-1 Student Visa section, para. 2)

International education can be a symbiotic opportunity where the learner and host

institution benefit from the experience. International students can study in a new

environment, which provides them opportunities to expand their global knowledge. In return,

host institutions can create culturally rich campuses where both domestic and international

students can make long lasting connections. Institutions can also benefit financially as most

international students pay out of state tuition (Baumgartner, 2021; Loudenback, 2016;

Martel, 2021).

Over the past 72 years, the U.S. has seen mostly positive trends in international

student enrollment. However, events such as war, international conflict, political tension, and

a pandemic has impacted international student enrollment (IIE, 2021; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice,

2007; Pottie-Sherman, 2018). Between 2003 and 2006, the U.S. saw a drop in enrollment

which was partially attributed to the political climate after the attacks on September 11th,

2001 (IIE, 2021; Lee & Rice, 2007). While 2007-2016 saw enrollment growth, enrollment

slowed significantly between 2017 and 2019 (IIE, 2021). Comments from politicians and

media figures have also contributed to hostile and unwelcoming environments (Cheng, 2020;

Glass et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2022; Pottie-Sherman, 2018). International student

enrollment continued to wane with the emergence of COVID-19.

During the spring of 2020, in response to the highly contagious virus, COVID-19,

most campuses in the U.S. closed their doors and shifted to remote learning to limit the

spread of infection. Students and campus employees scrambled to make sense of their new

virtual worlds. International students had additional challenges to navigate such as whether to

remain in the U.S. On-campus enrollment of international students has fluctuated greatly over the past two years. 99.6% of international students were on-campus fall of 2019; 80% of international students were on-campus fall of 2020; and 65% of international students were on-campus fall of 2021 (Martel, 2021). While there has been a drop in on-campus enrollment, data showed a 68% increase in new international student enrollment for 2021 (Martel, 2021).

Another area that is detrimental to international student enrollment is the student's own study abroad experience. Word of mouth is a strong recruitment tactic. If a student had a poor experience, not only will they not promote the school, but they may also dissuade others from considering it. According to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) "Word-of-mouth referral is one of the most powerful forms of promotion that international education institutions can use" (p. 85). In their study, Mazzarol and Soutar found that family and friends' recommendations and the reputation of the institution were the most influential factors for international students seeking academic programs abroad. Glass (2013) cautioned that international student enrollment numbers were at risk if campuses cannot create more hospitable environments.

An international student's study abroad experience begins before they leave their country. The first step an international student takes is completing pre-departure requirements such as paperwork (i.e., obtaining a passport and visa, and applying for admission) and ensuring financial support. These can be the first barriers that prevent or delay an international student from their study abroad experience. Once the pre-departure requirements are met, the student can disembark for their academic journey abroad. Upon arrival, international students may encounter individual challenges such as financial

constraints, language barriers, and culture shock. External factors, such as social support, campus services, community resources, and political climate can also impact an international student's experience (Lee, 2010; Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Rice & Lee, 2007). All of these areas can impact an international student's sense of belonging.

Strayhorn (2012) related a sense of belonging to a basic human need. Strayhorn defined a sense of belonging in relation to college students' experience as, "...perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus" (p. 3). Each student on campus deserves to feel a sense of belonging. If campuses are not meeting that basic need with each student, they are failing them. Strayhorn further identified that the absence or lack of a sense of belonging can lead to a sense of alienation. A feeling of alienation can be a significant barrier when it comes to academic experience, achievement, and/or success.

Statement of Problem

International students' experiences from pre-departure to arrival can play a crucial role in what type of experience they have on campus (Birnbaum et al., 2012). Current research specific to international students' experiences in rural areas is limited. This study seeks to better understand international students' experiences at a rural, Midwestern university. Data collected from this study can provide readers with a better understanding of what challenges and strengths are unique to this student population. Data can provide insight for campus administrators to enhance existing and/or create new programming and services to best support this student population.

Significance of the Study

There are many moving parts to international education including, but not limited to, access, affordability, support, and international relations. The study of international education is important from a micro-level (understanding the student and their experiences) and a macro-level (understanding the impact on a community and global level). An outcome of international education can be mutually beneficial relationships between the student and the economy, the campus community, and peer connections (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Mutually Beneficial Relationships between International Student and External Factors
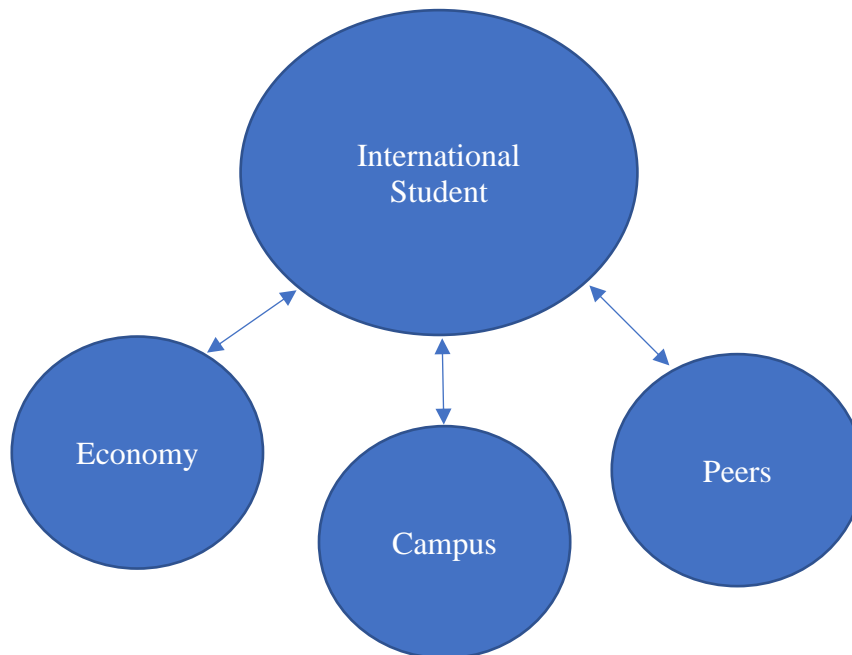
Note. Researcher's depiction of relationships amongst international students and the economy, the campus, and their peers. Smith, D. (2022).

According to Banks (2021), international education added $28.4 billion to the U.S. economy, as well as over 300,000 jobs in 2020-2021. Revenue generated from international

education supports the economy and labor market, and in return, international students have more opportunities to apply for jobs in the U.S. post-graduation (Baumgartner, 2021). International student enrollment can also be profitable for some host institutions (Cantwell, 2021). Many international students pay more in tuition and fees than domestic students. For example, the University of Iowa charged international students approximately $46,943, while Iowa residents paid approximately $21,418 a year (IOWA, 2022). Redden (2015) provided some rationale for these increased costs stating

> Universities that enroll international students unquestionably have extra monitoring and reporting requirements to the federal government -- requirements that can extend beyond graduation if a student opts for a postgraduation work placement through the optional practical training program -- and may face additional costs in providing adequate academic support and other services to a population of nonnative English speakers. (par. 7)

In return for paid tuition and fees, international students should have access to quality programming to meet their academic goals as well as safe, supportive, and inclusive services. From the campus perspective, the inclusion of international education can create opportunities for global partnerships and enhance cultural diversity. When welcoming international students to campus, it is imperative that the campus community is prepared to meet the needs of these learners while also making them feel part of the campus community. Research has criticized campuses that are expectant of acculturation and/or integration processes from international students (Lee, 2010; Yao, 2015). Lee (2010) noted that such actions "place the responsibility to adjust and integrate squarely on the outsider and inordinately blames him or her for having difficulty making the necessary adjustments,"

while "host campuses are blamelessly ignorant and play no role in the negative experiences of international students" (p. 69). Yao (2015) encouraged campuses to shift away from the international students' integration of dominant culture and strive to "understand [the] international students' perceptions of membership in a foreign college…" (p. 8).

Hosting international students allows campuses to create diverse learning and living environments. As a result, domestic students and international students have opportunities to interact with students from all over the world. Through interactions with international students, domestic students have more opportunities for intercultural communication and global perspectives (Glass, 2012; Lee, 2007; Museus, et al., 2017). Increasing international student enrollment can also provide more peer connections for current international students (Gareis, 2012; Glass, 2012; Glass, et al., 2013; Hendrickson, et al., 2010; Lau et al., 2018; Rivas et al., 2019; Van Horne et al., 2018). Peer connections are a critical component to feeling part of a community (Strayhorn, 2012). Socializing with other students can enhance a student's experience while decreasing their chances of feeling isolated, homesick and/or depressed (Gareis, 2012; Glass et al., 2014; Hendrickson, et al., 2010; Lee, 2010).

While research has been conducted as it relates to international students' experiences, research specific to international students in rural areas is lacking. More information from this area can contribute to future studies. Current studies highlight the common barriers and challenges faced by international students, including a lack of sense of belonging, English proficiency, and financial stress (Gareis, 2012; Glass et al., 2015; Lau et al., 2018; Lee, 2007; Lee, 2010; Museus, et al., 2017; Rivas et al., 2019; Sherry et al., 2009). International students, especially those from predominantly non-White regions, are more likely to experience racism and discrimination (Lee, 2010). The researcher suspects that there are

more unique challenges for international students in rural areas such as lack of transportation, religious services, and resources such as cultural attire and food staples. Campuses located in these areas should be responsible for understanding the needs of their student populations and ensuring the appropriate measures are in place to meet those needs.

When it comes to recruitment of international students, current/former students can be a great resource (Lee, 2010). Lee (2010) found that 20% of international students who had a negative experience studying abroad would not promote that institution to friends/family. Glass and collaborators (2013) stated the U.S. is at risk of a decline in international student enrollment. As a result, international students may be shifting their interest to study in other countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom (Gareis, 2012). By understanding the perspectives and experiences of international students, the campus community can take proactive measures to ensure they are providing a welcoming and inclusive environment.

Purpose of the Study

In some ways, international students can be considered a vulnerable population (Sherry et al., 2010). Having left their home country to live and study in a foreign place, they may be less familiar with the language, the laws, and the customs. The purpose of this study is to understand the perspectives and experiences of international students studying at a rural, Midwestern university. Based on these experiences, institutions can build or modify their international programming services. If institutions cannot create and maintain inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students, including international students, they are at risk of losing this valuable student population. A decline in international student enrollment is a loss for the institution (i.e., revenue, social responsibility, mission/values/strategic goals), for the domestic students (i.e., diverse learning and living environment, an expanded worldview, meeting new people), and for international students (i.e., gaining an international

experience, meeting new people, learning new skills, pursuing graduate programs or career opportunities within the U.S.).

Research Question(s)

This study addressed the following questions:

RQ1: How do international students experience sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern predominantly White institution (PWI)?

RQ2: What do international students find beneficial to sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern PWI?

RQ3: What do international students feel detracts from sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern PWI?

From this research, the researcher strives to discover opportunities for rural, PWIs to enhance and/or create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for their international student population.

Theoretical Framework

From global partnerships to cultural diversity to expanded worldviews, international students have much to contribute to college campuses. They also have much to gain including academic achievements, social connections, and a sense of community. The research questions of the study explore the benefits and deficits as they relate to their sense of belonging. To best understand their experiences, the researcher designed a hybrid theoretical framework that is supportive of the students' voices and stories. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) "A theoretical framework is the underlying structure, the scaffolding, or frame of your study" (p. 85). Using a hybrid lens, this study applied Strayhorn's (2019) college students' sense of belonging theory and Perez-Encinas' and Rodriguez-Pomeda's (2018) stages of international student mobility. Strayhorn (2019) suggested that college students'

sense of belonging is related to, "perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers" (p. 4). Since many international students have a more arduous application process, the researcher intentionally utilized theory that was inclusive of perceived experiences prior to arrival. The stages of international student mobility include pre-arrival, arrival, during stay, and (re)integration (Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2018). By including two theoretical lenses, the framework provided the study with "…a synthesis of the thoughts of giants" as it explores international students' sense of belonging during their transition abroad (Kivunja, 2018, p. 46). The rationale for a sense of belonging and international student mobility stages are provided in chapter two, and the research design and methodology are further explored in chapter three.

Research Design

This study followed a phenomenological qualitative approach. A qualitative study values the process of "…how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experience" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). This study sought to explore a phenomenon, studying abroad, and the "common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences," which contributed to a phenomenological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75).

Phenomenology

The phenomenon of studying abroad provides opportunities and experiences that are unique to each participant. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 75). This exploratory study sought to better understand how

international students were making meaning of their study abroad experience. Van Manen (1990) suggested that phenomenological research "…is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings" (p. 5). The researcher designed this study to allow others to better understand the world as international students know and experience it. Van Manen (1990) referred to this approach to research as being "…a caring act…to know that which is most essential to being" (p. 5).

Creswell and Poth (2018) stressed that qualitative studies, "…should contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researchers' lives" (p. 25). To determine what, if any, change was necessary, the researcher developed open-ended interview questions specific to the phenomenon of studying abroad. By using semi-structured interviews, the researcher had some flexibility when it came to the sequencing and wording of the questions. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "this format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (p. 111). Polkinghorne (1989) suggested interviewing between 5 and 25 individuals (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher interviewed 11 international students who were all experiencing the phenomenon of studying abroad.

By collecting multiple responses, the researcher used aspects of grounded theory, including open and axial coding, to identify shared themes (Glaser & Strauss, 2008). Through the open coding process, the researcher reviewed the transcripts and notated initial thoughts. The researcher read through the transcripts again and identified key components. These key components included responses that were repeated, surprising, aligned with research, stated as significant by the participant, and/or connected to theory (Löfgren, 2013).

Axial coding was applied to determine which codes were most important. Axial coding occurs when "the researcher identifies one open coding category to focus on…and then goes back to the data and creates categories around this core phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 85). The researcher anticipated themes would align with the existing research which indicates the value sense of belonging has on an international student's experience.

<div align="center">

Assumptions and Limitations

</div>

Creswell and Poth (2018) identified the following philosophical beliefs for social constructivism:

- Multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with others

- Reality is co-constructed between the research and the researched and shaped by individual experiences

- Individual values are honored and are negotiated among individuals

- Use of an inductive method of emergent ideas (through consensus) is obtained through methods such as interviewing (p. 35)

In this study, the researcher believed the phenomenon of studying abroad would be unique to each individual experiencing that phenomenon. The researcher assumed the responses of the participants were honest and representative of their lived experiences.

The researcher has their own experiences as it relates to the phenomenon of studying abroad. The researcher addressed this by engaging in bracketing which allowed them to "set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 78). Bracketing is further discussed in Chapter 3.

As the interim director of the International Center, the researcher worked closely with international students on campus. Creswell and Poth (2018) addressed the power dynamics that can arise with the interview process stating, "…the nature of an interview sets up an unequal power dynamic between the interviewer and interviewee" (p. 173). To address these dynamics, the researcher utilized Whittemore et al. (2001) validation criteria including

- Credibility (Are the results an accurate interpretation of the participants' meaning?)

- Authenticity (Are different voices heard?)

- Criticality (Is there a critical appraisal of all aspects of the research?)

- Integrity (Are the investigators self-critical?) (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 258)

Participants were provided with interview protocol prior to the interview and received a copy of the interview questions to refer to during the interview. Participants could withdraw their participation at any time. The researcher shared the initial transcripts with the participants to ensure their responses were accurately captured which addressed credibility. The researcher interviewed 11 international students from various backgrounds which addressed authenticity. The researcher remained critical and objective to the research process. Adhering to criticality, the researcher created code charting as a method to audit the data analysis (Saldaña, 2021). The researcher maintained integrity by utilizing bracketing to address any biases or reactions in response to their own experiences.

Delimitations

According to Baron (2020), "delimitations are factors that affect the study over which the research generally does have some degree of control," and they "describe the scope of the study or establish parameters or limits for the study" (p. 5-6). Limitations and delimitations

are further explored in Chapters 3 and 5. The delimitations for this study include:

1. The study was restricted to one rural, Midwestern university and generalizability was not feasible.

2. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews which consisted of open-ended questions.

3. Through purposeful sampling, participants were invited to voluntarily participate in the study.

Organization of Dissertation

Permission of IRB Approval

Permission to conduct this study was granted by Minnesota State University Moorhead's (MSUM) Institutional Review Board on September 3, 2021, and was renewed on September 19, 2022. Permission was also granted by the institution where the research was to be conducted.

Informed Consent

Participants were provided informed consent forms which outlined the purpose and intent of the study (see Appendix A). Participants could withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality purposes and no identifying information was disclosed in the study.

