International students stranded: A phenomenological approach to understanding international graduate students' experiences following the COVID-19 outbreak

by

Taylor R. Jennings

BA, University of Oklahoma, 2008
MEd, Northeastern State University, 2012

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Special Education, Counseling and Student Affairs
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

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Approved by:

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environments. Teaching does not only happen in the classroom, and I recognize those who have the role of educator outside of the classroom.

I also want to thank my teachers of faith, including my church family. In the Methodist church, I have been blessed with the best preachers, whom I believe God put in my life when he did for a reason. They each played a significant role in my faith journey and helped build and nurture my relationship with Jesus. I also want to thank my friends, the third strand of the braid with God. I could not have done this journey without my friends whom I trust and can lean on. You each bring something special to my life.

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every day how beautiful people are and how much we have in common, especially when we

come together to learn from each other. Thank you.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and God, who show me unending love, inspire me every day, and strengthen me when I need it.

Preface

"In learning you will teach, and in teaching you will learn." – Phil Collins

This dissertation is the product of 10 years of working with international students in higher education. I never imagined I would be a teacher, and I certainly never imagined that I would be fortunate to work with such amazing individuals from all around the world. I have loved every second that I have been involved with global education, which started with my own education abroad journey. I truly believe so many of the world's problems could be solved in a classroom with individuals from every corner of the globe. The good that international students bring to higher education will never fully be appreciated for how wonderful and important it is. I would never want to live in a world where we did not have international students in our universities in the United States. There are things that threaten this possibility, so we must fight to protect it. However, never underestimate a student's ability and desire to learn and the sacrifices they will make for an education to help the ones they love.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

One of several changes to college student demographics in the United States during the past decade had been the growing presence of international students on college campuses. International students had become one of the largest growing demographic groups in colleges and universities throughout the country (Cahapay, 2020). In the 2018–2019 academic year, international student numbers reached an all-time high of 1,095,299 (IIE: The Power of International Education, 2019). However, for the first time in more than a decade, in the 2019–2020 academic year, international student populations decreased (IIE Open Doors, 2021).

Throughout the history of international students in U.S. higher education, this group has been affected by many different global factors (De Witte & Soncin, 2021; Dennis, 2020). Political wars, policies, and even rhetoric have had positive and negative effects on international students studying in the United States (Choudaha, 2016; De Witte & Soncin, 2021; Fischer, 2020). Also, the economic value that international students bring while facing the high price of an education in the United States has had many effects on international students (Jacobs & Mitchell, 2021). Along with the political and economic factors, the overall internationalization of higher education has played a significant role in affecting the population trends of international students (Hajiyev, 2017).

In my almost 10 years of working in higher education, I have had the privilege of teaching more than 420 students from more than 35 countries and have witnessed the growing presence of international students on college campuses. Those who have worked with international students in higher education witnessed the overall growth with either optimism or uncertainty about the future (Cahapay, 2020; Helms, 2015). The possibility of the bubble bursting and the various effects that the economy and politics would have on this population had

been discussed, but no one was prepared for the effects of a global pandemic (Choudaha, 2016; Helms, 2015). While global pandemics are not a new phenomenon, many have called the effects of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) on higher education to be unprecedented and a turning point (Green et al., 2020). Since the public announcement of COVID-19 and eventual outbreak from Wuhan, China, in 2019–2020, the virus has created an unprecedented crisis in the world (Cahapay, 2020). As the virus spread, more and more organizations and institutions began to shut down and to transfer to online platforms. More than 91% of the world's student population was affected (Zhu & Liu, 2020). This included the significant population of international students in the United States.

This chapter will explore the rationale of the study followed by the introduction and explanation of the purpose statement, the research question, and operational definitions. The next section of the chapter will provide the framework, which served as the lens of the study, and will detail the methodology that was used for this study. Finally, possible limitations of this study are discussed.

Rationale for Study

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the foundations of the unique higher education ecosystem were impacted significantly, creating uncertainty regarding the implications for higher education around the world (Zhu & Liu, 2020). At the time, there were more than 5.3 million international students worldwide (Bilecen, 2020). More than 160 countries implemented nationwide closures (Araújo et al., 2020). It became evident that the worldwide international student population subset was left unaccounted for and unprotected from the damage and destruction of this global pandemic (Wright-Mair et al., 2021).

COVID-19 also took higher education in the United States by storm (Tesar, 2020). The international student population in U.S. higher education was greatly affected by the pandemic (Dennis, 2020; Fischer, 2020; Skinner et al., 2020; Wright-Mair et al., 2021). In the United States, many institutions of higher education have made offering on-campus experiences a priority; however, after COVID many were forced to teach their students online (Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022). As college campuses closed and other factors left international students unable to travel home, these students became stranded. The first part of this phenomenon deals with what was happening in the United States. To be more specific, while some international students did have the option to stay on campus during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, others were told to pack their belongings and depart, leaving some students without shelter (Wright-Mair et al., 2021). For both, there was a lot of uncertainty about the future for international students studying in the United States (Alaklabi et al., 2021). The second part of the phenomenon deals with students wanting to travel to their home countries. In March 2020 when several campuses closed and switched to remote learning, many international students wanted to finish their semester in their home country. However, various factors prohibited students from traveling home—closed boarders, visa restrictions, financial restrictions, access concerns, and health concerns (see Chapter 2; Dennis, 2020; Dickerson, 2020; Li, 2020; Wright-Mair et al., 2021). The combination of these factors—uncertainty in the United States and international students being prevented from traveling to their home country—led to the phenomenon of international students being stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to being stranded, international students worldwide and in the United States were left facing new struggles. International students have been reported as having difficult experiences during the pandemic (Dickerson, 2020; Li & Collins, 2014; Wright-Mair et al.,

2021). Once stranded, international students struggled with financial challenges, housing issues, feelings of isolation, and prejudice (Bilecen, 2020; Dickerson, 2020; Li, 2020; Fischer, 2020; Wright-Mair et al., 2021). International students are a vulnerable group who are affected greatly by crises (Thorup-Binger & Charania, 2019).

While we know international students have been affected by the pandemic, there are many needs still for research in this area. Alaklabi et al. (2021) wrote, "COVID-19 is a relatively new phenomenon thus there are relatively fewer studies delving on its impacts on education, and particularly how the pandemic affected international students" (p. 37). The severity of the crisis, how recently it occurred, and how it uniquely affected international students by leaving them stranded create a gap in research and reveal the lack of literature regarding how international students described their experience while being stranded during the pandemic (Alaklabi et al., 2021; Firang, 2020; Fischer, 2020). This study was intended to shed light on those international graduate students who were left stranded in the United States with the goal of understanding their unique experiences. COVID-19 will not be the last disaster to impact institutions of higher education in the United States, and much can be learned through learning about these experiences.

This investigation has implications relative to other researchers, academic administrators, student services professionals, and future international students. The transferability, the ability of research findings to be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings, will be discussed in Chapter 3 (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This research presents evidence that leads to an understanding of the lived experiences of stranded international students. Cahapay (2020) wrote, "By exploring these lived experiences, it offers inputs for the development of various mechanisms that will improve the conditions of this vulnerable group in times of unprecedented

crisis" (p. 603). This study helps educators and administrators to better understand challenges faced by international students and provides learning opportunities to those who work with this group. This research is important because of the significant number of international students in higher education. International students not only increase student numbers in higher education in the United States, but they also provide many benefits for the United States and college campuses. Along with money, international students "increase the diversity of student populations, add new perspectives to classroom conversations, and, related, increase our awareness and appreciation for other countries and cultures" (Lee and Rice, 2007, p. 381). International students play a very important role in bringing new ideas and diversity to the college environment. Therefore, we must support these students by first learning about their experiences.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine the experiences of international students who were stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic. The experiences of international students who were unable to travel to their home countries while classes in the United States transitioned online because of the COVID-19 pandemic may help define, explore, and understand international student experiences during the spring 2020 semester when the pandemic began.

Research Question

How do international students describe their experiences while being stranded in the United States following the COVID-19 outbreak?

Operational Definitions

1. *International Students:* Students attending an institute of higher learning in the United States but who are not currently United States citizens (Davis, 1994). The literature uses many different terms for this group of students. For unification and the purpose of this study, I will identify this group as international students. The international student population is a very diverse group made up of a mixture of age, gender, socioeconomic, and ethnic differences, yet they are usually distinguished by their country of origin (IIE: The Power of International Education, 2019). This population, their visa status, and selecting a sample from this group will be further explored and explained in Chapters 2 and 3.

2. *COVID-19:* Landi et al. (2020) wrote, "The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 that mainly affects the respiratory system, as interstitial pneumonia and acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS)" (p. 1613). The novel Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) was first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, and it spread rapidly severely affecting all countries and territories across the world (Alaklabi et al., 2021; Firang, 2020). This recent pandemic affected all sectors of the economy including higher education (Alaklabi et al., 2021).

3. *Stranded:* The purpose of this paper is to explore the essence of how international students describe being stranded. Therefore, this study will hopefully provide insight and deeper meaning to this term. However, for the purpose of this paper, stranded refers to students who were studying and living in the United States when classes

transitioned online and were unable or left without the means to move from or to travel to their home country for a specific reason.

Methodological Framework

This study utilizes phenomenology as the theoretical underpinning to bind the concepts and notions. Descriptive phenomenology emerged in the philosophical writings of Edmond Husserl (Moustakas, 1994). The core purpose of using descriptive phenomenology is to help researchers explore individuals' experiences because human behavior is determined by the phenomena of experience rather than by objective, physically described reality that is external to the individual (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Using the theoretical lens of phenomenology can help to understand people's lived experiences of a phenomenon (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Phenomenology was chosen as the theoretical framework that informed this study because of its emphasis on how students describe their experiences. Husserl believed individuals were seen as the vehicle through which the essential structure of the phenomenon of interest may be accessed and subsequently described (Priest, 2002). An important aspect of descriptive phenomenology is that it brackets out other input from the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). "An important component of Husserlian phenomenology is the belief that it is essential for the researcher to shed all prior personal knowledge to grasp the essential lived experiences of those being studied" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 727). For this reason, no other framework aside from descriptive phenomenology will be chosen to drive this study because the lens of the researcher does not contribute to gaining insight into how international students describe being stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Phenomenology as the framework for this study, along with the role of the researcher, will be further explained in Chapter 3.

Methodology

The research design employed in this study was also phenomenology. Phenomenology can be practiced across disciplines as both the theoretical and methodological framework (Bhattacharya, 2017; Gallagher, 2012). This study uses a phenomenological research approach to qualitatively explore the phenomenon of how international students describe being stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic. In trying to answer the research question, the purpose of the study is used to guide the research process (Crotty, 1998).

Descriptive phenomenological inquiry is appropriate to make sense of the experiences as they existed without external meaning, bias, or preconceptions. Because the goal is to elicit detailed descriptions of the participants' lived experiences, the research focuses on giving the opportunity to the participants to share their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). To achieve this, several aspects of phenomenological inquiry, such as participant selection, data collection, and data analysis is utilized to drive the research process and is further explained in Chapter 3.

Limitations

This study has limitations. First, because of the limited number of participants, the findings of this research are not generalizable to the entire international graduate student population. Another possible limitation is participants' language proficiency, which could limit this study because many are international students who speak English as a second language. This may make it difficult for them to explain their lived experiences and related themes. Also, the use of participants' second language required the researcher to refine the language for data presentation, which may affect the accuracy of data. Finally, this study focused on graduate students. Depending on the status of the student, they may have different experiences. Tozini and Castiello-Gutiérrez (2022) said, "Doctoral students reported higher social support in comparison

to undergraduate students and that master's students were more satisfied with the university's decision to move to online instruction than bachelors' students" (p. 134). Depending on student status, there were different levels of satisfaction of classes transitioning online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter Summary

International students in higher education in the United States have a long and abundant history. Many different factors affect this population. These students have faced unique challenges and experiences in higher education, including during times of crisis. However, no one was prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic that would have its affects across the world, on higher education, and on international students. When the pandemic began, many college campuses began to shut down and transition online. Students were encouraged to return home. However, many international students were unable to return to their home countries for various reasons. This left many international students stranded. The purpose of this study was to explore how international students describe their experiences while being stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic. To explore this question, the research design employed in this study was phenomenology because of how it aligned with the purpose of the study to explore how international students describe their experiences while being stranded in the United States following the COVID-19 outbreak. The following chapters will outline the research and literature that lead to the purpose of the study and then describe the research design used to employ this research study.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

While some believe the purpose of a literature review is to determine the answers about what is known on a topic, its true purpose is to review previous research to develop sharper and more insightful questions about the topic (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004). As mentioned, the purpose of this study is to explore how international students describe their experiences while being stranded in the United States following the COVID-19 outbreak. To reach the purpose of the study, the following section delineates a brief history of the literature on international student population trends and the various global factors behind these trends. After outlining some of the benefits of international students, the literature identifies trends in the challenges international students face while studying in the United States followed by a closer look at how international students have been affected by various crises in the United States. This is followed by a discussion of the limited empirical research literature on international students following the COVID-19 outbreak. The final section of this review presents the contributions of this study.

International Students

From 2000 to 2017, the numbers of internationally mobile students more than doubled to reach 5.3 million (Fakunle, 2021). China has been the largest country of origin for international students worldwide since 2000 with the United States being the top destination (Bilecen, 2020; Yao, 2018). There is a robust amount of literature relating to international students in higher education in the United States. According to IIE: The Power of International Education (2019), "An international student is defined as anyone studying at an institution of higher education in the United States on a temporary visa that allows for academic coursework." In the literature, this group of students is identified using various names, such as foreign students, sojourners, and

nonimmigrant students. For this research and unification, I will refer to this group as international students.

International Student Population Trends

International students are a large population in higher education in the United States. Total international student enrollment was 1,095,299 in 2019 (IIE: The Power of International Education, 2019). According to *IIE Open Doors* (2021), international students made up 5.5% of the total U.S. student population in higher education. While this number reached an all-time high 2 years ago, international students have been attending U.S. colleges and universities for many years (IIE: The Power of International Education, 2019). They have a very long and abundant history in higher education in the United States, and they have been tracked since the inception of Open Doors in 1954 by the Institute of International Education (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). There is a lot of information and data on international student numbers in higher education in the United States and the various factors that affect this student population.

Throughout the history of tracking international students in higher education, there has been a general upward trend of this population studying in the United States (*IIE Open Doors*, 2021). We have seen the greatest increases in numbers in the past decade (Fischer, 2020; Helms, 2015; Thorup-Binger & Charania, 2019). According to *IIE Open Doors* (2021), 690,923 international students studied in the United States in the 2009–2010 academic year, and that number rose to 1,095,299 in the 2018–2019 academic year. Throughout the tracking, there have also been a few years of decreases in the numbers. In 2002–2003 there was the smallest increase of international students that was followed by a 2.4% decrease in the population (*IIE Open Doors*, 2021; Lee & Rice, 2007). According to Lee and Rice (2007), "In 2004 the Institute of International Education reported that colleges observed the first absolute decline in international

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student enrollments since 1971" (p. 381). Another decrease came in 2019–2020 when international students numbers saw its first decrease in more than a decade, dropping to 1,075,496 from 1,095,299 the previous year (*IIE Open Doors*, 2021). On November 15, 2021, Open Doors released the highly anticipated international student population numbers for 2020–2021 following the COVID-19 outbreak. According to *IIE Open Doors* (2021), the total number of international students studying in the United States had decreased to 914,000, bringing the total percentage down to 4.6% from 5.5% the previous year.

Again, the numbers have shown a general overall trend of increasing international students studying in the United Statas and comprising a large population in higher education. Throughout the tracking, there have been years of skewed growth and some years of decreases in the population with a current downward trend. The next section will look at what the literature identifies as global factors that affect international students.

Global Factors

Throughout the history of international students in higher education, there have been many push and pull factors on this population. Many global factors affect international students, such as political and economic trends (De Witte & Soncin, 2021; Dennis, 2020). Internationalization in higher education is also a trend that has affected this population (De Witte & Soncin, 2021). These global factors affect international students' desires and ability to study in the United States.

Political

In the literature, the political climate has long been seen as a way to build global relationships; however, changing political climates have also had negative effects on international students. According to Sarkodie-Mensah (1998), "After World War II, the United

States wanted to expand its educational and cultural relations with many parts of the world" (p. 214). Altbach and de Wit (2015) mentioned other political initiatives to stimulate peace and mutual understanding through increasing international students in higher education. In 1949, Fulbright Scholarships were initiated.

> These were scholarships for the exchange of students and scholars between the United States and other nations, funded originally by the sale of United States military surplus after World War II. The program was conceived by Senator J. William Fulbright. (Hirsch et al., 2002, p. 288)

The Fulbright Scholarship still exists and many international students have been able to study in the United States because of it.

Three years following the establishment of the Fulbright Scholarship and 2 years before Open Doors tracking students, student visas were established causing a surge of international students. Goncalves (2009) wrote, "It is also important to note that scholarly visitors gained clear legal status in 1952, when the Immigration and Nationality Act first offered the F visa for those pursuing academic studies and the J visa for exchange visitors" (p. 3). While visas have opened the doors for many international students to study in the United States, they have also created obstacles for many international students (Choudaha, 2016). Visa holdups have contributed to softening enrollments, effecting the number of new international students coming to the United States (Fischer, 2020). The visa process has become one of the most important steps for international students to study in the United States. Many students studying in the United States today are on F1 visas.

> An F-1 student is a nonimmigrant who is pursuing a "full course of study" to achieve a specific educational or professional objective, at an academic institution in the United

States that has been designated by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to offer

courses of study to such students, and has been enrolled in SEVIS (the Student and

Exchange Visitor Information System). (International Student and Scholar Services,

2021, p. 1)

While some political policies, such as scholarships and visas, were initiated to open

higher education to international students in the United States, visas and other new policies have

made it more challenging for international students. Even more recently, the political climate in

the United States with travel bans and negative rhetoric has made it more difficult to recruit

international students (Dennis, 2020).

Economic

A lot of the literature surrounding international students addresses the financial benefits

they bring. International students bring millions of dollars to the U.S. economy (Choudaha,

2016; Helms, 2015; *IIE Open Doors*, 2021; Jacobs & Mitchell, 2021). In return, we have seen

the trend of international students being viewed as a financial gain and therefore are more

aggressively recruited. Heffernan and Poole (2005) wrote:

Universities in the United States are increasingly being encouraged to view international

education in business terms, and to look to offshore programs as a potentially lucrative

strategy at a time of decline in the levels of state support for higher education. (p. 226)

International students have been recruited to balance the loss of financial support from the

government.

Although international students have been recruited for the financial benefits they bring,

it has not been easy for them to pay the expensive price tag that comes with education in the

United States (Lee & Rice, 2007). Jacobs and Mitchell (2021) mentioned that mobility remains a

pie in the sky for most international students because of financial constraints. Whenever there are global economic shifts, it can have an effect on international students. Choudaha (2016) wrote, "The global financial recession of 2007-08 was one of the reasons that contributed to the skewed growth" (p. I). The global economy plays a large role in student ability of mobility.

Internationalization

One of the more significant trends that has affected the international student population has been the internationalization of higher education. Both politics and economics have driven internationalization of higher education (Hajiyev, 2017). There has been an increase in internationalized activities in higher education in the past three decades (Jacobs & Mitchell, 2021). One of the early contributors to the field of internationalization was David Throsby (De Witte & Soncin, 2021). Throsby (1998) wrote:

> At its most general, the concept of internationalization in higher education can be taken
> to embrace any aspect of the operation of higher education systems or institutions that
> reaches beyond national borders or that is influenced by or interacts with students,
> academic staff, administrators, institutions, systems, governments, or other stakeholders
> in other countries. (p. 8)

In a drive to internationalize higher education, international students have been recruited as key role players in this process. Many higher education institutions are seeking international students as a way to bring a global presence and perspective to campus and to further institutional internationalization efforts (De Witte & Soncin, 2021; Helms, 2015). For years, student mobility has played a large role in the internationalization of higher education (Jacobs & Mitchell, 2021). However, with the pandemic, student mobility has been greatly impacted. "Internationalization in higher education is entering a new phase" (de Wit & Altbach, 2021, p. 43). It is unclear to

what effect COVID-19 may have on the landscape of international higher education (Fakunle, 2021; Tesar, 2020).

Political and economic trends, as well as the internationalization of higher education, have affected and shaped the international student population in higher education. "Internationalization is a process in constant evolution, which changes in response to local, national, regional, and global environments" (de Wit & Altbach, 2021, p. 44). There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected international students in higher education as it has the world. However, a lot remains unknown about the effects it has had on this population (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Kanwar & Carr, 2020).

Benefits of International Students

International students bring several benefits by studying in the United States. As mentioned, these students are competitively recruited for these benefits (Dennis, 2020; Heffernan & Poole, 2005; Lee & Rice, 2007; Wright-Mair et al., 2021). In addition to increasing university enrollment numbers, international students add financial benefits as well as diversity and new perspectives to higher education in the United States (Heffernan & Poole, 2005; Lee & Rice, 2007; Wright-Mair et al., 2021).

Financial Benefits

International students greatly contribute financially to higher education in the United States (Dennis, 2020; Heffernan & Poole, 2005; Lee & Opio, 2011; Wright-Mair et al., 2021). According to data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, international students accounted for $44.7 billion of the U.S. economy in 2018, a 5.5 percent increase from the previous year (*IIE Open Doors*, 2021). This not only helped the overall U.S. economy but also helped create and

support jobs while contributing to the prosperity of higher education institutions (Wright-Mair et al., 2021).

New Perspectives

In addition to the financial benefit, international students bring a lot more to higher education in the United States. Lee and Rice (2007) wrote, "They increase the diversity of student populations, add new perspectives to classroom conversations, and related, increase our awareness and appreciation for other countries and cultures" (p. 381). International students foster a diverse campus environment and add new perspectives to the classroom. Ford (2019) wrote, "A diverse campus prepares all students for life in the 21st century and careers in a global economy" (p. 1). This diversity provides students an opportunity to not only learn about others but to have a better understanding of themselves (Ford, 2019). By diversifying the student population, increasing cultural exchange, and enriching educational input and output through the sharing of unique perspectives, international students help shape a positive learning environment of an institution (Wright-Mair et al., 2021).

Challenges in Higher Education

As abundant of a history as there is in the literature about global factors that affect international students, a lot of literature discusses the challenges international students face while on campus in the United States. As mentioned, international students have been studying in the United States for many years. While coming to the United States to study is a challenge for many students, they also face other issues while they are on campus in the United States (Choudaha, 2016; Wright-Mair et al., 2021). International students face a lot of difficulties ranging from financial, social, cultural, and language barriers (Aklamanu, 2017).

Financial

International students have faced financial challenges for many years (Choudaha, 2016; Lee, 2007; Rodríguez et al., 2019; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998; Shah et al., 2019). While an education from the United States is very highly regarded, it comes with a steep price tag, especially for international students (Lee & Rice, 2007; Shah et al., 2019). Not only do international students have to pay high out-of-state tuition rates, but fees are usually added (Lee & Rice, 2007). This leads many international students to rely on scholarships to pay some of the bill. However, while many international students are on scholarship from their home countries, sometimes these scholarships have high expectations for the students. International students may be required to finish their coursework in a very short amount of time; they may be required to take a lot of hours per semester while maintaining a certain grade point average; and they may also have to take additional language classes on top of a full course load (Choudaha, 2016).

International students also face work restrictions that can prevent them from affording the high price tag in the United States. During their educational tenure on campus, students who have obtained an F-1 visa are not allowed to seek employment off campus during their first academic year. However, under certain guidelines and restrictions, they can be employed on campus in some capacity (U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services, 2021). After that first academic year, F-1 students can then seek one of three types of off-campus employment: curricular practical training; optional practical training (OPT); and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics optional practical training extension. The training must be related to their respective field of study (U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services, 2021). However, these types of off-campus employment can be very competitive and also have many restrictions on qualifications (Flood, 2015).

The financial struggle for international students is a serious challenge (Lee, 2007; Rodríguez et al., 2019; Shah et al., 2019). These students usually have a much higher price tag than domestic students and they also have support and visa restrictions that make it difficult for them to pay the high price for education. Unfortunately, this is not the only serious challenge that international students face.

Social

Social risks that international students face include social exclusion and discrimination (Bilecen, 2020). Neo-racism is a form of discrimination based on national origin, skin color, and culture that some international students face. It is sometimes referred to as new racism. Spears (1999) said, "Neo-racism rationalizes the subordination of people of color on the basis of culture, which is of course acquired through acculturation within an ethnic group, while traditional racism rationalizes it fundamentally in terms of biology" (p. 398).

