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Surviving and Thriving: The First-Year Transition Experiences of Chinese Undergraduate Students in the United States

Abstract

The number of international students pursuing degrees at U.S. institutions at the undergraduate level surpassed those at the graduate level for the first time in 2013. Additionally, the majority of international students coming to the U.S. are from China. This phenomenological study used a conceptual framework of Schlossberg's Transition Model (1995) and the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (Museus, 2014) to analyze the experiences of Chinese undergraduate students in their first year of college in the United States. Three transition types were identified - academic, social/personal, and linguistic - and the students' preparation, sources of institutional support, and coping strategies for moving through these transitions were examined. Suggestions are offered for expanding theory and practice to encompass the unique needs of international students.

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Surviving and Thriving: The First-Year Transition Experiences of
Chinese Undergraduate Students in the United States

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Kerrie A. Montgomery

November 2016

Advisor: Dr. Judy Marquez-Kiyama

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ABSTRACT

Author: Kerrie A. Montgomery

Title: *Surviving and Thriving: The First-Year Transition Experiences of Chinese Undergraduate Students in the United States*

Advisor: Dr. Judy Marquez-Kiyama

Degree Date: November 2016

The number of international students pursuing degrees at U.S. institutions at the undergraduate level surpassed those at the graduate level for the first time in 2013. Additionally, the majority of international students coming to the U.S. are from China. This phenomenological study used a conceptual framework of Schlossberg's Transition Model (1995) and the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (Museus, 2014) to analyze the experiences of Chinese undergraduate students in their first year of college in the United States. Three transition types were identified – academic, social/personal, and linguistic – and the students' preparation, sources of institutional support, and coping strategies for moving through these transitions were examined. Suggestions are offered for expanding theory and practice to encompass the unique needs of international students.

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Surviving and Thriving: The First-Year Transition Experiences
of Chinese Undergraduate Students in the United States

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

International students currently account for 4.8% of students enrolled at all levels in institutions of higher education in the United States (“Open Doors,” 2015). With nearly 5 million international students estimated to be studying outside of their home countries worldwide, the United States, hosting approximately 17% of these students, is considered the top destination for those seeking degrees outside their home countries at both the graduate and undergraduate levels (ICEF Monitor, 2014). In 2013, for the first time in over a decade, the number of international students at the undergraduate level studying in the United States exceeded those at the graduate level (“Open Doors,” 2013). Moreover, despite competition from other English-speaking countries (Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada), the United States is well positioned to experience the greatest growth in undergraduate international student enrollment in the coming years (Choudaha, Chang, & Kono, 2013), even as Australia draws 24% of its undergraduates from other countries as compared to only 2% for the U.S.

The motivation for undertaking this research came from my personal experience as a university administrator in the United States. Having worked at institutions that were both public and private, large and mid-sized, and located in different regions of the country, I have interacted with international students attending these institutions as both

exchange student (J-1 visas) and matriculating students (F-1 visas). In the various professional positions I have held, I have been either directly involved in the experiences of these students, or have heard about challenges they faced while trying to adjust to their new learning environment. In my two most recent positions as a student affairs professional at two large, public, research universities located in the Southeastern United States, I have observed an increasing number of international students enrolling each year (at both the graduate and undergraduate levels). I believe that the increase in enrollment of international undergraduates, students who face unique adjustment issues beyond those of most domestic undergraduates, demands that programs and services be made available to support this valuable and highly sought after population of students. Given the value these students bring to campus through their cultural contributions, it is the obligation of U.S. institutions to provide an appropriate level of support to aid them in succeeding (Anderson, Carmichael, Harper, & Huang, 2009). The Institute for International Education (IIE) reports that in 2014/2015, international students contributed over \$30.5 billion dollars to the U.S. economy in the form of tuition, educational materials, housing, and living expenses. In light of the significant financial impact international students have on U.S. institutions and their local communities, it is in the best interest of administrators to support their successful transition to the university in an effort to retain them at their institutions.