Definition of Terms

F-1 Visa – Visa which supports students to enter the U.S. for full-time enrollment at accredited academic institutions (U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services, 2020).

International students – According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS, 2021) international students are defined as "Students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of

origin." For the purposes of this literature review, international students referenced are citizens of a country other than the U.S. that are seeking academic credit.

J-1 Visa – Visa which supports individuals' entrance into the U.S. to pursue an exchange program. Examples include professors or scholars, research assistants, students, trainees, teachers, specialists, Au Pairs, and camp counselors (U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services, 2020).

Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) – Also referred to as historically White institutions refers to institutions of which 50% or more of its student population is White (Lomotey, 2021).

Rural – Refers to an area or county of less than 50,000 people (Health Resources & Services Administration, 2021).

Organization of Study

The study continues with the following chapters: Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature as it relates to defining who international students are, identifying the benefits of international education, barriers to international education, and qualitative research methodology. Chapter 3 reviews the methodology including: research design, setting of the study, participants, data collection and instrumentation, data analysis, procedures, researcher's role, ethical considerations, and limitations. Chapter 4 reviews the findings. Chapter 5 further explores the findings including limitations and recommendations for future studies.

Conclusion

International education cannot sustain itself without the interest and investment of learners from around the world. International programming can meet macro and micro level needs of the learner which in turn can be beneficial for the host country and campus.

Countries and campus communities that want to be inclusive of international programming must ensure they are prepared to meet the needs of these visiting learners. In order to meet these needs, campuses must be intentional to understand the needs of the student populations they serve. International programming has the potential to benefit the learners, the institution, and the economy. However, with these benefits comes serious responsibilities. Institutions need to be aware of the potential challenges international students navigate from pre-departure to arrival to their return home. Some of these challenges are significantly different from those faced by domestic students. As a result, institutions must actively engage with this student population to best understand their needs as visiting learners.

CHAPTER 2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

An excerpt from Bhandari's (2021) *America Calling: A Foreign Student in a Country of Possibility*

They arrive in the US each August, thousands of them with dreams in their eyes and nervousness in their hearts, their belongings usually contained in just two suitcases. They come from over two hundred countries, large metropolises, and small towns – from China to Saudi Arabia, from Taipei to Timbuktu – heading to college campuses all over America, big Ivy Leagues and small community colleges, in New York City, Mobile, Alabama, and points in between. You can spot them easily at any of America's major airports, as they emerge from the belly of the airplane in twos or threes; perhaps their parents knew each other and made sure they had company on their travels over to a foreign land. Or perhaps they befriended each other somewhere along the way, embarking on a shared journey to a country that was strange yet familiar thanks to television and the internet.

Their luggage contains all their belongings, which will have to suffice until they can make enough money to buy clothes in America. That could take a while. The suitcases are bulging with clothes, books, homemade snacks in carefully sealed packets, and perhaps even a pressure cooker for the ambitious cook. Big white labels pasted on to the suitcases proclaim the travelers' long and strange names and their US destinations. For now, these are the maps of their lives: where they have come from and where they are going. But even on that first journey, their identity begins to get truncated as the address labels get ripped apart in the cargo hold of the airplane. So

Deepesh is now just Deep and Ashwini becomes Ash, convenient nicknames that their American friends will use anyway as their real ones are simply too much of a mouthful.

These travelers are foreign or international students who seek an American university degree, the Made-in-America brand prized by students all over the world. Their burdens are not light. They carry with them not only their two suitcases, but also their personal and professional aspirations, and the hopes and dreams of generations. (pp. 1-2)

International education is an opportunity that allows students to expand their worldview while studying in a foreign country. Colleges and universities within the U.S. have a variety of reasons to include and increase international student enrollment on their campuses. First, international education can create a diverse learning environment that is mutually beneficial for international and domestic students. International students can grow their academic knowledge while learning more about American culture. Domestic students have more opportunities to learn about diverse cultures when interacting with international students. Additionally, increased international student enrollment can benefit host institutions by creating global partnerships with other higher education institutions, and host institutions may generate more revenue from international students who often pay out-of-state tuition.

While there is inherent value in international education, there are concerning challenges as it relates to serving international student populations. Common barriers faced by international students include a lack of sense of belonging, English proficiency, and financial challenges. Depending on their country of origin, international students may be more likely to experience racism and discrimination (Lee, 2010). Campuses that host

international students have a responsibility to ensure their campus climate is inclusive, welcoming, and supportive, ensuring that all services and resources are meeting the needs of their student population.

Narrative Literature Review

A preliminary search was conducted to determine the extent of existing literature pertaining to experiences of international students at a rural, Midwestern university. Results indicated a dearth of research in this area. Broadening the search fields generated more robust results, some of which are included in the following literature review. A narrative literature review was used for this study. According to Day (1998) and Slavin (1995)

> Narrative overviews are useful educational articles since they pull many pieces of information together into a readable format. They are helpful in presenting a broad perspective on a topic and often describe the history or development of a problem or its management. (as cited in Green et al., 2006, p. 103)

Green and collaborators (2006) cautioned researchers regarding bias and encouraged researchers "attempt to reduce bias as much as possible through appropriate writing and research techniques" (p. 102). The researcher of this study was mindfully objective throughout the literature review process and received constructive feedback from their dissertation committee. The literature review explores who international students are, enrollment trends, the benefits of international education, the barriers to international education, and the role of sense of belonging.

Methods of Searching

Data on international student experiences of their study abroad programming is limited. Using Google Scholar and ERIC databases searching key phrases such as "international student experiences in the U.S." and "international student perceptions in the

U.S." results generated studies focusing on specific student populations based on program level (i.e., undergraduate or graduate) or country of origin or pertaining to a specific area of study (i.e., STEM or business). Broadening the search to include "international student experiences of belonging," generated results that aligned with the nature of this study. However, some of the results included studies outside of the U.S. While some international data are included in this literature review, a majority of the review is reflective of international students residing in the U.S.

Who is an International Student?

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, n.d.) international students are defined as "students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin." For the purposes of this literature review, international students referenced are from a country other than the U.S. In 2018-2019 students from the following countries studied in the U.S.: China (369,548), India (202,014), South Korea (52,250), Saudi Arabia (37,080) and Canada (26,122) (Open Doors, 2020). The most common programs studied by international students included Math and Computer Science, Business and Management, and Engineering (Open Doors, 2020). The states with the highest populations of international students included California, New York, Texas, Massachusetts, and Illinois (Open Doors, 2020).

International students can be degree seeking or they can be exchange students seeking academic credit at the undergraduate or graduate level. International students must apply for and receive a visa to enter the U.S. for academic purposes. An F-1 visa supports students seeking full-time enrollment at accredited academic institutions (U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services, 2020). A J-1 visa supports individuals' entrance into the U.S. to

pursue an exchange program. The United States Department of State (2022) offers dozens of exchange programs for international students including Fulbright, Teaching Excellence and Achievement, Youth Ambassadors, and more.

International students who want to study in the U.S. are advised by USAGov (2022) to follow these steps:

1. Research your academic options – apply to programs of interest

2. Finance your studies – be familiar with the costs associated with studying in the U.S. and be prepared to provide proof of financial support

3. Complete your academic application(s) - evaluation of academic record, standardized tests (this may include the Test of English as Foreign Language TOEFL)

4. Once admitted, apply for your visa; prepare for your visa interview

5. Prepare for departure - become familiar with the U.S. immigration system, life in the U.S., English language resources, etc. (n.p.)

Identifying programs of interest is a crucial first step. Once a student knows what program(s) they are interested in, they need to understand the financial responsibility and limitations associated with studying abroad. For example, tuition is generally higher for international students. The University of Iowa charges Iowa residents approximately $21,418 a year which covers tuition, fees, housing, and meals; while non-residents are charged approximately $43,381, and international students are charged approximately $46,943 (IOWA, 2022). International students are also ineligible for federal aid and job opportunities must be part-time and on-campus. If an international student wants to work in the U.S. while they are studying, they are only allowed to work a maximum of 20 hours per week during the academic term. Next, the college application process in the U.S. may require a certain level

of English language proficiency and students will need to have any transcripts evaluated. Once a student is admitted into a program, they can apply for a visa. This can be a timely and costly process. Most international students apply for the F-1 or J-1 visa. The J-1 visa is more common with exchange programs, such as Fulbright. If a student can complete all these criteria, they can then prepare for their departure.

Enrollment Trends

While the U.S. hosts international students from all over the world, the primary countries of origin are China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Canada (Project Atlas, 2020). As of 2020, the top five countries that enroll international students included the U.S., the United Kingdom (U.K.), Canada, China, and Australia (Project Atlas, 2020). However, it is important to note that Australia, Canada, and the U.K. have the highest percentage of international students enrolled when compared to the overall domestic student population. Between 2019 and 2020 the U.S. saw a 1.8% decrease in international student enrollment while the U.K., Canada, and Australia saw increases in enrollment. Researchers indicated this shift in enrollment could be a result of the political climate, response to COVID-19, and processes for obtaining a visa (Laws, 2020; Martel, 2021). Currently, the U.S. is seeing a rebound in enrollment with a 4% increase in international student enrollment in the fall of 2021 (Martel, 2021). While the overall international student enrollment is up, the Midwest saw an 11% decrease (Baer & Martel, 2020; Martel, 2021).

Certain events have jeopardized international student enrollment within the U.S. After the attacks on September 11th, 2001, the U.S. saw a drop in international student enrollment between fall 2003 and spring of 2006 (Lee, 2007; Open Doors, 2021). In response to the attacks, the U.S. increased national security efforts which included stricter visa policies and limitations on travel for those from certain Middle Eastern countries (Lee & Rice, 2007).

International student enrollment rose from fall 2006 until the spring of 2017. Enrollment growths were minimal for the 2017-2018 (1.5%) and 2018-2019 (0.05%) academic years. Research posited part of this decline was in response to anti-immigration policies and xenophobic rhetoric (Laws, 2020; Mathies & Weimer, 2018; Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). Factors such as political unrest and COVID-19 contributed to a 1.8% decrease in international student enrollment in 2019-2020 and a 15% decrease 2020-2021 (Baer & Martel, 2020; Institute of International Education, 2021; Silver, 2021).

Student Benefits from International Education

Both domestic and international students can benefit from the growth of international student enrollment. As campuses welcome more international students, domestic students have more opportunities for intercultural experiences and exposure to various worldviews in the classroom (Glass, 2012; Lee, 2007; Museus, et al., 2017). Aurah (2014) spoke to the strengths of the experiences of international students, stating, "By virtue of living and studying in a foreign country, international students exemplify drive and resourcefulness that could be modeled by all students" (p. 36).

Similarly, the growth of international students on a campus may provide more opportunities for social support networks for international students (Gareis, 2012; Glass, 2012; Glass, et al., 2013; Hendrickson, et al., 2010; Lau et al., 2018; Rivas et al., 2019; Van Horne et al., 2018). Social support networks are a critical component to feeling part of a community. Whether international students befriend domestic students or other international students, friendship can enhance a student's experience while decreasing the chances of feeling isolated, homesick and/or depressed (Gareis, 2012; Glass et al., 2014; Hendrickson, et al., 2010; Lee, 2010).

Benefits from Hosting International Students

   There are multiple incentives of international education for host countries and institutions. During the 2020-2021 academic year, international education generated $28.4 billion for the U.S. economy (Banks, 2021). As seen in Figure 2, international education can also stimulate job growth. According to Banks (2021), 306,308 jobs were a result of the surplus from international education.

   International education has also been seen as an opportunity to strengthen international relations. Colleges and universities have much to gain when it comes to international student enrollment. Campuses can grow global partnerships with other institutions abroad; they can generate revenue; and they can create culturally diverse environments for students to learn and grow.

Figure 2

Economic Benefits of International Student Enrollment to the U.S. – A Ten-Year Trend
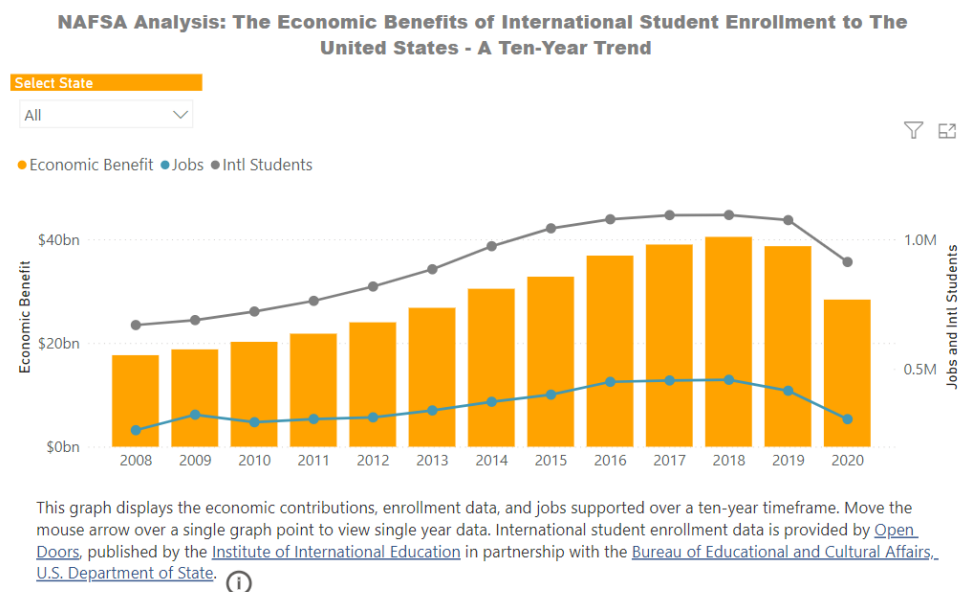
Note. From *Economic Value Statistics,* by NAFSA, 2021 (https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-

advocacy/policy-resources/nafsa-international-student-economic-value-tool-v2). In the public domain.

Barriers International Students Face

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging can be a positive and supportive factor for students, especially marginalized students (Glass et al., 2015; Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn, 2019). Glass et al. (2015) identified the areas of enrollment, student preparedness, local and global current events, financial resources, and racism and safety, to be detrimental to how an international student perceives their study abroad experience. Glass et al. suggested that "the international student experience is in no way equal" (p. 91). Where some international students may excel with language proficiency, academic expectations, social support, and/or financial support, others may struggle. To understand the international student demographic and their differing needs, higher education institutions must take the appropriate actions to ensure all student needs are being met.

Language Barriers

In several studies, researchers have determined international students' experiences are significantly impacted by their English skills and access to student support services (Lau et al., 2018; Lee & Rice, 2007; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Sherry et al., 2009; Van Horne et al., 2018; Wan et al., 1992). Sherry et al. (2009), surveyed international students at the University of Toledo and a portion of the results identified the importance and value of having various opportunities to learn English. For example, one student surveyed felt they could benefit from workshops on American English, including discussion on idioms and slang (Sherry et al., 2009). It is also important to understand the time that goes into learning a new language. International students may have to spend more

time processing information after a lecture, interpreting new terms in textbooks, and translating words from their native language into English when they are speaking with others. Lau et al. (2018) found that these areas can be a barrier when it comes to communication and interaction with faculty and peers. If international students are struggling with their English skills it can cause added stress when it comes to academic progress.

Academic Expectations

Higher education institutions have requirements when it comes to grade point average (GPA) and completion rate. In addition to meeting these requirements, students often have personal expectations when it comes to their academic progress. It is not uncommon for international students to have to study for longer periods of time especially if English is not their primary language. If international students are receiving external financial support, they may have additional academic criteria to meet.

A new learning environment can pose other challenges such as unfamiliar teaching styles. Aubrey (1991) stated that "…Western cultures tend to place greater emphasis on applying critical thinking skills as compared to non-Western more traditional teaching methods of lecturing and promoting note taking and memorization" (as cited in Lau et al., 2018, p. 3). As a result, international students may find themselves spending more time studying than they previously had. This can be especially challenging for international students that were considered high achieving in their academic setting back home (Lau et al., 2018). Aside from differences in instruction, international students may also encounter differences when it comes to interacting with faculty. Faculty in non-Western education systems may be viewed by students as "experts," while faculty in Western education systems may be viewed as "advisors" who endeavor to have students come to their own conclusions by applying critical thinking skills (Lau et al., 2018). Faculty can be a significant resource

and source of support for international students. Glass and collaborators (2015) stressed the importance of faculty's "intercultural competence" stating that, "international students may be more likely to embrace, and more influenced by, their perceptions of adjusting to the academic and disciplinary cultures in which they are socialized by professors" (p. 363).