Neo-racism is still racism in that it functions to maintain racial hierarchies of oppression (Lee & Rice, 2007). International students studying in the United States may not only be discriminated against because of their skin color but also because of their country of origin. Lee and Rice (2007) wrote:

Discrimination becomes, seemingly, justified by cultural difference or national origin rather than by physical characteristics alone and can thus disarm the fight against racism by appealing to "natural" tendencies to preserve group cultural identity—in this case the dominant group. (p. 389)

When an international student perceives that an environment is negative or unwelcoming, it can have negative effects on learning (Lee, 2007). It is important to note that international students from different regions perceived varying degrees of discrimination in college and that

international students make up a very diverse student population (Yao, 2018). Either way, several studies have focused on and confirmed discrimination against international students in general on U.S. college campuses, while other studies have highlighted issues of discrimination based on country of origin (Marginson et al., 2010; Yao, 2018).

Cultural

The culture alone can be quite different for international students studying in the United States (Choudaha, 2016). Lee and Rice (2007) wrote, "Different food tastes, views regarding sexual openness, perceptions of time, and gender roles were just some of the cultural adjustments encountered" (p. 386). These differences can lead to culture shock for many students (Wright-Mair et al., 2021). International students experience not only the typical stressors endured by most college students but also the added pressures of adjusting to a new environment (Akens et al., 2019). Additionally, some international students may have difficulty understanding the academic expectations, and they may experience difficulty with classroom engagement (Rodríguez et al., 2019).

Language

Finally, one of the bigger issues that some international students face is the language barrier. Wadsworth et al. (2008) wrote, "One of the most obvious and problematic identity markers for international students is English proficiency" (p. 69). Not only is it an issue of how international students perceive their own language skills, but they are even more concerned with how native English speakers perceive them. This can cause an issue of understanding in the classroom, but it can also cause barriers with peers and even isolation for the students (Wright-Mair et al., 2021).

The literature shows that international students face a variety of challenges in higher education in the United States (Akens et al., 2019; Aklamanu, 2017; Lee, 2007; Wright-Mair et al., 2021). The international student population is very diverse, and it is always important to remember that each individual has a different and unique experience (Wright-Mair et al., 2021; Yao, 2018). However, these are common challenges identified that international students face. The next section will address international students during and following various crises.

Crises

A crisis in higher education is defined as "an event, which is often sudden or unexpected, that disrupts the normal operations of the institution or its educational mission and threatened the well-being of personnel, property, financial resources, and/or reputation of the institution" (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p. 28). In this definition, students are included in the personnel of the universities and colleges. Crises can be contained to certain areas or worldwide, manmade or natural (Booker, 2014; Mitroff et al., 2006; Zdziarski et al., 2007). The variety and unexpectedness can make it difficult for colleges and universities to always be prepared for a crisis. Booker (2014) wrote, "Much of higher education treats crises as rare occurrences or as anomalies and therefore generally is not equipped or prepared to respond" (p. 17). When it comes to college campuses, there is a very mixed picture of preparedness responding in a variety of ways to a crisis (some more successful than others), and yet much remains to be done for all (Mitroff et al., 2006). Crises can have a large and lasting impact on higher education and on international students (Advani, 2005; Firang, 2020; Romero, 2003; Zdziarski et al., 2007). Wright-Mair et al. (2021) wrote:

In keeping with the inescapable nature of crises, it is worth noting that U.S. higher

education institutions have faced numerous critical turning points in the form of natural

disasters, school shootings, serial killers, mass murders, and suicides just in the last two

decades (p. 63).

However, for the purpose of this research, the focus will be on the September 11th terrorist

attacks and Hurricane Katrina because of the literature that addresses these crises and the effects

they had on international students. This will then tie into the much more recent crisis—the

COVID-19 pandemic.

September 11

On September 11, 2001, four planes were hijacked. Two planes crashed into the World

Trade Center complex; one plane crashed into the Pentagon; and the final plane crashed into a

field in Pennsylvania (Wright-Mair et al., 2021). Unfortunately, this had many negative effects

on international students. This crisis lead to new policies and tracking international students

along with new negative feelings and attitudes toward international students (Lee & Rice, 2007;

Romero, 2003; Wright-Mair et al., 2021).

Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) has been a significant way to

track international students since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Romero (2003)

wrote, "The primary innovation behind SEVIS is that it is an internet-based system which allows

U.S. educational institutions and exchange program sponsors the opportunity to share

information about international students, exchange visitors, and their dependents" (p. 10). SEVIS

is a web-based system; the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) serves as a division

of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and acts as a bridge for government

organizations that have an interest in information on nonimmigrants whose primary reason for

coming to the United States is to be students (U.S. Immigration and Customs and Enforcement,

2021). In conjunction with the Department of Homeland Security, the classification of visas, the

management of dependents, and the communication with the institutions that act as hosts to the international students are all overseen by the SEVP (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2021). Wright-Mair et al. (2021) wrote, "Essentially, these enactments made it more difficult for international students to enter the United States and bestowed upon higher education institutions the license to carefully monitor international students" (p. 64). Along with tracking students, the process for getting visas became more difficult and sometimes the waiting period for visas was too long (Lee, 2007). It was reported by American university administrators responsible for international students that a significant number of students were denied visas or were delayed long enough that they were unable to study in the United States (Altbach & de Wit, 2015). Unfortunately, the attacks also helped fuel hostility that some still have toward international students today, and it also made students question the safety of studying in the United States (Lee & Rice, 2007).

In 2002–2003, there was a slight increase of international students, followed by a 2.4% decrease in the population (Lee & Rice, 2007). "In 2004 the Institute of International Education reported that colleges observed the first absolute decline in international student enrollments since 1971" (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 381). During this time, many people who were looking at international students in higher education were unsure about the resiliency of these students and their ability to bounce back after a crisis such as the September 11 terrorist attacks (Fischer, 2020).

Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005. This Category 3 storm led to an estimated 1,200 deaths (Gibbens, 2019). While causing a great deal of destruction, natural disasters—tornadoes, earthquakes, and hurricanes—are not a new phenomenon to college

campuses. However, the damage of Hurricane Katrina was insurmountable in many ways (Wright-Mair et al., 2021). It was reported that the state of Louisiana incurred expenses between $500 million and $600 million (Wright-Mair et al., 2021). The financial aspect was only part of the damage. Following the hurricane, institutions of higher education were forced to close their doors for the longest time in their history (Lipka, 2005). In fact, two major universities announced that they would not open their campus doors for the entire fall semester (Wright-Mair et al., 2021). This led to the displacement of 84,000 students and 15,000 faculty members (Wright-Mair et al., 2021). Of the students displaced, 3,000 were international students (Advani, 2005). During their displacement, the majority of the students were not offered any form of evacuation assistance (Ladd et al., 2007). While this crisis had a great effect on many people, some were affected more than others. Wright-Mair et al. (2021) wrote, "Some students, based on the identities they hold (e.g., international students, students from a low socioeconomic background, or both), would have been more severely impacted than others" (p. 65). In addition to these impacts, international students were limited in their abilities to earn money because of visa regulations. "U.S. visa regulations only permit international students to work on the campus where they were originally admitted" (Advani, 2005, p. 1). With campuses closed, international students were unable to work. Additionally, they were not allowed to apply for federal aid like many other displaced students (Advani, 2005; Wright-Mair et al., 2021).

COVID-19

Initially detected in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, COVID-19 spread rapidly. In just a few short weeks, it had made its way to America's campuses (Firang, 2020). As the virus spread, more companies and organizations began to temporarily close, impacting more than 91% of the world's student population (Zhu & Liu, 2020). Higher education, like the rest of the world,

began to close and transition online, seemingly becoming digitalized almost overnight (Bilecen, 2020). Wright-Mair et al. (2021) wrote:

> Although institutions' closing their doors seems rational and effective at surface level, it has had serious implications for vulnerable student populations (e.g., international students, racially minoritized students, homeless students, students who were formerly in the foster care system, students who are estranged from their families for various reasons, and students who are subject to abuse and various types of violence at home) who were now being put at risk in an entirely different way. (p. 66)

COVID-19 was a global crisis that affected many people and some more than others, including international students.

COVID-19 is not the first pandemic to affect international students worldwide. There are examples of institutional responses to illnesses, such as yellow fever and the 1918 influenza pandemic (Thomas & Foster, 2020). Schwartz and Schwartz (2010) wrote:

> Over the past 10 years, outbreaks of SARS, H5N1 (Avian Influenza), and the current H1N1 (Swine Influenza) pandemic have raised awareness among health providers, public health officials and the public in general regarding the need for global and local pandemic preparedness. (p. 2)

Outside of the United States, pandemics such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2002 spread to various regions and other countries, but the United States managed to avoid any deaths (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2010). While global pandemics are not new and have had different effects on various countries, COVID-19 is considered unprecedented (Thomas & Foster, 2020). Various factors made COVID-19 the worst pandemic in recent years—rapid

spread, heightened vulnerability among aged and low immune people, and differential recovery

rates in different countries and age groups (Izumi et al., 2021).

Crises are not a new phenomenon to higher education and they can cause a lot of damage

and have long lasting effects (Wright-Mair et al., 2021). Looking at past crises, such as the

September 11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina provides a better understanding of the effects that

the crises have had on international students in U.S. higher education. As for as the COVID-19

pandemic, more time and studies are needed to see the full effects it has had on international

students (Fischer, 2020). The results of COVID-19 on international students remain largely

unexplored empirically; however, some stories of students being stranded and the challenges

they faced have been exposed. The next sections will focus on the limited empirical literature

and news articles about the COVID-19 pandemic that caused many international students to be

stranded in the United States and the challenges these students faced.

Stranded

On March 12, 2020, during spring break, students at the public university that served as

the research site for this study received notice that classes would transition online. The president

of the university wrote, "In-person classes will be suspended on all campuses from March 16–20

and classes will resume remotely March 23–27 to mitigate the spread of COVID-19" (Myers,

2020, p. 1). He encouraged students not to return to campus. "While completing classes

remotely, students are strongly encouraged to remain at their permanent homes away from

campus, unless they cannot return home due to travel restrictions, financial burden, or lack of

reliable internet access" (p. 1). Through this announcement and others like it, college campuses

were closing across the United States. Faculty members and other personnel were rushing to

move everything online, while students were coping with what this change meant for them.

Dickerson (2020) wrote, "When universities abruptly shut down because of the coronavirus pandemic, many students returned to their parents' homes, distraught over having to give up their social lives and vital on-campus networking opportunities" (p. 1). While this was certainly a difficult time for everyone in higher education, international students faced additional issues. Unable to travel to their home countries for various reasons, while also being discouraged or prevented from returning to campus, international students were stranded. "While other activities of higher education involuntarily quickly adapted and teaching and administration went largely digital in one form or another, thousands of international students were stranded and prevented from either travelling home or travelling to their institutions" (Jacobs & Mitchell, 2021, p. 23).

Many international students enrolled on college campuses across the United States when the pandemic hit remained in the United States. Fischer (2020) wrote, "As many as nine in 10 international students remained in the United States, a survey this spring by the Institute of International Education found." While many chose to stay, closed borders, visa restrictions, financial restrictions, access concerns, and health concerns all contributed to stranding international students in the United States (Fischer, 2020; Wright-Mair et al., 2021).

Closed Borders

Following the announcements of campuses closing, many students were rushing to book flights home only to discover that many international borders had already been closed (Dickerson, 2020). In addition, "There are also varying degrees of the shortage of flights to other international students' home countries" (Li, 2020, p. 1). Border closings and flight cancellations made it physically impossible for international students to travel home.

Visa Restrictions

Another obstacle that left students stranded related to visas. As mentioned, visas are necessary and one of the most important aspects for international students to be able to study in the United States. Applying and receiving visas can be challenging and time consuming. When COVID-19 began, that process halted altogether. Dickerson (2020) wrote, "The State Department has also suspended visa processing until further notice" (p. 1). Suspending visa processing had many negative effects on international students. Li (2020) wrote, "And even worse, there were also some graduated international students with an expired visa stuck in the United States who became 'illegal immigrants'" (p. 1). Not only would suspending student visas effect student status and prevent other students from traveling, but it could also affect their abilities to enroll in classes (Li, 2020). Students also feared that they would not be able to return to their studies if they traveled home because of the suspended visa processing (Dickerson, 2020; Wright-Mair et al., 2021).

Online classes also have strict visa restrictions. Dickerson (2020) wrote, "Normally, their visas require them to take classes in person, rather than online" (p. 2). Student visas normally limit the number of online classes that international students can take. Therefore, many were uncertain where the online transition left them (Wright-Mair et al., 2021). Dickerson (2020) mentioned, "The Department of Homeland Security temporarily relaxed that rule in light of the crisis, but the exception could be reversed at any time" (p. 2). International students did not know how long they would be allowed to take online classes.

Financial Restrictions

Another obstacle that left international students stranded were financial restrictions. Tuition for international students is much higher than that paid by American students (Dickerson,

2020). For many international students, it was too expensive for students to travel home during their studies before the pandemic. "Some flight tickets have even increased to 10 times the usual price, but they were still always sold out in a second" (Li, 2020, p. 1). Many of the flight tickets were too expensive, and a lot of the students were not able to ask their families for financial help. Dickerson (2020) wrote, "Some students have been reluctant to share the extent of their troubles with their families who were already struggling to pay for their schooling" (p. 1). Additionally, if the families did have some money to send to the United States, many were unable to get to the bank to send it because of lockdowns in their own countries (Dickerson, 2020). Not having the money or having access to the money caused many international students to be stranded.

Access Concerns

International students who traveled home had to worry about access to continue their educations. Students had to consider the time zone difference and the possibility of limited internet access (Li, 2020). In addition, many countries have limited access and banned education sites (Li, 2020). And on top of that, "Students who rushed to airports to beat looming border closures and wait out the pandemic at home also fear they will face legal hurdles when they try to return to the United States to complete their schooling" (Dickerson, 2020, p. 1).

Those students who decided to stay in the United States had to worry about finding housing in the middle of a semester and the possibility of dorm closures (Dickerson, 2020). This resulted in many students having no choice but to quarantine either on campus, where they would have limited access to support services, or off-campus (Wright-Mair et al., 2021).

Health Concerns

Health concerns also contributed to international students being stranded. Losing health insurance during the pandemic was a fear for many international students. Students who were

stranded or looking for housing had limited locations because many international students' health insurance only works near campus (Dickerson, 2020). Also, many were worried about their families' health in other countries. "Also, traveling might expose ourselves to the virus, so many of us, including me, stayed in the United States and waited for the summer to come" (Li, 2020, p. 1). For some, this was an impossible decision because staying in the United States meant that they would be away from their families who were simultaneously facing the same crisis back home, whereas returning home meant that they would risk contracting the deadly virus at some point during their travel and possibly taking it to their families.

Challenges While Stranded

While many international students were left stranded for a variety of reasons, those who remained in the United States faced additional difficulties. Fischer (2020) wrote, "The pandemic is upending daily life, but its impact could be especially seismic for international education, and one that those in the field have little ability to affect" (p. i). International students are a vulnerable group that are greatly affected by crises. Thorup-Binger and Charania (2019) wrote:

> Studies of the vulnerability of migrants in the face of a disaster have been well documented, and may include low socioeconomic status, language barriers, reduced horizontal social support, with minimal involvement in local social groups, and lack of knowledge about how the host country's government functions. (p. 1)

Many factors contribute to the vulnerability of international students during a crisis. Dickerson (2020) wrote, "The campus closures have created much greater calamity in the lives of the more than a million international students who left their home countries to study in the United States" (p. 1).

Financial Challenges

International students also faced many financial challenges during their time being stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Work restrictions, unemployment, and lack of financial aid caused international students to be hit extremely hard financially during the pandemic.

"A substantial number of international students are also watching their financial lives fall apart: Visa restrictions prevent them from working off campuses, which are now closed" (Dickerson, 2020, p. 1). Students who have an F-1 visa are not allowed to seek out employment off-campus during their first academic year (U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services, 2021). This meant that many international students lost their source of income when the pandemic happened. Pollak (2020) wrote, "Only 31 per cent had a job before COVID-19, and nearly all respondents have now lost these jobs" (p. 1).

Unfortunately, many of these students also did not qualify for relief funding. "Without access to the federal aid or support available to American citizens, these students are struggling to keep themselves afloat" (Srikanth, 2020, p. 1). While the federal government stepped in to help college students, international students were excluded from the $6 billion federal aid administered under the Trump administration (Dickerson, 2020).

Some students have been really hit hard by the financial challenges. Dickerson (2020) wrote, "As their bank accounts dwindle, some international students say they have had to turn to food banks for help" (p. 1). Others have even had to sleep on couches and borrow money from friends.

Loss of Housing and Services

Housing was an obstacle for many international students, especially those who were living on campus. "When COVID-19 broke out in the United States, many schools were closed and a large number of international students living on campus found that they no longer had a place to live" (Li, 2020, p. 1). Dickerson (2020) wrote, "Many had been living in college dorms and were left to try to find new housing, far from home in a country under lockdown" (p. 1). Also, many of the services that they students had come to rely on were no longer being provided and many daily necessities were in short supply (Li, 2020).

Isolation

The new environment for international students led to feelings of isolation. Once students were forced off campus, many lost their social environment as well (Li, 2020). Fischer (2020) wrote, "Avina Khiatani, a staff psychologist at the University of Oklahoma, said many of the international students who join a weekly virtual meetup that she runs feel distant not just from their families back home but from their American classmates, too" (p. 1). Many students' only interaction from others came behind a monitor or a screen, leaving many international students feeling isolated (Li, 2020).

Targets of Prejudice

In addition to uncertainties in terms of their financial situation, housing issues, and isolation concerns, international students—particularly those from China and other parts of Asia—experienced social exclusion and xenophobic attitudes and at times became victims of discrimination and verbal assaults (Bilecen, 2020). Many Americans used the fact that COVID-19 started in China to fuel and rationalize racist, anti-Asian rhetoric, attitudes, and behaviors

(Wright-Mair et al., 2021). Li (2020) wrote, "Asian international students stranded in the United States have found that racial discrimination against Asians seems to be getting worse" (p. 1).

Contribution of this Study

International students have been an expanding subset of the U.S. student population. They benefit U.S. higher education while facing various challenges. While crises are unavoidable and unexpected, international students have suffered additional challenges during these events. When COVID-19 began, the world changed overnight. Many people were affected, but international students were left stranded and facing additional challenges. While there is limited literature, mostly news articles, there has not been extensive empirical research on this group during COVID-19. There is some information of what it means to be stranded during the pandemic, however, the experience of being stranded has not been explored. Few current qualitative studies have been published regarding international students' daily lived experiences on college campuses during COVID-19 (Firang, 2020). Articles analyzing international students' responses to a student satisfaction survey are plentiful (Firang, 2020). Although these articles provide short stories of some experiences international students had in the United States, they do not provide the ample description and depth of understanding found in their personal experiences during COVID-19.

Chapter Summary

Scholars have yet to understand the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on international students and what their true experiences are (Firang, 2020). The full effects of COVID-19 and international students in higher education in the United States remain unclear (Bilecen, 2020; Dennis, 2020; Firang, 2020; Fischer, 2020). Fischer (2020) wrote, "When I speak with some veteran international educators, they remind me of the field's resiliency and

quick rebound after the September 11th terror attacks while others shake their head and claim they have never seen anything like this" (p. ii).

International students have long been an integral piece of the U.S. higher education system and until recently had only seen upward population trends. When crises happen—including the pandemic—international students face additional challenges. Therefore, it is imperative that scholars and the academy understand the grounding and the implications of this phenomenon. Overall, the literature supports the benefits of international students while identifying their challenges during crises and highlights the gap in knowledge at the intersection where these variables coincide. This study exploring how international students describe their experiences during the pandemic will add more depth to the existing literature and help close gaps regarding the experiences of international students within higher education contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

"Research designs are plans and the procedures for research that span the decisions from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection and analysis" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 3). They continued that research design involves the intersection of philosophy, strategies of inquiry, and specific methods. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of international students who were stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter will introduce the framework and lens and why it is suitable for the study. Then I will provide a suitable framework for the methodology. Next, this chapter will present the methods and procedures focusing on the research methodology, application, and design. Finally, I will address the trustworthiness of the research.

Suitability of the Research Design and Scope

The overall decision of research design involves which design should be used to study a topic and how this choice is justified (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998). Creswell (2009) wrote, "Informing this decision should be the worldview assumptions the researcher brings to the study; procedures of inquiry (called strategies); and specific methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation" (p. 3). Also, the selection of design is based on the nature of the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2009). This study used a qualitative approach.

Qualitative Research

"Those who engage in a qualitative form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 4). Deductive reasoning begins with a premise that is proven through observations. Inductive reasoning begins with a set of observations, seeking patterns in those observations, and then theorizing about those patterns.

Because the research purpose is to explore international students' experiences, this type of research is exploratory and inductive. In this research, I am also interested in how international students describe their experiences of a complex situation, such as being stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Creswell and Poth (2018) provided a list of characteristics of qualitative methodology. Extracted are the parts relevant to this study. Qualitative research is appropriate when:

(a)   a problem or an issue needs to be explored;

(b)   a group or population need to be studied;

(c)   variables that cannot be easily measured are identified;

(d)   silenced voices need to be heard;

(e)   there needs to be a complex and detailed understanding of the issue;

(f)   individuals need to be empowered to share their stories;

(g)   researchers want to understand the contexts or settings where participants experience the issue or problem;

(h)   statistical analysis or quantitative measures do not fit the problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 47–48).

First, the problem or issue that needs to be explored is how students describe being stranded. Not only can this type of problem be difficult to measure, but there must be a complex and detailed understanding of the issue. International students can also be categorized as a group that is silenced and has a voice that needs to be heard (Lee, 2007). These students need to be empowered to share their stories. Finally, the context or setting of higher education in the United States during a global pandemic affects a lot of people and is a serious issue that needs better understanding. The purpose of this study aligns with these characteristics of qualitative research.

Qualitative research has four elements: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and

methods (Bhattacharya, 2017; Crotty, 1998).

Epistemology

"Epistemology is concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what

kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and

legitimate" (Maynard & Purvis, 2013, p. 10). The knowledge we are seeking is how international

students describe their experiences while being stranded in the United States following the

COVID-19 outbreak. Epistemology, sometimes referred to as worldview, is a basic set of beliefs

that guide action (Creswell, 2009). In other words, your epistemology, or what you believe about

knowledge, determines what is accepted as valid evidence. Therefore, it will affect what you

may believe to be true. Because the epistemology is the grounding that decides the action to take

for the research, it helps shape the research design and needs to be identified, explained, and

justified (Crotty, 1998). Bhattacharya (2017) wrote, "Epistemology focuses on how we know

what we know" (p. 11). Epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, in much qualitative research

is relative in that individuals and groups shift how knowledge is created and understood, and

knowledge is socially constructed (Creswell, 2009). Because this research is interested in how

international students describe their experiences, I will assume that the epistemology is

subjective and socially constructed. An individual's understanding and meaning are an important

part of a qualitative research study. Meaning is not discovered but constructed based on

interactions with the world; this is called constructionism (Bhattacharya, 2017; Crotty, 1998).

Therefore, the meaning of something or a situation will depend on the individual and the

interpretation. This recognizes that different people may make a different meaning of the same

situation. Constructionism and how knowledge is created through it also can be described by

linking the knower and the known (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004). Looking at international students

could not be done without considering the context and the experiences that they each underwent

individually. Crotty (1998) wrote, "In this view of things, subjects and objects emerge as

partners in the generation of meaning" (p. 9). In this study, constructionism will help generate

meaning of international students with their experiences during the pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

The epistemology branches and informs the theoretical framework. Crotty (1998)

described theoretical framework as the philosophical stance behind the methodology. To

determine the methodology, there must be an understanding of theoretical framework, which is

aligned through the epistemology, in this case constructionism. One theoretical framework

situated in constructionism is phenomenology.

Phenomenology.

Sloan and Bowe (2014) wrote:

The broadest definition for phenomenology is that it is a theoretical point of view

advocating the study of individuals' experiences because human behavior is determined

by the phenomena of experience rather than objective, physically described reality that is

external to the individual. (p. 2)

Bhattacharya (2017) wrote, "Phenomenology offers a theoretical lens to understand people's

lived experiences of a phenomenon" (p. 98). Phenomenology provides the theoretical lens to

focus on the essence of the experience. An essence could be understood as a structure of

essential meanings that explicates a phenomenon of interest (van Manen, 1990). The essence or

structure is what makes the phenomenon to be that very phenomenon.

As a philosophy, phenomenology can be divided into two major branches: descriptive and interpretive. Immanuel Kant (1764) gave us the earliest known reference of the term phenomenology; however, Edmund Husserl (1913-1982) gave us the modern adaptation of the phenomenological approach (Priest, 2002). Priest (2002) wrote, "Husserl believed that access to the material world was through consciousness, and that all knowledge was derived from experience" (p. 51). Husserl's descriptive phenomenology aimed to identify the meaning of an individual's lived experiences or to extract meaning from their everyday life (Husserl, 1970). Therefore, Husserl believed individuals were the vehicle through which the essential structure of the phenomenon of interest may be accessed and subsequently described (Priest, 2002). The framework of phenomenology's principal theme is intentionality or awareness to get to the pure essence of the experience or the way that individuals look at something—the phenomenon.