Statement of Problem

In 2014-15, according to the Institute of International Education's (IIE) annual report, a record high number of international students¹, 974,926, were enrolled in U.S. institutions ("Open Doors," 2015). The 2013 report noted that enrollment of international undergraduate students from all countries exceeded graduate student enrollment from all countries for the first time in over a decade ("Open Doors," 2013). This trend continued in 2014/15 with 40.9% enrolling at the undergraduate level and 33.8% enrolling at the graduate level ("Open Doors," 2015). Furthermore, 31.2%, the highest number of international students enrolled in the United States, were from China ("Open Doors," 2015). The Chinese undergraduate population currently represents 12.8% of all international students enrolled in the United States, and is growing at a faster rate than the Chinese graduate population ("Open Doors," 2015). In spite of the continued growth of these populations, little research has been done to understand their experiences on campus, and what they have, want, and need in order to succeed in their transition and, ultimately, choose to remain at their institutions. As such, the following research questions will guide this study:

How do Chinese undergraduate students experience the first year of college at an institution in the United States?

¹ For the purposes of this research, international (or foreign) students will be defined using the working definition published by the American Council on Education (2006), "International students are defined as students who are neither U.S. citizens, immigrants, nor refugees, thus excluding permanent residents (p. 3)."

1. *How do they describe their motivations for pursuing a degree in the U.S.?*
2. *In what ways do they feel they were prepared to navigate the new environment?*
3. *How do they describe the support they had from the institution?*
4. *What strategies were most helpful in their transition process?*

International Undergraduate Enrollment Trends

Recent data continues to indicate an overall growth trend of international students in the United States (“Open Doors,” 2015), however the general body of literature on international student mobility does not often distinguish between graduate and undergraduate level enrollment, making it difficult to gain specific knowledge about either population. Until recently, international student enrollment in English-speaking host countries, including the United States, was largely at the graduate level. According to Open Doors (2015) a major shift occurred in the United States starting with the 2011/12 academic year. Table 1 illustrates the trajectory of the enrollment shift over a four-year period. This change is significant because the rate of graduate enrollment consistently exceeded that of undergraduate enrollment for at least the decade prior to this shift, with the gap ranging from a few to twenty thousand more graduate students in the United States in any given year (“Open Doors,” 2015). The sharp uptick of undergraduate enrollment, over 36,500 more international undergraduates than graduates studying in the United States in the past year alone, supports the need for this research as

an increase in enrollment numbers for this student population will require universities to be more responsive to their needs than ever before (Glass, Buus, & Braskamp, 2013).

Table 1

International Student Enrollment Rates

Year	Graduate Enrollment	Undergraduate Enrollment	% Difference Undergraduate v. Graduate Enrollment
2010/11	296,574	291,439	- 1.7%
2011/12	300,430	309,432	+2.9%
2012/13	311,204	339,993	+9.2%
2013/14	329,854	370,724	+8.8%
2014/15	362,228	398,824	+9.0%

Adapted from Open Doors, “Fast Facts,” 2015.

Based on personal observation and anecdotal information gained throughout my career, it appears that international students at the graduate level are typically welcomed into a community of scholars associated with their academic programs, in which they receive academic and social support in their adjustment to the U.S. university setting.

International students at the undergraduate level, on the other hand, appear to be received into a large entering class of other undergraduate students who are primarily domestic, and are not offered a great deal of individualized attention to address their unique needs related to adjustment and persistence.

Mobility, Recruitment, and Access of International Students to the United States

The United States has long been the top host country for international students, and the continued growth of enrollment numbers is due to a variety of “push-pull factors,” (Mazzarol & Souter, 2002), those that push the student from their home country

and/or pull them toward the host country. Among these factors are: Reputation of U.S. higher education overall; Reputations of specific institutions; Lack of access to higher education in the home country; Potential for enhanced employment opportunities at home or in the host country; Efforts of U.S. institutions to recruit qualified international students to their campuses; Immigration/visa policies (Douglass & Edelstein, 2009; Goodman, 2009; Goodman & Gutierrez, 2011; IIE, 2013; Mazzarol & Souter, 2002; McMurtrie, 2008; “Open Doors,” 2013).

Push factor: Lack of access to quality higher education in home country.