Social Support/Representation

Experiences on-campus and within the surrounding community can vary greatly based upon the type of international student and the type of community. Some researchers have indicated international students of color are at greater risk of experiencing discrimination on and off campus (Lee & Rice, 2007; Sherry et al., 2009). When surveyed about their experiences related to their race or culture, one student from the Netherlands said, "…I haven't experienced discrimination. But then again, I take a cynical view that I'm a White guy who speaks English. So that makes you less a target for discrimination" (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 393).

When it comes to forming social groups on campus, some studies have shown international students are more likely to connect with other international students for social support (Rivas et al., 2019; Van Horne et al., 2018). This could be attributed to the fact that domestic students are less likely to seek out friendships with those who are different from themselves (Fischer, 2012). This could also be attributed to international students' perspectives of Americans. A study conducted by Rivas and collaborators (2019) showed that many participants felt Americans have a "sense of superiority," are "hard to get close to," and "exhibit superficial interactions" (p. 692).

Some researchers are questioning the expectations put on international students when it comes to adapting to U.S. cultural norms and academic expectations, yet the universities are not equally accountable for ensuring all students are represented as part of the campus

community. Johnson and Sandhu (2007) identified "*acculturation*" as "changes in values, beliefs, and behaviors that result from sustained contact with a second culture" (as cited in Lau et al., 2018, p. 2). Yet not all campus communities are making the effort to learn about the needs of international student populations to ensure their needs are being met (Lee & Rice, 2007). A study conducted at the University of Toledo found that "over 60% of respondents felt that their culture was either not understood, or only understood a little - suggesting a need for increased cross-cultural knowledge and understanding on campus" (Sherry et al., 2009, p. 39).

Access to Resources

In looking at student support services, international students are often in need of financial support. Not only do international students often pay more tuition, but they also pay up to $500 a semester for International Student Insurance (Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Saul, 2018; Sherry et al., 2009). One study found that international students with less financial resources were more likely to have negative experiences on campus (Glass et al., 2015). Another study found that some international students were less aware of the resources and services available to them (Lau et al., 2018). Some services such as counseling and accommodations could be seen as stigmatized depending on a student's cultural values and beliefs. Lau et al. (2018) recommended creating a campus culture that normalizes and validates the feelings and experiences of all students.

Impacts of COVID-19

Residential campuses can provide safe, supportive, and enriching living environments for students. Campus housing can be the host of social events and many students rely on campus dining for their meals. When COVID-19 emerged during the spring term of 2020, campuses in the U.S. began closing. Domestic students were able to return home with family

or relatives. Many international students faced a predicament: were they to stay in the U.S. and face an isolated campus community or to navigate the unpredictable hoops of international travel during a pandemic to return to their country of origin? Most international students chose the former option of staying on-campus.

In the fall of 2020, approximately 81% of international students were on-campus (Baer & Martel, 2020). Students living on-campus encountered locked buildings, limited dining options, and minimal on-campus resources. After campuses closed many faculty and staff worked remotely which meant student services were accessible online or over the phone. COVID-19 negatively affected the health and financial support for international students. According to Chirikov & Soria. (2020), the top concerns of undergraduate international students included financial support, access to healthcare, and personal health and well-being. Due to campus closures, some international students temporarily lost their on-campus jobs which threatened the income they relied on. Unlike domestic students, international students cannot work off-campus unless they are approved to work in Optional Practical Training (OPT) or Curricular Practical Training (CPT) (Majorana, 2021). Furthermore, international students were not eligible for economic relief programs such as the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) (Majorana, 2021). COVID-19 prompted individuals to be more mindful of hygiene and social interactions. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) encouraged individuals to frequently wash their hands, wear a face mask, limit social interactions, and stay home when feeling ill (Centers for Disease Control, 2021). Political discourse created additional challenges for international students. Comments from politicians and media figures have also contributed to hostile and unwelcoming environments (Cheng,

2020; Glass et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2022; Pottie-Sherman, 2018). As a result, some international students had increased concerns over their safety and well-being (Chirikov & Soria, 2020). Students of Asian descent reported more harassment and discrimination (Chirikov & Soria, 2020). During a time when on-campus students needed support staff the most, few staff were directly available to assist students in navigating these challenges. Considering these challenges, it is no surprise that international students were more likely to report cases of depression and anxiety.

The remainder of international students who returned home to complete their coursework remotely experienced their own challenges. International students residing in different time zones had to navigate synchronous classes at unconventional hours. As campuses began reopening, international students seeking to return to the U.S. for on-campus experiences had to navigate the various travel restrictions and visa processes (Baer & Martel, 2020). Some international students were unsuccessful in their efforts to return. This was reflected in enrollment numbers for the fall of 2020 when international student enrollment dropped 16% (Baer & Martel, 2020).

Research Question(s)

This study addressed the following questions:

RQ1: How do international students experience sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern predominantly White institution (PWI)?

RQ2: What do international students find beneficial to sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern PWI?

RQ3: What do international students feel detracts from sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern PWI?

Theoretical Orientation

The research questions designed for this study are connected to the phenomenon of studying abroad and are related to the theoretical orientation. The use of theories can provide a study with, "…a synthesis of the thoughts of giants in your field of research, as they relate to your proposed research or thesis, as you understand those theories, and how you will use those theories to understand your data" (Kivunja, 2018, p. 46). After reviewing the literature, the researcher identified connections between international students' experiences and sense of belonging and international student mobility. To understand the participants' experiences (data), the researcher developed a hybrid theoretical lens combining Strayhorn's (2019) college students' sense of belonging theory and Perez-Encinas' and Rodriguez-Pomeda's (2018) four stages of international student mobility.

Sense of Belonging

Guiding the understanding of students' experiences is Strayhorn's (2019) college students' sense of belonging theory. Strayhorn explored the process of defining a sense of belonging and stated it, "…is one term with many meanings" (p. 11). Strayhorn shared their working definition of a sense of belonging for college students as

> …students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

Strayhorn (2019) identified seven core elements of sense of belonging:

1. Sense of belonging is a basic human need.

2. Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior.

3. Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance (a) in certain contexts, and (b) at certain times.

4. Sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering.

5. Social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging.

6. Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes.

7. Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change. (pp. 29-39)

Belongingness is believed to be part of the human condition and is included in Maslow's (1943) Theory of Human Motivation. Drawing from this hierarchy of needs, Strayhorn (2012, 2019) created their hypothesized model of college students' sense of belonging (see Figure 3) and updated this model to include fullest potential and educational mission (see Figure 4). Strayhorn's sense of belonging theory believes that "…sense of belonging is a basic human need," and as a result, "…satisfaction of such needs affects behaviors and perceptions, and characteristics of the social context influence how well these needs are met" (p. 4). Strayhorn identified the positive outcomes associated with sense of belonging including involvement, happiness in life, achievement, and retention.

Strayhorn also identified negative outcomes of depression and suicide to be associated with those lacking sense of belonging. Strayhorn concluded, "…satisfaction of emergent needs leads to positive outcomes and permits emergence of higher motives, while deprivation of such needs leads to negative outcomes and frustration" (p. 26). In their research, Strayhorn (2012) found "…a preponderance of evidence suggesting the importance of 'fitting in,'" and that, "…college students stress the importance of social acceptance, support, community, connections, and respect to their own identity, wellbeing, and academic success" (p. 5).

According to Deci and Ryan (2000), when students' needs are not being met, it can impact

goal setting and academic performance (as cited in Strayhorn, 2019). Strayhorn suggested,

"to excel, students must feel a sense of belonging in schools or colleges, and therefore

educators must work to create conditions that foster belongingness among all students" (p.

17).

Figure 3

Strayhorn's Hypothesized Model of College Students' Sense of Belonging
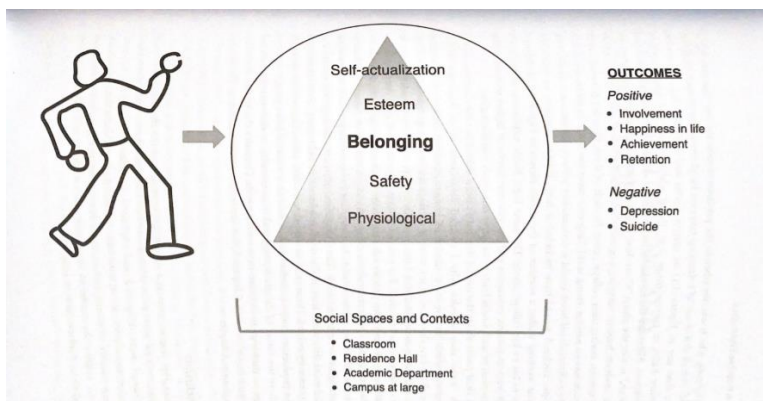
Note. College Students' Sense of Belonging (p. 25), by Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). New York:

Routledge.

Figure 4

Revised Model of College Students' Sense of Belonging
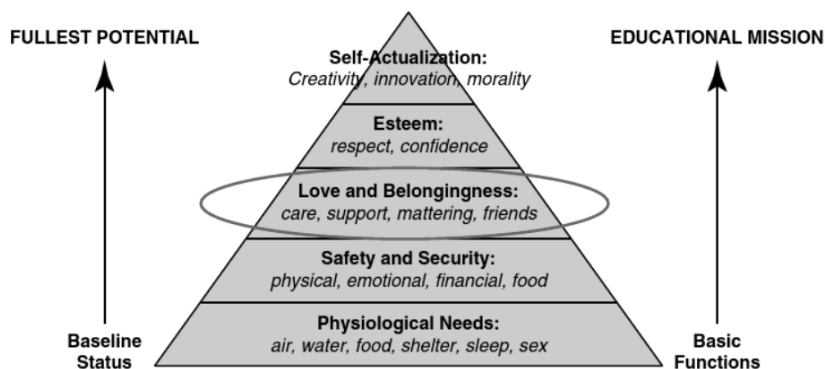
Note. College Students' Sense of Belonging (p. 41), by Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). New York: Routledge.

Strayhorn (2019) urged creating sense of belonging in areas where individuals may find it challenging to create connections. Even further pressing, Strayhorn suggested the need for sense of belonging amongst marginalized communities. This study seeks to explore the experiences of international students who are part of a marginalized community at a PWI in the rural, Midwest.

International Student Mobility Stages

Perez-Encinas and Rodriguez-Pomeda (2018) identified four stages of international student mobility to include: pre-arrival, arrival, during stay, and (re)integration. Perez-Encinas and Rodriguez-Pomeda provided the following descriptions for the stages

> …issues before arrival or pre-arrival information, arrival support, induction and welcome, learning in the classroom (academics) and learning in a new environment or life outside the classroom, and completion and return (reverse cultural shock) (p.23)

Connections between students' perceptions and their international student mobility stage are noticeable within the literature reviewed above. Perez-Encinas and Rodriguez-Pomeda stressed that international students' needs can vary, and their stage of mobility may impact the level of those needs.

Conclusion

International education has the potential to be mutually beneficial for students, host institutions, and local economies. The literature reviewed has addressed the strengths and challenges experienced by visiting students, and research has identified why institutions need to invest in supporting this vulnerable student population. There is a dearth of information related to experiences of international students in the rural U.S. Rural areas can pose unique challenges related to isolation and limitations to resources such as public transportation and city offerings (social and cultural). Furthermore, immigrants in predominantly White rural areas experienced higher rates of discrimination than those in urban areas. Institutions and communities that welcome international students have a responsibility to ensure these students are supported, included, and welcomed to the area.

It is important to note that international students can face some, or none, of the challenges outlined in this review of literature. Nonetheless, it is imperative that campuses are safe, inclusive, and acknowledge the representation of their student body. Glass and collaborators (2015) remind us that "universities have an ethical obligation to construct policies and practices that empower students…" (p. 364). As international student populations continue to grow on college campuses, it is pertinent that these institutions are actively engaged with this student population to identify and understand their needs as learners and campus community members. The purpose of this study is to gain a better

understanding of how international students experience a sense of belonging on their college

campus.

CHAPTER 3.   METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how international students experience their study abroad program. International students may represent a small portion of a campus' overall student population and they can be considered a marginalized student group. By identifying and understanding the needs of international students, campuses will be better equipped to support this student population.

The researcher sought to highlight the voices and experiences of international students enrolled at a rural, Midwestern university. The social constructivist approach will be the most suitable as there is not one set experience, rather there are multiple experiences or realities (Patel, 2015). The researcher focused on the phenomenon of studying abroad as it is experienced from the perspective of an international student. Responses were collected from semi-structured interviews and interview questions sought to understand their experiences of their study abroad program. Data were analyzed using axial and open coding methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glaser & Strauss, 2008). The researcher anticipated finding common themes throughout each story.

Research Question(s)

This study addressed the following questions:

RQ1: How do international students experience sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern predominantly White institution (PWI)?

RQ2: What do international students find beneficial to sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern PWI?

RQ3: What do international students feel detracts from sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern PWI?

Research Design

Acknowledging the power behind voices and stories, a phenomenological research design was utilized for this study. The phenomenon of studying abroad does not generate one single experience. Rather, each individual has their preconceived expectations including their own meanings and interpretations of their lived experiences. A phenomenological approach was taken to explore the experiences of international students during their study abroad journey. Following Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology, the researcher "focused less on [their] interpretations," and "more on a description of the experiences of participants" (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 78). As a result, the researcher identified reality as being socially constructed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Creswell (2013)

> In this worldview, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of experiences…These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views…Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. (pp. 24-25)

The researcher provided a platform for participants to openly share experiences of their study abroad program. With this approach, a focus is placed on words. According to Miles and Huberman (1994)

Words, especially organized into incidents or stories, have a concrete, vivid,

meaningful flavor that often proves far more convincing to a reader – another

researcher, a policy maker, a practitioner – than pages of summarized numbers. (p. 1)

Miles and Huberman (1994) described qualitative data as having the ability to

"preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which consequences, and

derive fruitful explanations" (p.1). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews allow for a level of flexibility and spontaneity. According to

Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "this format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at

hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (p. 111).

By collecting multiple stories, the researcher used aspects of grounded theory,

including open and axial coding, to identify shared themes (Glaser & Strauss, 2008).

Through the open coding process, the researcher identified key themes. Axial coding was

applied to each key theme. Axial coding occurs when, "the researcher identifies one open

coding category to focus on… and then goes back to the data and creates categories around

this core phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 85). The research anticipated themes will

align with the existing research which indicates the value sense of belonging has on an

international student's experience.

While reviewing the literature, conducting the research, and analyzing the data, the

researcher referenced theoretical frameworks from Strayhorn (2019), and Perez-Encinas and

Rodriguez-Pomeda (2018). Strayhorn's college students' sense of belonging theory allowed

the researcher to explore how belonging influences the perceptions of international students.

Participants were asked interview questions related to their preparation, arrival, and ongoing

stay. Perez-Encinas' and Rodriguez-Pomeda's stages of international student mobility theory

allowed the researcher to explore international students' perceptions during various stages of their study abroad experience.

Validity

Rigorous qualitative research should be trustworthy and authentic (Schwandt et al., 2007; Shufutinsky, 2020). Schwandt et al. (2007) referenced Lincoln and Guba's criteria for trustworthiness which includes credibility, transferability, and dependability and confirmability (Schwandt et al., 2007). The researcher engaged in credibility by conducting member checks with participants to ensure accuracy in the printed transcriptions. The researcher asked interview questions that generated thick rich descriptions to support transferability. The researcher also developed an audit trail (see Appendix E) which supports dependability and confirmability.

<div align="center">

Setting of the Study

</div>

The study was conducted at a rural, liberal arts college in the Midwestern U.S. The campus is comprised of approximately 5,000 students. A majority (88%) of the students are in-state residents. About 2% (or 120 students) are international and the remainder are out-of-state students. The institution is a predominantly White institution. As of 2018, 80% of enrolled students were White, 3% were American Indian, 3% were Hispanic/Latino, 2% were Black/African American, and 1% were Asian. Campus has multiple residential housing communities and is surrounded by scenic landscapes including forests and lakes. Campus amenities include outdoor recreation rentals, an indoor recreation center with a rock-climbing wall and swimming pool, multiple dining services, gun lockers, an art gallery, support services, an underground tunnel, and more.