Methodology

"Methodology is the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes" (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). The methodology also helps connect the theoretical framework and epistemology to the methods that will be used in the study. Crotty (1998) wrote, "Epistemology is the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology" (p. 3). To understand and explain the methodology, the theoretical framework and epistemology have to be considered (Crotty, 1998). Because the purpose of the study is to explore how international students describe their experiences while being stranded in the United States following the COVID-19 outbreak, the best methodology to use for this study is phenomenology, which is embedded in the theoretical perspective of phenomenology and the epistemology of constructionism.

Descriptive Phenomenology.

Phenomenology was not fully defined as a research method until the 1970s when phenomenological psychologists established a methodology derived from the philosophical traditions mentioned above (Groenewald, 2004). Phenomenological researchers were interested in understanding the social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved (Vagle, 2014). Bhattacharya (2017) mentioned three key ideas to selecting phenomenology as the methodology: identifying the phenomenon, working with a group who have shared phenomenological experiences, and aligning with a specific phenomenology (p. 98–99). Through this study, I am interested in the phenomenon of being stranded during the COVID- 19 pandemic. From the literature, we saw that many international students had this shared phenomenological experience. The specific phenomenology that will be used for this study is descriptive phenomenology. Descriptive phenomenology, which is named for how the data is collected and analyzed, involves the researcher reducing the lived-experience information into the phenomenological essences through bracketing, reflection, and data analysis (Vagle, 2014).

Bracketing, also known as reduction or epoche, is a key component of phenomenology. Bracketing is when the researcher engages in reflective activities to identify and bracket out preconceptions and biases (Vagle, 2014). While a phenomenon is defined by the meaning it has for its subject, anything outside of the immediate experience must be disregarded (Snyman, 1993). To isolate the phenomenon under investigation and interpret the meaning of lived experiences, descriptive phenomenology involves bracketing—the suspension of all suppositions to isolate an individual's true lived experience (Vagle, 2014). The data in a phenomenological study comes from the participant's descriptions and perspectives related to the phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004). The data in this study is narrative data that will be collected from participants about the

phenomenon under investigation. The participants offer raw data in the form of everyday stories, natural conversation, and reflections about their lived experiences.

Phenomenology varies from other forms of qualitative research because descriptive phenomenology applies reflection and analysis of lived experiences to identify a universal structure of the phenomenon under investigation instead of other research that focuses on themes emerging from empirical data analysis (Vagle, 2014). These phenomenological themes are not simply generalizations but instead are elements that form the larger meaning of the phenomenon. To get to the essence of the phenomenon, preconceptions and biases are bracketed out by using bracketing activities and engagement with the data, in this case interview transcripts (Vagle, 2014). Through these phenomenological research methods, the researcher grows to know the participants on a personal level and to understand their lived experiences and meaning beyond both of their preconceptions about being an international student during the pandemic. Therefore, the essential themes that are reported by all participants describe the phenomenon so that it would be recognizable by anyone who is experiencing the same phenomenon (Vagle, 2014).

Van Manen (1990) wrote:

The point of phenomenological research is to "borrow" other people's experiences and their reflections on their experiences to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience. (p. 62)

The deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience is the phenomenon. By looking at international students and having them reflect upon the experience of being stranded in the United States during the pandemic, we can draw a better understanding of the magnitude and significance of their experience.

The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it, and from the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13)

It is not as much about exploring the experience of a particular phenomenon, but it is about the essence of that experience. Phenomenology aims to describe the ways in which things are experienced. For this research the focus is on the experience of being stranded and not what the individuals think about the challenges they faced while being stranded. Descriptive phenomenology is the best phenomenological methodology when an inquiry seeks to identify universal qualities of a phenomenon not completely conceptualized in prior research. Phenomenology has specific methodological guidelines (Vagle, 2014).

Methods

Crotty (1998) said the methodology is the strategic plan of action underlying the choice and use of a particular method, thus linking the approach to the desired outcome. "Methods is the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data related to some research question or hypothesis" (p. 3). Therefore, it is important to consider the context or environment where the research will be performed. Creswell (2009) wrote, "The process of designing a qualitative study emerges during inquiry, but it generally follows the pattern of scientific research" (p. 65). Phenomenological research methods involve garnering insight into a person's past, lived experiences as they recollect them (Vagle, 2014). The goal of phenomenological approach is to elicit detailed descriptions of the participants' lived experiences; therefore, the research will focus on giving participants the opportunity to share their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). To achieve this, several aspects such as phenomenological reduction—continually returning to the

description of phenomenon as it is according to the participants—and bracketing or epoche—to abstain from using personal bias—will be used (Moustakas, 1994). The methods for this study will be explained in following sections of research design, data collection, and data management and analysis.

Research Design

Research design is the blueprint for the research (Bhattacharya, 2017). The research design must first address the theoretical perspective and how those perspectives will play a role in the study. Because the theoretical perspectives were previously addressed, now the research design will guide the research site, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis and management.

Research Site

A phenomenological study focuses on obtaining descriptions of experiences from individuals who have lived through situations in which the phenomenon has taken place (Giorgi, 2009). To capture the shared experience of the phenomenon, the research site is important to consider. The research site for this study was a public university located in a midsized Midwestern United States town. This site was selected because of the accessibility I have to the international population because of my 7 years of working at the University. I will later discuss how my involvement was useful in participant selection as well as my withholding as the researcher through bracketing in the data analysis section. Although the data was collected through interviews on Zoom (a cloud-based video conferencing service) and not physically on the research site, the research site provides insight into the international student demographic.

According the university's enrollment summary by ethnicity, (Office of the Registrar, 2021), it had 21,719 students enrolled in 2019. The three largest student populations were

Caucasians with 16,439 (76%), international with 1,471 (7%), and Hispanic Latino with 1,587

(7%). Because the population of the study will focus on international students, I will further

break down the number of this population. The visa status of the international students at the

university are F-visa, J-visa, and other. The other category includes nondegree-seeking students,

exchange students, and special programs and professional degrees (International Student and

Scholar Services, 2021). The university where this study was conducted had the following

enrollment for spring 2021, and the top three populations were China with 284 (25%), India with

124 (11%), and Saudi Arabia with 110 (10%). Enrollment of international undergraduate

students was 419 (37%) and enrollment of international graduate students was 681 (60%). Table

3.1 shows the top 10 places of origin by country in spring 2021 at the university where this study

was conducted.

Table 3.1

Top 10 Places of Origin

Country	Total Number of Students
China	284
India	124
Saudi Arabia	110
Paraguay	55
Nepal	39
Iran	33
Bangladesh	30
South Korea	30
Nigeria	29
Sri Lanka	27

Note. Source: International Student and Scholar Services, 2021.

Participant Selection

A phenomenological study focuses on obtaining descriptions of experiences from

individuals who have lived through situations in which the phenomenon has taken place (Giorgi,

2009). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), researchers intentionally select participants in purposeful sampling because the research problem under examination can best be informed by the participants. This research is focused on the experiences of international students who were stranded in the United States following the COVID-19 pandemic. A purposeful sampling procedure was required because only certain participants who had experienced the phenomenon would qualify for the research (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 1990). Merriam (1998) mentioned that a purposeful sampling approach allows a researcher to "discover, understand, and gain insight," by selecting a deliberate sample of participants that allows for such information to be learned (p. 77). This type of sampling provides necessary information from the participants. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), there are three things to consider when using purposeful sampling: who and what to sample, what form of sampling to take, and how many participants or sites to sample. To secure participants for this study, I used both criterion-based sampling and snowball sampling forms for purposeful sampling.

Criterion sampling involves selecting participants who meet specified criteria determined by the researcher (Patton, 1990). Participants recruited using criterion sampling were selected based on their connection to the phenomenon of interest in the study. Because the international student population is so diverse and there is a need to maximize the shared experience of the participants, additional criteria was included.

First, it is important to consider the visa status of the participants. A student with an F-1 visa is a nonimmigrant who is pursuing a full course of study to achieve a specific educational or professional objective; a student with a J-1 visa is also a full-time student, however, a substantial portion of funding is from a source other than personal (International Student and Scholar Services, 2021). There are other differences between F-1 and J-1 students, such as employment,

their dependents, program changes, and other factors. Therefore, only F-1 students were eligible to participate in this study.

Along with visa status, it is important to consider other factors that affect international students. Many international students face cultural adjustments and transition challenges when they first travel to the United States to study (Kwon, 2009; Lee & Rice, 2007; Rodríguez et al., 2019; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Therefore, students needed to have been in the United States for a year before the spring 2020 semester. Language ability is another important factor that affects many international students. Because the interviews and research for this study were in English, English language ability was a factor to consider. Graduate students often have additional academic requirements (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). In addition, graduate admissions has different English proficiency test score requirements than undergraduate students for international students where English is not their native language (Office of the Registrar, 2021). Therefore, only graduate international students were eligible to participate. Finally, participants had to be willing to be involved. These students had to be able to describe a description of the phenomenon considered essential to the phenomenological research (van Manen, 1990).

The second purposeful sampling technique was snowball sampling, which involves the use of people who would know of other people who meet the researcher's specified criteria for participation (Patton, 1990). Snowball sampling is a recruitment procedure in which research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once participants completed the demographic questionnaire and it was determined that they met the criteria, they were selected to participate in the study. These participants were

then asked to share the recruitment email with other people they thought would meet the criteria to be potential participants in this study.

There has been no real consensus in terms of the number of participants required in a phenomenological study (Boyd, 1993). It is important to remember that while quantitative research is wider in scope, qualitative focus is deeper. It was earlier suggested that any number of participants from two to 10 is considered enough to reach a point of saturation in a phenomenological study, but it has been recommended that at least six participants are needed before no new themes would emerge in a qualitative study (Boyd, 1993). Therefore, the original plan for this study was to search for six to 10 participants to interview for this study to achieve the point of saturation.

Criteria of Inclusion and Exclusion

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), criterion-based sampling is used because participants meet some criterion for quality assurance. Therefore, the process of identifying participants began with identifying criteria that are important when choosing someone to be interviewed. Students who were stranded following the COVID-19 pandemic were chosen to participate if:

(1) They were international students who wanted to return to their home country but were unable to because of closed borders, visa restrictions, financial restrictions, access concerns, health concerns, or any other self-identified reason.

(2) They were enrolled at the research site and stayed in the United States throughout the entire spring 2020 semester.

(3) They possessed an F-1 student visa for identification as international students when they were studying.

(4) They had studied in the United States for a minimum of 1 academic year before the spring 2020 semester.

(5) They were full-time graduate students.

(6) They were willing to be interviewed at least twice for the purpose of the study.

(7) They were willing to set aside 1 hour for each interview. However, the duration of the interview itself would take less than an hour.

Exclusionary criteria included:

(1) Participants who were not prohibited in any form of returning to their home country.

(2) Participants who did not want to return to their home country during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recruitment Procedures

Before students could be recruited to participate in the research, I had to receive Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix A). Once approval was given, the following recruitment procedures were followed:

(1) An initial recruitment letter (Appendix B) was sent to participants through email via an international student association's LISTSERV. I knew the LISTSERV because of my work experience at the university, but I withheld further information for confidentiality. The email described the purpose of the study, interview process, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria for eligibility as participants.

(2) International students who were interested in becoming participants clicked on a Qualtrics survey link in the initial recruitment letter and were asked demographic questions (Appendix C).

(3) Because a minimum of six participants were not found that matched the criteria, a snowball sampling procedure was used. Existing participants were asked if they knew of anybody who would be a suitable candidate for the study. Those who showed interest in the study were sent an email that included the basic information of the study.

(4) Steps 1 and 2 were repeated for the new group of prospective participants.

(5) Participants who did not meet the criteria and were not selected to participate in the study were emailed a rejection-to-participate letter (Appendix D).

(6) The selected participants were sent an informed consent form (Appendix E).

(7) Once the consent form was returned to me, an interview letter (Appendix F) was sent to the participants. The participants were asked to select a pseudonym for confidentiality and scheduled an interview time via email. Weekly reminder emails were sent to participants until the first interview was confirmed.

The first initial recruitment letter was sent out on August 18, 2022, to the International Student Association (ISA) LISTSERV. A follow-up email was sent to the same group on August 25, 2022. From these two recruitment emails, no one had completed the demographic questionnaire. On August 26, 2022, an initial recruitment letter was sent through the International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) to all enrolled international graduate students. Six individuals completed the demographic questionnaire. Of these six individuals, one did not meet the criteria and another did not fully complete the questionnaire. On September 8, 2022, a follow-up email was sent through the ISSS LISTSERV. Three more individuals responded to the questionnaire. Two of them did not match the criteria and one of them did not fully complete the demographic questionnaire. On October 5, 2022, an initial recruitment letter was sent out

through the Alumni Center to all former international students. A follow-up recruitment letter was sent out again on October 12, 2022. From these two recruitment emails, one individual responded, however, they did not meet the criteria. On November 9, 2022, an initial recruitment letter was sent to the Intensive English Program (IEP) LISTSERV. A follow-up recruitment letter was sent on November 16, 2022. From these two recruitment emails, two individuals responded, but neither of them met the criteria. Between September 15, 2022, and November 24, 2022, I used additional criterion sampling and snowball sampling recruitment procedures as well. I began by contacting former students and colleagues by using email and social media, such as Facebook and LinkedIn. I also contacted those participants who met the criteria and asked them to share the information with anyone they thought would be interested in the study. No additional individuals completed the questionnaire. Some of those who did express interest informed me that they did not meet the criteria.

Participants interested in the study completed the demographic questionnaire. Twelve responded in total to the call for participants and completed the demographic questionnaire. From the 12, four participants met the criteria. The eight who did not meet the criteria were notified through email. Three of the individuals were undergraduate students. One of the individuals did not attempt or want to travel home during the pandemic. Two of the individuals said that they were not prevented from traveling home. Finally, two individuals did not complete the entire demographic questionnaire. The four individuals who matched the criteria were contacted directly and asked about their willingness to participate in the study.

For this study, four participants completed the demographic questionnaire, completed the informed consent form, and participated in this study. Initially, I said that I would interview six participants. As mentioned, the two purposeful sampling techniques that I used were criterion

and snowball sampling. In spring 2020, there were 747 graduate international students enrolled at the university (International Student and Scholar Services, 2021). In spring 2020, 49 of those students were new. In fall 2019, 111 of those students were new. And in spring 2019, 44 of those students were new. Because the criteria required participants to have been studying in the United States for at least 1 year, 543 graduate international students were left to possibly fit the criteria for this study. Through both purposeful sampling techniques, more than 900 students received multiple emails to participate in this study. In the recruitment emails, participants were informed that they would receive a $25 gift card for participation in the study. Again, only 12 individuals responded. "Potential participants have become increasingly concerned about being involved in qualitative research due to privacy, security, personal safety, and even cultural concerns" (Vagle, 2014, p. 38). In addition, international students may have their own reasons for not wanting to participate in research studies, such as time and language barriers (Lee, 2007). However, despite facing issues in the purposeful sampling process, this study still achieved data saturation.

It was suggested earlier that any number of participants from two to 10 is considered sufficient to reach a point of saturation in a phenomenological study, but it has been recommended that at least six participants are needed before no new themes would emerge in a qualitative study (Boyd, 1993). The initial reason that six participants were going to be selected for this study was because of saturation. While the recruitment procedures did not produce more than four participants for the study, saturation was still achieved. Saturation, which is redundancy that is derived from the data collected, involves critical reflection by the researcher based on the value of the data collected and the research goals (Wertz, 2005). Eighty-seven pages of transcript were collected as data for this study. When the researcher is presented with the same redundant themes or units of meaning from the participants and the data does not offer

new insight into the phenomena, this is the best indicator that data saturation is achieved (Merriam, 1998; Wertz, 2005). For this study, I interviewed three participants when I noticed that some of the phenomenon shared was repeated from previous participants. Some of the more obvious themes, such as having concern for family and changing social connections, were very clear early in the data analysis process of identifying units of meaning. The other three themes were identified during the later steps of data analysis. It was clear that five essential themes were shared among these three participants. Another participant was interviewed to ensure data saturation was achieved, making it a total of four participants interviewed for the purpose of the study. Saturation was achieved because the five essential themes were present, and no new themes emerged during the data analysis of the fourth transcript.

Participants all were students at a public university located in a midsized Midwestern town in the United States. Their ages ranged from 26 years to 31 years when they were interviewed. Three of the participants were female; one was male. The participants were international students from El Salvador, Argentina, and two from India. All four of the participants were full-time graduate students on an F-1 visa. Participants were interviewed between September 7, 2022, and September 27, 2022.

Participants were chosen through the criterion sampling procedures. The chosen participants had met both the inclusionary and exclusionary criteria, which included international students who wanted to return to their home country but were unable to because of closed borders, visa restrictions, financial restrictions, access concerns, health concerns, or any other self-identified reason; participants who were enrolled at the research site and stayed in the United States throughout the entire spring 2020 semester; participants who possessed an F-1 student visa for identification as international students when they were studying; participants who had studied

in the United States for a minimum of 1 academic year before the spring 2020 semester; participants who were full-time graduate students; participants who were willing to be interviewed at least twice for the purpose of the study; and participants who were willing to set aside 1 hour of time for each interview.

Reciprocity and Ethics

There were various considerations I kept throughout this study. Ethics, confidentiality, and reciprocity are all important factors to consider when conducting research with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To address the ethical issues, I received institutional and local review and approval for the study. Because this research involved human subjects, it was reviewed and approved through the IRB to meet ethical guidelines before interviews were conducted (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Also, participants were informed of any possible risks and their rights to withdraw from the study any time throughout the research process. Necessary consent forms were obtained from the participants. Confidentiality of the participant was maintained because all identifiable characteristics were omitted from the data and findings before being presented. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), it is important to consider reciprocity for good data collection. It is important for participants to feel recognized for their time invested in the study, so rewards in the form of $25 gift cards were provided for participants after the final interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection

To determine the type of data collection used, it is important to consider the framework and methodology, which is phenomenology for this study. "The phenomenological reduction consists of the attempt not only to clear away (bracket), but simultaneously to confront the traditions, assumptions, languages, evocations, and cognitions in order to understand the

existential 'facticities' of everyday lived experience" (van Manen, 2014, p. 42). Priest (2002) mentioned that interviews, along with a verbatim transcript of audio-taped interviews, are the most usual data source for phenomenological studies. Because this study involved human subjects, a research proposal was submitted to the IRB.

Interviews

The phenomenological approach utilizes an interview approach when gathering data for a study. Phenomenologists should conduct in-depth interviews with participants, focusing on what goes on within, the feelings and beliefs, and encouraging them to describe the lifeworld that is free from any intellectual or societal constructs (Groenewald, 2004). The interview process is like a dialogue between the participants and the researcher (Groenewald, 2004).

Van Manen (1990) wrote, "What first of all characterizes phenomenological research is that it always begins in the lifeworld" (p. 7). In trying to reach everyday lived experiences, interviews can be a source of reaching that goal. "The essence of an experience emerges from interview data as participants describe the particular aspects of the experience as they lived it" (deMarrais and Lapan, 2004, p. 57). Using interviews helps reveal the essence and help better understand the experiences. The interview process itself is also very beneficial for the research.

> One of the key originating ideas of phenomenology is that if we had experienced a
> phenomenon in our past, as we recall our experiences, then perhaps we can find
> possibilities for new ways of understanding those experiences through making new
> meaning and gaining new insights. (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 64)

Through an interview, the participants can recall a past experience and gain understanding and insight.

For this study, I did two in-depth phenomenological interviews with the participants individually. The interviews took place via Zoom. There are new opportunities for interviewing research participants thanks to advances in information and communication technologies such as Zoom, but research and data collection using technology tools is still rather new (Archibald et al., 2019). While difficulty connecting and call quality are possible disadvantages of using Zoom, the convenience and cost effectiveness make the benefits of using Zoom for data collection outweigh the challenges (Archibald et al., 2019). The length of the interview and amount of questions asked was dependent on the participants and the experiences they were willing to share (Groenewald, 2004). Bhattacharya (2017) wrote, "Generally speaking, qualitative interviews are conversations between the interviewer and the interviewee" (p. 126). There are many different types of conversations, and they are always personalized to the situation. For the in-depth interviews, I used a semi structured format using open-ended questions to help participants articulate a description of the phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004). Bhattacharya (2017) wrote, "Formal semi structured interviews involve the researcher preparing questions in advance with possible probes identified" (p. 127). In a semi structured interview, limited sets of questions were asked to probe a specific topic, with follow-up questions used to probe deeper. Giorgi (2009) stated that a basic question in phenomenology should follow this form: "Please describe for me a situation in which you experienced learning (or anything else)" (p. 124). I prepared the interview questions (Appendices G and H) in advance following this phenomenological form. All interviews were conducted in English.

Transcribing

Because the interviews were conducted using Zoom, the video conferencing service also provided transcriptions by using Zoom's audio transcript feature of the interview. Therefore, I

read the transcripts while listening to the audio of the interview to make sure that the transcript was verbatim. This was done immediately after an interview was conducted to ensure that I remembered things said that maybe were not clear on the audio recording (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The audio recording and transcript were recorded and transcribed using the Zoom app on my personal laptop. After completion of transcription, I read and re-read the transcripts to ensure immersion to the participants' perspective of their experiences as international students.

Data Saturation

Data saturation occurs when no new information is discovered in data analysis, and this redundancy signals to researchers that data collection may cease (Boyd, 1993). Saturation involves critical reflection by the researcher based on the research goals and the value of the data collected (Wertz, 2005). The best indicator for data saturation is when the same redundant themes or meaning units is presented from the participants, and the data does not offer newer insight into the phenomena (Merriam, 1998). For this study, I intended to interview six to 10 participants. However, after three participants, the same redundant themes were presented. A fourth participant was interviewed to confirm no new themes and it did not offer new insight into the phenomena. Therefore, data collection was completed once there was data saturation.

Data Analysis

Once the data had been collected came data analysis. According to the literature on the design of phenomenological studies, there are several ways to analyze the data. The data analysis of this study followed the structure following the descriptive phenomenological approach, which was utilized in this research study (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

Bracketing

One primary tenet of descriptive phenomenology is the separation of the researcher's feelings, beliefs, and biases about the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2009; Giorgi, 2009). The steps taken in the data analysis when following transcendental, descriptive phenomenology are designed to bracket out the researcher's experiences and discover the essence of the phenomenon by participants (Creswell, 2009). Bracketing is the process of a conscious effort to see the phenomenon as it is, not from a biased perspective imposed by the researcher to influence the research findings (Hycner, 1985; Merriam, 1998). The purpose of bracketing is not for the researcher to forget past experiences but instead keep those past experiences from being engaged with the present experiences of the participants (Giorgi, 2009).

Before judgement can be set aside, the judgments need to be identified. Bracketing identifies the researcher's vested interests, personal experience, cultural factors, assumptions, and hunches that could influence how the study's data is viewed. To identify these judgements, I began by discussing my background and life experiences. Also, I listed possible presuppositions to help remove as much bias as possible and how this affected subjectivity. Finally, I bracketed my personal beliefs about the research topic. This was all done by reflecting and journaling each interaction before and after each interview. Before the other data analysis steps, I actively bracketed biases, concerns, and preconceived notions by writing them down on a list to which I constantly referred to ensure that these biases were not driving the data analysis. Descriptive phenomenology was used to alleviate any potential biasness because the focus on phenomenological reduction helped me to bracket my own consciousness and experiences regarding the research topic.

As the researcher, I have a lot of personal experience related to this topic. I have worked with international students in higher education for more than 10 years as both an instructor and

as an advisor. Also, in my doctoral studies, all my papers and research have been about international students in higher education. My personal experience of working as an instructor and advisor with international students is filled with stories of challenge, resilience, appreciation, celebration, rejection, and acceptance.

After reflecting on my personal experience working with international students, I also listed assumptions I had about the experience of international students stranded. It was not until I began to conduct the interviews when I realized that the interview was different than what I expected. Some of the assumptions I witnessed in my reflective journals were on how much I focused on the challenges the participants faced. I assumed that stranded would only have a negative connotation. I was surprised by how dimensionally and thoroughly the participants described their experiences. This was especially evident after my first interview with Emilia Garcia when I was journaling afterward and noticed how rounded the interview was compared to what I was expecting. While Emilia Garcia shared some difficult parts of the experience, she also shared some of the lighter moments of chatting with her boyfriend or funnier times of having to share her toilet paper.