Though some high-quality higher education is available in China, gaining access can be extremely difficult. In the 1990s, the Chinese government identified and focused on strengthening the academic programs of approximately one hundred top-tier universities (Michael & Gu, 2016). A few years later, the government also invested nearly \$70 billion dollars (US) for targeted enhancements to fewer than half of these institutions, creating a small group of elite, high-quality universities (Michael & Gu, 2016). A 2011 report on mobility trends of Chinese students noted that in spite of the fact that there were nearly 2,000 institutions of higher education in China, the

rapid growth of the student population in the past decade has also created challenges in the area of quality control of programs, government investment, and hiring and retaining faculty members...the system as a whole is not able to meet the public’s demand for high-quality higher education (Xinyu, 2011, p. 26).

Admission to the elite universities is determined in large part by scores on the Chinese college entrance exam, known as the *gaokao*, which is administered over two to three days every June (Gu & Magaziner, 2016). With limited space at the top-tier institutions, and a significant drop in the quality of universities for students forced into second and

third-tier schools as a result of their scores, the pressure on test-takers (over nine million of them in 2015) to do well on this exam is extremely high (Gu & Magaziner, 2016). In addition, social, and especially economic changes in China over the past two decades, have resulted in a new, wealthier middle-class who can afford to send their children abroad for a high-quality education (Brooks & Water, 2011). As a result, the financial freedom of Chinese families to send their children abroad for a U.S. education, and the failure of China's educational system to meet the demand for high-quality education in the country, has pushed many Chinese students to pursue degrees in the United States (Choudaha & Chang, 2012). The desire to study very specialized fields is another impetus for international students to look beyond their home countries for their degrees (Altbach, 2004). The United States is home to a high number of programs in the sciences, as well as the areas of business and management, that receive high rankings from a variety of sources and, as a result, draw a large number of international students (Goodman & Gutierrez, 2011).

Push factor: Enhanced job opportunities. China's political and economic growth over the past thirty years has created the need for a well-educated population in a variety of fields, especially those related to technology, business and industry, and agriculture (Brooks & Waters, 2011). The quality of U.S. higher education, which is considered a pull factor for international students, is directly related to the push factor of enhanced job opportunities. According to Altbach (2004), "a significant number of international students go abroad to study with the aim of staying in the host country to work and make a career" (p. 21). One of the avenues offered in the United States for

gaining this kind of opportunity is the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program that allows international students to work in the United States for up to 12 months in a job related to their field of study (Goodman & Gutierrez, 2011). For students graduating in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields, the OPT period can be extended up to a total of 29 months (Goodman & Gutierrez, 2011). The OPT program is a means of gaining experience that makes these graduates more employable both at home and in the United States after graduation, an important consideration in the choice of international students to study outside of their home countries. Bodycott (2009) asserts that Chinese parents, especially, are obsessed with “securing a university place for their child in a degree program that will ensure future employment and the possibility of migration” (p. 368), and will, as a result, place considerable pressure on the child to seek out a program abroad in order to uphold their wishes. In the study conducted by Bodycott, when interviewed separately, both students and parents indicated that employment opportunities following graduation (regardless of the location) were a significant push factor for the students to go abroad for their education. That said, according to Xinyu (2011), the Chinese government is now making active efforts to attract back many of the students who go abroad for their education. They are doing so by offering incentives for conducting research and establishing new businesses, as well as recruiting those educated overseas to work at universities in order to continue improving the quality of Chinese institutions of higher education (Xinyu, 2011).

Pull factor: Reputation of U.S. higher education and/or individual institutions. According to Goodman and Gutierrez (2011), “the reputation and prestige of an institution holds considerable weight in a student’s decision to leave her home country and pursue study in the United States” (p. 94). This assertion supports earlier research about international students’ selection of a host country for pursuit of a degree (Lee, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Mazzarol and Soutar’s research indicates that an “institution’s reputation for quality” (p. 83), may be a powerful pull factor for some students. Later research also suggests that some international students will select a U.S. institution they have never seen, or about which they know very little, based solely on that institution’s reputation (Lee, 2008). Institutional rankings (at the world and national levels) in publications such as the *Times Higher Education* and *U.S. News and World Report*, as well as funding provided by major national agencies, also factor heavily into the marketing of U.S. institutions to students overseas (Goodman & Gutierrez, 2011). Operating in tandem with institutional reputation is the weight international students place on personal recommendations or referrals from family members and friends (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Pull factor: Increased recruitment efforts. After a drop in international student enrollments in the years immediately following the events of September 11, enrollment numbers began to rebound in 2005 and have remained steadily on the rise, with a record high number of students (974,926) enrolled as of 2014-15 (“Open Doors,” 2015). According to an IIE administered survey, gains in enrollment numbers can largely be