Describing the surrounding community is as important as the campus community. The surrounding community is comprised of approximately 15,000 residents. The

community is predominantly White (79%) and has a large American Indian/Alaska Native population (11.2%). Additional residents identify as Black (2.7%) and Hispanic/Latino (3.2%). The city has several retail stores and multiple grocery stores. The closest grocery store from campus is just over one mile and Walmart is two miles away. Entertainment options consist of a movie theater (four miles away) and bowling alley (three miles away). The downtown area is growing and consists of restaurants, clothing stores, and a brewery. Public transportation in the community is limited. Rideshare options like Lyft are intermittently available due to minimal staff in the area. Small transit buses run from 7am-6pm on weekdays and 8am-5pm on Saturday. The buses do not have scheduled stops, rather, those who need a ride must dial ahead to schedule a pick-up. A regional airport offers costly, limited flights to the nearest international airport and a Greyhound bus provides long-distance transportation options. Weather in this area changes each season. November through March are the coldest months with average temperatures ranging from -3 degrees Fahrenheit (lows) to 36 degrees Fahrenheit (highs). With windchill, it is not uncommon to have winter days that drop down to the -20s and -30s. In addition to the wind, the winter season brings snow, sleet, and slush. Midwestern winters can feel long, cold, and dark. April, May, September, and October have lows in the 30s (Fahrenheit) and highs in the 50s (Fahrenheit). June through August has lows in the 50s (Fahrenheit) and highs in the 70s (Fahrenheit).

Participants

Through purposeful sampling, international students were invited to participate using outreach methods of e-mail and in-class announcements. Purposeful sampling approach was used "…because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 326). Sampling had the potential to evolve into snowballing as the international student population tends to be a

close-knit group and it is possible that participants were recruited through word-of-mouth.

To be eligible to participate in the study, participants must have been foreign-born holding an

F-1 visa and must have been 18 years of age or older. 11 students participated in the study.

Person-to-person semi-structured interviews were conducted. According to Patton (2015)

> We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly
>
> observe…We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe
>
> behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe
>
> situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people
>
> have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world.
>
> We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing,
>
> then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. (as cited in Merriam &
>
> Tisdell, 2016, p. 108)

The researcher believed the participants were the experts of their experiences and

wanted them to feel empowered during the interview process. Semi-structured interviews

provided the researcher with more flexibility in the format of the interview process which

was supportive of the participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews were

conducted in-person. Participants' audio responses were captured via Zoom and an audio

recorder. Based on responses, the researcher could better identify how students experience

sense of belonging and what factors contribute to and detract from sense of belonging.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Data were collected during one-on-one interviews involving the researcher and the

participant. The researcher and interview questions were the main instruments for this study

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews took place in-person. Audio was captured and

recorded using Zoom and a back-up audio recorder. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identified

audio recordings as a popular method of interviewing. The researcher took fieldnotes during the interview to "record…reactions to something the informant says…" and to assess the quality of the interview (p. 131). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) indicated

> The informant's health, mood at the time of interview, and so on may affect the quality of data obtained, as might an informant's ulterior motives for participating in the project. Furthermore, all information obtained from an informant has been selected, either consciously or unconsciously, from all that he or she knows. What you get in an interview is simply the informant's perception of the phenomenon of interest at that particular point in time. Although this personal perspective is, of course, what is sought in qualitative research, the information in any single interview needs to be considered in light of other interviews and other sources of data such as observations and documents. (pp. 135-136).

Zoom was also utilized as a transcription tool which automatically transcribed participants' responses. In the event that Zoom failed to capture certain responses, the researcher setup a secondary recording device by using a digital audio recorder. The researcher conducted a preliminary review of the transcriptions and made grammatical corrections where needed. This process allowed the researcher an opportunity to further identify "…insights and hunches about what is going on in [the] data" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 200).

<div align="center">**Data Analysis**</div>

Aspects of grounded theory were applied during the data analysis process. Vollstedt and Rezat (2019) suggested that "the methods and techniques of grounded theory make use of different elements: some relate to the collection, some to the evaluation of data, and some refer to the research process" (p. 84). The researcher used grounded theory to guide the data

analysis process. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) refer to the qualitative data analysis process as inductive and comparative.

After data were collected and interviews were transcribed, the researcher shared the transcript with the participant for member checking. This contributed to the validity of the study. Each participant had the opportunity to review their transcript and provide feedback.

The researcher organized the data following the data analysis spiral (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Starting with data collected from the interviews, the researcher moved through a systematic process of analyzing the data (see Figure 5). The researcher used open and axial coding to generate themes.

Figure 5

Data Analysis Spiral
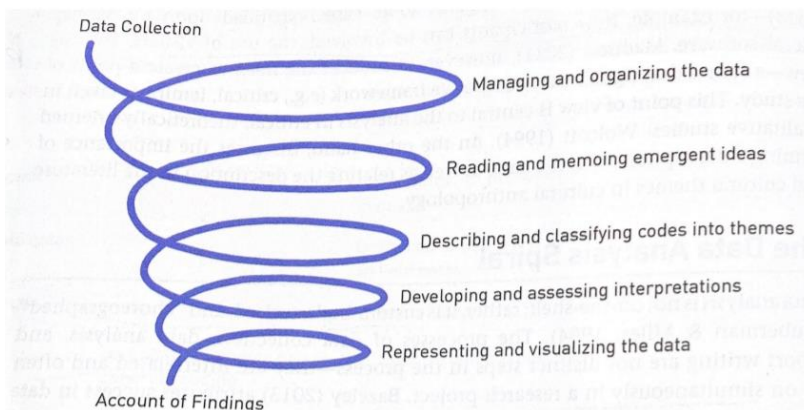
Note. Qualitative inquiry & research design, (p. 186), by Creswell, J.W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). California: Sage Publications.

The researcher initiated the open coding process by thoroughly analyzing the data. Through the open coding process, the researcher reviewed the transcripts in stages. During the first review of the transcripts the researcher notated their initial thoughts. The second review of the transcripts, the researcher identified key components which included responses

that were repeated, that were surprising, that aligned with research, the interviewee stated its significance, and/or were connected to theory (Löfgren, 2013). Then, the researcher created sections of data based on concepts or categories. Strauss and Corbin (1990) described concepts as having one code, and categories as "concepts of higher order" (as cited in Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019, p. 86). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the open coding process includes, "tagging any unit of data that might be relevant to the study" (p. 229). Vollstedt and Rezat (2019) provided a list of questions to guide the process of data interpretation

- What? Which phenomenon is described?

- Who? Which people are involved? Which roles do they embody, or which ones are assigned to them?

- How? Which aspects of the phenomenon are dealt with? Which are left out?

- When? How long? Where? In what way is the spaciotemporal dimension biographically relevant or important for single actions?

- Why? Which justifications are given or deducible?

- Whereby? Which strategies are used?

- What for? Which consequences are anticipated? (p. 87)

The open coding process allowed the researcher to identify similarities amongst participants' responses as well as similarities between participants' responses and theory.

After the researcher identified concepts and categories through open coding, the researcher used axial coding to identify relationships between the concepts and categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). After themes were generated through the open and axial coding processes, the researcher engaged in interpretation which,

"…involves abstracting out beyond the codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 195). Data were represented using a table that identified the common categories and themes.

During the open and axial coding processes, the researcher generated memos or handwritten notes in the margins (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Writing memos provided an audit trail which contributed to the quality and credibility of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). Vollstedt and Rezat (2019) stated that "memos are needed to argue and prove the development of the grounded theory from the data and are thus a crucial aspect to draw back to…" (p. 90).

Since the text-rich transcriptions were electronic, digital files were the most conducive method for managing and organizing the data. Transcriptions of each interview were stored via a digital file and named according to the chronological order (e.g., interview one, interview two, etc.). Digital files were stored over a secure sever using a password-protected computer. Copies of the interview transcripts were printed, which provided the researcher a tangible template to read, re-read, and notate. Printed copies of the interview transcripts were kept in a locked filing cabinet.

Pilot Study

The researcher conducted a pilot study to assess the preceding data analysis procedures. During the pilot study, the researcher interviewed three participants who were international students with active I-20s. Two participants were undergraduate students, and one participant was a graduate student. Participants that volunteered for the pilot study were ineligible to participate in the final study. Participants were provided interview protocol and a list of interview questions. Participants were able skip any questions they were not

comfortable answering and could end the interview at any time. The researcher asked a total of 19 questions.

The pilot study allowed the researcher to refine the interview questions which included ordering the questions in the following format: demographic, pre-arrival, arrival, sense of belonging, and stay. The researcher also added the following questions:

- Do you live on-campus or off-campus?

- Has anyone in your family studied abroad?

- Upon your arrival, what was most surprising?

- Upon arrival, what was most challenging?

- What do you miss most from your home country?

These questions were added to provide more information for demographic purposes as well as to better understand the participants' initial experiences upon arrival. In addition to revising interview questions, a pilot study can help a researcher better understand the recruitment process, and the challenges that go along with it, as well as the role of the researcher (Kim, 2011).

Procedures

Two methods served as outreach tools for this study. First, international students were contacted via email using a listserv from the international center on campus. Then, the researcher made announcements during two classes that were specifically designed for international students. The participants were able to schedule a person-to-person interview between the hours of 7am-7pm Monday through Sunday. Once a participant selected a time, the researcher provided the participant with the interview protocol and informed consent form.

Interviews were conducted in-person and were scheduled for one hour. Participants received a letter of consent and interview protocol that they completed prior to the interview. The first few minutes of the interview consisted of a review of the letter of consent and the interviewer provided the participant an opportunity to ask questions. The interviewer informed the participant they could end the interview at any time. After the interview concluded, the researcher e-mailed the participant thanking them for their time and recommended they reach out if they had any follow-up questions. The researcher also provided information on how participants could obtain results from the study once the study was finalized.

Researcher's Role

Shufutinsky (2020) posited a rationale for use of self in qualitative research stating it "is a method of addressing the potential biases associated with the main research instrument" (p. 52). Prior to conducting this research, the researcher participated in several study abroad programs. The researcher's firsthand experiences ignited an interest to further explore the experiences international students have about their study abroad programs. If a researcher has a personal experience that is intertwined with their research topic, they have the opportunity to enhance credibility by using epoché or bracketing (Butler, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Shufutinsky, 2020; Tufford & Newman, 2010). According to Tufford and Newman (2010), "bracketing is a method used by some researchers to mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project" (p. 2). Figure 6 depicts the areas a researcher can include bracketing.

Figure 6

The Integration of Bracketing into Qualitative Methodology
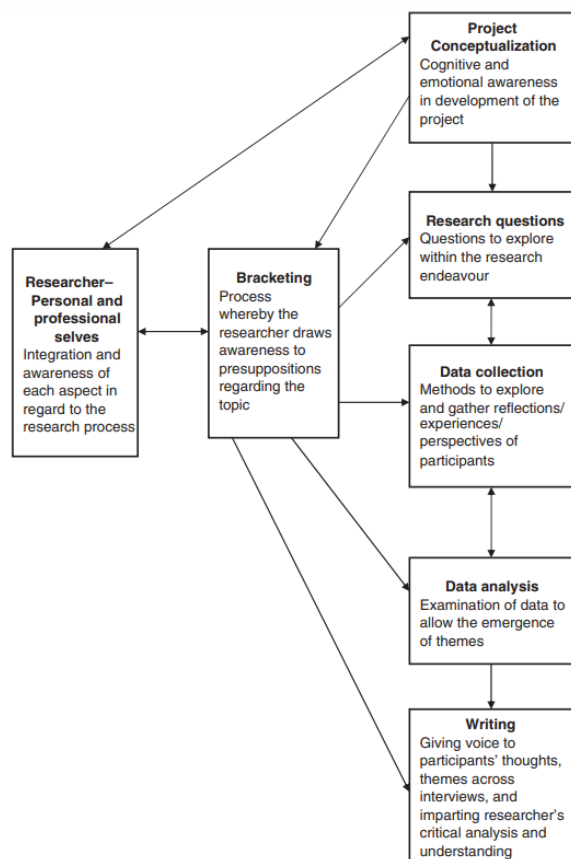
Note. Qualitative Social Work. Bracketing in qualitative research, (p. 9), by Tufford, L., & Newman, P. (2010). doi: 10.1177/1473325010368316

   The researcher engaged in bracketing throughout data collection, data analysis, and writing. While conducting interviews, the researcher was able to write ideas relevant to the participants' responses. Memoing was used during interviewing and data analysis. During this time the researcher actively engaged in bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Tufford and Newman concluded that

    Bracketing one's preconceptions can render audible the nuances and subtleties of

    participants' responses while protecting the researcher from the potential trap of

simply categorizing responses into preordained slots or filtering the participant's lived

experience through the researchers own personal experience. (p. 12)

Bracketing is one of many methods to promote credibility with qualitative research. The

researcher also utilized methods of member checking and audit trails.

Member checking contributes to internal validity and it invites participants to further

be part of the research process. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) "internal validity

deals with the question of how research findings match reality. How congruent are the

findings with reality? Do the findings capture what is really there? Are investigators

observing or measuring what they think they are measuring?" (p. 242). As echoed throughout

this study, the researcher was intentional about empowering the participants. Member

checking took place after interviews were transcribed. Participants were invited to provide

feedback on their responses and indicate whether anything was missing or misinterpreted.

This validation process contributes to the accurate depiction of the participants' experiences.

Auditing or audit trails provide a visual representation of the researcher's process of

making meaning and finding themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016;

Tracy, 2010). The researcher created an audit trail (see Appendix E) which includes themes,

emergent codes, and evidence (responses). Each response is linked to the participant that

gave the response. This audit trail allows the reader to see what a participant said, what

emergent code was identified from the response, and what theme evolved from the emergent

code.

Ethical Considerations

Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended ethical considerations be applied to all

phases of research. Prior to initiating the study, the researcher obtained approval from the

Institutional Review Board (IRB). Prior to conducting the interviews, participants were

provided with a letter of consent which detailed the purpose of the study and stated

participation was voluntary and could be terminated by the participant at any time. The

researcher acknowledged the power dynamic that existed between an interviewer and

participant. To address this concern, the researcher was mindful to "avoid leading questions,

withhold sharing personal impressions, and avoid disclosing sensitive information" (Creswell

& Poth, 2018, p. 55). The researcher was intentional in making the interview process as

comfortable and accessible as possible for participants. While analyzing and reporting the

data, the researcher ensured the privacy of participants by creating pseudonyms and refrained

from including any personally identifying information. All participants were provided

information on how to access this study once it was finalized. Electronic data were kept on a

password protected computer over a secure server and printed data were kept in a locked

office inside of a locked cabinet. Data would be destroyed one year after the study.

Limitations

The sample size of this study was small, yet specific. While this study will not have

generalizability, it is still valuable as it can be replicated elsewhere. The value of this study

can be inferred by those reading this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that

"*reader or user generalizability* involves leaving the extent to which a study's findings apply

to other situations up to the people in those situations" (p. 256). Research regarding how

international students' experience sense of belonging in the rural, Midwest is lacking. This

study relied on similar studies pertaining to sense of belonging or experiences of

international students; however, future studies are needed to contribute to credibility

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Language may be seen as a limitation as English was used for the

purposes of this study and English may or may not have been the primary language for

participants.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the perceptions of international students enrolled in a rural, Midwestern university. From these findings, the researcher hoped to identify ways to better support this student population. Purposeful sampling was utilized as the researcher wanted to interview a specific group of students on campus. Following a qualitative phenomenological approach, data for this study were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to ask predetermined questions with the opportunity to follow up with probing questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data were analyzed using the steps outlined in the data analysis spiral (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data analysis included open and axial coding to identify themes and generate categories.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Introduction

International students entering the United States in pursuit of a study abroad program will have experiences that are unique to them. No two students will have the same exact experience. Everyone has their own perception of reality and makes their own meaning of their experiences. International students may also have similar, shared experiences which is unique for individuals experiencing the phenomenon of studying abroad. The purpose of this phenomenological study sought to better understand how international students experience and make meaning of their study abroad experience. The frameworks used to guide this study included Strayhorn's (2019) sense of belonging and Perez-Encinas' and Rodriguez-Pomeda's (2018) stages of international student mobility. The first three chapters provided an overview of the study, reviewed the literature, and discussed the methodological approach and research design. Chapter Four focuses on the role of the researcher, description of the sample, research methodology, and analysis of the data and findings.

Researcher's Role

Prior to conducting the study, the researcher had been an international student and had participated in four study abroad programs. In their third program abroad, the researcher completed their graduate internship in South Africa. This first-hand experience of being an international student ignited an interest to better understand the phenomenon of studying abroad. While in South Africa, the researcher was affected by the level of belonging they experienced. Having encountered elements of homesickness and culture shock, the researcher felt deeply connected and supported by their new community in South Africa. Unbeknownst to the researcher, these personal experiences were the catalyst to better understand the

phenomenon of study abroad. The researcher sought to explore how others experience study abroad and to see what, if any, role sense of belonging has in that experience.