It is important in descriptive phenomenology to use bracketing so that researcher biases through these experiences are not reflected. While Heidegger's (1962) interpretive phenomenological approach uses presuppositions or expert knowledge by the researcher as valuable guides to inquiry, descriptive phenomenology focuses on the essence of the experience by removing the researcher's personal bias and experience (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Therefore, my withholding as the researcher is intentional, and I bracketed out my personal experience throughout the research process and excluded my personal interpretations of the themes that emerged.

Reading for Meaning

Hycner (1985) wrote, "An obvious but important step in phenomenologically analyzing interview data is to have the interview tapes transcribed" (p. 280). The transcription contains a meaning that the researcher is seeking to understand (Hycner, 1985). An important first step of the process is to repeatedly read all the transcripts to get the whole meaning of the participants' experiences. It is recommended that each individual interview transcript be read at least three times before continuing further with the data analysis process (Giorgi, 2009).

The goal of this step is to get a sense of the entire description by going through each individual transcript wholly (Giorgi, 2009). Data in qualitative research and from interviews are often long and tedious; therefore, it is important for the researcher to understand the individual experiences before analyzing the data further (Patton, 1990). All the transcripts were read with the focus of understanding the participants experiences and meaning in a wider context without considering the research focus (Wertz, 2005). In this step, meaning units were only observed and nothing was officially identified (Giorgi, 2009). It is also important to note that I applied bracketing by employing zero value judgment during this process (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2005).

Identifying Units of Meaning

The transcript provided many pages of data, and descriptions taken from the transcripts were too long. Therefore, it was necessary to break them into smaller parts where the meaning was more easily understood (Giorgi, 2009). In this step of the data analysis, the focus was to create units of meaning by analyzing individual descriptions (Giorgi, 2009). Identifying meaning units in phenomenological research not only focuses on the explicit meanings shared by the participants but also delves deep into the implicit meanings (Wertz, 2005). This is why the first step of reading for overall meaning is important. This process can be very arbitrary because

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different researchers could identify different units of meaning (Giorgi, 2009). Because this is phenomenological research, the process of transforming units of meaning and how it relates to the phenomenon is more important and does not weaken the validity of the research (Giorgi, 2009).

The process to identify units of meaning, which is each shift in the meaning that is identified by the researcher, was done by marking (slashing, underlining, or highlighting) on the transcribed interview sheet (Giorgi, 2009). As I read through the transcript and noticed a shift in meaning, it was marked. By the end of this step, the descriptions marked were broken down to various statements of units of meaning that were experientially determined by me, the researcher, rather than being definitive units of meaning (Giorgi, 2009).

Identifying the Essence

Next, the units of meaning were checked for their relevance to the focus of the study (Giorgi, 2009). Also, relevance and redundancy in meaning were checked (Giorgi, 2009). Then, I integrated the units of meaning. I developed interpretive meanings of each of the significant statements (Giorgi, 2009). Then, I reread the units of meaning to ensure the original description was evident in the interpretive meanings. Again, bracketing was important for this part of the process. This process refers to the attempt made by the researcher to translate the participants' unanalyzed meaning units into relevant units of meaning (Giorgi, 2009).

Compiling the Units of Meaning

Until this point, each interview and transcript were looked at separately. However, in this step of the process, the data was analyzed together. All shared experiences were identified and compiled when there were two or more participants that shared the same identified themes or units of meaning. If there were two or more similar meaning units, it was assumed that the units

could be considered general meaning units and themes for the research, but that was not true for all cases (Wertz, 2005). Only the shared experiences that were shared collectively by the majority, more than half, of the participants were kept as the themes for the study.

Structure of the Meaning

For the final step, full narrative descriptions for the shared experiences were generated (Giorgi, 2009). This was done based on the shared experiences generated by the individual meaning units identified earlier. The narrative description design was sequential in nature to better illustrate their lived experiences as international students stranded in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. The final description provided a narrative account of the compiled themes based on the experiences of all the participants in the study.

Data Management

I used a variety of methods to manage the data for this research study. Recall that all the interviews were conducted via Zoom. The interviews were recorded using Zoom and stored on the Zoom cloud, which is password protected. Zoom also transcribed the interviews. The recordings and transcriptions were downloaded and saved onto an external hard drive that is also password protected. Once they were saved to the password protected hard drive, they were erased from the cloud. The stored documents (interview recordings and transcriptions) were saved with the date and time of the recordings along with detailed and descriptions of the documents as the title. To maintain confidentiality of the participants, all the names on the documents were masked and pseudonyms were used. All data will be kept because the participants allowed the researcher to keep it for further research or publication.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an important practice because it shows the researcher and readers that the findings generated from the qualitative study are worthy findings (Saldaña, 2009). This is referred to as the validity of a study in quantitative research. However, there is still no definitive guide on the amount of trustworthiness techniques needed. The consensus seems to be that more trustworthiness techniques being used promises a better credibility level in a study (Saldaña, 2009). For this study, I used different trustworthiness techniques to improve the credibility of the findings: bracketing, debriefing, reflective journals, and rich, thick description of the phenomenon was used to ensure trustworthiness of the study.

Debriefing

For debriefing, peer review and member checking were used. Peer review is an external check of the research. This study is conducted under the supervision of the major professor who will review and debrief the entire process of the research. The proposal and defense will be reviewed and approved by the members of the doctoral committee. For member checking, interview transcripts were sent to the participants to have the opportunity to correct any misconceptions or inaccurate information. After the completion of the research, the researcher shared the findings in a debriefing statement (Appendix I) with the participants who may view the final version of the dissertation and ask questions.

Reflective Journals

Reflective journals, or memoing, involves collecting whatever the researcher sees or experiences—such as field notes—in the study to gain better perspective (Groenewald, 2004). Memoing in phenomenological research refers to a researcher's daily diary that records information that could inform a researcher's self-reflection and clarity and method decisions and

changes to the methodology. (Giorgi, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Smith, 2018). This is

different from bracketing because of its frequency and its goals. Unlike bracketing, which took

place before and following interviews and other steps of data analysis, the reflective journal was

kept daily during data analysis. Also, the aim of the reflective journal is not to identify

judgements and set them aside but instead to look at the larger picture of the research process.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) wrote, "reflective journals represent a broad ranging application that

could improve all areas of trustworthiness in all qualitative research" (p. 327). Therefore,

reflective journaling was used to improve trustworthiness.

Description of Phenomenon

Providing a description of a phenomenon that is thick and rich is a strategy to achieve

transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick description is an in-depth picture that explains

culturally situated meaning and abundant specific detail (Tracy, 2010). For this study, I compiled

information collected through data and used it to describe the phenomenon in detail, which

allows readers to have the holistic picture of the study and to determine the transferability of the

study. In other words, I provided enough detail so that readers may come to their own conclusion

about the scene. Lincoln and Guba (1985) wrote, "Thick description becomes necessary to

enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can

be contemplated as a possibility" (p. 316). In the end, it is up to the reader to make a judgment

about the transferability of a study (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998).

Transferability is the ability to apply research findings to another similar setting (Lincoln

& Guba, 1985). This allows readers to decide whether the findings of the study can be

transferred or applied to other similar settings. Three strategies were used to improve

transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, to ensure a thick and rich description of the

phenomenon, open-ended phenomenological interview format was used. Second, quotes were used in the findings in Chapter 4 that were based on themes relevant to the study. Finally, the third strategy was prolonged engagement in the phenomena, which was achieved by interviewing participants until data saturation on the emerging themes was achieved. The length of the interviews and the richness of the stories collected through in-depth interviews were crucial to guarantee credibility of findings. While there was no definite timeline for this study, each participant participated in two in-depth interviews estimated to be an hour long each. Also, data collection continued until there was data saturation. As mentioned before, I continually interviewed participants until no new themes emerged.

Chapter Summary

The literature review in Chapter 2 revealed the complexity of being an international student during the 2020 pandemic. This study used descriptive (or transcendental) phenomenological method (Giorgi, 2009) that is rooted in the core philosophy of phenomenology (Husserl, 1970). A phenomenological approach fit the criteria for the study because this study focused on how individual international students interpreted their own experiences and what those experiences meant to them. The research question for the study was: How do international students describe their experiences while being stranded in the United States following the COVID-19 outbreak? Research design is an important part of the research process that involves the intersection of philosophy, strategies of inquiry, and specific methods (Creswell, 2009). This chapter focused on the theoretical and methodological framework of phenomenology that was used for this study. The design and the suitability of the design were addressed as well as the trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter 4 - Findings

This chapter reports the results of the study on how international graduate students expressed their experiences of being stranded in the United States during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The experiences of international students who were unable to travel to their home countries while classes in the United States transitioned online due to the COVID-19 pandemic may help better define, explore, and understand international student experiences during the spring 2020 semester when the pandemic began.

The experiences of the phenomenon were derived using a phenomenological approach to data analysis described by Giorgi (2009) and Wertz (2005). Participants shared various firsthand accounts of their experiences as international students stranded during the pandemic. A compilation of meaning units derived from individual participants created a meaning structure or general understanding of the phenomenon. Five essential themes were derived from the process: having concern for family and self; adjusting to school and jobs online; creating a healthy routine; changing social connections; and self-identifying deeper meaning of being an international student. To present the findings from the research, this chapter is organized into five sections: Review of Methods, Participant Narratives, Being Prevented from Traveling Home, Essential Themes, and Chapter Summary.

Review of Methods

The research question explored how international students describe their experiences while being stranded in the United States following the COVID-19 outbreak. A methodological framework of phenomenology was used for this study. Four individuals met the criteria and were selected as study participants. Two semi structured interviews were conducted with each participant. The interviews were transcribed, and the data was analyzed. Throughout the analysis,

I employed bracketing. For the analysis, I first read each transcript for meaning a minimum of three times. Next, I marked on the transcripts every time there was a shift in meaning to identify the units of meaning. I then integrated the units of meaning for each participant transcript to identify the essence. From there, I compiled all units of meaning from all four participants. Finally, I wrote a full narrative description for each participant to better illustrate their lived experiences as international students stranded in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant Narratives

The participants shared their lived experience in prompted but unstructured interviews that address the study's research question. These interviews aided in provoking and capturing the participants' unique experiences by allowing the participants to present their narratives in their own words. To keep the narratives as reflections of the participant experiences, I provided my personal, researcher reflections drawn from bracketing activities in my journal. This represented not only my reflections, but it also provided evidence of the manner in which I set aside biases, concerns, and preconceived notions (Vagle, 2014). The goal of descriptive phenomenology is to describe the phenomenon without any interference from interpretative influences (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2014).

The four participants (Emilia Garcia, Tom, Ceres, and Emma) each shared their experiences in two semi structured interviews. From these interviews, I analyzed the data and created structures of meaning in the form of narratives. The following individual narrative descriptions for each participant will be sequential in nature to better illustrate their lived experiences as international graduate students stranded in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 4.1 summarizes the participants' demographic information.

Table4.1

Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Nationality
Emilia Garcia	26	Female	El Salvador
Tom	30	Male	India
Ceres	31	Female	Argentina
Emma	31	Female	India

Participant Narrative 1: Emilia Garcia

Emilia Garcia was a 26-year-old female graduate student from El Salvador pursuing a master's degree in food science and working as a research assistant. She had traveled home to El Salvador in January 2020 to attend her sister's wedding. In the spring 2020 semester, she was living off campus and had two female roommates. One was also from El Salvador. She remembers hearing about COVID-19 for the first time. Emilia Garcia said, "We were just living together, and she told me that her mom had told her about this virus that was going on in China, and that she should be careful." At first, Emilia Garcia did not worry too much about it coming to the United States. However, in early March she started hearing more about it, and during spring break she learned that classes were transitioning online. Emilia Garcia thinks she remembers being in her apartment when she received news that classes had transitioned online. Emilia Garcia did not have any plans for spring break. However, because everything was closing, her boyfriend and family canceled plans to buy tickets to visit. Also, Emilia Garcia's boyfriend had a sister who lived in the dorms on campus. Because the dorms closed during spring break, the sister moved in with Emilia Garcia during the start of the pandemic. It was Emilia Garcia's last semester before she was going to graduate, so she was worried about finishing her research in the lab. Fortunately, she was considered essential personnel and was able to continue going to the lab for a bit to work on her experiments while campus was closed.

Unfortunately, that was only until April, and then no one was allowed on campus. While Emilia Garcia thought the virus would be worse in the United States because of all the people traveling, she was not too worried about the virus because she thought she was young and healthy. However, she had more concern in her home country for her father who is diabetic.

During the spring 2020 semester, Emilia Garcia was living with two roommates. When Emilia Garcia first heard about everything being online, she thought she still would be able to stay and do her experiments because they were required for graduation. However, when she learned she could no longer go on to campus, she thought she would go back home. By then, Emilia Garcia said that she could not go home because there were no more flights and borders were closed. When Emilia Garcia thought about traveling home, a lot of things prevented her from being able to travel home. Before Emilia Garcia decided she wanted to go home, she helped her roommate travel home. This was the roommate who had told Emilia Garcia about COVID first. Emilia Garcia's roommate decided immediately to travel home. However, when the roommate booked a flight, it was canceled. After a few more weeks of trying, the roommate was finally able to fill out a survey, call the consulate, and take a humanitarian flight. Emilia Garcia was unsure if she would be able to make it home in the first place because of all these steps. In addition, Emilia Garcia did not know if she would be able to complete everything from El Salvador when she arrived. Emilia Garcia wanted to apply for Optional Practical Training (OPT) and was not sure how it would be affected if she traveled home, especially with all the paperwork. The OPT application is to be completed while in the United States. Finally, Emilia Garcia was unsure if she would be able to travel back to the United States and defend her research before graduation. About traveling home, Emilia Garcia said, "I decided it was not worth it."

Emilia Garcia described it as "frustrating" not being able to travel home. A part of that was because she saw the domestic students driving to their homes at the start of the pandemic, and she knew she could not. In the beginning, Emilia Garcia said that a challenge was the lack of information, especially about the virus and risks. Another challenge was lack of resources. The stores were running out of necessary items. Emilia Garcia said, "I ran into not having toilet paper at my house." Emilia Garcia was able to get things she did not have from her friends, which helped. Fortunately, during this time Emilia Garcia was able to continue working as a Research Graduate Assistant. While she was worried about being paid because she could not go into the lab, her professor let her know that she would continue to get paid because of writing for publications.

During the spring 2020 semester, Emilia Garcia started living alone. One roommate traveled home, the other roommate moved in with a boyfriend, and Emilia Garcia's boyfriend's sister went home to Paraguay. Because Emilia Garcia was living alone for the first time, routine was very important. Emilia Garcia said, "I had to establish a routine for myself because I was just going crazy." The average day for Emilia Garcia had a lot of routine with her setting alarms on her phone. She started with breakfast. After the alarm went off, Emilia Garcia would switch to working on her thesis. Her alarm was also set for when she needed to take a break and when she needed to attend her classes. Emilia Garcia even had an alarm to remind her to workout. After her roommates moved out, Emilia Garcia repurposed the space by moving her desk into one room and making it an office. Having different spaces for eating, working, and sleeping— along with setting alarms for different tasks—worked well for Emilia Garcia.

Emilia Garcia had a lot of concern for her family. Her father is diabetic, so he was the first to stop going to work. Emilia Garcia's sister and brother-in-law were able to stay home and

work because they were both computer scientists. Emilia Garcia would talk to her family on the phone and video chat. It was more frequent during the pandemic. Emilia Garcia and her family often talked about them being in quarantine together. Emilia Garcia's family assured her that they were all being safe and trying to protect her father, and only her mother would leave the home to go grocery shopping. Emilia Garcia has seven younger siblings who still lived at home, and they were all quarantined together. Emilia Garcia said, "I wanted to be with my family to help them because I know it is a lot of work to be with a lot of kids at home and, and I could not." If Emilia Garcia went home, she felt that she could have been the one to do the grocery shopping and work for the family. Emilia Garcia worked in food producing and believed she could have kept her job during the pandemic because it was in the food industry. Emilia Garcia said her family would call her often for information about the virus and how it spread. Emilia Garcia said, "It was hard to try to give them some useful information or useful tips for them to be safe because like we just did not know." Emilia Garcia was having to assure her family about the virus and provide information while she was so far away from them. She did not have much concern for her own safety because she was able to distance herself from others and taking all precautions.

As a student, Emilia Garcia was concerned about being able to finish her research in the lab to graduate. Whether it was in person or not, Emilia Garcia had to present her research by the end of the semester. Her priorities at this time continued to be her studies and writing her thesis. This caused some stress because a lot of her thesis relied on her data that was in the lab on campus. Emilia Garcia obtained a second computer screen from the lab before it closed so she could work from home. She finished her thesis without having to go to the lab. She was able to write an introduction, a plan, and a hypothesis for her thesis. Emilia Garcia's graduate courses

were also very interactive. She was taking a fermentation class that required tours to different

restaurants around town. After courses transitioned online, Emilia Garcia said, "We just had to

watch some videos online, so that was a little disappointing."

Emilia Garcia said that she had closed herself off socially a bit. She did have a few

friends in her apartment building, but she would only visit them maybe once every 2 weeks for a

cookout. During the pandemic, video chat became popular. Emilia Garcia reconnected with some

friends from home, saying, "I did also do a video call with my high school friends, which is

something that we had never done before, and I do appreciate that."

For support, Emilia Garcia's advisor was helpful, and they continued to meet weekly

through Zoom. Emilia Garcia's advisor also reminded her to take breaks and take care of herself

during this time. Emilia Garcia could not think of any specific resources that were helpful during

this time, just that everybody was doing the best that they could. There were various things

offered through Zoom, but Emilia Garcia did not use many of them. It was helpful for her to see

others posting about their experiences on social media because it made her feel like she was not

the only person going through this. Her main support she said came from her boyfriend, who she

talked to for hours every day. While Emilia Garcia did not spend too much time with her friends

in her apartment building, they would help each other when they needed it. Emilia Garcia said,

"We did this project with my friends that whenever we went to the grocery store and there was

something that we knew the other one needed, we would just buy it for them before it ran out."

As an international student, Emilia Garcia really felt that she was affected by COVID-19

because she was unable to travel home to be with her family unlike other students at the

university. Fortunately, she did not feel that she ever had to put her safety at risk while she was

in the United States. Although she wanted to go to work on her experiments, Emilia Garcia never

felt at risk or that she had to go if she did not want to. She also felt that it helped that the university was surrounded by a smaller community. Emilia Garcia became emotional when she recalled what she learned from the experience as an international student. She said:

> I think it taught me a lot about myself, um, and what I can overcome. Um, I guess, just being by myself for so many weeks or months, uh really taught me that I can, do like, I guess I do not need anyone else to do what I do.

> When asked if she would change anything, Emilia Garcia thought maybe she would have gone more to see her friends living upstairs in the apartment building because there were times that she was lonely. She said, "I do not know why I just did not want to go there; maybe I thought it was a sign of weakness or something." However, Emilia Garcia also realized that would have been risky because her friends continued to go out during the pandemic. Emilia Garcia reflects that there was a lot of uncertainty at that time. She said:

> Obviously, I am not from this country and I am one of those persons who thinks that the United States does not owe me anything. And so, I was not expecting them to look after me. And if I needed some things, I probably should have gone back to like my country… but, obviously I would not do that because I was not going to be able to come back, which I did want to do. So it was a little bit of I want to stay here, but then again, if I stay here and something happens to me, obviously, I am not priority here.

Emilia Garcia did not feel that the United States was responsible for taking care of her.

Participant Narrative 2: Tom

Tom was a 30-year-old male graduate student from India pursuing a doctoral degree in physics and working as a teaching assistant (TA). Tom remembers hearing about COVID-19 for the first time when his friends were traveling to study in the United States and had layovers in

some of the hotspots of the virus. Tom had heard of other similar viruses, such as SARS, so he did not catch much of the seriousness of COVID-19. Soon though, Tom started hearing more about it in the news right up to spring break 2020. During spring break came the announcement that campus would close and transition online for a while. Tom did not have any plans for break other than to work and catch up on some things. At first, he was not too worried about being online because most of his work as a doctoral student was already on the computer. However, Tom was still unsure how his research, classes, and teaching would transition online. Tom said, "I did not know how business would now proceed." During the spread of the virus and the transition online, Tom also was concerned for his family in India.

Tom was living in a university apartment with a roommate from India during the spring 2020 semester. When he realized that the rest of the semester was going to be online, he wanted to travel home. Tom said, "There were very confident reports or opinions that this would even extend to the next semester and possibly the semester following that, and it made a lot of sense that when I am working virtually for me to go back home and do the same thing." However, the lockdown prevented Tom from traveling home during the spring 2020 semester. International flights were canceled. Additionally, traveling to India requires multiple layovers unless it is a government flight, and every country had different policies on lockdown. Tom said that the airlines did not know how to properly handle this, therefore, many flights were grounded and halted during layovers. Tom said, "There were a lot of uncertainty, and every kind of news indicated that was not the right time to travel; even if you wanted to travel, it was not possible because of the series of lockdowns that were happening." Tom would have needed to fly to New Delhi, going through other places that had their own travel restrictions. Also, Tom's home was not near the airport, so he would have had to take other public transportation as well. Finally,

Tom said it was difficult and dangerous to travel to the store, so traveling to India would have been way too dangerous.

When asked to describe the spring 2020 semester after being unable to travel home, Tom said, "It was kind of worrying in some sense because I had a reason to travel to India." Tom was worried about his family back home. He wanted to be home even more because he knew that it did not matter if he were in the United States. He could do everything the same online, so he really wanted to be where he could help his family instead of quarantining alone in the United States.

Day-to-day life for Tom during the spring 2020 semester was "directionless and chaotic." Everything had changed for Tom. He said, "The experiences of what I had experienced in the United States was different now." All university engagements—teaching, proctoring, trading, interacting, and studying—had changed. Sleeping, living, and working all in the same space was very difficult for Tom. He did not thrive in this environment. He said:

> I was realizing that, like different modes of engagement is what works for me, like traveling to different places for different meetings and doing different nature of work at different places and engaging like allocating different times for different activities is what contributes to my efficiency.

Tom was not too worried about his health in the United States because he felt the population was small enough and he could avoid people and go shopping when there were less people. He did not feel like he was being very healthy having to do everything from home. Tom said, "I realized that if I had to be productive, I had to step out and go to some places and possibly be exposed to the virus." Walks became a part of Tom's routine. He said, "One of the ways I started navigating is probably going on for a regular walk outside." Tom also increased

the frequency that he would talk to his family. Before the pandemic, Tom would talk to his family twice a week. However, during the spring 2020 semester, he talked to them almost daily.

Feeling stranded was difficult because Tom was concerned for his family, especially because he is the only son of his parents. Tom's parents got COVID, and he really wanted to be there for them. His parents' age and the fact that they had no one else there to take care of them made him really wish he were there. He would talk to his parents daily and would ask about how others from his home were doing. Tom said, "I was inquiring about all the people that I knew from India, and a few of my teachers and neighbors passed away because of COVID." Tom added, "There was also this stigma of getting COVID and the government coming into place the homes and all those things were happening around that time." Tom was very worried for his family during the pandemic, but he also felt it was expected of him to return home to take care of his family. Tom said, "The culture expects me to look after my parents when they come of age and when they actually have difficult time." Tom did not have too many concerns for his own health. Tom was only concerned about all the unknowns of the virus in the beginning, and he was also concerned about the health system in the United States. He said, "The idea of insurance was completely new for me at that time." If Tom were to get sick, he did not know where to go, or how much anything would cost.

The spring 2020 semester also had challenges for Tom as a TA. There was a lot of uncertainty for Tom when he had to start doing everything online. Proctoring examinations, grading, and guarding student responses all switched to an online format. Tom also did not like teaching online. Tom said, "I prefer to be in person and do that, but now you have the Zoom rooms, and you have to the separate Zoom room, split rooms, and all the stuff you need to go and engage." Tom also had to record labs for students to watch. Although a lot had to change when

everything transitioned online, Tom was still able to do the work he came to do as a graduate student. He said, "Fortunately, the pandemic did not have a very huge impact on my financial situation."

Being an efficient graduate student was a top priority for Tom during the spring 2020 semester. The spring and early summer is an important time for a graduate student to showcase their research capabilities. Tom said, "My main priority was on like increasing the efficiency of work in terms of delivery of results and the work and the timeline to meet." As a student, it was very different for his classes because he was used to receiving his mathematical instruction in person and with discussion of how it was done. Online it was not as easy to discuss the problems as a researcher and a student. Tom said, "There is not the same level of comfort that you have discussing when you are in person but rather than that happens through a Zoom." Tom had a research group that he could still go to for questions that was very helpful. He had a lot of questions about how a lot of his studies would be online. Another issue that he struggled with was being productive. Tom said, "it was not much efficient during this virtual mode of working, and that had a very serious impact on my research." Fortunately, Tom was able to split some of the work with his classmates. Tom said, "We started actually splitting up the homework assignments too." Although Tom and his classmates did not feel too comfortable working together on Zoom, it did help dividing the work.