attributed to an increase in recruitment efforts by U.S. institutions. Allan Goodman, President and CEO of IIE stated,

As they [international students] come here to invest in their futures, they also expose U.S. students to new cultures and ideas. U.S. institutions are taking proactive steps to facilitate this critical exchange and internationalize their campuses by welcoming international students and providing more opportunities for collaboration. (“Institute of International Education,” 2011, para. 11)

According to a U. S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report (2007), the over 2 million students studying outside of their home countries make significant contributions to their host countries. The author of the report suggests that the United States depends on the presence of international graduate and undergraduate students with regard to both economic and foreign policy matters, and these students bring needed skills to research fields and the general workforce. Notably, the author asserts that international students “have been important sources of innovation and productivity in our increasingly knowledge based economy” (p. 1). Furthermore, according to this report, international students aid in foreign relations by being ambassadors for their home countries and bringing knowledge of the United States back to their home countries once they have completed their studies.

According to the Open Doors Economic Impact Report (2015), international students contributed a total of over \$30.5 billion dollars to the U.S. economy in 2014/15. This figure includes money spent on tuition and fees to their host institutions, as well as other educational expenses and general living expenses. In addition to the sizeable financial contributions international students make to their institutions and surrounding communities, they also add to compositional diversity on campuses and provide diverse

perspectives both inside and outside of the classroom (Andrade, 2006; Choudaha, Chang, & Kono, 2013; Glass, Buus, & Braskamp, 2013; Lee, 2008, 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

In order to fully realize the benefits of a diverse student population, the role of international students is becoming increasingly important. Like domestic minority students, who share their diverse cultures and backgrounds with other members of the campus community, international students also contribute their many and varied languages, cultures, and worldviews with members of the campus. Otten (2003) introduces the perspective that international, or intercultural, education, both of which depend on the presence of international students, furthers the goal of enabling students to appreciate diversity and difference. Numerous scholars espouse the notion that international students are a valuable source of diversity at U.S. institutions, particularly in light of the trend toward internationalizing campuses (Hanassab, 2006; Kim & Kim, 2010; Lee, 2008; Lee & Rice, 2007; Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). Otten's suggestion that "the outcome of intercultural learning is intercultural competence...to enable positive and effective interaction with members of other cultures both abroad and at home" (Otten, 2003, p.15), is more important than ever in light of recent trends focusing on the skills and competencies desired of college graduates by employers in the global marketplace.

U.S. institutions recognize the valuable contributions of international students, both financially and with regard to the campus environment, and with the support of the federal government have increased recruitment efforts in order to attract these students to

the United States. As a result of increased efforts to internationalize U.S. institutions, universities are actively recruiting international students to provide cultural diversity, enhance academics and raise the reputation of the institution (Bodycott, 2009; Glass, Buus, & Braskamp, 2013). Lee (2010) asserts that international diversity brings “financial, cultural and intellectual benefits... to the institution as well as the host country” (p. 66). These contributions have provided a rationale for the increased recruitment of international students by institutions of higher education for some time. In fact, a recent article in the New York Times suggests that these rationales continue to be used to heavily recruit international students, and Chinese students in particular. An administrator at one institution shared that recruitment of international students began years ago as a means of providing domestic students with exposure to world cultures, but that recently it had become fiscally necessary because of budget cuts (Saul, 2016). Lee (2010) also suggests, however, that there is not always an accompanying level of support or an interest in a successful educational experience for these students once they have arrived on campus. For instance, Lee’s (2010) research indicates that international students report experiences of “‘neo-racism;’ that is, discriminatory treatment based on negative perceptions about an individual’s country of origin and its culture, not only his or her race” (p. 70), and that “international students’ perceptions of their experiences can impact future enrollment trends” (p. 68), making it important to focus on student satisfaction, help to provide positive experiences, and support their success in order to encourage these students to remain on our campuses and encourage others to attend institutions in the U.S.