At the time this study was conducted, the researcher was interim director of the International Program Center on campus at a rural, Midwestern university. The researcher's previous experiences abroad and professional role of leading an international center allowed the researcher to build rapport with the participants. While analyzing the data, the researcher kept a journal where they engaged in bracketing to promote credibility.

Description of Sample

Participants were recruited through emails using a listserv that the researcher had access to as the interim director of the international center. Three emails were sent out between September and October 2022, inviting participants to participate in a voluntary qualitative study. A total of 11 international students responded (18% response rate) and all of them completed the interview process. Upon the completion of interviews, the researcher engaged in member checking by providing participants with a copy of their interview transcript. Participants were given several weeks to review the transcript and provide any necessary feedback.

Table 1 shows the participants' area of origin in comparison to the overall international student population at a rural, Midwestern university.

Table 1

Area of Origin

Area of Origin	Participant Sample	Total Population
North America (Canada, Caribbean Islands)	2 (11%)	19 (31.5%)
Africa (Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia)	6 (55%)	17 (27.9%)
Asia (China, Iran, Japan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam)	3 (27%)	15 (24.6%)
Europe (Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Poland, Spain)	0	9 (14.8%)
South America (Columbia)	0	1 (1.6%)
Total	11	61

Over half (55%) of the participants were from African countries, nearly a third (27%) were from Asian countries and 18% were from the Caribbean. This aligns with the overall international student population which has 31% from North America (Canada and the Caribbean), 28% from Africa (Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, South

Africa, Zambia), 25% from Asia (China, Iran, Japan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South

Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam), 15% from Europe (Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland,

Netherlands, Poland, Spain), and 1% from South America (Columbia).

      As seen in Table 2, a majority (91%) of participants were undergraduate and the

remaining was at the graduate level. This aligns with the total international student

population where 92% are undergraduate students and 8% are graduate students. Over half

(55%) of the participants had been at the institution for more than a year while 45% of the

participants had been at the institution for less than a year.

Table 2

Student status

Status	Sample Population	Total Population
First Year	3 (27.2%)	13 (21.3%)
Second Year	1(9.1%)	16 (26.2%)
Third Year	4 (36.4%)	9 (14.8%)
Fourth Year	2 (18.2%)	18 (29.5%)
Graduate	1 (9.1%)	5 (8.2%)
Total	11	61

      As shown in Tables 3 and 4 (see Appendix C) over half (55%) of the participants

lived on campus while 45% of the participants lived off campus. A majority (73%) of

participants had a language other than English as their first/primary language. 27% of

participants indicated English as their first/primary language.

Data Analysis

The study utilized Strayhorn's college students' sense of belonging theory (2019) as well as Perez-Encinas' and Rodriguez-Pomeda's (2018) stages of international student mobility theory. This study addressed the following questions:

RQ1: How do international students experience sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern predominantly White institution (PWI)?

RQ2: What do international students find beneficial to sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern PWI?

RQ3: What do international students feel detracts from sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern PWI?

Data were collected through in-person, semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked a total of 26 questions (see Appendix B). Research questions were divided into five sections covering demographic information as well as questions pertaining to pre-departure, arrival, sense of belonging, and stay. A portion of this categorization (pre-departure, arrival, and stay) followed Perez-Encinas' and Rodriguez-Pomeda's (2018) stages of international student mobility theory. Participants could end the interview at any time and were free to skip any questions they were not comfortable answering. Every participant completed the interview process, and no questions were skipped.

Interviews were audio recorded on Zoom and a back-up recorder was used to record audio. Upon initial interview transcriptions, the researcher found the transcription software with Zoom to have multiple errors. Using the back-up audio recorder, the researcher found higher accuracy using Microsoft Word transcription. The researcher listened to each recording and followed the transcription to address any errors created by the transcription software. The process of closely listening to the recordings while reading the transcriptions

allowed the researcher to become further immersed in the responses of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once the researcher revised the initial transcription, the researcher engaged in member checking. Each participant was asked to review their transcription. The process of member checking helps ensure the participants' responses were accurately recorded and creates credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data were organized following the data analysis spiral which includes data collection; managing and organizing the data; reading and memoing emergent ideas; describing and classifying codes into themes; developing and assessing interpretations; representing and visualizing the data; and account findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were analyzed using aspects of grounded theory. While the researcher did not seek to generate theory, open and axial coding were utilized to analyze the data. To honor the significance of the participants' words and experiences, the researcher took an inductive approach to the coding process. Through inductive coding the researcher identified patterns and themes that were unique to the lived experiences of the participants interviewed (Saldaña, 2021).

Prior to analyzing the data, the researcher reviewed for transcription accuracy. This process allowed the researcher to get closer to the participants' experiences which provided the researcher an opportunity to better understand the participants' responses. In the first stage of open coding, the researcher notated their initial thoughts as they emerged. These initial thoughts included hunches, questions, and personal inquiry. In the second stage of open coding, the researcher identified phrases that were repeated amongst participants, and responses that were surprising and that aligned with theory (Löfgren, 2013). A total of 800 codes were identified in these two stages. The researcher used both descriptive and in vivo coding. Descriptive coding allowed the researcher to be actively involved in making meaning

of the participants' experiences (Miles et al., 2020). In vivo coding allowed the researcher to directly capture the essence of the participants' experiences (Saldaña, 2021).

After several stages of open coding, the researcher began the axial coding process in which 800 codes evolved into 12 categories, also referred to as emergent codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). Saldaña (2021) depicted how this process can look (see Figure 7). The researcher created an audit trail (see Appendix E) to show the connection between participants' statements, emergent codes, and themes.

Figure 7

Codes-to-theory model
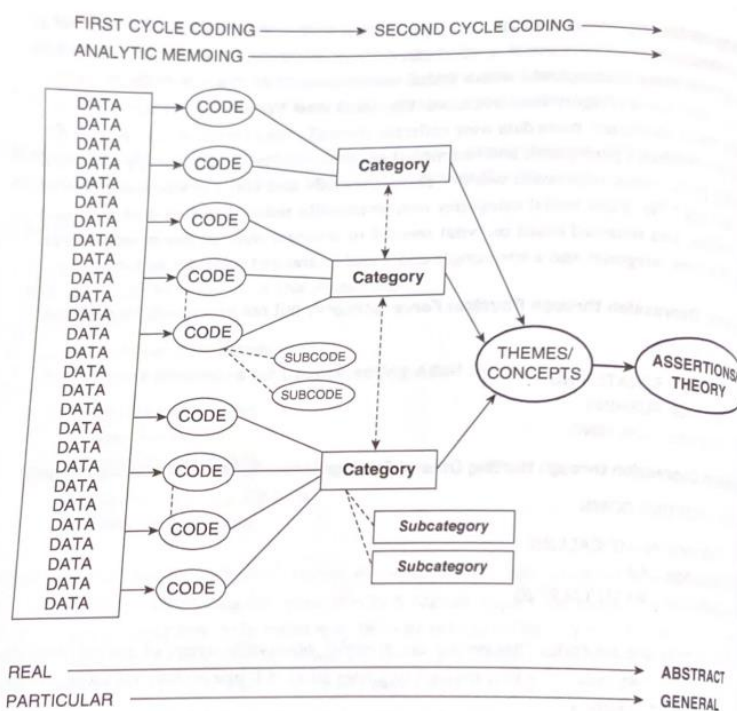
Note. The coding manual for qualitative researchers, (p. 18), by Saldaña, J. (2021). California: Sage Publications.

The researcher created diagrams throughout the coding process to conceptualize the creation of categories based on the coding themes. Creswell and Poth (2018) recognized this process

as a way to create a "central phenomenon" (p. 315).

Presentation of Data – Results of Analysis

In reviewing the results of the analysis, it is important to revisit one of many definitions of sense of belonging. According to Strayhorn, (2012) sense of belonging can be experienced as "...perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus" (p. 3). Strayhorn (2019) also identified that sense of belonging can be fluid and change over time.

Research Question One

Research question one (RQ1) explored the following: How do international students experience sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern predominantly White institution (PWI)? The researcher found that participants experienced sense of belonging through words or actions by an external or internal source that elicited feelings of belonging.

Theme One: External Dialogue or Actions

The first of four themes that emerged from participants' responses was the dialogue or actions by others that contributed to feelings of belonging. This theme focuses on the positive effect that outside sources can have on an individual's experience. Two of the 12 emergent codes with this theme were accepted and supported.

Accepted. Reflecting on how feeling accepted is related to sense of belonging, Strayhorn (2019) defined sense of belonging as

> …students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of
> connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted,
> respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus
> such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

When asked "what does feeling welcomed mean to you?" A participant responded, "Being accepted. Being given a platform to share your ideas. Being listened to as well as much as listening to other people. And being able to fit in and by fitting in, I mean being able to actually synchronize with the environment" (Participant_#10, 2022). Another participant described they feel welcomed when they are not seen as a "stranger or foreigner" to others (Participant_#2, 2022). Multiple participants provided responses that spoke to fitting in which is a major component of acceptance. Two participants shared they feel a sense of welcoming when they are "respected as a human being," (Participant_#3, 2022) and when, "people don't point out your differences" (Participant_#8, 2022).

Supported. Responses related to the emergent code of supported included support from staff, campus resources, and the campus community. As seen in Appendix D, Participant_#1 (2022) expressed that they felt most welcome when others were "available," and provided a "phone number or email." Participant_#1 "appreciated" the support the resources on campus were able to provide and for them, it contributed to a sense of welcoming. Similarly, another participant, explained they feel welcomed when "someone is going out of their way to show me that they want me to be there" (Participant_#5, 2022). Participant_#4 (2022) associated a significant value with support as it relates to creating a sense of welcoming as they are "from a faraway place," and "don't have no family." Participant_#9 (2022) placed value in the type of support given, stating they feel welcomed when others, "want to be part of your journey, more like trying to help you. Not just want to know but also want to help you out and advise you on what to do."

Theme Two: Internal Dialogue or Actions

Participants provided responses that involved their internal processing of making sense of their experiences. Sense of belonging does not only happen in conditions that

involve others; sense of belonging also happens internally as one conceptualizes its meaning in their life. The codes that emerged with this theme included, preparedness, resilience, and self-growth.

Preparedness. Preparedness emerged amongst participants in ways of supportive life experiences which included research of the area, family who had studied abroad, participants' own experiences abroad, and participants' previously earned degrees. For one participant, their efforts in researching the area before arriving allowed them to better understand, "culture in the US and how people act" (Participant_#3, 2022). Participant_#8 (2022) felt their previous experiences traveling abroad allowed them to "meet different cultures," and gain a "sense of independence," which assisted in how they adjusted to the area (see Appendix E).

Resilience. Participants' statements regarding ways they overcame adversity were attributed to the emergent code of resilience. The ability to be resilient in challenging times can impact the way one experiences belonging. In two responses, Participant_#1 (2022) shared their perception of adapting to the culture in the area. Participant_#1 was prideful in maintaining an open mind when engaging with others and found it helped them to create more connections. Participant_#1 also acknowledged that while they keep an open mind, they still adhere to their own values and beliefs (see Appendix E). Participant_#2 (2022) expressed feeling lonely at times and found that the ability to "love yourself" is what allows them to "handle things" (see Appendix E). Similarly, Participant_#3 (2022) shared that while they miss family and friends back home, it was important to them to "not give up," as they felt, "life is better here than it was at home" (see Appendix E). Participant_#7 (2022) explained how their transition abroad created feelings of "imposter syndrome," and explained

that things take time to get used to.

Self-Growth. In sharing about their study abroad experiences, multiple participants shared ways they have grown, personally. This self-growth is one way of experiencing a personal sense of belonging. Participant_#4 (2022) appreciated how this opportunity has allowed them to look at their life differently, now seeing "so many ways you can get to a point," likening the process to using "Google Maps" (see Appendix E). Participant_#6 (2022) explained how their study abroad experience was not just about their academic program, but their connections with others, stating, "study abroad changes your mind and perspective in so many things, not just your field. You learn a lot from people" (see Appendix E). Participant_#10 (2022) shared that their study abroad experience allowed them to feel more "fulfilled," and this positive experience has made them feel more connected to their program (see Appendix E).

Research Question Two

Research question two (RQ2) explored the following: What do international students find beneficial to sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern PWI? The researcher identified that international students found actions or behaviors that promote inclusion to be beneficial to their sense of belonging.

Theme One: Actions or Behaviors that Promote Inclusion

Research has shown that factors related to inclusion can lead to sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). Participants provided feedback that connected activity, community, and resources as inclusive areas which contribute to their sense of belonging. These actions or behaviors were produced by an individual or by more than one person (a collective).

Activity. As referenced in Figure 8, areas that participants reported to have positive impact on their sense of belonging included intramurals, religious affiliation, and social gatherings. Participant_#4 (2022) had a positive association between playing soccer and building their social network. Participant_#6 (2022) found their faith to be an opportunity to meet others and feel more connected to the community. Participant_#11 (2022) felt that "welcome activities," such as orientation were the most helpful in meeting people and feeling connected (see Appendix E).

Figure 8

Excerpt from Audit Trail

Theme	Emergent Code	Evidence	Participant
Actions or behaviors that promote inclusion	Activity	People ask, do you want to join team, or do you want to play right now and then from then you start making these connections and building relationships with people.	4
		And the most important thing also to grow in my faith because I'm a Christian.	6

Note. A Phenomenological Study of International Students' Sense of Belonging at a Rural, Midwestern University, (p.113), by Smith, D., (2023).

Community. Community and belonging are closely correlated in several studies (Strayhorn, 2012, 2018). Multiple participants identified a strong sense of community. Participant_#3 (2022) stated they could, "feel the bond here" and Participant_#4 (2022) referred to the campus as a "big extended family" (see Appendix E). Participant_#7 (2022) acknowledged that even though they do not know everyone on campus, people are "willing to get to know us and welcome us" (see Appendix E). Participant_#9 (2022) specifically identified the strong bond of the international community with the following statement

> We just felt like a group of people like no one was like, oh, I'm from this country. We are like 8 of us from 8 different countries, but like at the end of the day, we're all people like we're all very similar and the fact that we all new and international kind of made us similar, so like all the differences made us the same, so it really just felt like so natural and everything.

Resources. Several participants referenced the importance of resources and the impact they made on their experiences. Participant_#1 (2022) explained how helpful the international admissions team was in their transfer process and that the staff were "nice and warm" (see Appendix E). Participant_#3 (2022) felt that their faculty were "kind-hearted people," and the participant was surprised at the level of support on campus (see Appendix E).

Research Question Three

Research question three (RQ3) explored the following: What do international students feel detracts from sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern PWI? Based on the data, the researcher concluded that international students found actions or behaviors that limit inclusion to detract from their sense of belonging.

Theme One: Actions or Behaviors that Limit Inclusion

   Cultural Insensitivity. As depicted in Figure 9, Participant_#5 (2022) provided

valuable feedback about their study abroad experience and the challenges they have

encountered with sense of belonging. Participant_#5 expressed that an "institution is

generally a reflection of the people. So, and I don't believe the people are very accepting of

cultures they don't know." Participant_#5 further referenced the lack of cultural

understanding that some had which created conversations they felt were "offensive."

Participant_#8 (2022) shared a similar experience and felt like some classmates were

"ignorant" about other cultures and that they had to explain or teach their peers of their

ignorance (see Appendix E).

Figure 9

Excerpt from Audit Trail

Theme	Emergent Code	Evidence	Participant
Actions or behaviors that limit inclusion	Cultural Insensitivity	I think the institution is generally a reflection of the people. So, and I don't believe the people are very accepting of cultures they don't know.	5
		I do think they're curious, but they don't know how to start asking questions without being offensive.	5

Note. A Phenomenological Study of International Students Sense of Belonging at a Rural,

Midwestern University, (p.115), by Smith, D., (2023).

Language. For Participant_#2 (2022), their challenges with speaking English impacted how they interacted with their peers as well as faculty (see Appendix E). Participant_#11 (2022) found their classroom experience to be challenging at times due to the speed of the instruction and the time it takes them to interpret the information. Participant_#11 stated, "…for international students that I see like we need some time or maybe some, I won't say cheat or unfair stuff but just like we might need more resource, like if during class time professor can just helping us more, that will be much better because right now the challenge is like cannot understand during class time, yeah" (see Appendix E). Participant_#7 and Participant_#8 found the accents and speed to interfere the most with their ability to understand conversations (see Appendix E).