Tom's social circle at the university consisted of other international students also living in university apartments. Tom said that they were a close-knit group because they had been through so many similar situations as international students. However, once COVID started, their interaction became very limited. After a while, because they were all socially isolating, some of them would get together. However, it was still very restricted. Unfortunately, other social groups

for Tom were hindered or even lost during the pandemic. Tom and his classmates used to regularly meet at the library and coffee shops to discuss the class and different assignments. Tom said, "All that stopped." He and his classmates did try to meet virtually, but it just was not the same and there was not the same comfort level. Tom said, "I think this was a unanimous thing that we all agreed, as I said, because everything was revolving around Zoom, and people were slightly hesitant to again come back to the same mode to engage." Tom also emphasized the fact that he lost other social aspects during the pandemic. Making new relationships and building those outside the periphery of his own culture could no longer be done in such an informal setting, such as a coffee shop. Tom said, "So there were limiting factors with whom I engaged in and who I did not engage." As an international student, Tom was trying to build relationships with both international and domestic students. However, it was difficult when they were no longer on campus. Another social group that was impacted by the COVID lockdowns were his interactions with others from India or those with similar backgrounds at all levels. Tom spoke passionately about how it was helpful to have all kinds of professors and staff who understood his experiences as a student from India. Tom said:

> Sometimes actually, they come from the same background with whom you feel more comfortable discussing the issues that you are trying to go through, and because of this stage of being distinguished professors, they precisely know; like they can stand in the shoes of the research adviser what they are expecting, and they also precisely know the background from which we are coming from.

> However, during COVID, those defining interactions were limited. Tom said, "All these kinds of social interactions actually gave a holistic perspective of my existence here both personally and academically."

While Tom felt like he had lost very important social aspects when everything transitioned online, he did have support structures. Fortunately, Tom was having three weekly meetings with his advisor, and the advisor noticed his struggles with productivity during the pandemic early on. Talking to his advisor and reaching out to other work colleagues really helped Tom. Also at the university, Tom said that the graduate secretary was very helpful, always answering his questions. Tom had a roommate who was also from India. However, he was in a different program of study. Tom said, "I think there was also an important support structure that I had a roommate who was from … engineering." He and his roommate also had mutual friends from different areas of study that provided a support structure.

As an international student, Tom said that a very important aspect is the connection to community that happens through various events and festivals, such as various sporting events and the Indian Student Organization (ISO). As an international student, Tom relied on these events for connection to both other international students and domestic students. Tom also mentioned how important face-to-face interactions on campus are for international students. Those formal and informal discussions with other students to professors really play a big part of the learning environment. Tom said, "I can enumerate many such instances which I think we are instrumental in changing the perspective of learning and studying." Meeting people, being involved, and making connections are so important for international students, and Tom felt as though he lost a lot of that during the spring 2020 semester. "As an international student, it is very important to have such community which has nothing to do with your work who do not know what you a really doing." Also, Tom said how difficult it can be as an international student to understand the health system in the United States. He said, "I think this one aspect for international students is that we are not aware of insurance and how to make sense of all these

functions." Tom also mentioned how communicating online can be difficult for students whose first language is not English. "What I spoke and how I spoke really mattered." Tom mentioned how challenging it can be when speaking through Zoom instead of in person, not only because of language challenges but also because of how some may perceive you. Tom said, "They were also decisive of what kind of relationship I was going to have with them in the long run." Tom wished he would have made more use of online resources to help him in this area. Tom said, "There are a lot of rephrasing software that are available that you can subscribe to that actually represents the paper arguments in a very structured way in English." Also, sending out agendas before meetings could have helped Tom communicate more clearly in English. Finally, Tom wished that he had found more places to work outside during the pandemic. He worked very hard to be successful during the pandemic, but it was a challenging time. Tom said, "I wanted to go home; people back in India wanted me there; and I was expected to be there, but all things got complicated because of the travel restrictions and being stranded."

Participant Narrative 3: Ceres

Ceres was a 31-year-old female graduate student from Argentina pursuing a doctoral degree in agronomy and working as a research assistant. Ceres had traveled to Argentina in December 2019 and had traveled home with her husband in 2018 to change her visa. Ceres remembers hearing about the virus but said that she was completely clueless about it. Ceres did not have any plans for spring break. She said, "I remember perfectly when I was, and I even remember where I was sitting, and I was reading the newsletter" that stated classes had transitioned online. Ceres had heard from her husband that classes would be online for a few weeks, but she did not think it would happen even though her friend in Iowa had classes canceled the week before. At first, Ceres was happy when she received the news that classes had

transitioned online because she wanted to work from home; social interactions can be draining

for her. However, Ceres mentioned that there were feelings of paranoia about the virus and being

scared to even go to the supermarket. Ceres remembers going shopping to try to find alcohol for

disinfecting surfaces. Ceres said, "I remember specifically the first weeks where we had not

information about anything or just social media information." Ceres felt like those were weird

times that we were living in.

During the start of the pandemic, Ceres was living with her husband in a one-bedroom

apartment close to campus. At the start of the pandemic, without notice, Argentina started

closing borders, so Ceres thought it was impossible to go home. Ceres said that Argentina does

things at a different pace and that there is a lack of structure, and it took them a while to take

measures for the virus. Because of her and her husband's work and a possible job change, Ceres

did not think they would have time to travel down and back with all the quarantine restrictions

and questions about visa status. Ceres said, as a research assistant, she does not have vacation

time and neither does her husband if they were to get stuck in Argentina. There were also issues

with flights. The frequency of flights was reduced and there were even questions about flights

being canceled. In addition, "They increased the taxes, the taxation, on the flights." Sometimes

that tax increase can be 70 percent according to Ceres. Ceres worried if she and her husband

were able to travel home, they would not be able to come back.

Ceres describes being stranded as hard. She said, "All the paranoia and things starting to

grow up in the society, impacted more aspects of our lives." Ceres was sad when she learned that

she could not visit her family and they could not visit her. She said, "My heart sank because, I

get a little bit emotional here, I know that for many, many people in Argentina you cannot decide

that." Ceres was in a chat group with others from different departments at the university and she

said that one of the girls was having a really hard time. Ceres said, "she was really suffering and struggling a lot on being alone." Ceres knew when she came to the United States that she would miss important things at home, however, it was different knowing it was impossible to travel home. She said:

> There are intrinsically things about living abroad, and you know that when you provide the ticket to leave your home, you will be missing those things, but I think knowing for sure that you cannot come back is even worse because one thing is like we do not have the chance.

On top of everything, Ceres said, "I think the overarching theme is uncertainty, like, with everything." There was uncertainty for treatments if she did get sick. There was also uncertainty about borders closing in both Argentina and the United States.

The day-to-day life of Ceres had many unknowns at first. Ceres and her husband were living in a one-bedroom apartment; however, they were hoping to move to a house in early spring 2020. Also, her husband was applying for a new position at the university. When classes transitioned online, Ceres and her husband would have to work together to both have class online while sharing a room. Ceres said, "Our desks were one in front of the other, and I would raise my hand to let my husband know I needed to talk." Ceres and her husband had to work together to both be able to participate in their online classes and work. There were also aspects of Ceres's routine that had not changed. Ceres would still wake up early in the mornings. Ceres said, "I feel like we never had that bomb that some people have like being on the couch, like eating chips, and nothing like that kind of never happened to us." However, not long after classes transitioned online, Ceres and her husband had some big changes in their lives.

In March 2020, Ceres's husband got a new position. Ceres and her husband decided to also move into a house shortly afterward. Therefore, they needed to buy a car because they moved from an apartment close to campus to a house far from campus. Ceres and her husband felt very fortunate for these things during the pandemic. Ceres said, "That was a blessing that we were able to do that in those circumstances, right?" Ceres and her husband had moved from a one-bedroom apartment to a house where they each had their own office. All of this happened very quickly according to Ceres. She said, "I think we never had the chance to stop, which was kind of a blessing because probably otherwise they would have the same situation as many other people had." Ceres stayed busy moving and buying furniture. After they moved, they established a routine of cooking everything at home and exercising outside. During the pandemic, her priorities were initially her academics, but "I remember once all the worries in the society faded away a little bit, we started to get in a good routine." With everything happening that was out of her control, Ceres focused on trying to keep as much of a normal life as possible. She said, "Putting us in a bubble compared to what was happening outside our bubble." Ceres and her husband were fortunate to be able to continue working. Financially, Ceres and her husband had also saved, so they were prepared in case they could not make money. Ceres said:

> In terms of the financial situation, we have a mentality of saving a lot because we are
> used to because of our country to live in day by day so otherwise you will not be living,
> so we already have savings and have some peace of mind in that regard.

At 17, Ceres had moved away from her family to go to school, so she had not lived with her family for a while, and she did not see it as a problem. She did know that having her husband and having been away from her family since she was 17 was one less layer of stress than other people had. Ceres said that she talked to her family pretty much the same amount as before the

pandemic. Ceres is the oldest of three children. She said, "I am like really all the comfort to my brothers, so for me I am more like my kids than my brothers." Ceres also had concern for her father getting sick because he worked in a hardware store that requires a lot of interaction. Ceres said, "In Argentina everything is different; at the hardware store you have pretty much your front desk and all the merchandise is behind you, so the person has to go back and show you the tool." Ceres talked quite a bit about the differences in the Argentina and the United States regarding health care, and she felt she had more and better resources here. Although Argentina has public health and insurance is not required, Ceres said that the hospitals did not have enough supplies, especially during a global pandemic. Also, she said the economic circumstances were completely different for her in the United States and her family in Argentina. If Ceres's family were to get sick, she could not send them money because of the taxes. Ceres said, "It is not that I do not want to pay for them, but it is like impossible to pay things in Argentina from here because they charge you extra taxes." There were several things that frustrated Ceres about Argentina. She said, "Also, you probably know this that I am very critical of the government in Argentina." Ceres said that the government had destroyed public health and it is dangerous to get sick in Argentina. This gave Ceres a lot of stress worrying about her family in Argentina. Also, Argentina had implemented "martial court" and no one could leave their homes after 6:00 p.m. Ceres said that this made everyone upset because they do not trust the government. One of the hardest things for Ceres not being able to travel home was that she and her husband had both lost family members. Both Ceres and her husband had grandparents who had passed away and a cousin. She said, "I think this is one of the first time that I am not crying by mentioning him, and for me was difficult to not being able to be there." Also, Ceres mentioned how she and her

husband also missed good times with family. Ceres had a niece who was born, and one of her best friends had a baby.

When everything transitioned online, Ceres was taking a geography course. Ceres's computer was not compatible, so she had to use the computer lab or borrow her husband's computer. Ceres was also taking a professional development class that required a lot of interaction. Ceres said, "I think the most challenging classes to move to the online format, I had." She did acknowledge the faculty and how they did an amazing job with transitioning online. However, some of the older faculty had some difficulty with it. A priority for Ceres during the pandemic was to really focus on her studies. She said, "I took a lot of pride on getting As and doing all the things in a proper way."

For work, Ceres said her boss was very flexible, which was very helpful. Ceres did remote sensing and was able to work independently if she had everything in by the end of the day. Fortunately, all of her work was on the computer. Therefore, when everything switched online, "for me it was a continuum." Ceres said that she was a part of a very big team, which was good because they already had online communication platforms like Slack and Teams. Ceres said, "We were already moving that communication channel, so it was smooth." While her position was not affected much, her program had struggles. Her team and visiting scholars were supposed to do research in agronomy. However, because the teams could not go out together, they had to reduce the size of samples from thousands to hundreds. Ceres said, "it was a big problem and a lot of money." However, for Ceres, this problem did not affect her personally or her job. She said, "We had people joining in from a lot of places; some places I had no clue that they existed, so that was really nice." Also, the university helped make the transition for the teacher evaluations online easy. Finally, Ceres was thankful that equipment could be checked

out. She said, "It was also a really important thing to maintain the productivity, and I appreciated that a lot."

For her support, Ceres was very thankful for her husband. She said, "I like to have my husband with me, and we are pretty much one person and do everything together." Ceres and her husband enjoyed spending all their time together, especially during the pandemic. She said, "I think comparing with some of my peers or people I know both here and Argentina, our situation was not that bad because we had each other." Ceres did not consider herself or her husband very social. She did not spend much time with her peers because there was about a four-to-six-year age gap, and because they liked to party more. In fact, they continued to party during the pandemic and all of them contracted COVID. While Ceres was very glad that none of them got too sick, it did make it hard at work because all her colleagues had it at the same time. Ceres said, "I really like to respect things, especially in those situations because you are representing not only yourself but also the university, so for me it was like you will not die because you are not partying every Thursday." Her best friend was in Argentina at the time, so she was used to talking to her friend on the phone during the pandemic. Ceres did not need to talk to her friends or family too much but would message them often.

As an international student Ceres said it is difficult to think back on some of these things, especially not being able to travel home since the start of the pandemic. Ceres mentioned how she felt that she was between countries and not really a part of both. She also felt helpless in not being able to change the politics in either. Ceres said:

> I have the problem in Argentina, and I have currency here, and I am one person; so I feel like it is really uncomfortable and, it is not something that I can change because we do not change politics in any country.

About studying in the United States, she felt like her experience was easier than her brother's because of how easy the transition to online was, especially because of the faculty and access to platforms like Canvas (a learning management system) and Zoom. Ceres said it was amazing compared to the nonexistent resources students in Argentina had. She was also thankful that she was able to experience everything at the university first before it had transitioned online. About studying in the United States, Ceres said, "I had an opportunity kind of to live both lives, but I totally respect what all people feel because it is what they know." Ceres felt very thankful for her situation and how she even enjoyed the transition online. She said, "Even in the first part, we were living in a one-bedroom apartment, we figured things out; however, we were probably more resourceful because we needed to deal with it and it is part of life." As mentioned, Ceres felt very fortunate that she was able to keep working. "Since we are international, not having the work means that you do not have the visa and you need to go back home." Ceres did say that being an international student shaped her experience. "I think coming from countries where you do not have so many resources available all the time makes you a little bit more resourceful and inventive." She said that the pandemic has given her a different perspective. "As an international student, I think we do not know much about the country despite how many years you spend in the country, it is not your country, and it will never be."

Participant Narrative 4: Emma

Emma was a 31-year-old female graduate student from India pursuing a doctoral degree in civil engineering and working as a TA. She was visiting her home in India when she first heard about the virus in 2019. When Emma was traveling back to the United States to study, she saw a lot of people wearing masks. Therefore, she wore a mask thinking it was a virus that would just go away after a little while. However, four days after Emma returned, she started hearing

how the United States was the third-leading country with the virus, and she heard of campuses closing across the United States. Because of this, Emma canceled her spring break plans to visit her uncle in New York. During spring break, Emma was in her apartment when she received the email that classes had transitioned online. Emma said, "I was like, well, no, I do not think this is happening, you know?" Once she realized classes would be online, she wished she had stayed in India with her family. Emma said, "So my first thought was like, oh, I could have been in India with my family and did all this schoolwork online."

During the spring 2020 semester, Emma was living in a two-bedroom apartment close to campus with her roommate who was also from India. Neither had a car. After classes transitioned online, Emma wanted to travel home because she wanted to help her family and she thought she could have saved money. However, various things prevented Emma from traveling. First, it would cost too much to travel home. It is already expensive to travel between the United States and India, and Emma had just traveled home the month before. Second, Emma was worried about getting people sick through traveling, especially her family. If Emma flew home, there would be layovers. Emma had a larger chance of not only getting sick, but also being stranded because of borders closing. Finally, it was almost impossible to get a flight home because so many had been canceled and the limited flights had long lines.

Emma described this time of being stranded as "scary, hard, lonely, frustrating, and heartbreaking." Emma was worried about her family, and she did not know how her work and classes would transition online. In addition to Emma's day-to-day life changing, she also worried about her finances. "During that time it was all full of rumors, so we were scared that university may pay us less or they will stop paying us for a semester." However, Emma also said that being a graduate student and continuing to do her work online helped her to be financially stable.

Emma's day-to-day life during the spring 2020 semester had a lot of routine. She would start by waking up a little later and having breakfast with her roommate. They would discuss world news, each other's families, and things they were working on. After breakfast, Emma and her roommate would start with classes, work on assignments, check the news, chat with friends on the phone, meet with professors on Zoom, and learn new things online. Emma said that she would not describe her living situation as bad other than not having a car. Financially, Emma could not afford to have groceries delivered. Also, the food Emma usually eats is different in the United States, so she preferred to cook. However, the food Emma liked required a lot of vegetables and perishables, but she and her roommate were unable to go to the grocery often without a car and the danger of the pandemic. Unfortunately, there were some difficult times with having enough food to eat. Emma said, "Like we had it bad for groceries, like food and stuff, and I think for a week we just lived on the milk, bread and eggs." Fortunately, Emma and her roommate made use of CATS cupboard, a food pantry for students. Emma and her roommate would go online and request commodities and they could go by and pick them up without encountering anybody. Emma did not know if there were resources only for international students, but this was very useful for her. Overall, Emma says that her living situation was not too bad.

Emma was very concerned for her family back home. Emma's parents were older, and she also had a 90-year-old grandmother. This worried her because the virus was more dangerous for elderly people. Emma said that she had a lot of concern for her family because of the lack of facilities and the population size in India. Emma's family was very social, and she had to tell them not to open the doors for anyone and remind them to wear masks. Emma said, "Yeah, and it was a lot of pressure on me being here, um, I am thinking about them." Emma felt like the

family police. In fact, that was her biggest concern during the pandemic, especially when her mom contracted COVID. On the other hand, Emma did not have much concern for herself. She felt that she and her roommate were being very safe and doing things to protect themselves. Also, Emma's family felt she was safer in the United States than in India. However, when numbers of those infected increased in the United States, her family wanted her to come home— even if it meant she could not finish her degree. She assured them that she was being very safe and that the university was doing its part.

During the spring 2020 semester, Emma was an instructor for a surveying class. The class required a lot of lab work. Emma said that she was scared for that and unsure how they would do it online. The labs give students hands-on experience, but that could not happen. Instead, Emma recorded herself doing the experiments, which she did not think was very productive. Emma said, "We did not deliver the goal of the lab." However, the students could still watch them and learn. On the other hand, the lecture was easy to put on video. Emma would make the slides, record the lecture, and post everything on Canvas. She said, "The transition of lectures from in-person to online was not really hard but labs were very much, and I do not think they were very productive."

When classes transitioned online, Emma said that she was doing some really cool lab work to graduate. Unfortunately, the machine she needed was inside a university building, and Emma could not access it. This worried her because she thought it would delay her research and prevent graduation. Fortunately, Emma and her professor found different ways to have virtual access to do her research. Also, she did not have a book for class because she was using one from the library, but her professor delivered the book to her apartment for her. Emma also mentioned she could have checked out a laptop if she needed one. Along with access, time was a

concern for Emma. First, it took time for her to learn how to do the research online. Also, learning to teach online, use the online tools, and daily tasks during COVID were also time consuming. Getting groceries and cooking during COVID took a lot more time because Emma was scared to have food delivered during the pandemic. This made it difficult for Emma to be as productive in her research. This is the one place Emma said that she had to choose her health over her academics. Emma wanted to work on her experiments, but she knew she could not. Through these times, Emma mentioned that her advisor and all professors were a great academic support system. Emma said, "They were there for us; all the professors and the university in whole was for us the students."

Although Emma did not think she was too social before the pandemic, she mentioned aspects of social life that were hindered by the pandemic. Emma had a great research group in her civil engineering department that she was no longer able to meet with. With her friends, Emma used to get a ride, and they would go grocery shopping together and then have tea afterward in one of their apartments. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic, they could no longer do these things together. She said, "the few friends we used to meet on a regular basis, uh, we could not do that."

While Emma felt some difficulties in her social life, there were certainly those who were her support during this time. First, was her roommate. They both made a lot of effort to take care of each other. Emma said:

> She made a lot of effort and I to make sure that we both keep up each other, sane during
> that time, and just discuss everything and anything from professional to the personal
> stages, and cook for each other, and care for each other.

Although Emma's family was far away, they supported her by checking on her every day. Emma's family would talk to her for hours if she was lonely to make sure she was stable, sane, and healthy. While the pandemic also helped her connect with old friends from India. Emma said, "I was in contact with my friends back in India, so that I think it was a great time to reconnect." Emma would play games with her old friends and talk about the current situation.

As an international student, Emma said one of the biggest differences was being away from her family. She watched many students in the United States pack up, receive reimbursement, and move home during the pandemic. Emma said, "We could not have that even if we wanted that, we could not have that." Not being able to go home, Emma was constantly worried about her family, and they were worried about her. Emma said that it took a toll on her mental health and made it hard to focus on day-to-day life. Also, as an international student unable to go home, Emma could not save money by living at home like other students. International students already must pay higher tuition, and Emma said that she would have spent less money living at home. Also, while living in the United States, as an international student Emma had working limitations on her visa that prevented her from making more money. If she moved home, it really could have helped her financially.

One other difference that Emma felt as an international student dealt with being targeted. Emma said, "It is not a very strong feeling, but whenever we went to groceries or something … we felt that maybe we get targeted, you know, being Asian or being international." Emma continued to explain that there was a small fear of someone saying something to her or mentioning her mask that she wore. While she did have this thought, she also loved the community she lived in and only experienced good things. When talking about the support she received during this time as an international student, Emma said, "I do not know if I may say

this, I did not hear much form the international student services." Overall, Emma was very happy to be an international student studying in the United States, and it even strengthened her view about her overall experience. Although the online transition had challenges, Emma learned so much about technology and communicating with students. There is not much she would change about her experience during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Emma said, "I think I am pretty happy with whatever I have done during this COVID time." She would maybe have changed into being more disciplined with respect to time management, but overall she was happy with how she handled the situation.

Summary of Participants

Participants chosen for the study had experience as international students who were stranded in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants showed great interest in the topic. They put effort in making the data collection process smooth, and they thoroughly articulated their experiences during the interview process. Data analysis indicated many similar shared experiences by participants in the study that helped in determining data saturation during data analysis. The participant narratives are representation of the interviews, bracketing, and repeated transcript review. Additionally, participants engaged in reviewing the transcripts. This presentation of individual participants' narratives included their lived experiences and the personal meaning that they attributed to the phenomena.

Being Prevented from Traveling Home

The findings of this study have emphasized the unique circumstances experienced by international students in the United States. Various obstacles prevented international students from traveling home during the pandemic. The participants shared their experiences of being stranded in the United States at the beginning of the pandemic. All their stories begin with them

discussing the obstacles and challenges that prevented them from traveling home. Table 4.2

summarizes the obstacles and challenges that prevented the four participants from traveling

home during the spring 2020 semester.

Table 4.2

Reasons that Prevented Travel

Emilia Garcia	Tom	Ceres	Emma
Closed borders	Canceled flights	Closed borders	Closed borders
Canceled or reduced flights (humanitarian flights only)	Multiple layovers (unless government flight)	Canceled or reduced flights	Reduced flights
Unable to apply for OPT outside the United States	Varying policies for each country/layover	Increased flight costs	Multiple layovers
Extra paperwork (survey)	Flights grounded during layovers	Visa status uncertainty	Too Expensive
Extra Travel (consulate)	Unprepared airlines	Time and money with quarantine restrictions	Concern for getting others sick
Might not make it to home country	Needed additional public transportation from airport to home	Might not be able to return to the United States	Concern for getting family sick
Might not be able to return to the United States	Too dangerous		

Many things prevented the participants from traveling at the start of the pandemic. All

four mentioned the canceled or reduced flights. Tom mentioned how the airlines were not

prepared for this situation. In addition, three participants mentioned closed borders. There were

also financial obstacles. Emma mentioned how it was already expensive to travel home; Ceres

discussed the increased cost of flights and added taxes. In addition, it would take more time and money for quarantine. Another issue was the multiple layovers. Tom added that this was challenging because of the varying policies of different countries and the possibility of a flight being canceled during a layover. Also, there was uncertainty about visa status. Emilia Garcia was unsure about applying for OPT outside of the United States. There may have also been additional paperwork such as surveys or even additional travel for trips to the consulate or even transportation from the airport to the participants' hometowns. There was also the concern for getting sick, getting others sick, or even getting family members sick. Finally, the participants were not sure they could even make it home, and if they did, they possibly could not even return to the United States if they wanted to.

Essential Themes

A phenomenological approach to data analysis was used to derive the experiences of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2005). A compilation of the units of meaning derived from individual participants created a meaning structure or general understanding of the phenomenon. The units of meaning were compiled into groups and relevant meaning units shared by all participants were compiled into themes. Data analysis revealed five essential themes. A discussion of each theme will be supported by passages extracted from the interview transcripts in the participant's own words.