Pull Factor: Visa and immigration policies. The Immigration Act of 1924 first allowed international students to study in the United States (“Foreign Students,” 2003). Almost 30 years later, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 required all U.S. visa applicants (including students) to be fingerprinted as part of the application process; this requirement was repealed in 1986 (“Foreign Students,” 2003). Ten years after the fingerprinting requirement was repealed, Congress moved to enact The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA), which mandated that the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS, now part of the Department of Homeland Security) develop an electronic tracking system to monitor international students (Urias & Yeakey, 2005). This mandate came a few years after the first bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, when it was acknowledged that the paper based tracking system in place at the time did not discover that one of the terrorists responsible for that attack was living in the United States on an expired student visa (Urias & Yeakey, 2005).

In 1997, the INS moved forward with a pilot program for the electronic tracking system called Coordinated Interagency Partnership Regulating International Students (CIPRIS), which was intended to test the feasibility of such a system (Urias & Yeakey, 2005). In July 2001, CIPRIS was formally converted to a web-based tracking and monitoring system and was given a new name, Student Exchange and Visitor program (SEVIS), and a new processing fee for users (Urias & Yeakey, 2005). Later that year, after the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, the utility of the new tracking system received more serious consideration when the INS learned that several of

the terrorists who had carried out the attacks were in the United States on student visas (Urias & Yeakey, 2005). As a result, when Congress enacted the Uniting [and] Strengthening America [by] Providing Appropriate Tools Required [to] Intercept [and] Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT) Act in October 2001, it required, among other things, that the INS fully implement SEVIS by January 30, 2003 (Urias & Yeakey, 2005; Warwick, 2005). Due to many technical glitches, required implementation of the system was initially postponed until February 15, 2003, and then, more significantly, to the start of academic year 2003-04 (Warwick, 2005).

SEVIS was intended to track the movement and enrollment of foreign students in the United States and required international student advisors to amass a volume of demographic information never previously collected (Hamilton, 2003). In addition to new demographic data required by SEVIS, the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Reform Act of 2001 also called for the collection of additional information (Urias & Yeakey, 2005). Among the data advisors were now required to gather and report: failure to arrive on campus or to enroll; dropping below a minimum required number of credit hours; changes in major; changes in the number of dependents; and many others (Hamilton, 2003). This kind of monitoring and reporting turned international student advisors into bureaucrats rather than supportive staff members and it placed burdens on their time and energy. The increased bureaucracy also alienated foreign students and generally created a perception that the United States was not a welcoming place for foreign students (Altbach, 2004; Jacobson, 2003; Johnson, 2004; Lee, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007; Warwick, 2003). SEVIS had a twofold negative impact on students. First, it imposed a new

financial burden on them by requiring them to pay for its operation with a \$100 application fee (Johnson, 2004). While many international students perceived the fee as an arbitrary penalty, its stated purpose was to fund the new system (Urias & Yeakey, 2005). Second, SEVIS monitored them more intensely than any other segment of the population aside from those in the penal system (Johnson, 2004). This kind of close scrutiny contributed to students' feelings of rejection by the United States. Furthermore, the cost and regulatory burden placed on colleges and universities by SEVIS can affect the way staff at international student offices on campuses interact with and are perceived by their foreign students (Johnson, 2004; Urias & Yeakey, 2005). In addition, although SEVIS has received the most negative scrutiny, the application process alone was more difficult for foreign students in the post-9/11 world. The U.S. Department of State (DOS), for example, required student visa applicants to attend a face-to-face interview at the nearest U.S. Consulate or Embassy in their home countries (Jacobson, 2003). The interview requirement built resentment among foreign students who endured lengthy waits for an interview and, often, had to incur travel costs to get to their nearest U.S. Consular or Embassy offices, even for a short stay visa (Johnson, 2004; Lee, 2007). The DOS also increased the scrutiny given to applications for student visas, especially in certain fields (e.g. biotechnology, aerospace engineering, and others) (Jacobson, 2003). In a survey of university administrators who were asked to rank the reasons they felt foreign student enrollment had declined at their institutions, approximately 40% noted "visa troubles" for the drop in undergrad enrollment, and 47% noted "visa troubles" for the drop in graduate enrollment (Lee, 2007). The result of the new policies and procedures:

long delays, increased fees, and an overall signal of discouragement, causing many to abandon their pursuit of higher education in the United States (Johnson, 2004; Lee, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007). These processes clearly created numerous roadblocks for international students with regard to their access to enrollment at U.S. institutions of higher education.

Over time, a loosening of those requirements at both the governmental and institutional levels began to promise significant returns in the form of an increase in international student applications and enrollment for the 2008/09 academic year (McCormack, 2008). McCormack suggested that growth was predicted for the undergraduate population, and states that, “admissions officers cited several possible explanations for enrollment increases, including continuing improvements in the visa process and an increased perception that the United States is welcoming to foreign students” (p. A1). Given these changes, combined with a weakened U.S. dollar, and the increased efforts of individual institutions, the tide had begun to turn for international student enrollment numbers (McCormack, 2008). In the wake of budget cuts at many higher education institutions, administrators also seem to have realized that international students who pay full tuition contribute to the economic health of their institutions and they began putting more effort into recruiting these students (Alberts, 2007). The data reflects a promising trend toward the elimination of certain barriers to access for international students at U.S. institutions, however, once they arrive on campus they still face issues similar to those of their non-traditional and domestic minority peers. In light of the efforts of U.S. institutions to recruit international students, and the important roles

they play on our campuses, it is essential that we provide programs and services that assist them in succeeding during their degree programs in much the same way we provide such programs and services to our non-traditional and domestic minority students.

Chinese Student Enrollment

The push-pull factors described in this chapter offer insight into the rationale for international students, generally, to pursue studies in the United States. They do not, however, explain the especially high number of Chinese students choosing this path. To understand the motivations for this population, in particular, to pursue degrees in the U.S., it is necessary to understand the circumstances in China that have led to them.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Chinese leaders began to recognize the need for modernization in the areas of technology, industry, and agriculture, and the importance of internationalizing higher education in order to make necessary advances by opening themselves to the West (Guruz, 2008). In December 1978, a group of fifty-two Chinese scholars arrived in New York under a government-sponsored program to the U.S., and since that time, there has been a steady increase in the number of Chinese students studying in countries around the world, with the largest number choosing to come to the U.S. (Xinyu, 2011). Over the same roughly thirty-year period, while record numbers of students have gone abroad for their education, the system of higher education, along with the country itself, has also grown tremendously (Xinyu, 2011). The challenge with this tremendous growth has been the ability to establish high-quality institutions that can meet the demand from increasing numbers of students (Guruz, 2008).

A 2007 OECD report on higher education in China described a variety of factors leading to the state of the system, chief among these being the economic and political changes experienced over the past several years. In discussing the failure of the system to keep up with the forces of economic growth being experienced throughout China, the report's authors stated,

The quality of higher education must be improved so as to beef up the scientific and technological innovativeness of universities and to better vocational training targeting at the training of more skilled workers able to contribute to the building of an economically stronger society (OECD, 2007, p.8).

From a political perspective, the authors of the OECD report indicated that with the growing democratization of China, the government was making efforts to close gaps in social stratification and provide greater opportunity for all of its people. They asserted,

Education is the most important means to relieve poverty, and for social wealth to evenly trickle down to different strata of society. The government needs to better guide the human resource development at the national level, provide public education for every citizen, and gradually strengthen educational support for the disadvantaged group (OECD, 2007, p. 8).

With education seen as a means for the continued development and advancement of the country, the government has sought to improve the quality and capacity of its institutions in order to meet the demand of its growing population (Guruz, 2008). According to Xinyu (2011), the government funding initiatives of the 1990s, known as Project 211 and Project 985, had a goal of creating "112 world-class universities" (p. 33), and "enabled the fast development of a number of participating Chinese universities" (p. 33).