Discrimination. Discrimination was identified as an emergent code through the responses of participants which focused on ways they felt indirectly or directly marginalized based on their identity. Aspects of their identity included race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The researcher associated responses pertaining to biases and prejudices under this emergent code. A few of the participants (Participant_#6, 2022; Participant_#7, 2022; Participant_#10, 2022) indicated their experiences of discrimination happened once or twice. Participant_#6 shared the following

> It's not always a bed of roses...I think, it's hard to adjust because sometimes you feel you're being treated differently because you come from a different country. I'll say it only has happened once in my entire life, for three years I've been here. Because sometimes you're walking along the path, but someone pulls aside the car and they call you crazy words, you know?...And maybe it's because of my color, because of

my appearance. That's why it's sometimes people yell at you and they're driving stuff like that. That's kind of weird. And it only happened like once or twice in my life that I've been here.

Others (Participant_#8, 2022; Participant_#11, 2022) spoke to a higher prevalence. Participant_#11 stated, "…it's just like a lot of people in here is more, I don't know, judgmental, I guess like kind of homophobic or some of them have racism." Participant_#11 further explained, stating, "It's really obvious like the way they look at you…they really like to stare…I mean, you know, just smile first please."

Restrictions. Restrictions can impact an international students' sense of belonging as it can depict an "us versus them" mentality. Participant_#7 (2022) identified this by stating a perceived "gap," between the domestic students and international students (see Appendix E). Two challenging areas of restrictions include work and financial support. International students are limited to working on campus at 20 hours a week (during a term). Domestic students have more opportunity to choose where they work and how often they work. International students are also limited to the type of financial resources they can access. For example, many do not receive funding from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Several participants (Participant_#4, 2022; Participant_#7, 2022; Participant_#8, 2022) referenced hardships endured because of these restrictions. Another form of restriction involved classroom expectations. Participant_#11 (2022) felt that due dates and timelines were not supportive of international students who "need to spend more time extra time to doing our assignment" (see Appendix E). Participant_#11 commented that while they were being treated like an American student, they felt that this was more of a disadvantage for them.

Summary

Understanding international students' sense of belonging as it relates to the phenomenon of studying abroad is an area that needs ongoing research. This study contributed valuable data that can help leaders and students alike to better understand how international students experience sense of belonging while they are studying abroad. Chapter five will look further into the summary of results, comparisons of the findings, limitations, implications of the study, and recommendations for action and further study.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

Introduction

In the 2020-2021 academic year, over 900,000 international students studied in the U.S. which generated $28.4 billion in revenue (Banks, 2021). The value of international student enrollment goes beyond financial gain. From an administrative perspective, international student enrollment can strengthen international partnerships and diversify the learning experience. Both international students and domestic students can mutually benefit from international education as it allows both groups to learn about each other's culture. Literature has shown the value that peer connections and sense of belonging have on a college students' experience (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). Yet, minimal research has explored how international students experience sense of belonging while studying abroad in the U.S.

This phenomenological study sought to better understand the experiences of international students at a rural, Midwestern university. The theoretical framework consisted of Stayhorn's (2012, 2019) college students' sense of belonging theory as well as Perez-Encinas' and Rodriguez-Pomeda's (2018) international student mobility stages (adapted from Kelo et al., 2010). This chapter will review the summary of results, comparison of the findings, limitations, implications of the study, recommendations for action, and recommendations for further study.

Summary of Results

This study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do international students experience sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern predominantly White institution (PWI)?

RQ2: What do international students find beneficial to sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern PWI?

RQ3: What do international students feel detracts from sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern PWI?

To gain insight on how international students experience sense of belonging, one of the interview questions asked participants to define what sense of welcoming means to them (see Appendix D). One participant shared,

Being accepted. Being given a platform to share your ideas. Being listened to as well as much as listening to other people. And being able to fit in and by fitting in, I mean being able to actually synchronize with the environment and then you know, like, be able to put energies that work for your goal (Participant_#10, 2022).

When participants were asked questions about how they experienced sense of belonging (RQ1), codes that emerged included accepted and supported, and preparedness, resilience, and self-growth. These codes were attributed to themes that participants experienced sense of belonging through dialogue or actions by an external source (theme one) or internal source (theme two) which elicited feelings of belonging. An audit trail (see Appendix E) depicts the breakdown of theme, code, and evidence (participants' responses).

When participants were asked questions about what they find beneficial to sense of belonging (RQ2), codes that emerged included activity, community, and resources. These codes were linked to the theme of actions or behaviors that promote inclusion (see Appendix E). When participants experienced actions or behaviors that resulted in feeling included, this contributed to feelings of belonging. Participants shared specific examples such as being invited to play a sport, being listened to, friendly encounters, attending orientation activities;

and availability of campus resources.

When participants were asked questions about what they find detracts from sense of belonging (RQ3), codes that emerged included language, cultural insensitivity, discrimination, and restrictions. These codes were linked to the theme of actions or behaviors that limit inclusion (see Appendix E). When participants experienced actions or behaviors that were non-inclusive, this created a lack of belonging for participants. Participants shared specific examples such as being asked offensive questions, difficulties communicating with Americans, experiencing racially biased hate speech, and having more restrictions than domestic students when it comes to employment opportunities and financial resources.

Comparison of the Findings with Theoretical Framework and Previous Literature

The theoretical frameworks used in this study included Perez-Encinas' and Rodriguez-Pomeda's (2018) international student mobility stages (adapted from Kelo et al., 2010) and Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) college students' sense of belonging theory. According to Moustakas' (1994) "…moments of perception bring to consciousness fresh perspectives, as knowledge is born that unites past, present, and future and that increasingly expands and deepens what something is and means" (pp. 53-54). The researcher sought a comprehensive overview of the participants' experiences from the application process to arrival to the duration of their stay.

Stages of International Student Mobility

Pre-arrival

To better understand how someone experiences a phenomenon, it can be helpful to identify what their perceptions and expectations were prior to experiencing the phenomenon. Moustakas' (1994) refers to perceptions as "the primary source of knowledge" (p. 52). The pre-arrival stage involves processes such as searching for academic programs, researching

the campus and surrounding community, applying for admission, preparing for and attending the visa interview, and organizing their personal belongings. Participants identified affordability, admissions processing, and family support to be most important during their pre-arrival stage. Affordability is one of the five factors considered when selecting a study abroad program (Glass et al., 2021). Glass et al. also identified a supportive admissions process and family involvement can influence the decisions made during the pre-arrival stage.

Arrival

Participants were asked interview questions about experiences they encountered during their arrival. The timeframe of this stage included arriving to campus through their first month. Participants shared positive arrival experiences including feeling supported. Specific examples included receiving help from strangers in the airport, participating in orientation, and accessing campus resources. Ammigan (2019) stressed the importance of campuses arrival programming as it is the first opportunity to create a welcoming experience.

Participants shared challenging aspects to their arrival, including adapting to language barriers, homesickness, and the weather. Half of the participants expressed challenges with adapting to the English language. Some felt the differences in accents made it difficult to understand what was being said while others felt the pace of the speech as difficult to keep up with. Multiple studies have found language barriers to pose challenges for international students (Lau et al., 2018; Lee & Rice, 2007; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Sherry et al., 2009; Van Horne et al., 2018; Wan et al., 1992).

When participants were asked what they missed most about home and what challenges they experienced upon arrival (in the first semester) a few participants referenced challenges with missing home. Specific examples included missing the comfort and

familiarity of their community, missing certain friends and family members, and feeling aspects of their personhood, like their humor, were frequently misunderstood by Americans. Hendrickson et al. (2011) identified that homesickness can interfere with international students' abilities to create social connections. In their study, Hendrickson et al. found that international students who were friends with domestic students were less likely to experience homesickness.

As previously addressed in Chapter 3, the region where the study was conducted experiences four seasons, and the winter season can be snowy and very cold. For some participants, this required a significant adjustment. Developing a detailed and informative orientation program is vital to the arrival stage (Ballo et al., 2019).

Stay

Positive Aspects. Participants were asked questions pertaining to their study abroad experience from post arrival to present day. For participants that arrived August 2022, this was a short span of time. Most participants (73%) had been on campus for at least one year. The positive aspects of their study abroad experience included academic experience, feeling accepted, and self-growth.

Academic Experience. Participants were asked what they were looking for in a study abroad program and responses regarding academic experiences emerged. In their study of over 45,000 international students, Ammigan (2019) found that international students value academic programming and it is a factor that impacts their decision for referring the program to others.

Some participants appreciated that they were gaining academic opportunities that were not available to them in their home country. One participant said, "I wanted to do things with computer science, so that's what propelled me to study abroad, because universities in

my country, they don't teach as much as what I was looking for" (Participant_#6, 2022).

Another participant said, "I wanted an education style which combines theory and practice.

Something like that. Because in Africa we have that problem that we don't have a lot of labs"

(Participant_#7, 2022). According to their study, Fakunle (2021) found that minimal program

options in a students' home country was an incentive to seek program opportunities abroad.

Some participants also referenced the significance of approachable faculty and

teaching styles. One participant described their perception of teachers back home compared

to the U.S., "The teachers are respect first, and also we were brought up being taught that the

teachers are people you should fear in a positive way. And yeah, here you can make jokes

with them" (Participant_#5, 2022). Another participant shared,

> The classes are, I wouldn't say easy, but the professors make them easy. The
>
> professors here actually teach. They want you to succeed rather than fail. Because we
>
> have like back home, we have a kind of messed up culture where if you fail, that this
>
> professor has a low chance of students passing his class that means he's a great
>
> professor. Yeah. So professors tend to make their classes harder. Because that's how
>
> the schools are because they want to make this ranking and stuff. They don't care
>
> about the students. Here they care more about the how the student than the school I
>
> guess (Participant_#3, 2022).

Studies have shown that teaching styles can be something that international students find as a

barrier (Lau et al., 2018; Rivas et al., 2019; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Van Horne et al.,

2018;). However, this is not always the case. Findings from this study indicated the opposite.

Several participants in this study appreciated the ease of the teaching styles and

approachability of faculty, especially their first year. In their study, one of Aurah's (2019)

participants acknowledged, "Although it is difficult at first, if you get a good professor who knows you are different and helps you, passing is not as hard" (p. 41).

Feeling Accepted. Another area participants identified a positive value they experienced with their study abroad program was feeling accepted by peers. Regarding peer connections, one participant shared,

> Having this relationship with people makes you open yourself more. Especially when you are going through something that is you know bad or anything you are going through, you have the chance to express yourself to the people you know, the people you love (Participant_#4, 2022).

Another participant appreciated the connections with other international students. They said,

> We just felt like a group of people like no one was like, 'oh, I'm from this country.' We are like 8 of us from 8 different countries, but like at the end of the day, we're all people, like we're all very similar and the fact that we're all new and international kind of made us similar, so like all the differences made us the same (Participant_#8, 2022).

Multiple studies have shown the importance that peer connections have for international students especially as it relates to creating a sense of belonging and increasing overall satisfaction (Ammigan, 2019; Gareis, 2012; Hendrickson et al., 2010; Rivas et al., 2019).

Self-Growth. Several participants commented on the self-growth they experienced because of their study abroad program. One participant said, "It will feel lonely sometimes, of course like there's no way to get rid of this feeling. So, you have to cope…to love yourself. Friends will graduate and friends will go, and you will be by yourself to handle things" (Participant_#2, 2022). Another participant said,

And I feel like the US is like a good example for a place you can test your waters. Because you learn new things, new culture. It's not always one way. There's so many ways you can get to like a point. It's kind of like when you're using your Google Maps to get to somewhere you can use so many routes to get to somewhere you can choose the route you want the easier, the harder, the longest one, the shortest one, the longest one might be the best one, 'cause you can see things and places. That's how I see the experience (Participant_#4, 2022).

Another participant said studying abroad allows you to "realize what's important to you" (Participant_#8, 2022). The opportunity for self-growth is one of many reasons a student may choose to study abroad, and it is also a positive outcome of studying abroad (Fakunle, 2021). While resilience can be a strength of some international students, Lee (2010) cautioned it should not be assumed that all international students are resilient. Such assumptions could inadvertently contribute to negative experiences.

Negative Aspects. As previously explored in Chapter 2, international students are a marginalized population at most institutions and are more likely to encounter barriers as it relates to language, belonging, and financial support than their domestic peers (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Lee & Rice, 2007; Lee, 2010; Rivas et al., 2019). Participants were asked to describe challenges they experienced with their study abroad. The main challenges encountered included language barriers, discrimination, cultural insensitivity, and restrictions.

Language Barriers. Many of the participants indicated challenges with their English proficiency. For one participant, the challenge was understanding what people were saying and they said, "I just kind of like the basic conversation...So I think that is most challenging

because I feel so awkward and nervous, and I don't know how to answer and then they cannot help me" (Participant_#2, 2022). Another participant shared a challenge was being understood by others, stating, "I struggle with my accent. It's weird when you say something, and people are like huh? Or like you feel like self-conscious about it. So that's the real struggle, like public speaking" (Participant_#8, 2022). Multiple studies have identified challenges international students navigate as it relates to language barriers (Aurah, 2014; Rivas et al., 2019; Sherry et al., 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Cultural Insensitivity. Acts of cultural insensitivity can be forms of microaggressions. According to Sue (2010, p. 3) (as cited in Yeo et al., 2019, p. 44) racial microaggressions are

> The everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. Individuals engaged in microaggressions target marginalized groups based on race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, class, and religion, often on a subconscious level.

> One participant shared the challenges they faced when talking with American students, particularly those from smaller towns, stating,

> It's sometimes difficult to talk to someone who grew up in a small city with all American faces and then I'm in the country they typically haven't heard of. And that's a lot of what I've known and grown up with. I don't always feel welcomed when someone isn't open minded and yeah (Participant_#5, 2022).

This participant went on to share that, "I think the institution is generally a reflection of the

people. So, and I don't believe the people are very accepting of cultures they don't know"

(Participant_#5, 2022). Along a similar line, another participant shared that their American

peers could be welcoming, but also ignorant, stating,

> And like to them it's, I mean it's not like it comes from like a place of like harm 'cause
>
> they literally don't know. But it's like, we were like in a class one time naming like
>
> different races and someone said African Americans. I said black. He's like 'what's
>
> the difference?' And I'm like, well, I'm neither African or American, so I don't like
>
> that term (Participant_#8, 2022).

If situations like the ones described above are left unaddressed, this can reinforce conditions

for an unwelcoming environment for international students. If campuses allow a culture of

microaggressions to occur, students are at higher risk for experiencing discrimination (Yeo et

al., 2019).

Discrimination. Several participants shared at least one experience where they were

discriminated against. This is one of the most unsettling barriers that international students

experience (Birnbaum et al., 2012; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Lee & Rice, 2007; Lee, 2010;

Rivas et al; 2019; Smith & Khawaja, 2019). For one participant, they were targeted by

someone driving by and shared, "Because sometimes you're walking along the path, but

someone pulls aside the car and they call you crazy words, you know? And maybe it's

because of my color, because of my appearance" (Participant_#6, 2022). Another participant

shared that someone wrote the N-word on a whiteboard outside of their dorm door. They

decided against reporting it as they did not want to draw attention to themselves or cause

disruption as an international student. Another participant shared that they frequently

encountered homophobia, stating, "A lot of people in here is more…homophobic…it's really

obvious like the way they look at you" (Participant_#11, 2022).

  Restrictions. Restrictions were another challenge for many participants throughout their study abroad stay. Restrictions included limitations with employment and financial resources. One participant shared,

> Work restrictions, let's just start there. Only being able to work on campus that definitely specifically since campus jobs are like eight to four kind of thing, which is when class is going on or extracurriculars like it's weird to so sometimes it's difficult to actually get the 20 hours a week that we are allotted, and it's not open on weekends, that kind of thing (Participant_#8, 2022).

If international students are limited to how many hours they can legally work, this directly affects how much money they can earn while they are here. Regarding financial pressures, one participant expressed challenges with paying their balance in full every semester stating, "you have to like pay everything for the semester before you can register for the next semester. I respect that because it's their policy, but me personally…I just don't think it's something they should do. They should be more lenient" (Participant_#4, 2022). A study conducted by Sherry et al. (2009) found that over half of their participants surveyed had experienced financial hardships.

Sense of Belonging

  Through each stage of their study abroad journey, participants described situations that contributed to or detracted from a sense of belonging. The findings of this study supported that sense of belonging played a meaningful role for international students during their study abroad experience. Strayhorn (2019) defined college students' sense of belonging as

…students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of

connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted,

respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus

such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

In defining what sense of belonging meant to them, participants described two scenarios for

experiencing sense of belonging which derived from external and internal sources.

Participants also shared examples of what factors contribute to and detract from a sense of

belonging.