Essential Theme 1: Having Concern for Family and Self

Deep concern for family was one of the most salient themes from this study. The participants wanted to be with their families when the pandemic began. Emma said, "So my first thought was like, oh, I could have been in India with my family, and did all this schoolwork online, you know?" There were various reasons they were concerned and wanted to be there to

help their families. Although the participants were unable to be there, they still cared for and tried to help their families. There was also more uncertainty than worry about themselves and the virus.

All four participants were concerned about certain family members' health. Emma's parents were older, and her grandmother was 90. Tom's parents were also older, and he wanted to be there to take care of them. Tom's parents did contract COVID, which was very stressful for him, especially because he had already learned that former teachers and neighbors in India had passed away from the virus. Also, Tom said that there was no one else who could take care of his parents. Ceres was concerned for her father because he worked at a hardware store and his job "requires a lot of interaction with the person and touching a lot of things that other people will be touching, so in terms of health situation it was different." Fortunately, Ceres' father was able to stop working and stay home. Emilia Garcia also had concerns for her family's health because her father is diabetic.

Beyond health concerns, the participants mentioned how they wanted to help their families through other challenges during the pandemic. Emilia Garcia has seven younger siblings. She knew this was hard on her family being quarantined together, and she wished she could be there to help them. Emilia Garcia expressed her frustration:

> It was a little bit frustrating. My dad has diabetes and I do have a lot of young siblings, and so I knew it was going to be a lot of work for my mom, especially. So, I did want to be there to just help them. And then, I guess, I also kept thinking that if I had been there, I would probably be the one that would have been able to go out to groceries. So yeah, I think it was a little bit frustrating because I wanted to be there to help my family, and I could not.

It was difficult for Emilia Garcia not being able to do the grocery shopping for her mother. She also wanted to help her mother by working so that her mother could stay home. Emilia Garcia felt that she could have worked because her background was in the food industry. That would have allowed her mother to stay home during the pandemic. Ceres also had siblings whom she was very close with, and she wished she could have been there to help them. Ceres said, "I am the oldest from three … and I am like really all the older comfort to my brothers. So, for me, I am more like my kids than my brothers." Tom also wanted to be there for his family. However, Tom also felt that there was an expectation of him to take care of them because he is the only son. Tom described this expectation:

> The culture expects them to look after their parents when they come of age and when they actually have difficult times … . I mean, you have come to study abroad, and there are your parents who are actually suffering back at home. So, there is an inherent pressure to address to these things. … I wanted to go home. People back in India wanted me to be there. And I was expected to be there, and I wanted to be there. But this all things get complicated because of the travel restrictions and being stranded.

Another concern the participants had for their families was about how the different countries handled and were affected by the pandemic. While there was more possibility that the virus would come to the United States faster and have higher numbers, the participants were more worried about how it would affect their families in their home counties. There was concern about the virus in the United States because of the population and travelers. Emma said, "There were so many cases all around the United States." Emilia Garcia said, "I thought that it was going to come to the United States first, just because there are a lot of more travelers and people coming in and out of the United States rather than in my home country." Although they thought

the virus would spread quickly in the United States, they were more worried about how their home countries were affected and would handle the virus. Emma said, "Actually, my parents felt I am more safer here in the United States rather than being in India." Tom was worried about the government going to his family's home in India when his family contracted COVID. Tom said:

There was also this stigma of getting COVID and the government coming into place the homes and all those things were happening around that time. … I had a more serious concern about the way things would unravel in India because of the density of population, and I, I am also aware of the health infrastructure that is available.

Emma also had concern for her family in India because of the population and space in her country. Emma said:

Yeah, I wanted to be with them to help them and all those things, and in India it is totally different. It is always crazy in India because we do not have that much facility as we have in the United States. We are too much populated in a very small place, and in every household, we have, like five to eight people living under, like, just in a two-bedroom apartment, you know? So, um, and also you cannot really avoid contact in India definitely.

Ceres also had concerns for her family in Argentina and how things were being handled. Ceres said, "In Argentina, as soon as everything started here, in Argentina we tend to do the things in another pace. So, the Government took their time to take measurements." Ceres especially did not trust the health system in Argentina. She said:

A status of the public health is quite different from the things that you can get here even though you need to pay or have an insurance here, so especially in the big areas or big cities. The hospitals, they do not have anything under normal circumstances. So, if you

have a global pandemic, they did not have like, not even beds to put the people. So that

was tough.

Ceres worried about her family having access to everything it needed in Argentina, and this

caused a lot of stress for her. In addition to not trusting the health system, Ceres also had

concerns about the government. Ceres said:

Well, in Argentina they implemented, I do not know if they were in English, but when

the government tells you like martial court when you cannot go out until certain time and

was at 6:00 p.m., so nobody could be in the street after 6:00 p.m. and they make the

firefighters alarm sound. We have some shady history in Argentina using the same

technique, so everyone was really upset.

Tom, Emma, and Ceres all discussed how the pandemic was different and being handled

differently in their home countries. The government, population, and health system in the

participant's countries added to the concern they had for their families.

Although the participants were far away from their families, they tried to help in any way

that they could. Emma's family was very social, and it was hard for them to avoid people. Emma

was trying to protect her family from far away:

I had to keep, um, pressurizing them to do not open the door, or do not let people in. Not,

do not go out, please wear masks. So, … I was a family police. Yeah, and it was a lot of

pressure on me being here. Um, I am thinking about them.

Both Tom and Emilia Garcia talked to their family more frequently on the phone. Emilia Garcia

would try to give them helpful advice as well:

And so my mom kept and my sister kept asking me things like, should I bring my grocery

store into my house? Uh, should like my sister wanted like to put them outside on the

house in the sun so that the sun will burn the virus away, which I was like, no, that is not how it works. Um, and so we also did not know if the virus was actually transmitted through food or through like surfaces. And so, it was hard to try to give them some useful information or useful tips for them to be safe because like we just did not know.

While the participants emphasized concern for being there for their families, there was also some concern for themselves. Emma and Tom did wonder about what would happen if they contracted COVID. Both Emma and Tom did not know for sure where to go and how to pay for it. The health insurance in the United States was challenging for them. First, Emma thought that she may lose her insurance because the campus closed. Emma said, "They may not pay for our insurance because nobody is here." Tom had many questions about the health insurance in the United States. He said:

The more complicated thing was that the health system functioning in the United States, like what insurance entails, what it does not entail, whether testing is part of the insurance plan or even the treatment is part of the insurance plan. And the very idea of insurance was completely new for me at that time. Much of the Indian health system actually does not function on the basis of insurance policies. So, you have more open, and you have a lot of options at hand, and you weigh in the medicine. But here, the entire functioning of the health system was different. And there was also this ambiguity on what is covered in the health insurance that we are being offered and what is not offered. And I also had a kind of a minor health issue immediately after … coming here. So when I came for the first time, I think, within two or three days, I caught a very high fever. And at that time, the university medicine center was closed, and I did not have a health insurance at that

time. So, I had a kind of a bitter experience on navigating with the health system when you do not know how the system functions.

Tom and Emma were not too worried about catching it because they were being safe, and they felt healthy. In fact, all four participants mentioned not being too worried about the virus themselves. Emma felt that she was being safe, and in fact her family also felt that she was safer living in the United States than being in India with them. All the participants also felt the town where they were living in the United States was small and the virus would not be too bad there. Emma and her roommate also felt that they were also careful about the virus. And Emilia Garcia said:

> I guess I just thought that I was a healthy person, I, so I was not that worried about me, and also because I was just living with other two girls who were in the same age range. So, I was like, if we get sick, it is just probably going to be a flu, or I mean, I thought we were gonna be fine. I guess, I was a little more worried about my family in my home country.

All the participants were not very concerned for themselves during the pandemic because they thought they were either being safe, or they thought they were healthy if they did catch the virus.

It was very clear that the participants had a lot of concern for their families during the pandemic. They were worried about their health, not being able to help them, and how their home country was handling the pandemic. Although the participants could not be there to help their family members, they tried to help by talking to them more and giving them advice. Even more, the participants had some concern about what to do about the virus. However, they felt they were healthy, being safe, and their town in the United States was a safe place. A clear theme from this study is the concern that the participants had for their families.

Essential Theme 2: Adjusting to School and Jobs Online

In addition to concern for family, participants were unsure how everything would adjust online. An essential theme from this study was the participants adjusting to both their jobs and school being online. While being stranded, the participants also had to adjust to how they were students and workers. The four participants remembered exactly when they learned that everything had transitioned online. Ceres recalled:

I remember perfectly where I was. I even remember, and where I was sitting, and I was reading. I think it was on the newsletter that we receive information. And later, like all the professors, uh, were sending the emails. I was like nah, nothing would happen like, yeah, they are like just taking measures precautions. So, so I was like, okay, let us see how we adapt to this.

The participants had very mixed feelings about being at home. When Ceres first learned that everything would be online and at home, she was excited. She said:

I feel like all my life I have been wanting to work from home and like for me, the environment being in a classroom and with a lot of people and interacting with a lot of people requires a lot of energy from me, and at that time I, like, I got pretty drained. And so, that was my first reaction.

Being able to work from home was good for Ceres. However, Tom was learning that this environment really did not work well for him. Tom said:

I would describe it as directionless and chaotic, and for, for me, because I am not a person who is used to like confining to a room and doing all the things very systematically. It is never possible. Like uh, sleeping, eating, and doing work, watching movies, or anything, even speaking with friends. Everything is happening at the same

place, and most of them involves just again the keyboard for mobile and things like. I am

not really good at really leveraging and managing these things simultaneously to their

extreme efficiency. … I was realizing that, like different modes of engagement, is what

works for me, like travelling to different places, for different meetings, and doing

different nature of work at different places, and engaging, like allocating different times

for different activities is what contributes to my efficiency and putting all of things at one

place in the same time to do is not my cup of tea. Yeah, I mean, like my experiences with

staying at home and working, were not really good and also not productive, both

academically and physically, emotionally.

For Tom, staying home was very challenging. Unlike Ceres, Tom realized he was someone who

needed to get out and do things. While the participants had various feelings about staying home,

they all transitioned to studying and working online.

Taking Classes and Conducting Research Online

All four participants were unsure how everything would transition online. Tom

mentioned how every aspect of the university transitioned online, and he knew how everything

operated in person, but was unclear how it would be online. Succeeding and doing well in their

programs of study was very important for all four participants. Ceres said, "I, I am a really

competitive person, and I, I took a lot of pride on getting 's and doing all the things in a proper

way."

The classes transitioning to an online format was challenging and disappointing. Both

Ceres and Emilia Garcia thought they would miss out on certain things. Ceres thought her classes

would be very difficult to transition. She said:

The time I was taking one course in geography where we need to use their computer labs because there is a problem with a … compatibility between the software they use and the computer I have. So, I need to use their facilities. And then another class was professional development that requires a lot of interactions between individuals in the class.

Ceres thought these classes would be difficult to transition online for different reasons. Fortunately, Ceres could use her husband's computer for the online transition of her geography class. Ceres' other class, professional development, required a lot of interaction with her classmates, and she did not think it would be the same online. Emilia Garcia also had classes that would be different in the online format. Emilia Garcia said:

I also was taking the fermentation that included a bunch of tours around town to like the breweries and the wineries and a cheese factory or diary. Um, and obviously they had to be canceled. And, we just had to watch some videos online. And so, that was a little disappointing. Um, and then I, I just had to, yeah, move my mindset that I was gonna have to take classes online.

Emilia Garcia was disappointed that she was not able to continue the tours around town for her class. While she continued learning through online videos, she felt it was different than having the class in person. Tom also missed learning in person, saying:

As a student, and the courses that I were taking were very mathematically later, right? I mean like, like when you are in person like it makes a lot of sense when, like instructors, like a lot of equations on boards, and when they make transition from one equation another equation there is a lot of discussion that happens, like. How did you do that? How did you do that? And, most often we have to draw diagrams in the board. Instructors draw diagrams on the board, sticks with the physical systems. Uh, now like this, because the

both the courses that I was taking at the time were mathematically laid and I am involved

in these kind of activities. So, there was even this uncertainty of how things would be

managed, right?

The instruction for the classes was going to be different online. In addition, like Ceres, Tom

thought the interactions with classmates would be different. Tom could no longer work with his

classmates. He said:

Most of them, we used to go together to library, have a chat about how to do this

assignment. So, there was also this aspect of academic socializing that involved, like, find

discussions about performing research and all that stuff. So, all that got stopped.

Tom also felt that there was not the same comfort level of working with classmates over Zoom

(see Essential Theme 4: Changing Social Connections). There were many adjustments to classes

transitioning online.

In addition to the transition of the classes online, there was also a transition for the

research, which caused concern about finishing research to graduate. Both Emma and Emilia

Garcia were concerned about the logistics because they would not have access to their research.

Emma said:

I was scared because I was in the middle of my, um, research. I was doing some really

cool, interesting experiments, and the machine is in the building, and we are, we do not

have access to the building, and I was worried about that will delay my research and my

graduation.

Emma was worried about being able to finish her research because she did not have access to the

lab. Once Emma did transition online, it still was challenging and time consuming. Emma said:

I would say my, my concern was to, uh, being delayed, uh, with the research work, because, as I told you, I had to perform experiments, and I did not have access to that. So, we were finding different ways that, um, having virtual access all those things. … That was my biggest concern actually because I was not able to perform as well my research schedule, you know. And that took my, and it took so much of my time to transition to online.

Although it took a lot of time for her to transition, fortunately, Emma could continue to work on her research online. Emilia Garcia also was worried about completing her research because her work was in the labs. At first, Emilia Garcia could continue to go to the lab. Emilia Garcia said, "I was able to go back to my lab for a little bit. But then when they decided that there was no essential people going in, um, I was not able to go." Emilia Garcia was unsure how she would finish her thesis if she could no longer go to the lab. She made her schoolwork her top priority. Emilia Garcia said:

My thesis. Yeah, that I was writing it, and I, like I had a deadline because I knew I was gonna present. I think it was end of June, regardless. If it was virtual, or in person. I was gonna present. So, like that was my main goal, or my main focus, to finish.

After Emilia Garcia was unable to go to the lab, her advisor had to find a way for Emilia Garcia to finish her thesis. Emilia Garcia said:

Yeah, the last part I could not properly finish. I just wrote like an introduction or a plan of why I was gonna do it, or what was the hypothesis, but that we could not finish because of COVID. So, I just, um, and I think after they let us go back to the lab, I did finish some samples, and just freeze them so that my advisor could finish that if she wanted to, but I did not do it.

There were other concerns about conducting the research online besides access. Tom was also working on research, but he was not worried about being able to access it because it was already all on the computer:

I am a PhD student here, and most of it revolves just around like computers and all like, even if I go to office, that is all I am supposed to do, so in some sense, like I was not too much worried that it would impact my research.

Instead, for Tom it was the social aspect of transitioning online for his research and being able to be productive at home. Tom said:

It was not much efficient during this virtual mode of working, and that had a very serious impact on my research. Uh, so because I was conscious of this, I was, my main priority was on like increasing the efficiency of work in terms of delivery of results, and the work and the timeline to meet and stuff like that.

Completing their research was very important for the participants. There were physical and other challenges that made it difficult to do the research and be productive. Fortunately, technology helped in the transition. Ceres was especially grateful for unlimited Zoom. She said:

But the thing was, we use the Zoom without limits from the university because otherwise, we will need to pay for that. It is extremely expensive service. And the good thing behind that was that we were able to open the events for the entire world.

Emma, Emilia Garcia, and Ceres were all thankful that the university offered laptops, monitors, or other technology to for students to check out and take home. Ceres said:

And then, I, well, another thing that was really neat for me was at that time, we had the ability to I think that was for only 2 weeks or something like that, but we could sign in

with our names and bring our equipment to home. So, I have the monitors, the computer,

like all the things that I needed.

While Emma did not need to borrow any equipment, her roommate did. Emma was thankful they

offered this to students:

The university offered, uh, the people, the laptops, the iPads, the caps. Um, yeah, they

made it so easy. Even though it was um difficult, but they made it so easy that I think the

education system really wanted students to learn, no matter what you know. So yeah,

yeah, it was very easy for us, I think. Yes.

Working and Teaching Online

In addition to being graduate students, all four participants also worked at the university.

For the participants, teaching online and learning how to adapt the classes had a lot of

uncertainty for their work. Teaching online was different, especially for labs. Emma was

teaching a surveying class that had labs and she was unsure how to transition them online. Emma

said:

I was an instructor of record for surveying class, which requires labs, labs to be done, um,

outside the building like it is a surveying class. So, I was more scared for that. How we

will do that for the rest of the semester. It was like mixed feelings, kind of. Uh, but lot of

scary.

Fortunately, Emma was able to continue to teach the labs with adjustments. Instead of students

completing the labs, Emma would record them for students to watch. However, she felt they

were not as productive this way. Emma said:

The like transition of lectures from in person to, uh, online was not really hard. But labs were very much, and I do not think they were very productive, or they did deliver what we wanted. Yes, so that is the major thing. So yeah, everybody missed it.

While the transition of the lectures was not much of a challenge for Emma, there was no way to make the labs as productive online. Tom also mentioned how teaching online was very different. In fact, Tom described it as an entirely different thing with many challenges. Tom said:

I was not someone who was used to being a teaching assistant in a virtual environment. I prefer to be in person and do that. But now you have the Zoom rooms, and you have the separate Zoom room, split rooms, and all the stuff you need to go and engage. And also, the lab demonstrations were being held, and they were video recorded. … And even the grading stuff was happening online, which we were not sure on how to navigate. And again, … there is not the same level of comfort that you have discussing when you are in person but rather than that happens through a Zoom. I think the courses is a whole different thing. Usually, when you have all the assignments, people usually work in groups. It is practically impossible to work alone and get all the assignments done regularly. These are the challenges. And I mean, again, lot and lot of challenges.

Tom also mentioned the challenges of speaking English online. He said:

So entire focus was on how articulate, how clear, and how the right choice of words matter a lot at that time. And when you are a person whose first language is not English, you need to be very careful because that was also a time where many of the people with whom I was interacting with were new to me. Because we were writing a paper, we started collaborations with people from outside our own research circle. So that was also the first time I was coming to meet many people. And what I spoke and how I spoke

really mattered. They were also decisive of what kind of relationship I was going to have

them in the long run. And I observed that. Had it been in person, I think things would

have been much better in comprehending. I would have shared the document and all this

stuff. So I think that was a big shift.

While the participants felt the individual pressure of transitioning their work online, there

were also departmental changes. Ceres's colleagues who went into the field for agronomy could

no longer collect as many samples as before, which hurt the department. Ceres said:

Their research was also really stressful because in many situations in agronomy we do

not have a long period of the time, right? If we are losing the critical period or a specific

vegetative state, you are losing your year of research. So, for them, yes, it was stressful.

And in many situations, the size of the studies got reduced instead of collecting thousands

of samples versus in the hundred.

Although this did not directly affect Ceres's work because she did not go into the field, it was

affecting the research and the entire department.

Fortunately, not all the work transitions online were challenging. Although Ceres

department did struggle to collect samples, the communication for her department transitioned

smoothly. Ceres mostly did research online for work, so she was able to continue. Also, it was an

easy work transition because her department was already using certain technology. Ceres said,

"Also, since my team is quite big, we already have implemented the use of Slack, very similar to

Teams. I think it is in Microsoft. So was already moving that communication channel, so it was

smooth." In addition, both Ceres and Emma mentioned how easy and smooth the transition was

in comparison to their home countries, Argentina and India. Ceres said, "I feel that the

experience with classes in Argentina was not even remotely the same experience that I had, or I am having here in the United States." Emma said:

India … there was some trouble transitioning from in person to online, because we do not have that good of, um, Wi-Fi networking all those things and everybody does not own a laptop, or, uh, such technology with them, and it was so hard for everyone to, uh, be there. But that was not the case here. The university offered, uh, the people, the laptops, the iPads, the caps. Um, yeah, they made it so easy.

A lot was changing for the participants during the pandemic, especially with the transitioning online. There were a lot of obstacles and adjustments. Despite all the challenges, all the participants continued to transition to the online environment.

Essential Theme 3: Creating a Healthy Routine

While everything was transitioning online, participants created routines to help with the adjustments. The study findings revealed how the participants dealt with being stranded by establishing a healthy routine. All four participants created and utilized different strategies for creating a routine. The daily routines of these participants were an important part of the experience of being stranded.

Establishing a routine and starting with breakfast was helpful for Emma, Ceres, and Emilia Garcia. Emma said, "I have a roommate as I told you before. So, we used to make good breakfast. Yeah, eat together." Ceres said, "We had our breakfast, lunch, dinner in the office because it was the only thing available." Emilia Garcia said:

So, I would like, wake up, prepare my breakfast, and then I had an alarm set on my phone that, like I need to start, like, sit down and start writing my thesis at this time, and I did set like breaks for like 15, 10–15 minutes break.

Another important part of establishing the routine was taking breaks. Between her breaks, Emilia Garcia would eat, work on her thesis, take classes, and exercise. Tom also took breaks. He would take walks between different tasks. Tom said, "I kind of feel refreshed after every walk. And I used it. Actually, I made this point that after every of those walking sessions, I would do a different nature of job." Emma would have a balanced routine of chatting with her roommate, friends, and family while also working on her computer. Emma said:

> So, we used to make good breakfast. Yeah, eat together. Um, then start with the classes and whatever assignments for there and then. Um, look up the news. What is happening with COVID all over the world, and this to start with friends over the phone and with the roommate, and then um I used to. Then we used to like, sit and chat about mostly about these things, and how, how it is changing, uh, all over the world, and what is happening in India. So, we used to mostly discuss about, mostly about the COVID things and what is happening, and, uh, do our, uh, meetings with the professors. Um, attend the classes and prepare to teach, get used to Zoom, learn new things. How to, yeah, how to better convey and communicate through online and, and, and just discuss how weird it is not to see people.

While some of the breaks were more intentional—such as Emilia Garcia and Tom using alarms and walks—Emma divided her days between communicating with friends and family and completing work tasks.

Creating a workspace, like setting time to work, was helpful in establishing a routine. Ceres and her husband had to share an office when the pandemic began. For both Ceres and her husband to be able to communicate in class, they created a hand system. Ceres said:

We had to again one bedroom apartment and our desks were like one in front of the other, so I was taking classes on one side, and he was giving classes, like teaching on the other side. And, we took turns to talk. But, sometimes I need to participate in the class, so I raise my hand (laughter). Was like, yeah, it was a nice dynamic.

While Ceres was navigating her workspace with her husband, Emilia Garcia was using her new free space. Emilia Garcia had a roommate who moved out, and she was able to convert that room into an office. She said:

It was a three-bedroom apartment. So, the third room that was empty after this from my roommate had left. I moved my desk, and some, like, yoga mat, so I was working there and doing some exercise there cause if I was, like, in my bedroom, I was not really working or focusing. Um, so I had that little room for, like, my working space.

Ceres was the only participant to move during the spring 2020 semester. Her situation changed rather drastically from sharing a one-bedroom apartment with her husband to having a house with each having their own office. Ceres said, "We moved from one bedroom apartment where we had our own rooms for our offices. So, the transition was not that bad." Moving was a part of Ceres's routine that kept her very busy.

Creating a healthy routine was important for the participants. Keeping a healthy routine might not have been one of the top priorities for the participants, but it was something that really helped them. Ceres said:

So, we always maintain, like a good diet, a lot of exercise, and it is what we do. And, what we did, and we keep doing. Like trying to maintain that although it was not something that we actively think about it, uh, we did it. And I think now, putting more

thoughts on that was kind of a priority. Like trying to keep as much of our normal life as possible. Putting us in a bubble compared to what was happening outside our bubble.

Although the participants may not have always been intentional about establishing a healthy routine, it was an important part of their experience while being stranded. Social connections also were an important part of the participants' experiences while being stranded.

Essential Theme 4: Changing Social Connections

The theme of social relationships was another one of the more salient themes from this study. Throughout the transcripts, the participants expressed the important roles that different people played in their lives during this time. Unfortunately, through the participants' experiences, some of those important social interactions were lost. On the other side, some of the social connections were strengthened.

Losing Social Connections

While stranded in the United States during the pandemic, all four participants dealt with loss of social connection and support. Colleagues and classmates were no longer able to meet and get together like they used to. In addition, in trying to be safe from the virus, the participants could also no longer gather with their friend groups. Unfortunately, participants even mentioned how they felt a lack of support from some of the support services. Tom said, "So all these social interactions were impacted, um, from like the little lockdowns." There were many aspects of social interaction and connection affected by the pandemic.

One of those social losses was in their academic departments and with classmates. Emma used to enjoy working with her colleagues in the research department before the pandemic. Emma said, "We have a very good research group in the department. So, yeah. We were not able

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to meet or see each other. That was one aspect of it." Although it was under different circumstances, Ceres also mentioned not being able to meet with her colleagues. She said:

> Then at night my peers were partying all together. For me that was like I, I really like to respect things, especially in in those situations, because you are representing not only yourself, but also the university and the team and the college, the department. So, for me it was like, okay, you will not die because you are not partying every Thursday drinking beers.