Unfortunately, however, with the focus on quality being limited to these 112 institutions, and the rapid expansion of the higher education system in China over such a short period, the result was a serious supply and demand issue with regard to high-quality institutions.

In addition to the limited availability of high-quality academic programs in China, and the extreme competition to obtain admissions at these institutions, the rise of a wealthy middle-class has also influenced Chinese student mobility to the U.S. and other countries around the world. The implementation of the one-child policy, and improvements to the Chinese economy over the past thirty years, have resulted in greater wealth for a larger segment of the population (Xinyu, 2011). As a result, when students are unable to obtain a spot in the top universities in China, many families now have the financial means to send them abroad (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Furthermore, the selection of the U.S. as a primary destination for these students may be due, in part, to the important role of U.S.-China relations and our increased interdependence on both human and economic capital over the past decade (Lampton, 2003).

The relationship between China and the U.S. is viewed as one of the most critical geo-political relationships around the globe (Watkins, 2015). This relationship comprises and influences issues ranging from climate change, to international security, to technology, to the global economy (Watkins, 2015). A 2015 *Washington Post* article about U.S.-China relations asserted,

The economies are so tied through investment, debt, business deals and trade that they may very well rise or sink together. On the economic side, China is now investing more money in the U.S. than the U.S. is in China. Given all of these ties, it's in the U.S. interest to work with China, at least sometimes, as a close partner (Swanson).

Beyond the economic relationship, however, and despite some ideological conflicts related to governance structures and policies, the U.S. and China have forged a strategic

alliance that addresses issues of climate change and counter-terrorism that also have implications for the larger global community (Swanson, 2015).

Since 2009/10, Chinese students have continued to represent the largest number of international students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education each year (“Fact Sheet: China,” 2015). U.S. institutions, in particular, are attractive to this population of students because of their strong academic reputations as well as the increased chances for employability upon completion of the degree (Pang & Appleton, 2004). Access to U.S. research institutions with strong programs in advanced technology and sciences is also desirable to Chinese students owing to the limited number of such programs in China (Pang & Appleton, 2004). Tan and Weidman (2013) assert that the trend of increasing numbers of Chinese students in the United States, at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, is likely to continue indefinitely. They attribute this, in part, to “a demand for more advanced academic credentials” (p. 118) which is the result of a highly competitive job market in China. These authors further suggest that economic conditions in both China and the United States make it more attractive for Chinese students to study in the United States, and makes U.S. institutions more interested than ever in recruiting these students who are able to pay their own expenses (Tan & Weidman, 2013). On a deeper level, for a society that has often been subject to a harsh political climate, wealth is often viewed as a buffer, and a good education is seen as the most obvious path to attaining wealth (Bond, 1991), which makes highly regarded academic programs quite desirable. Research on what Chinese students and their parents consider important in the selection of a study abroad destination touched on all of these push-pull factors for Chinese

students and reinforces the selection of the United States as the favored destination for Chinese students at both the graduate and undergraduate levels (Bodycott, 2009). Moreover, the important geo-political relationship between the U.S. and China makes the U.S. an important destination for Chinese students seeking to learn more about American culture and norms (Chang, 2014). Whether these students return to China or choose to stay in the U.S. for their careers, the cultural knowledge gained during their educational experience can serve to enhance and strengthen foreign relations between the two countries (Chang, 2014).

Purpose and Significance of Study

The findings of research conducted on international student experiences in English-speaking host countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Canada, show that these students experience many of the same issues encountered by U.S. domestic minority students (Hanassab, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007; Kim & Kim, 2010; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Watson, et al., 2002). Issues related to the difficulty of domestic minority students in adjusting to the campus environment, feelings of being discriminated against, lack of support, and an expectation by non-minority students and faculty that they are able to serve as informants on behalf of all other minority students are not uncommon (Watson, et al., 2002). Similarly, international students in English-speaking countries outside the United States have reported that they feel a lack of institutional support, have difficulty adapting to the new higher education system, and, especially those from non-Western countries, are the targets of bias and stereotyping primarily as a result of their difficulties with the English language (Lee, 2010). In

addition, issues of financial difficulty, perceived discrimination, and adjusting to new pedagogical styles, were also reported in research conducted at Australian institutions (Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010).