External Dialogue or Actions

When international students experienced belonging from external sources, they felt

accepted and supported (see Appendices D and E). Findings from this study support

Strayhorn's (2019) definition of belonging referenced above. Examples of acceptance from

an external source were attributed to relationships with peers. When students are able to

establish meaningful friendships, they are less likely to experience feelings of isolation or

depression (Gareis, 2012; Glass et al., 2014; Hendrickson, et al., 2010; Lee, 2010). When

asked what feeling welcomed means to them, one participant shared, "For me, feeling

welcome, it is love. It's an action of love and I was showed an action of love the very first

day I landed" (Participant_#6, 2022).

Examples of support from an external source were attributed to participants'

references of campus resources and faculty. Several participants felt that campus resources,

such as the international center, were invested in the students' experience which positively

impacted their sense of welcoming. One participant referenced the support they felt when

transferring to the institution stating,

They were very patient because over the phone I was very confused about the transfer

process. And you guys took the time to like, hey, this is how it is. Just like, don't

worry about it much like it's going to get solved. You just need to sign. So also, when

I got here, I feel like so worried before I met you because I was like, okay, I'm in a

different town like I don't know if these people are going to help me. But as soon as I

met you guys, like I felt like so nice and warm (Participant_#1, 2022).

Participants also referenced the positive impact that faculty support had in making

them feel welcomed. One participant said, "Genuinely it is my biggest surprise was like the

teachers are awesome…I can feel that they're actually kind-hearted people" (Participant_#3,

2022). In their study, Glass et al. (2015) found that international students from varying

backgrounds had positive experiences with faculty and were more likely to rely on faculty for

general inquiries than their domestic peers.

Internal Dialogue or Actions

Participants also described how their own experiences and strengths contributed to

feelings of belonging. These included participants' feelings of preparedness, resilience, and

self-growth. Glass et al. (2015) identified that preparedness is one area that can affect how

one experiences their study abroad program. Regarding their preparedness, one participant

said,

I traveled a lot, so I think that also kind of helped. Like I was used to meeting

different cultures and that kind of thing, cause imagine you've never, ever left your

hometown. And then you come here and it's like, 'Oh my God, there's so many

different people. Oh my, what is this? What is that?' So, I think that was able to like

help me adjust like able to like travel (Participant_#8, 2022).

Glass et al. (2015) encouraged researchers to look at the strengths of international

students as opposed to the deficits and barriers they face. Glass et al. referred to international students as, "participants in a complex, influential, and often vast transnational social networks" (p. 84). One participant, with previous experience studying abroad, shared, "Every time that you get to a new place, you don't feel very at ease…sometimes I had maybe the imposter syndrome, like maybe you don't belong here. But after that I just get used to it" (Participant_#7, 2022). This participant undoubtedly had acquired strengths from their previous study abroad experience that helped them navigate certain challenges they were faced with.

For some participants, they realized that their study abroad experience had shaped them in new ways. This focus of self-growth was described by one participant as,

> [Studying] abroad changes your mind and perspective in so many things, not just your field. You learn a lot from people. It's just good to diversify the culture because they always say travel away for you to learn from your culture. So that's so amazing thing and it makes sense like for my country people from my country person or for my community, if they study abroad, I think they'll have knowledge that will not only help themselves but they also help the community that's and for anyone (Participant_#6, 2022).

This participants' experience aligns with what Fakunle (2021) refers to as experiential and aspirational rationale which allows individuals to "experience something different," and "pay it forward" (p. 680).

Factors that Promote Inclusion

When identifying what factors contribute to sense of belonging, the theme that emerged was actions or behaviors that promote inclusion. Components that contribute to inclusion consist of activity, community, and resources. Several participants spoke highly of

activities such as orientation, intermural sports, involvement with faith-based organizations, and involvement with student led organizations. There is a connection between the aforementioned activities and community. Those examples create conditions for community. When asked to define sense of welcoming, one participant said,

> Well, it means a lot, especially when you come from a far away or place. You know that you come by yourself. You don't have no family, nobody, and you feel welcome, like a family. Especially the international center, they did a great job on welcoming like the international students cause you know, leaving your family, and going to study abroad takes a lot. It's not easy because believe it or not, you miss your family every day and you want to talk to them, you want to see them…I feel like the international center is doing a great job on like having students feel comfortable and feel at home (Participant_#4, 2022).

This association of familiarity of home is referenced by several participants, multiple times throughout the interviews. Another participant said when they experience welcoming, they "don't feel like a stranger" (Participant_#2, 2022). It is not being treated as an "other;" it is the experience of together. Another participant described this experience of community and belonging as a symbiotic relationship where they are "Being listened to as well as much as listening to other people" (Participant_#10, 2022).

For international students, reaching out to campus resources is not always an option. For example, if an international student wants to transfer, get a job, or talk about reducing their credit load, they need to work closely with a designated school official (DSO) as all of these things require approval and/or processing of immigration paperwork. Participants described feeling a sense of welcoming when resources were readily available to them. One

participant said,

> Very welcoming means someone wants to know what you are going through. Not
> what you want but what you need. They want to know exactly how you are feeling at
> certain point in time. They want to be part of your journey, more like trying to help
> you. Not just want to know but also want to help you out and advise you on what to
> do. That's my own definition of feeling welcomed (Participant_#9, 2022).

Factors that Limit Inclusion

When feelings of belonging are missing, Strayhorn (2019) likened this to
"marginalization, isolation, or alienation" (p. 29). Chapter 2 reviewed literature in the field
and identified that international students may experience barriers within their study abroad
experience including sense of belonging, language barriers, academic expectations, social
support/representation, access to resources, and impacts of COVID-19. The findings from
this study identified components that detract from belonging to include language barriers,
cultural insensitivity, discrimination, and restrictions. The challenges that international
students voiced align with research that has been conducted on international students'
experiences as well as college students' sense of belonging.

International students' English proficiency and/or their access to language-based
resources can affect how they experience their study abroad program (Lau et al., 2018; Lee &
Rice, 2007; Malinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Sherry et al., 2009; Van
Horne et al., 2018; Wan et al., 1992). Having confidence with communication skills
facilitates learning opportunities and engaging with peers. International students who face
language barriers are more likely to spend more time processing the information shared in
classes (Lau et al., 2018). In turn, this limits opportunities for working, spending time with
friends, or engaging in self-care.

When feeling welcomed, participants shared they "are not treated like a stranger," (Participant_#2, 2022) and are "respected as a human being" (Participant_#3, 2022). Participants shared examples of cultural insensitivity that they experienced which created feelings of otherness and limited feelings of inclusion. Some participants spoke to challenges they encountered when their American peers were not respectful to their culture. One participant said, "I do think they're curious, but they don't know how to start asking questions without being offensive" (Participant_#5, 2022). Glass et al. (2021) suggested that these attitudes can pose a threat to belonging as it creates division which leads to feelings of not belonging to the space. Rivas et al. (2019) found that international students can have a difficult time creating friendships with American students. Addressing these challenges, one participant suggested there should be more education for domestic students. Studies have found a need to provide more opportunities for the campus community to develop cultural competencies (Glass et al., 2013; Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014; Sherry et al., 2009).

Over half (55%) of the participants had experienced at least one form of discrimination during their study abroad experience. Several studies have shown that international students of color are more likely to experience acts of discrimination (Lee & Rice, 2007; Sherry et al., 2009).

Participants identified challenges with restrictions for employment opportunities and accessing funding. International students are eligible to work on campus jobs for 20 hours during the semester and 40 hours during vacation breaks. If international students are limited to the number of hours they can work, they are in turn limited with the amount of earnings they can generate. Glass et al. (2015) found that international students with fewer financial resources were more likely to have negative experiences throughout their study abroad

program.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the researcher was unable to recruit an international student athlete to participate in the study. Being closely connected to a team centered environment, athletes may have a unique perspective on belonging. Also, due to time constraints, the sample size was restricted to international students at one institution. If more time had allowed, the researcher could have interviewed international students across multiple campuses.

Implications of the Study

Much of the existing research available on international students' experiences of study abroad programs focus on the challenges and barriers that international students face. These can include, but are not limited to, sense of belonging, discrimination, language barriers, academic expectations, social support/representation, access to resources, and impacts of COVID-19 (Aurah, 2014; Birbaum et al, 2012; Chirikov & Soria, 2020; Gareis, 2012; Glass et al., 2015; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007; Lee, 2010; Majorana, 2021; Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Sherry et al., 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Some studies have compared the college experiences of international students and domestic students (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Rivas et al., 2019; Van Horne et al., 2018). The findings of this study contributed to existing research on international students' experiences of study abroad programs. However, this study looked closer at international students' experiences of sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern university. Very few, if any, studies like this have been conducted. The findings of this study indicated that belonging plays a meaningful role in the study abroad experience. When participants experienced belonging, they felt more accepted and supported; and aspects of preparedness, resilience, and self-growth facilitated one's

ability to experience sense of belonging.

Recommendations for Action

Findings from this study call for diversity training for students and campus employees, increased access to financial resources, and review of campus policies. Some of the participants in this study felt that their peers and some faculty lacked cultural sensitivity. Over half (55%) of the participants also reported being discriminated against at least once during their study abroad. Institutions should be taking measures to eliminate acts of discrimination. Discrimination should never be tolerated on a college campus.

International students are not eligible for federal financial aid. As a result, campus administrators should look closely at financial resources for international students. One way campuses can do this is to create more scholarship opportunities for international students as well as instituting emergency grants for international students that provide financial support during times of economic hardship.

Campuses should review their policies to ensure that international students are being treated equitably. Some areas to consider include:

- Admissions policies
  - Does the domestic admission policy mirror the international admission policy?
  - Is an international transfer student supported in the same way that a domestic transfer student is?
  - Are international and domestic students equally required to take placement tests?
- Academic Expectations

- o   Do international students have access to English language resources?

- Registration Policies

    - o   Are international students required to pay certain fees (i.e., health insurance)? If so, are there consequences if these fees are not paid (i.e., registration holds)?

- Tuition and Fees

    - o   Are international students charged a higher rate than domestic students? If so, are international students receiving additional resources and services?

    - o   If international students are experiencing financial hardship, are there financial resources available to them?

Recommendations for Further Study

This was one of the first studies to be conducted on how international students experience sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern university. More research is needed in the area of sense of belonging within the international student community. To increase reliability, future studies similar to this should be replicated across campuses. Also, it has been suggested that one's associations with sense of belonging changes over time (Strayhorn, 2019). As a result, future longitudinal studies on international students' sense of belonging could be conducted.

There is also opportunity to study subgroups of international students, such as

- International student athletes

    - o   Athletes can have a unique perspective with belonging as they are very involved in team sports.

- International students who have had family members study abroad

- International students who have previously studied abroad

Lastly, future research should be considerate to a strengths-based approach. For example, what have been the outcomes of international students' experiences of studying in the U.S.? A recent study by Ammigan et al. (2019) did just that by identifying international students' satisfaction of their program. Glass et al. (2015) has called for, "more holistic" research that focuses on international students' "resilience and strength" (p. 84).

Researcher's Reflections

The researcher's ontological belief is that one's reality is unique to the individual. The researcher applied this perspective to their own lived experiences when they were an international student. The researcher believed that their experiences were unique to them. While there were certain aspects that may have been similar to other international students' experiences at the time, no one else would have made meaning of their study abroad experience in the same way. As a result, the researcher was conscientious of accurately capturing the lived experiences of the participants in this study.

As interim director for the International Center, the researcher was committed to better understand a student demographic that they once belonged to and that they currently work to support. Residing in a rural setting, with limited access to transportation, culturally diverse services and resources, and social events, the researcher sought to better understand how international students experienced sense of belonging. The researcher was surprised to see that these specific limitations were not voiced amongst participants' responses.

This research experience has made the researcher a better practitioner in the field of education. The semi-structured interview process strengthened connections between the researcher and participants. The process also allowed the researcher to gain a better

understanding of the international students' strengths and struggles. As a result, the researcher was more vocal in advocating for the needs of international students, especially as it relates to equity with admissions practices. The researcher also created a virtual registration event for new students. These Zoom meetings allowed the researcher and new students to talk about academic requirements and expectations, campus life, and preparations for departure. The researcher has been inspired to continue assessment efforts to better understand the international students they work with and has hopes to continue research in the field of international education.

Conclusion

For any student, being immersed in a college experience will create feelings that are unique to them. For international students, studying abroad means leaving the familiar behind and embarking on an opportunity to learn in a foreign setting. In addition to this loss of the familiar, international students need to navigate changing immigration regulations, employment restrictions, limitations to financial aid resources, academic expectations, and cultural differences. By understanding these barriers, institutions can be better prepared for supporting international students. And while there are undoubtedly barriers that an international student may face, it is important to identify the strengths they have acquired through their international education journey. This study found that traits of resilience, preparedness, and self-growth had a positive impact on sense of belonging.

By understanding international students' experiences of sense of belonging with their study abroad experience, campus employees can make informed decisions that actively support international student populations. As campuses create learning environments that are inclusive for all students, they are increasing opportunities for students to experience sense of belonging. By providing more opportunities for belonging, campuses are contributing to the

overall health and well-being of their students while also supporting academic success and

retention (Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn, 2019).

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APPENDIX A. INFORMED CONSENT

You are invited to participate in a study which seeks to better understand the experiences of international students at a rural, Midwestern university. Data collected from this study will contribute to the research conducted by the interviewer (Danielle Smith) as it relates to international students' sense of belonging. The interviewer (Danielle Smith) is conducting this study in pursuit of their Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at Minnesota State University Moorhead. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are an international student at Bemidji State University.

If you decide to participate, you will receive information regarding the interview process via e-mail. There will be one interview and it will be conducted in-person. Should you not be able to interview in-person, there is an alternative to interview over Zoom. You will have the ability to schedule your interview time between 7am-9pm Monday-Sunday. The interview will be scheduled for 60 minutes. Information you provide during the interview will only be used for the purposes of this study and it will not be used for any other purposes. Any personal identifying information, such as your name, will be kept confidential. Information you provide will help the interviewer (Danielle Smith) better understand international students' experiences in the rural, Midwest. There are no risks to be expected from this interview. You may find the interview beneficial as a way to experience an interview process.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relationships with Bemidji State University. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

If you have any questions, please ask the interviewer (Danielle Smith). If you have any additional questions later, you can contact Danielle Smith at Danielle.smith@go.mnstate.edu or 320-291-9118.

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study.

_____ _____ _____
_____

Signature   Date   Signature   Date

Disabilities Statement: We would like to make sure that all the materials, discussions and activities that are part of this study/interview are accessible to you. If you would like to request accommodations or other services, please forward your request as soon as possible. It is possible to contact Disability Services by calling 218-755-3883 or email address Disabilityservices@bemidjistate.edu. Also available through the Minnesota Relay Service at 1-800-627-3529.

APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Demographic

1. What is your country of citizenship?

2. What is your first/primary language?

3. Do you live on-campus or off-campus?

4. How long have you been a student at this institution?

5. Have you studied abroad before? If so, where?

6. Has anyone in your family studied abroad?

Pre-arrival

7. Prior to departure, what were you looking for in a study abroad program?

8. What factors led to your decision to study here?

9. How did you prepare for your study abroad program here?

Arrival

10. Upon your arrival, what was most surprising?

11. Upon arrival, what was most challenging?

12. When did you arrive?

Sense of Belonging

13. What does feeling welcomed mean to you?

14. Was there a time you felt a sense of this here?

15. Was there a time you felt a lack of this here?

Stay

16. Regarding your study abroad experience, what are things you have valued and what are things you would like to see change?

17. What is your campus involvement?

18. What major(s) are you pursuing?

19. Do you plan on earning your degree from this institution? Why or why not?

20. What have you enjoyed about your study abroad here?

21. What have been some challenges with your study abroad here?

22. What do you miss most from your home country?

23. What would you tell your friends about study abroad in general and what would you tell your friends about this institution?