Classmates were hard to connect to as well during the pandemic. Tom really enjoyed meeting and working with his classmates in the library or a coffee shop, but unfortunately, they were no longer able to meet. Tom and his classmates did try to connect on Zoom, but it was not very successful. Tom said:

> Everything was revolving around Zoom, and people were slightly hesitant to again. Come back to the same mode to engage. We, we, we try to, frankly speaking, like this happened like we chatted in a social media app, and we all gathered together to discuss once. But its frequency was not increasing. Like people did not feel like we had to meet again in this way, to really have a chitchat about anything because, like what discussions, and these discussions resembled so much that people were not actually much comfortable doing it.

Working with others for school and work was challenging in some ways for the participants and caused the loss some of the social connections with some colleagues and classmates.

There were other connections on campus that were lost during the pandemic. Even the potential relationships and connections to others was gone during the pandemic. The loss of connections on campus was a big part of Tom's identity as an international student. Tom said:

As an Indian student association. IAS here. Like, there are a lot of festivals, and there are a lot of activities back in India which actually fall in the spring semester. So, you have a lot of even the Indian community's activities that happen in the spring semester. So, all those activities are a point where … you come, come across people from the same community who are at different tiers in this university, So, all these places like I realized, because I precisely after the pandemic, what I really missed during the pandemic in the early years of my graduate's life. So, these all kind of social interactions which actually gave a holistic perspective of my existence here, both personally, academically, professionally.

Not only had Tom felt like he lost a social connection with others on campus at all levels from the same background, but he also felt like it was a lot of his identity and "existence" at the university.

Another social aspect lost was with friends. Emma really enjoyed the times she and her friends could go grocery shopping together and then have tea in one of their apartments before the pandemic. This was not only difficult for her because she missed spending time with them, but Emma and her roommate relied on her friends because they had a car. This made it very difficult for Emma and her roommate to even get groceries. Emma said:

We loved doing grocery shopping, you know, because that is, that is when, uh, because we do not have cars. So, we ask our friends to, uh, give us a lift. So that is when we, we get together. We go around, do the shopping come back, have some tea, sit, and chat. So, we missed that. So that was one aspect of it. Um, definitely. The social life was hindered.

Emma's friends were an important resource for her to be able to grocery shop, and they were also an important part of her social group in the United States. Emilia Garcia also had a

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group of friends she lived near. Her friends in her apartment building were also international and they would help each other when needed. After the pandemic started, Emilia Garcia would only see them once every 2weeks possibly to cookout. Tom also was not able to connect socially like he used to with his friends before the pandemic. Tom said:

> The social circle like I had a few set of, of friends. Uh, because I was living in the university campus. Most of them were also international students, and because we went through same kind of similar struggles, like the cultural difference, and making sense of the cultural things and academic stuff. So, like we were like tightly knit even then. Um, people used to come to home, and we used to go places, but it was very much limited.

In addition to Tom losing his ability to spend time with his already international friends, he also felt it was important to make friends with other students from the Unites States. However, that was very difficult during the pandemic. Tom said:

> And I was trying to also build relationships with people like who are outside the periphery of my own culture. And the best way to do is to go to a neutral place, such as a coffee shop and have discussions of, uh, many things like even within physics there are different research groups, and even across research groups, there are a lot of international students and U.S. students. And so, this all things were stopped, and I was, uh, and I could interact with only those people who I was very close with, and who shared my same sense of, uh, security or a risk factor risk causing. So, these were the limiting factor with whom I engaged in who I did not engage.

Emma, Emilia Garcia, and Tom shared how they were unable to meet with their group of international friends that they had previously established before the pandemic. Furthermore, Tom

shared how it also become almost impossible to make new friends, especially those from the United States.

Another social connection that seemed to be absent during the pandemic was some of the support. Some participants did not feel that they received much support from International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS). Emma said, "But I do not know if I may say this, I did not hear much from the international student services. You know, ISSS. Although they used to send emails now and then." Emilia Garcia also recalled only a few resources being offered.

On the other hand, not all social connections lost were necessarily seen as a negative. Ceres was happy about everything transitioning online. Although this would mean fewer social interactions for her, it was a relief because that had been draining to her. As mentioned before, Emma and Emilia Garcia also said that they were not too social before either.

Gaining Social Support

Though the participants all lost some form of social support or connection, they also gained social support. The participants had various forms of social support and bonds that grew even stronger. In addition, the participants were also able to build new connections and receive various kinds of social support.

The participants with roommates became very close. Emma was very thankful for her roommate and the connection that they built during the pandemic. She said:

> It is just my roommate and me. No, she, she made a lot of effort, and I had a lot of effort
> to make sure that we both keep each other sane during that time. And just discuss
> everything and anything from professional to the personal stages and cook for each other,
> care for each other.

Emma's roommate became like a sister to her, and Emma described her as a lifelong friend. Tom also had a roommate who was from India who was an important support for him. Tom said:

> And I think there was also an important support structure that I had a roommate who was from completely, he was from engineering. They had nothing to do with physics. He was also from India. So partly, that helped me because he came to know what background I come from and in what ways the current situation.

Tom was thankful his roommate was from India because his roommate could understand his situation better, but he was also thankful that he was from a different department because it opened more doors for him to people outside of his department.

> Ceres's roommate was her husband, and he was her main support during the pandemic. Ceres said:

> I like to have my husband with me, and we are pretty much one person. We do everything together. I do not know if that is good or not, but we do everything together. So, for me it was kind of the same. In fact, I was kind of happy to be able to spend the entire day together every day.

Ceres was happy to spend so much time with her husband. Emilia Garcia did not have roommates because they moved out. However, she did have a boyfriend who was her main support during the pandemic even though he was in Paraguay while she was in the United States. She said, "I think my main person who helped me was my boyfriend, who I was just talking every day by phone. I think we talked for like two hours every day, or something, which is more than we do now."

Again, family was important for the social support even though they were all far away. Emma, Tom, and Emilia Garcia all shared that they talked to their family more frequently during

the pandemic. Emma said that her family would call and check on her daily. Tom said, "The way things were evolving in U.S., in India, and across the world and the kind of implications that have on me and on them, so I started calling frequently, almost frankly, on a daily basis." Although her husband was her biggest support, Ceres also got a lot of support from her family. However, she did feel like she needed them as much as others. Ceres said, "Our situation was not that bad because we had each other. … Although we love our families, I, I moved away from home when I was seventeen years old, because I need to study."

In addition to roommates and family, the faculty and administrators really made an important impact on the participants while they were stranded. Emma shared:

I was taking classes and they went to online, and I did not have the necessary textbook for that so that was one concern of me, because I used to borrow it from the library and use it so. But my professor was kind enough to drop the book to my house, so that was really good.

Not only did the professor deliver a book to Emma, but he also made sure she had everything she needed to be able to work from home. Emma said:

It was difficult but me, and again my professor was helpful. In that case as well, he made sure that I can access the machine virtually, and we worked not efficiently, but yeah, we made it work somehow to some extent.

Emma and Tom really felt like some people went out of their way and were especially helpful during a difficult time. Tom mentioned the graduate secretary in his department:

She is extremely friendly, and she exactly knows what were the concerns that we have, where all things might go wrong. And particularly a person like me, I am very frank and feel free to contact her and ask things about. So, she also makes sure that she is always

available to help. So, she knows even the functioning of the department, the things that go into functioning. And she also knows people from my own research group to having formal conversations about. And she has been here for a long time. She also knows how the university functions, what to expect, what not to expect. I think that person, I think, I would call a big resource for me.

All the participants said that the professors and faculty did a wonderful job with everything transitioning online. Ceres said, "It was really fluid, and again going back to what I said before, about the faculty, the body of faculty that we have. I think they did an amazing job." Emma said:

> And academically, I think, every, every professor in the university whose courses I was taking, they made it, the transition, they made it very easy, and they, they were not very strict about the, the deadlines, because they know it was the life was very disruptive during that time. So, and they also offered all the help and the resources they could possibly give us to make sure that we are, we are performing, you know? We are trying. We are, we are performing, and, and it is and the transition they made sure that the transition is not too drastic for us. So, academically, it was all good. They made, they used to send us beforehand the questions, or they used to ask us questions, and what we need what we want to do. If they, we are comfortable with that or not, how we, how we want to proceed with all these things. Basically, yeah. They were there for us, you know. All the professors and the university in whole was for us for the students. And yeah, academically, it was not overwhelming for me. Actually, it was really, really a good experience. and I am thankful to them for being so available, you know, being and, and listening to us.

Emma felt that in addition to the professors and faculty, the entire university was supportive and helpful through during the experience. Emma, Tom, and Emilia Garcia said that their advisors were good at checking on them and helping them. Emilia Garcia said:

> I think my advisor really helped me a lot. Like, we kept meeting every week through Zoom, and we had like Zoom meetings through Zoom, and like I had my thesis to write, and so I kept sending her updates on what I was doing every week or so. And, so, um, that was nice. She was also telling me that I should not be working all day, that I should also try to at least go out for a walk a little bit by myself um to kind of not be locked inside my apartment all day, which was true.

Emilia Garcia's advisor helped her a lot by not only helping her with her studies but also by checking on her physical and mental health. Emma said:

> I think my advisor played a big part. So, he made sure that we are comfortable enough to do meetings on the Zoom platform, and he made sure that, if, if at all, we are not as productive as it should have been, he is still okay with it you know he made us, he assured us that, that it is all okay. You just need to keep working and do not stress up yourself. And in every meeting, he made sure that he asked about our family, how we are doing, and, and like he showed that he cared. You know, I think that helped a lot.

> Like Emilia Garcia, Emma felt that her advisor was also good at checking on her and asking about her family. Tom also mentioned how that regular connection with an advisor was very helpful for him. Tom said:

> I used to have regular meetings with how things are happening and so that, if anything happened, at least I will have one person with whom who has the knowledge of how the

things were developing and stuff like that. So, I think that person, he is also my current

advisor now. So he was, I think, a lot of help to me during that time.

Another benefit of meeting regularly was that Tom's advisor was able to identify times he was

struggling with productivity.

While the participants were losing some of the friendships that they had made in the

United States, some of the participants reconnected with friends back in their home countries.

Emilia Garcia said, "I did also do a video call with my high school friends. Something that we

had never done before, and I do appreciate that because I do not really see them often." Both

Emma and Emilia Garcia were happy to reconnect with their friends back home.

There were many social connections gained or strengthened throughout their experiences.

The bonds with the participant's roommates grew stronger. They were supported by various

family members or significant others. And they felt very supported by the faculty, staff, and

advisors in their programs of study and work. Also, some of the participants were able to connect

with old friends.

The theme of social connections was very clear from this study. Unfortunately, some of

the connections were lost. However, there were also social connections made and even

strengthened. Others were an important part of these participant's experiences.

Essential Theme 5: Self-Identifying Deeper Meaning of Being an International

Student

For all the participants, the experience of being stranded was rooted in their experience as

an international student. However, there were times throughout this experience that the

participants identified a deeper meaning to the experience as an international student, or that they

particularly felt that their experience was different from other students because they were

international students. While all the participants for this study were chosen because they matched the criteria of being an international student, their identity as an international student and the meaning of that was a theme in this study.

Clearly all four participants identified that they were unable to travel home to be with their families during the pandemic because that was a part of the criteria for this study. However, they also pointed out how it was uniquely different than the other students in the United States who could go and be with their families. Emma said, "You could not go back to your family because you were so far away." Emilia Garcia said:

I think mostly that I could not even consider going back to my family, because I know some, like, students from the United States, they would go back to their families, or at least, had the chance or the opportunity to do that. Um, I could not.

Unfortunately, not only could the participants not travel home to see their families, but this also had other implications. Emma said not being able to go home affected her financially, too. She said:

I think, going back to family yes, and also maybe you would have saved money, you know? I am being here, I am spending money. And if I was with the family, go back, and I think I would have saved so much of money, you know? That would have helped my financial status as an international student. We, we have to pay more than some students here, and we do not get to work. Um, because we have our on our visa status, we have some working our limitations. We cannot go beyond that. Yeah. So there are things which I think, being an international, you have to go through, which are inevitable. But, yeah, so those are the main concerns.

Another aspect of being an international student deals with sense of belonging. Tom mentioned how important it was for his identity as an Indian student to connect with others who had a similar background, and how only those from a similar background could understand him. Tom said:

> You come, come across people from the same community, who sometimes actually come from the same background, with whom you feel more comfortable discussing like the issues that you are trying to go through. So, these all kind of social interactions, which actually gave a holistic perspective of my existence here, both personally, academically, professionally. What is the professional expectation one has to, uh, showcase to thrive in this environment, and how we differ from what we have been considering about it from our own cultural background.

As an international student, Tom felt a different connection with those from a similar background as him. In fact, having those relationships and people who understood him was a significant part of his existence. Ceres also pointed out how she felt as though she was a part of two different countries. Ceres said:

> Despite how many years you spend in the country, it is not your country, and it will never be. And that is fine. I do not even feel that Argentina is my country. I have that problem that happens sometimes with people moving countries that you do not belong anywhere. And for me it is fine, I can live with that. I know that there are some people that struggle with that. But it is not my case.

While Ceres does not feel that she belongs to either country, she does not mind because she feels that it gives her perspective. Furthermore, Emilia Garcia did not feel that the United States owed her anything. Emilia Garcia said:

I think it is just that, again, we did not know and there were just a lot of uncertainty. And I do not know if, it felt like, I guess, obviously, I am not from this country and I am one of those persons who thinks that the United States does owe me anything. And so I was not expecting them to look after me. And if I needed some things, I probably should have gone back to, like, my country. Um, but, obviously I would not do that because I was not going to be able to come back, which I did want to do. So, it was a little bit of I want to stay here, but then again, if I stay here and something happens to me, obviously, I am not priority here. And so, eh.

While not belonging, having different social connections, and not being a priority can be challenging, there was also pride in the participants' experiences as international students. Ceres felt that she was able to overcome more because she was an international student. She said, "But I think coming from countries where you do not have so many resources available all the time makes you a little bit more resourceful and inventive." Emilia Garcia also felt proud of everything she overcame. She said:

I think it taught me a lot about myself, um, and what I can overcome. Um, I guess, just being by myself for so many weeks or months, uh, really taught me that I can, do like, I guess I do not need anyone else to do what I do. Um, sorry (holding back tears).

Unfortunately, the participants identified some experiences of being an international student during the pandemic as challenging, such as not belonging, inability to connect and be understood, and even feeling taken care of. However, these challenges also helped them overcome because of their identities as international students.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, data collected from four participants provided a detailed presentation of the study findings. This phenomenological study focused on understanding the experiences of international students who were stranded in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. The meaning of the experience was expressed in the participants narratives, and the results revealed five essential themes. The next chapter will address the essence of being stranded, interpretation and summary of findings, and implications and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The intent of this study was to share the experiences of graduate international students who were stranded in the United States because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study addressed the research questions in the participants' own words. While research explores the experiences of international students studying in the United States, a great deal of value comes from hearing them describe what they experienced in the spring 2020 semester while they were stranded. The findings of this study cannot be generalized to all international students who were stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that was not the goal. However, they allow an accessible view into the participant's lives. Descriptive (transcendental) phenomenology captured the type of data that is rarely presented in the literature (Moustakas, 1994). By sharing their experiences, the participants invited others into their world. In an area of research dominated by literature pre-COVID-19, the findings of this study present a new perspective on the international student experience of being stranded during the pandemic.

The research question guiding this study was: How do international students describe their experiences while being stranded in the United States following the COVID-19 outbreak? Five essential themes were identified from the data analysis process that shed light on that phenomenon. To further discuss the research findings, this chapter is organized into five sections: The Essence of Being Stranded, Interpretation and Summary of Findings, Implications for Practice, Recommendations for Future Studies, and Conclusion.

The Essence of Being Stranded

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of international students who were stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the study systematically describes the essence of being stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic. As

discussed by four international graduate students, it was the inability and prevention of travel to their home countries for various reasons. Each study participant reported their experiences spanning about 9 weeks from spring break 2020 to the end of the semester in mid-May 2020. Although the sample size for this study was four international graduate students, the essence of their shared narrative is a peak into the lived-experiences of international graduate students stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic.

International graduate students wanted to be with their families to help them, and they had various concerns for their families, especially for their health. In addition, participants were concerned about the government and health systems in their home countries. Although they could not be with their families, the international graduate students tried to stay connected and help their families from afar with advice and communication. While also concerned about themselves, the international graduate students had greater concerns for their families. They were not too worried about getting sick from the virus; the concern was about what to do, where to go, and how insurance worked in the United States. Simultaneously, the international graduate students were transitioning their studies, research, and employment online. Participants reported disappointment in missing some of the in-person aspects of the classes, and they had concerns about being able to complete their research. However, thanks to technology and help from faculty and staff, they were able to complete their studies and research online. Similarly, teaching online presented challenges for participants. Again, most things were adapted and completed online. While transitioning everything online, the participants were creating routines —such as setting alarms, scheduling breaks, and getting out for walks—and establishing established designated workspaces at home.

Participants also navigated changing social connections. While some of the relationships and connections were lost—academic departments, classmates, and friends—many social relationships were strengthened or became a form of support. Family, faculty, administration, and friends back home were important social connections for the international graduate students. Finally, self-identifying the deeper meaning of being an international student was an important part of the essence of being stranded. There were times that they identified that they had more challenges because they were international, and they also examined their sense of belonging. However, in the end, their identity is what helped them overcome everything to be successful.

In conclusion, each of the four participants defined being stranded in a manner consistent with their experiences. The essential themes helped define the essence of being stranded. The participants indicated that they perceived that they were stranded upon looking back at their experience. There were times the participants described being stranded as frustrating, stressful, scary, and chaotic. However, looking back they also said there was not much they would change about the situation and that they were proud of what they overcame and their identity as an international student.

Interpretation and Summary of Findings

Five essential themes were identified from the data analysis process. These themes were temporally bound experiences in the semester journey from first learning of classes transitioning online to the end of the spring 2020 semester (as outlined in the criteria). The five essential themes were having concern for family and self; transitioning online; creating a healthy routine; changing social connections; and self-identifying deeper meaning of being an international student. Each theme represents a part of the experience for Emilia Garcia, Tom, Ceres, and Emma as they navigated the uncharted semester of being stranded during the pandemic. To

interpret and summarize the findings of this study, I began by reviewing the literature, comparing it to the findings of this study, addressing new findings to the study, and interpreting the findings for this study.

Some of the findings from this study were reflected in previous literature related to international students' experiences while stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previously, I presented a foundation of literature for positioning the study within a framework of existing publications involving both international students in higher education and previous crisis, including what we knew about the COVID-19 outbreak. The literature review revealed that international students faced a variety of challenges during the pandemic (Dickerson, 2020; Firang, 2020; Kanwar & Carr, 2020; Srikanth, 2020). Many factors contributed to the vulnerability of international students during the COVID crisis. Dickerson (2020) wrote, "The campus closures have created much greater calamity in the lives of the more than a million international students who left their home countries to study in the United States" (p. 1). The literature addressed a variety of challenges faced by international students stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bilecen, 2020; Dickerson, 2020; Fischer, 2020; Li, 2020). However, the findings of this study revealed that the experience international students had while stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic was more in depth than merely facing challenges.

Financial Concern

Financial challenges were identified in the literature review as a challenge for international students during the pandemic. Work restrictions, unemployment, and lack of financial aid caused international students to be hit extremely hard financially during the pandemic (Dickerson, 2020; Pollak, 2020; Srikanth, 2020). However, in this study, financial challenges were not identified by the participants; instead it was more of a concern for finances.

Financial challenge relates to obstacles that an individual must overcome related to finances; financial concern is the fear an individual has about finances.

According to previous literature, work restrictions and unemployment affected many international students during the start of the pandemic (Dickerson, 2020). Many international students lost their source of income when the pandemic happened. Pollak (2020) wrote, "Only 31 per cent had a job before COVID-19, and nearly all respondents have now lost these jobs" (p. 1). However, in this study, all four participants continued working during the pandemic and it did not affect their financial situation.

While the students did not face the challenges of work restrictions or unemployment resulting in a lack of income, there was still concern about finances. Emma said, "During that time it was all full of rumors, so we were scared that university may pay us less or stop paying us for a semester." Recent literature supported the concern that the international graduate students had about funding for work. Sustarsic and Zhang (2022) said, "Considering the university's budget cuts due to the pandemic, students felt anxious whether their hiring departments would be able to secure funding for another year" (p. 70).

In addition to income, there were thoughts of saving money and facing surprise financial costs during the pandemic. Emma also expressed how she thought she could have saved money by traveling home and living with her family if possible. And she mentioned how it is already more expensive for international students to study in the United States. Emma and Tom were both worried about the financial aspect if they caught COVID because they were unsure about health insurance. This study did not identify financial challenges for the participants. However, it did identify that finances were a concern for the international graduate students.

While previous and current literature mentioned financial challenges that international students faced during the pandemic, this study emphasizes the concern that the participants had while stranded (Dickerson, 2020; Pollak, 2020; Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022). Mbous et al. (2022) said, "Opinions concerning the impact of departmental financial support were, for the most, auspicious" (p. 9). These findings show how important graduate research and graduate teaching jobs are for international students, and how important they were during the pandemic. Additionally, more current research and this study show that international students working for university departments had more job and financial security (Mbous et al., 2022).

Adaptation to School and Work Online

Findings from this study showed that international students had to adapt to doing their studies and jobs online. The literature review did not address how international students were affected when everything transitioned online. However, this and other studies addressed how international students adjusted to their studies and jobs online during the pandemic. There was a lot of uncertainty, some challenges, and even some benefits as the participants adjusted to studies and work online.

All four study participants mentioned the transition online and how different it was teaching, working, researching, and taking classes online. At first, the participants were unsure of how it would be done. While some things adapted easier, such as lectures, there was a lot of uncertainty about labs, research, and completing graduation requirements.

Since the start of the pandemic, many studies addressed universities transitioning online. Various studies identified challenges during the transition online (Chusak et al., 2022; Li, 2022; Maleku et al., 2022; Wright-Mair et al., 2021). Li (2022) said, "Challenges comprised adaptability issues due to the sudden shift to online classes, time-management issues, being

distracted by social media plus technological obstacles" (p. 16). Some findings in this study supported the literature that identified these challenges. Adaptability issues referred to the sudden shift to online classes, meaning that they needed additional time to get accustomed to the new learning style (Li, 2022). Emma mentioned how everything took more time and it made it difficult to work on research. She said, "That took a lot of time, so, basically we, I did not have enough time to do my research, so that was the biggest concern." Tom also mentioned how difficult the adjustment was and that it affected his productivity.

From the uncertainty and these challenges, participants adjusted to be successful online. Participants established routines to help with adaptability issues. It is important for students studying online to make healthy habits to adjust to an online environment (Chusak et al., 2022). While the students were struggling adjusting online with time and productivity, creating a healthy routine was very helpful for them. This included making schedules and taking breaks for walks or exercise. Being successful online requires a lot of discipline and motivation (Alaklabi et al., 2021). In addition to routine, advisors and faculty helped students adjust to being successful online.

Additionally, some aspects of transitioning online were easy and even beneficial to the participants. In contrast to current literature, social media and technology were not identified as challenges in this study but instead were aids for the students (Li, 2022). Emilia Garcia mentioned how it was helpful reading about other people's experiences on social media. It was the same with technology. While adapting to the format was challenging, the technology was helpful for the participants. Emma said, "So the way they transitioned the in-person classes to the online that was so quick and so efficient, and I was like, really surprised, and I got to learn so much of cool technology, and how to use it." Ceres mentioned how having access to unlimited

Zoom was one of the most useful things for her during this time and how it helped connect her to so many people worldwide.

This study identified how international graduate students adjusted to working and studying online. Martirosyan et al. (2022) said, "While most international students managed the transition well, they faced similar struggles as their non-international peers" (p. 92). Although the students adjusted and transitioned to working and studying online, there were still challenges. Students adapted by creating healthy routines. In addition, there were also benefits and support for the students adjusting to classes and work online. Shifting to online classes as both students and teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic constituted unprecedented experience and brought priceless lessons from which we should learn. Teaching students how to create a healthy routine and providing various technology and support, can help students with the online transition (Chusak et al., 2022; Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022).

Isolation and Loss of Social Connections

Feelings of isolation resulted from campuses transitioning online during the pandemic and international students were no exception (Fischer, 2020; Li, 2020; Maleku et al., 2022). Social isolation deals with social contacts and having few people to interact with regularly (Wright-Mair et al., 2021). During the pandemic, students were confined to doing everything in their homes, leading some to face isolation. While this study did identify isolation, not all participants felt isolated. Therefore, from this study, we identify both isolation and loss of social connection from various groups during the pandemic.

Some study participants really struggled doing everything online; others were relieved and happy to stay home. The participants who enjoyed and relied on being social felt a greater

sense of isolation (Fischer, 2020; Li, 2020). However, all participants reported a loss of social connections.

This study identified that academic departments, classmate connection, on-campus student organizations, and friendships were lost or hindered during the pandemic. Not being able to meet as easily with research groups and colleagues was challenging. This study also found that working with classmates became very challenging. Groups did not want to meet via Zoom because so much time already was being spent online and people were adjusting to the platform. The top academic challenges reported by international students during the pandemic were difficulties in engaging with classmates, having group discussions, and completing group work (Martirosyan et al., 2022).

In addition, the loss or absence of student organizations was a challenge, especially the international student organizations including the ISSS. While one participant did recall seeing emails occasionally from ISSS, another expressed not hearing much from the group. Mbous et al. (2022) said, "Additionally, international students were dissatisfied with the International Students' Office, mostly pertaining to their communication with respect to ICE regulations, legal status, orientation, and guidance for administrative paperwork (in-and-out of campus), and commitment to social blossoming during the pandemic" (p. 10). Although ISSS was emailing about opportunities, there was a disconnect in the support that the students were getting. Before the pandemic, ISSS and other international student organizations had been a good way for international students to meet others with a similar background.

Unfortunately, this study also revealed that participants lost connection with other international students and friends during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, participants would spend a lot of time with each other in their apartments. However, because of the pandemic, they

could no longer gather. Also identified was the possibility of meeting new friends on campus and in informal settings. While Emma mentioned having a smaller group of friends, being isolated from her other friends meant she no longer had a ride to the grocery store and getting food became a challenge.

From this study, we saw that all participants lost social connections. However, unlike previous literature, not all students felt isolated. Unfortunately, that does not mean that these losses do not have the negative effects that isolation has. Loss of interpersonal contacts can have severe negative effects on international students (Maleku et al., 2022). It can benefit international students to create online communities and build connections among students to counteract these negative effects (Maleku et al., 2022).

Social Support

While this study did identify forms of isolation, there were also important groups of social support during this time. Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez (2022) said, "Social support systems for international students can consist of family and close friends back home as well as different connections in the host country including co-nationals, other international students, local/domestic students, faculty or staff, or a combination" (p. 137). According to this study, family and friends in the participants' home countries—along with friends, faculty, and staff in the United States—were significant social support groups for international graduate students while they were stranded during the pandemic.

This study found that the participants talked more to their families during the pandemic. Maleku et al. said (2022), "Despite being away from their families, international students identified their families as their most extensive support system" (p. 2427). In addition to family, this study identified that reconnecting with friends back home was a form of support during the

pandemic. Staying connected to friends in their home countries can help international students feel supported (Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022).

In the United States and at the university, there were significant support groups for the participants. Roommates were some of the most significant supports during the pandemic (Maleku et al., 2022). Working together and discussing the experience with a roommate or significant other was helpful for the study participants. All participants in the study also identified faculty, staff, and advisors as very helpful and instrumental in their success during the pandemic. Teachers delivered books to students; staff were very helpful and knowledgeable; and advisors helped with both challenging schoolwork and participant well-being. Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez (2022) said, "students who feel highly supported by faculty members tend to feel less lonely" (p. 137).

The social aspect was a very significant part of the international graduate students' experiences. The literature addresses the various significant support groups for these students (Maleku et al., 2022; Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022). Social support for international students can come from a variety of sources both in and out of the United States. It can be beneficial to encourage students to stay connected with friends and family back home. In addition, where students live and who they live with can provide additional support for international students. Finally, from this study we see how important faculty, staff, and advisors are for social support.

Inability to Help Family

Previous literature did not address much about the concern the students had for their families back home. In fact, it did not ask much why students wanted to return home in the first place. More of the literature focused on the things that prevented them from traveling instead of

why they wanted to return home (Dickerson, 2020; Jacobs & Mitchell, 2021). From this study, it was interesting to learn that the participants were concerned for their families and wanted to return home to help them. There is little literature about the care and responsibility the international students feel for their families back home. One of the greater challenges for the participants was the inability to be with family, especially to help them. While being stranded, all four participants were concerned for their families. Tom was concerned about the government going to his family's house; Ceres was concerned about the government enforcing "martial court." Emma and Ceres were both concerned about how well the health systems in their home countries would be able to take care of the sick. This study revealed a new and very significant challenge for international graduate students stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic: how and why participants were worried for their families.

While there was little that universities could do to help students who could not return home, it is beneficial to understand the responsibility that international students feel for their families. Being away from family support can cause anxiety, however, university support could help mitigate the anxiety experienced by international students during the pandemic (Mbous et al., 2022).

Fear of Prejudice

The literature mentioned international students as targets of prejudice. This study revealed that international students feared prejudice during the pandemic. Emma stated how it was a fear of hers sometimes while she was shopping. She worried that someone would possibly say something to her, especially about her mask. Zhang et al. (2022) said, "Yet for many students, the pandemic and uncertainty about immigration status made them question their sense of belonging and their racial/cultural identity, creating psychological conflict and in some cases

overt anxiety" (p. 3). Whenever Emma would go shopping, she was more aware of her cultural identity. Tom also mentioned how he was more aware of his cultural identity online and how he was perceived by others online based on how well he spoke English. Tom said, "And what I spoke and how I spoke really mattered; they were also decisive of what kind of relationship I was going to have them in the long run." Again, Tom did not say that he had been a target of prejudice. However, there was concern of how he was perceived.

The literature mentioned how many Asian international students had experienced added racial discrimination. From this study, of the four participants, two were of Asian descent and these two mentioned being more aware of possible prejudices. Universities may be able to support international students by directly acknowledging current challenges and by advocating for international students and strengthening anti-racism efforts and education on campus with a focus on the unique needs of international students (Zhang et al., 2022).

Identifying Agency

Finally, from this study, the participants were able to express their agency. Agency is the sense of control that an individual feels in their life and belief in their ability to handle a wide range of tasks and situations (Tran & Vu, 2018). The foundation of this study centered around international students being stranded in part to their inability to travel to their home countries. The literature review addressed various push and pull factors that affect international students. However, the previous literature did not address when mobility for international students is prevented or stopped completely. The participants shared their experiences of being stranded. While they expressed situations that were out of their control, they also addressed their feelings, understanding, and handling of the situation. Ceres shared that she felt that she was not a part of either country, the United States or Argentina, but she was okay with that. Ceres also expressed

that made her more able to overcome challenging situations. Emilia Garcia also shared how proud she was of herself for all that she had overcome.

Whenever international students travel abroad, they travel knowing that there will be important situations they will miss back home, and they also know that ultimately various people may be in control of their mobility (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Jacobs & Mitchell, 2021). International students stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic are an example of this. However, throughout this experience, the participants expressed their abilities to handle such challenging situations. Borders will continue to be affected by wars and pandemics. From this study, international student services can see how important it is in helping international students identify agency to overcome such challenges.

Summary of Findings

Most of the literature focused on the challenges international students faced while being stranded. Early on, little was known about the effects COVID-19 had on the international student population. When the pandemic began, there was a lot of concern for students and how damaging the pandemic would be on this population. While this study confirmed previous literature and found that the students did have many challenges throughout their experience of being stranded, this study also identified additional findings that describe the experience of being stranded.

Implications for Practice

Cahapay (2020) said, "By exploring these lived experiences, it offers inputs for the development of various mechanisms that will improve the conditions of this vulnerable group in times of unprecedented crisis" (p. 603). The data collected from this study can offer several

opportunities and considerations for higher education relative to other researchers, academic administrators, student services professionals, and future international students.

University administrators, faculty, and staff all play very important roles in supporting international students (Firang, 2020; Nguyen, 2016). From this study, we learned how important graduate teaching assistant and graduate research assistant jobs are for international students when it comes to financial stability (Mbous et al., 2022). University administrators should be aware of this and provide opportunities for on-campus work when possible. In addition, this study revealed how important administrators and faculty were in supporting international students, especially in challenging times (Zhang et al., 2022). Faculty and advisors played one of the more significant roles of social support for the participants of this study. Because the participants had built previous relationships with their teachers and advisors, it was easier to continue those connections once they transitioned online. While there are organizations and departments that specifically help international students, faculty and staff should not underestimate their value as support and resources for students. Also, faculty and staff should acknowledge the unique challenges that international students may face—separation from family and fears of prejudice—and advocate on their behalf (Zhang et al., 2022). Lastly, school administrators can help international students be prepared for an online format. Li (2022) said, "A blended model that combines online and face-to-face classes could be adopted to boost students' preparedness for unexpected circumstances during emergencies" (p. 16). Online classes may be a new growing trend for higher education (Li, 2022). University faculty, staff, and administrators can help prepare international students for this trend.

For future international students, the results of the study have highlighted a variety of challenges international students may face in the United States during a crisis. However, there

are things we learned from this study that international students can do. First, students should

seek teaching and research jobs for financial security. Students should also establish a healthy

routine and seek various social support groups including online communities.

Altogether, these findings bring up some interesting reflections and implications for

future practice. I hope that this data sheds light on the complexity of the international graduate

student experience and how it is shaped by the experience of being stranded during a crisis

(Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022). In identifying the complexity of the experience, there is

hope that this study provides all those at the university and future international students

implications and guides for future practice and beneficial resources.

Recommendations for Future Studies

This qualitative research was designed to explore the experiences of international

students stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because the COVID-19 pandemic is a new

and evolving crisis, the study contributes to the body of knowledge that exists within higher

education in a few ways. There have been various studies conducted on international students in

the United States, but little is understood about their experiences of being stranded in the United

States at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Results of the present study have indicated

relevant points that help explain their experiences. Pandemic-related campus closures impacted

students (Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022). International students faced many challenges and

highlighted the importance of family and other support groups. All faculty and university

members can make a difference in being support for this group of students.

In addition to the contributions of this study, several recommendations are suggested for

future research. While this study's findings add to the existing literature, they are not without

limitation. The COVID-19 pandemic is an evolving crisis, and this research only focused on a

particular period. Future studies should examine the pandemic today and the lasting effects of international students being stranded.

Because of the nature of qualitative research studies, as well as the phenomenological methodology chosen, a broader survey of international students at multiple degree levels could further illuminate the experience of being stranded. Although this study did not specifically address or explore in depth the differences in the nationalities of the participants, regionality could play a role in the experiences. Furthermore, the sample size used in this study does not represent a global perspective of international graduate students. In addition, different recruitment procedures could be used, such as selecting a different research site, to get more participants. Future research studies could also be conducted on the perspectives of being stranded by interviewing online international students on specific continents or in various regions of the world.

Lastly, future research studies could use a variety of research methods to ask similar questions. This qualitative research was designed to help understand the experience of international graduate students to identify the meaning to better serve this population in the future. The directions for future research and the implications addressed in this study are steps designed to improve higher education for international student populations studying in the United States.

Conclusion

The primary research question of the study was how do international students describe their experiences while being stranded in the United States following the COVID-19 outbreak. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of international students who were stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic. A phenomenological approach was

used as it fit the criteria of understanding the lived experiences of individuals in a specific

phenomenon of interest (international students stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic). The

essential themes jointly highlighted the essence of the international graduate student experience

of being stranded. Results of the study reflected previous literature and added to the literature of

what international students experienced while stranded studying in the United States.

As we are 3 years from the start of the pandemic, we have a better picture of the

experience. This study has helped fill the gaps and add to the literature of the international

graduate student experience. Suggestions for future research include using different variations of

the study including time, population, measurements, or methods.

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Appendix A - IRB Approval

KANSAS STATE
UNIVERSITY | University Research
Compliance Office

TO: **Christy Craft**   Proposal Number IRB-11257
          Spec Ed, Counsel & Student Aff
          Manhattan, KS 66506

FROM: **Sara Rosenkranz, PhD, Chair**
          Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 08/03/2022

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "International students stranded: A phenomenological approach to
         understanding international students' experiences following the COVID-19 outbreak/Dissertation."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full
approval. This proposal is **approved for _three years_ from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 08/01/2022

EXPIRATION DATE: 07/31/2025

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

    No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting
human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to
continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced
post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries,
unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately
to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Electronically signed by Sara Rosenkranz, PhD on 08/03/2022 10:08 PM ET

Appendix B - Initial Recruitment Letter

Subject line: International student participants needed for doctoral dissertation research

Hello,

My name is Taylor Jennings, and I am a doctoral student at ****** ***** University. I am currently working on my dissertation which is investigating how international students describe their experiences while being stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am seeking students who:

- wanted to return to their home country once the pandemic began in spring 2020, but were unable to return due to closed borders, visa restrictions, financial restrictions, access concerns, health concerns, or any other self-identified reason,

- were enrolled at the research site and stayed in the United States throughout the entire Spring 2020 semester,

- possessed an F-1 student visa for identification as international students when they were studying,

- had studied in the United States for a minimum of one academic year prior to the spring 2020 semester,

- were full-time graduate students during the spring 2020 semester,

- are willing to be interviewed at least twice for the purpose of the study, and

- are willing to set aside one hour of time for each interview.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to:

- complete a brief online demographic questionnaire,

- attend two Zoom interviews (approximately 45-60 minutes),

- and may review the interview transcripts for accuracy and further comment (sent via email).

Students who choose to participate in the study will choose a pseudonym (fake name) to protect their identity. Remember that participation is completely voluntary, and participants can choose to stop and end involvement at any point. Participants who participate in the study will be awarded a $25 gift card upon completion.

You can contact me with questions at ***************@***.edu or (***) ***-****. Please feel free to share this with other international students at who may also meet the criteria at ****** ***** University.

I appreciate your consideration. Your input could help others understand the experience international students had during the COVID-19 pandemic.

If you are interested in participating, please go to:
[Qualtrics Survey link] and complete the brief demographic questionnaire.

Sincerely,

Taylor R. Jennings

Appendix C - Demographic Questions

If you are willing to participate in this study, please complete this demographic questionnaire

that is necessary for the purposes of the study. Your information is important and will be a

source that informs this study. You can contact me with questions at

**************@***.edu or (***) ***-****.

(These questions will be created in Qualtrics, a web-based survey, and distributed through a link

in an email).

1. What is your age? _____

2. What is your gender?

   a. Male

   b. Female

   c. Non-binary/third gender

   d. Prefer not to say

3. What is your country of origin or residency? _____

4. Which race or ethnicity best describes you? (allow multiple answers)

   a. American Indian or Alaskan Native

   b. Asian / Pacific Islander

   c. Black or African American

   d. Hispanic

   e. White / Caucasian

   f. Multiple ethnicity/ Other (please specify) _____

5. What is your academic class status?

    a. Undergraduate

    b. Graduate

6. What is your visa status?

    a. F-1

    b. J-1

    c. H-1B

    d. Other (please specify)

7. How long have you been studying in the United States?

    a. Less than 1 year

    b. 1-2 years

    c. 2-3 years

    d. 3-4 years

    e. More than 4 years

8. Do you have any family or support system available in the United States?

    a. No

    b. Yes

8A. Which family or support system do you have available in the United States?

    c. Parent(s)

    d. Sibling(s)

    e. Spouse

    f. Partner

    g. Cousin(s)

h. Other (please specify): _____

8B. Where does your family or support system live in the United States? _____

9. Where were you living when the spring 2020 semester began?

    a. On campus

    b. Off campus

    c. Other (please specify)

10. Did you live alone at the beginning of the spring 2020 semester?

    a. No

    b. Yes

11. Did you want to return to your home country when classes transitioned online due to COVID in the spring 2020 semester?

    a. No

    b. Yes

11A. Why did you want to return to your home country when classes transitioned online in the spring 2020 semester?

_____

_____

12. Were you prevented from returning to your home country during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?

    a. No

    b. Yes

12A. What factors prevented you from returning to your home country during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?

_____

_____

13. Did you move residency at any time during the spring 2020 semester?

    a. No

    b. Yes

13A. Why did you move residency during the spring 2020 semester?

_____

_____

14A. What is your name? _____

14B. What is your email address? _____

Thank you for responses to the previous questions. I will be in contact with you for the next steps of the study. Thank you for your participation.

Appendix D - Rejection to Participate Letter

Subject line: Notification for international student participants interested in doctoral dissertation research

Hello,

Thank you for taking the time to complete the online questionnaire. Based on the needs for this study, you have not been selected to participate in the study. Please understand this is not about you, but the rigid guidelines dictating this research.

Thank you for your interest in this study.

Sincerely,

Taylor R. Jennings

Appendix E - Informed Consent Form

Subject line: Notification for international student participants interested in doctoral dissertation research

Hello,

Thank you for taking the time to complete the online questionnaire. Based on the needs and criteria for this study, you have been selected to participate in the research study. Attached you will find an informed consent form. Once you read through the form carefully and decide you wish to participate, sign the form and return it to the researcher. You can contact me with questions at ***************@***.edu or (***) ***-****.

Sincerely,

Taylor R. Jennings

Attachment:

Project Title: "International students stranded: A phenomenological approach to understanding international students' experiences following the COVID-19 outbreak"

Project Approval Date: 8/1/22

Expiration Date: 7/31/25

Dear Participant,

You are being invited to participate in a research study. The following form will provide you with information of this research study, your involvement, and the associated risks and benefits of the research. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without repercussion. Please read this from carefully. It is important that you fully understand this form in order to make an informed decision of your participation.

The purpose of this study is focused on understanding the experiences of international students who were stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic which will contribute to the research literature.

The length of the study will be for one academic semester although active participation will be estimated at three hours. Data will be collected through a minimum of two interviews which will be approximately one hour in length each and consist of you reflecting and discussing your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring 2020 semester. Prior to the initial interview, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire with information regarding age, academic status, and so forth. The interviewer will conduct the interviews through Zoom. All interviews will be recorded for transcription and data analysis purposes. All interview transcripts and questionnaire documents will be safely stored on a computer with a password only accessible to the researcher. Before any interviews, you will be asked to select a pseudonym, fake name, which will be used to report findings in writings and/or presentations.

Your name will not be revealed in research findings in any way, and your identity as a participant will be known only to the researcher. Three years after the completion of this study, all data will be destroyed unless you agree to allow the researcher to keep them for further research or publication purposes.

There are no anticipated risks beyond those encountered in everyday life. However, please be aware that discussing the experience of being stranded might cause discomfort. If at any time you feel discomfort or wish to speak with someone, counseling services is the primary mental health resource on campus. They provide therapy, consultation, and referral information for students. Visit https://www.xxxxxxx.edu/counseling/

This study will likely not benefit you directly. However, your participation in this study will increase the understanding of the experiences of international students who were stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic. After the final interview, you will be provided a $25 gift card for the recognition of your valuable contribution to this study.

I would be happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed. You may view the final version of the dissertation and ask questions.

By signing below, you indicate that you understand the purpose, procedures, and risks and benefits of this study, and you agree to participate in this study. Once I receive your informed consent, I will send you an interview letter. I truly appreciate your time as a research participant in this study.

Sincerely,

Taylor R. Jennings

Doctoral Candidate

(***)***-****

**************@***.edu

Major Professor: Dr. Christy Craft

Principal Investigator

Department Chair/Associate Professor

Department of Special Education, Counseling and Student Affairs

(***)***-****

******@***.edu

Please check the boxes that apply:

_____ Yes _____ No, I agree to participate in this study.

_____ Yes _____ No, I (do not) allow the researcher to keep the data for further research or

   publication.

By signing below, I indicate that I have read and understood the nature, purpose, and procedures

of this study and I agree to participate in this study.

Participant Name _____

Signature _____ Date _____

If you have questions or wish to discuss on any aspect of the research with an official of the

university or the IRB, contact XXXX XXXXXXXXXX, Chair, Committee on Research

Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, XXXXXX XXXXX University, XXXXXXXXX,

XX XXXXX, (XXX) XXX-XXXX or XXXXX XXXXXX, Acting Associate Vice President for

Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, XXXXXX XXXXX University, XXXXXXXXX, XX

XXXXX, (XXX) XXX-XXXX.

Appendix F - Interview Letter

Hello,

Thank you! I received your informed consent form, and you are now enrolled in the study.
Before the first interview, I need you to do two things:

1. Your ability to speak openly about the topic is important to me and I am committed to
   protecting your identity from anyone other than the researcher. Please choose a pseudonym,
   fake name, and respond back to this email with your choice.

2. To schedule an interview, please send me three dates and times that work for you. Our
   individual Zoom interview will be approximately 45-60 minutes long. During the interview, I
   will be asking a series of semi-structured interview questions.

I look forward to your response back with your pseudonym, chosen fake name, and interview
times so we can proceed with the research. Again, I value your interest and effort in this project.
Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions. You can contact me with questions at
***************@***.edu or (***) ***-****.

Finally, if you know of anyone else that would meet this research criteria, please feel free to
share the survey link with them as well.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Taylor R. Jennings

Appendix G - First Interview Questions

Date:

Interviewer:

Participant's Pseudonym:

Start Time:

Duration Time:

Instructions: To begin the interview, I will start recording and read the date, interviewer, participant's pseudonym, time, and the following script:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. As described in the Informed Consent Form, the interest is in exploring how international students describe their experiences while being stranded in the United States following the COVID-19 outbreak. The questions I ask will have to do with your personal experiences and narratives as an international student.

Semi-Structured Interview

Establish the context of the participants' experience: Experience of being an international student stranded

I am interested in learning about your experience as an international student becoming stranded. Maybe we can start with your journey when campus closed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. What were your thoughts and feelings when you first heard about COVID-19?

2. To what extent were you worried about it in your home country or it reaching the United States?

3. Prior to spring break 2020, what concerns or change of plans did you have, if any, that were due to COVID-19?

4. Could you describe where you were and what you were feeling when you learned that classes had transitioned online due to COVID-19?

5. Can you describe the factors that prevented you from traveling to your home country during the online semester, Spring 2020?

Reconstruct the details of their experience within the context it occurs: Experience surrounding the pandemic

I would like to learn more about your personal life experience. Could we talk a bit about your day-to-day life during the pandemic?

6. What did a typical day look like for you during the pandemic in spring 2020?

7. What did your social circle look like?

8. What were your priorities during this time?

9. How did this experience of being stranded due to COVID-19 impact your experience as an international student? Academically and socially?

10. To what extent did you feel as though you had to choose between your academic career and your health and safety?

11. Explain how your view has changed, if at all, about studying in the U.S.

Appendix H - Second Interview Questions

Date:

Interviewer:

Participant's Pseudonym:

Start Time:

Duration Time:

Instructions: To begin the interview, I will start recording and read the date, interviewer, participant's pseudonym, time, and the following script:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. As described in the Informed Consent Form, the interest is in exploring how international students describe their experiences while being stranded in the United States following the COVID-19 outbreak. The questions I ask will have to do with your personal experiences and narratives as an international student.

Semi-Structured Interview

Encourage the participants to reflect on the meaning: The Individual's Experience

I would like to learn a bit more about your experiences surrounding being stranded. Please describe for me a situation in which you experienced being stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. How did you feel not being able to travel to your home country during the start of the pandemic?

2. What were some challenges you were faced with and how did you overcome them, if you did?

3. Could you describe your living situation as an international student during this time of being stranded and the rest of the spring 2020 semester?

4. Can you explain your financial situation during the pandemic? Were you able to work?

5. What health concerns, if any, did you experience during the pandemic?

6. Could you tell me about your support system as an international student? Both academic and personal?

7. What resources were particularly helpful to you as an international student?

8. Was there ever a time you felt your experiences were different from other students because you were an international student?

9. What was your communication like with your family back home?

10. If you could go back and do something different during this time as an international student, what would it be and why?

11. Is there anything else you think I should know, or you want to tell me, with regard to your experience of being stranded due to COVID-19?

Appendix I - Debriefing Statement for Participants

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your involvement in the research titled "International students stranded: A phenomenological approach to understanding international graduate students' experiences following the COVID-19 outbreak." This phenomenological study was conducted to examine the experiences of international students who were stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were analyzed through a phenomenological framework. Findings of the research are shared in the attachment.

Thank you for taking the time to review the interview transcripts that were sent to you for review and for the help in making the appropriate changes needed. After you review the final version of the dissertation, you may ask any questions that you have about the findings. Please feel free to contact me at ***************@***.*** or my major professor, Dr. XXXXXXX XXXXX at ******@***.edu.

If you have any questions regarding confidentiality of your identity as a participant of this research, contact XXXX XXXXXXXXXX, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, XXXXXX XXXXX University, XXXXXXXXX, XX XXXXX, (XXX) XXX-XXXX or XXXXX XXXXXX, Acting Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, XXXXXX XXXXX University, XXXXXXXXX, XX XXXXX, (XXX) XXX-XXXX.

Sincerely,

Taylor Jennings