24. What are your plans after graduation?

APPENDIX C. DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Table 3
Student housing

Student Housing	Sample Population
On-Campus	6 (55%)
Off-Campus	5 (45%)
Total	11

Table 4
English as a first language

English as a First Language	Sample Population
Yes	3 (27%)
No	8 (73%)
Total	11

Table 5
Previous Experience

Previous Experience	Sample Population
Family member studied abroad	8 (72.7%)
Transferred	4 (36.4%)
Previous degree	3 (27.3%)

APPENDIX D. DEFINITIONS OF FEELING WELCOMED

Participant	Sense of Belonging Defined
1	Before I had a bad understanding of what welcoming means because I would think like welcome, it's just like with a nice smile is like welcoming. But I will say like if they receive you with open arms and not in the sense of like a hug, but I just say if you have like they, they make you feel like say like just by the normal things like saying like, "Hey, how are you, How's your family," those kinda little questions that they do like, how's your family like, do you need any help with anything like those little questions I feel like that's like the welcoming part. Being always I don't want to say always available but at least giving you like at least a cell phone number, an email like, hey, just if you have any questions at any time, just e-mail me and I will respond to you as soon as you can, like those kind of things. Like I really appreciate that. And always like having a shoulder, like feeling like you have like a shoulder even though you might never like talk to them like anything personal but like even like knowing that you have that, I'll say that's like the most welcoming part
2	You just feel like you are not stranger, or you're not a foreigner to them. You are a foreigner, but if they feel more welcome and then you will not feel very very lonely kind of. I don't know how to explain this question. But it is very important for you to feel like they are welcoming so they were not like saying some mean words to you. I think that's my answer. Being friendly. They will just be friendly
3	Feeling respected I'd say, like I'm respected, even though I am an international student I am respected as being a human and stuff. I guess. So. That's one of the biggest things that make me feel welcomed people. By, like treating everybody the same in a way it makes me feel very much respected. I guess. It also helps me feel welcomed.
4	Well, it means a lot, especially when you come from a far away or place. You know that you come by yourself. You don't have no family, nobody, and you feel welcome, like a family. Especially the, the international, the IPC, they did a great job on welcoming like the international students 'cause you know, leaving your family, and going to study abroad takes a lot. It's not easy because. Believe it or not, you miss your family every day and you want to talk to them, you want to see them. You know they do things with them. Yeah, I feel like the international program is doing a great job on like having the students feel comfortable and feel at home
5	Someone is going out of their way to show me that they want me to be there
6	For me, feeling welcome, it is love. It's on an action of love and I was showed an action of love the very first day I landed. That is, that means welcoming
7	Feeling welcomed... I can say that like when you arrive in a new environment if you don't want to go back as soon as you get there, then you feel like you're welcomed there, like people are kind to you. You don't have any bad experience like somewhere you trip over or for most African or black person have racist experience. If you don't have some kind of stuff, maybe you feel like you're welcome. And one thing when I was coming here, I felt that they're not, they're not really a lot of foreign like international students. But I realized that there are a lot of African students even, like Nigerians, so it's very good. So sometimes you feel like at home when you are with them, so you don't feel like you're foreign at all. And having people wanting to get to know you, know your culture, discover that that helps a lot.
8	I guess just being able to relax, you know what I mean? Like, it's that you don't have like, your guard up all the time. It just feels kind of familiar and easy. You just kind of feel it really like sometimes like a person's energy is off but like you can just like tell when it clicks like. I don't know. And it's like people don't point out your differences. Like they're just like, oh, you're a person, that's it. Like, I don't care where you're from or what you look. Like, just talk to you like a regular person without bringing up those things. So I guess that's kind of it
9	Very welcoming means someone wants to know what are you going through? Not what you want but what you need. They want to know exactly how you are feeling at certain point in time. They want to be part of your journey, more like trying to help you. Not just want to know but also want to help you out and advise you on what to do. That's my own definition of feeling welcomed
10	Being accepted. Being given a platform to share your ideas. Being listened to as well as much as listening to other people. And being able to fit in and by fitting in, I mean being able to actually synchronize with the environment and then you know, like. Be able to put energies that that work for your goal
11	Feeling welcome, of course, the meaning of feeling will come to me will be like having more welcome activity I guess. And then at the same time people are new with each other so showed respectful patience and trying to know more with each other first, not just judging people in the first things, yeah

APPENDIX E. AUDIT TRAIL

Research Question One: How do international students experience sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern predominantly White institution (PWI)?

Theme	Emergent Codes	Evidence	Participant
Theme One: External dialogue or actions	Accepted	You just feel like you are not stranger, or you're not a foreigner to them. You are a foreigner, but if they feel more welcome and then you will not feel very very lonely kind of. I don't know how to explain this question. But it is very important for you to feel like they are welcoming, so they were not like saying some mean words to you. I think that's my answer. Being friendly. They will just be friendly.	2
		Feeling respected I'd say, like I'm respected, even though I am an international student I am respected as being a human and stuff. I guess. So. That's one of the biggest things that make me feel welcomed people. By, like treating everybody the same in a way it makes me feel very much respected. I guess. It also helps me feel welcomed.	3
		For me, feeling welcome, it is love. It's on an action of love and I was showed an action of love the very first day I landed. That is, that means welcoming.	6
		Feeling welcomed... I can say that like when you arrive in a new environment if you don't want to go back as soon as you get there, then you feel like you're welcomed there, like people are kind to you. You don't have any bad experience like somewhere you trip over or for most African or black person have racist experience. If you don't have some kind of stuff, maybe you feel like you're welcome.	7
		And it's like people don't point out your differences. Like they're just like, oh, you're a person, that's it. Like, I don't care where you're from or what you look. Like, just talk to you like a regular person without bringing up those things. So I guess that's kind of it. 8	8

		Being accepted. Being given a platform to share your ideas. Being listened to as well as much as listening to other people. And being able to fit in and by fitting in, I mean being able to actually synchronize with the environment.	10
		And then at the same time people are new with each other so showed respectful patience and trying to know more with each other first, not just judging people.	11
	Supported	I will say like if they receive you with open arms and not in the sense of like a hug, but I just say if you have like they, they make you feel like say like just by the normal things like saying like, 'Hey, how are you, how's your family,' those kinda little questions that they do like, how's your family like, do you need any help with anything like those little questions I feel like that's like the welcoming part. Being always I don't want to say always available but at least giving you like at least a cell phone number, an email like, hey, just if you have any questions at any time, just e-mail me and I will respond to you as soon as you can, like those kind of things. Like I really appreciate that.	1
		Well, it means a lot, especially when you come from a far away or place. You know that you come by yourself. You don't have no family, nobody, and you feel welcome, like a family. Especially the, the international, the IPC, they did a great job on welcoming like the international students 'cause you know, leaving your family, and going to study abroad takes a lot. It's not easy because believe it or not, you miss your family every day and you want to talk to them, you want to see them.	4
		Someone is going out of their way to show me that they want me to be there.	5

		Very welcoming means someone wants to know what are you going through? Not what you want but what you need. They want to know exactly how you are feeling at certain point in time. They want to be part of your journey, more like trying to help you. Not just want to know but also want to help you out and advise you on what to do. That's my own definition of feeling welcomed.	9
Theme Two: Internal dialogue or actions	Preparedness	My biggest preparation was reading about the culture in the US and how people act here, because how people act here is completely different than how people act there.	3
		Another thing, I think the most important thing that I did in preparation was to prepare myself to detach from my family because it was going to be a transition for a long time.	6
		I think just like in general so I traveled a lot, so I think that also kind of helped. Like I was used to, like meeting different cultures and that kind of thing, 'cause imagine you've never, ever left your hometown. And then you come here and it's like, Oh my God, there's so many different people. Oh my, what is this? What is that? So, I think that was able to like help me just being like able to like travel. I also worked a lot too. So like I took a very gap year between high school and college and I worked and I think being able to get that sense of independence and like learn money management skills and stuff like that. That was really one way to like prepare me 'cause I'm like, I'm going away on my own, I'm going to be an adult.	8
		I had a degree already…I know what it takes to be in college	9
	Resilience	It's like if you study here, you'd better like adapt to the system here instead of like trying to adapt it to your way.	1

		So you've got to respect that like, if you're in a different country, they, don't like, don't lose your culture, but also don't disrespect their rules and their laws and those kind of things. I will say the most to my friends. Also, I will say like try to get to know different people, like don't, don't judge them right away because there's some history going on before, like whatever you about their race or anything, they just try to get to know them like not everybody is like that.	1
		So yeah, it just feel it will feel lonely sometimes, of course like there's no way to get rid of this feeling. So you have to cope with your like. You love yourself. Friends will graduate and friends will go, and you will be by yourself to handle things.	2
		It's hard. In the beginning, you're going to miss your friends, your family. You're going to feel distant and be depressed for a good chunk of it. Thoughts about going home. Always come to your head. You should never listen to them. Don't give up on it. And you should, like, life is better here than it was.	3
		Every time that you get to a new place, you don't feel very at your ease first time, so. Some, sometimes I had maybe the imposter syndrome, like maybe you don't belong here. But after that I just get used to it.	7
	Self-growth	And I feel like the US is like a good example for a place you can test your waters. Because you learn new things, new culture. It's not. It's not. It's not always one way. There's so many ways you can get to like a point. It's kind of like when you're using your Google Maps to get to somewhere you can use so many routes to get to somewhere you can choose the route you want the easier, the harder, the longest one, the shortest one, the longest one might be the best one, 'cause you can see things and places. That's how I see the experience.	4

		And there's so many opportunities and everything, it's just, it's like a whole dictionary, you're trying to find new words every day. That's how the US is. It's like everything, is like every day you learn something new, it's like directly or indirectly, you'll learn something new.	4
		But also study abroad changes your mind and perspective in so many things, not just your field. You learn a lot from people. It's just good to diversify the culture because they always say travel away for you to learn from your culture.	6
		So I think you get you get a sense of like realizing what's important to you.	8
		Actually, I may have even exceeded my goal, like I may have gone way above what I expected to 'cause I've ended up even picking up certain skills that I did not think I was going to get. You know, like I didn't think the expect to get back. But I ended up getting them so I will be calling myself a fulfilled person by the time I turn in my completion so that's the reason why I choose to finish from here.	10

Research Question Two: What do international students find beneficial to sense of belonging at a rural, Midwestern PWI?

Theme	Emergent Codes	Evidence	Participant
Theme One: Actions or behaviors that promote inclusion	Activities	People ask, do you want to join team, or do you want to play right now and then from then you start making these connections and building relationships with people.	4
		And the most important thing also to grow in my faith because I'm a Christian.	6
		The meaning of feeling welcome to me will be like having more welcome activity I guess.	11
	Community	There's a great community bond in here because I can feel the community here.	3
		This is the culture and how familiar the university is it's like this big extended family that, you know, everyone is really directly or indirectly…	4
		Having this relationship with people makes you open yourself more. Especially when you are going through something that is you know bad or anything you are going through, you have the chance to express yourself to the people you know, the people you love. So I feel like it's a good thing to have fun. Relations and people welcome you no matter who you are or how you are.	4
		So seeing strangers like we don't know them and they are willing to get to know us and to welcome us. That was just awesome.	7
		We just felt like a group of people like no one was like, oh, I'm from this country. We are like 8 of us from 8 different countries, but like at the end of the day, we're all people like we're all very similar and the fact that we all new and	9

		international kind of made us similar, so like all the differences made us the same, so it really just felt like so natural and everything.	
	Resources	They were very patient because over the phone I was very confused about the transfer process. And you guys took the time to like, hey, this is how it is. Just like, don't worry about it much like it's going to get solved…. So also, when I got here to Bemidji, I feel like so worried before I met you because I was like, okay, I'm in a different town like I don't know if these people are going to help me. But as soon as I met you guys, like I felt like so nice and warm.	1
		Genuinely it is my biggest surprise was like the teachers are awesome…I can feel that they're actually kind-hearted people.	3
		We have a sense of people who are willing to help each other even if they don't know each other.	3

Research Question Three: What do international students feel detracts from sense of
belonging at a rural, Midwestern PWI?

Theme	Emergent Codes	Evidence	Participant
Theme One: Words or actions that limit inclusion	Cultural insensitivity	I think the institution is generally a reflection of the people. So, and I don't believe the people are very accepting of cultures they don't know.	5
		I do think they're curious, but they don't know how to start asking questions without being offensive.	5
		From individuals, it's sometimes difficult to talk to someone who grew up in a small city with all American faces and then I'm in the country they typically haven't heard of. And that's a lot of what I've known and grown up with. I don't always feel welcomed when someone isn't open minded and yeah.	5
		Because yes, they are welcoming with also like ignorance. And like to them it's, I mean it's not like it comes from like a place of like harm 'cause they literally don't know. But it's like, we were like in a class one time naming like different races and someone said African Americans. I said black. He's like 'what's the difference?' And I'm like, well, I'm neither African or American, so. I don't like that term.	8
	Language	I know like I just kind of like the basic conversation and I don't know how to get answered. So I think that is most challenging because I feel so awkward and so nervous and I don't know how to answer and then they cannot help me. But after a while I understand. Yeah.	2
		I wish there's more international students. Because we kind of have a similar experience. Because sometimes	2

		it's really, for me, it's really hard to communicate with Americans. I mean, I don't understand some of the slang or joke or TV show or actor or anything. I don't know. It's sometimes hard to continue the conversation all the time. I just don't know how to keep the conversation.	
		Another thing I will say the challenge was the language my English is too slow, and people here speak fast. So, it was I will listen more, maybe ask twice so that I understand. So, the communication part of it was also a challenge too.	6
		The second thing I'd say is the language, like some people, I can hear them well what they are saying, so others, they have a different accent or speak very fast.	7
		I'm not for me specifically, but like language barriers. I know a lot of students I often like struggle with that. Or like the accents, I struggle with my accent. It's weird when you say something and people are like huh? Or like you feel like self-conscious about it. So that's the real struggle, like public speaking, but yeah.	8
		The challenging thing here will be like I'm missing about the, for me with more like language, I guess I mean like because for international students that I see like we need some time or maybe some, I won't say cheat or unfair stuff but just like we might need more resource, like if during class time professor can just helping us more, that will be much better because right now the challenge is like cannot understand during class time, yeah.	11

	Discrimination	It's not always a bed of roses. There's sometimes the flip side on this. I think, it's hard to adjust because sometimes you feel you're being treated differently because you come from a different country. I'll say it only has happened once in my entire life, for three years I've been here. Because sometimes you're walking along the path, but someone pulls aside the car and they call you crazy words, you know? So that's one of the things that make me and maybe it's because of my color, because of my appearance. That's why it's sometimes people yell at you and they're driving stuff like that. That's kind of weird. And it only happened like once or twice in my life that I've been here. Yeah, but pretty much the biggest percentage is welcoming.	6
		So there's one guy in the bar, he was drunk and he was yelling at us, and we felt like, ah, maybe he noticed that we are foreign and he wanted to annoy us or I don't know…I think that's the only moment that we feel like maybe you are not welcome.	7
		My first semester, they have those little whiteboards outside the door, someone wrote the N word on mine, but like, I just brushed it off. I was like, probably they were just drunk.	8
		People say mean things to you or like look at you the wrong way or just leave the room when you enter.	8
		You just get left out…it's not a bad thing…probably an international student, maybe that's why. Back in my country I mean everybody is asking 'hey you guys wanna hang out' stuff like that. But here? Not so much.	9

		I didn't really like the experience I had in that store, you know, like I was ignored by the, I was trying to pay for something and then like this person just kept attending to other people and I was standing right there, I didn't like that, you know, but then I just started to walk away. I put back what I wanted to get and I was like, I mean people are different.	10
		I won't say unwelcoming, but it's just like a lot of people in here is more I don't know judgmental, I guess like kind of homophobic or some of them have racism. It's really obvious like the way like they look at you. It's just like they really like to stare with each other. I mean, you know, just smile first please.	11
	Restrictions	But like, you have to like pay everything for the semester before you can register for the next this yeah, I respect that because it's their policy, but me personally, I don't think it's, I don't know, I don't. I just don't think it's something they should do. They should be more lenient.	4
		We see that in every country, international students don't have the same like international student, don't have the same benefits like national student and that's totally fair but sometimes we have that feeling like they are doing they're doing too much like the gap is too much. And sometimes it doesn't encourage your international student to come and studying abroad. Even though they have the potential academic skills, so	7
		Work restrictions let's just start there. Only being able to work on campus that definitely specifically since campus jobs are like eight to four kind of thing, which is when class is going on or extracurriculars like it's weird to so	8

		sometimes it's difficult to actually get the 20 hours a week that we are allotted, so it's not open on weekends, that kind of thing. So those restrictions are definitely on there.	
		I think one of the challenges that most international students experience first challenge is a study visa, that becomes, it's a, it's a barrier that can even prevent you or your prospects you know, and the process itself is, it's pretty, it's pretty hectic, you know. You get denied sometimes and then sometimes you don't even get a chance to get another opportunity like a short space of time to go back and you know re apply for a study visa.	10
		Yeah, because like, actually every student have many classes they are gonna take and especially for international students we actually need to spend more time extra time to doing our assignment and I feel like Professor won't really care about international student. They're challenging because for me also my friend when we trying to communicate with Professor they looks like they think we are one part of USA and that's good. But it's just like you know. It just makes me makes us have more challenges I guess yeah.	11