In response to the issues faced by domestic minority students, programs and services are routinely implemented in an effort to aid in their transition to college as a means of increasing persistence, but the same does not appear to be happening for international students. Unfortunately, there is a gap in the literature regarding the persistence rates of international undergraduate students in the United States, but anecdotal information suggests that although this growing population may persist at acceptable rates, they are doing so with considerably less support from the host institution than that afforded to domestic minority students who face many of the same obstacles. That said, a variety of cultural and other factors may contribute to the successful transition and persistence of international students. The following study aims to identify those factors, for Chinese students in particular, in an attempt to provide appropriate and relevant support programs and services before and during their enrollment at U.S. institutions. Since “international students” are a heterogeneous population, it is appropriate to focus this research on one segment of the population. Given their increasing numbers, Chinese students have been selected for this study, but this research is intended to be the first step in beginning to develop such programs and services that may ultimately be useful to all international students on U.S. campuses.

Conceptual Framework

In order to examine and understand the transition experiences of Chinese students in the U.S., a conceptual framework comprising Schlossberg's (1995) Transition Model and Museus' (2014) Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (CECE) Model, and incorporating elements of Chinese culture, was employed. Schlossberg's Transition Model served as the backbone for my conceptual framework as it provides a foundation for understanding the common elements of individuals' transition experiences while respecting their unique personal circumstances (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Museus' (2014) CECE Model provided additional guidance for considering the campus environment as it affected the transition experience for these students. Finally, I believe that examining the transition experience for this population of students required a consideration of the Chinese cultural norms and values that played a critical role in the desire for these students to pursue an education outside of their home country. The guiding research questions in the context of this conceptual framework allowed me to conduct the analysis from a positive perspective, focusing on factors that aided in the transition process through the first year of undergraduate enrollment, as opposed to negative experiences that required a remedy.

Schlossberg's Transition Model (1995)

In order to understand transition experiences, it is necessary to define what is meant by "transition." The term "psychosocial transition" is defined by Parkes (1977) as, "a change that necessitates 'the abandonment of one set of assumptions and the development of a fresh set to enable the individual to cope with the new altered life

space” (as cited in Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, p. 28). According to Schlossberg et al., “A transition is not so much a matter of change as of the individual’s own perception of the change” (p. 28). The Transition Model introduced by Nancy Schlossberg (1995) to understand and aid individuals going through a transition, comprises three main elements: “Approaching Transitions: Transition Identification and Transition Process; Taking Stock of Coping Resources: The 4 S System; [and] Taking Charge: Strengthening Resources” (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 26). Approaching Transitions examines the impetus for the transition as well as where the individual is in the transition process (Schlossberg et al.). The 4 S System refers to the resources available to an individual in their transition process – Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies (Schlossberg et al.). Taking Charge explores ways that individuals can strengthen the resources at their disposal (their 4 S’s), in order to move more effectively through the transition process (Schlossberg et al.).

Approaching Transitions. In order to understand a transition, it is necessary to understand the kind of transition being experienced – anticipated, unanticipated, or non-event (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). An anticipated transition is one in which the individual expected the change in his or her life to occur, such as attending college, while an unanticipated transition is one that is not predictable, such as illness, divorce, or the death of a loved one (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). A non-event is a transition an individual expected that does not ultimately occur, such as not getting accepted to the university of their choice (Schlossberg et al.). In the case of Chinese undergraduate students in the U.S., some combination of these kinds of

transitions could have been anticipated. Many of these students may have anticipated attending college, but perhaps not in the United States. Others may not have expected to attend college at all, but found themselves able to through scholarships or some other intervention. In carrying out this research, it was important to understand how the participants characterized their individual transition experiences in order to look for commonalities or differences among them based on the type of transition with which they identified.

Other factors requiring consideration in an examination of the type of transition being experienced are the concepts of relativity, context, and impact (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Relativity has to do with the way the transition is perceived by the individual (Schlossberg et al.). In other words, two individuals may be experiencing the same anticipated transition (e.g. attending college in the U.S.), but they may perceive it differently based on their individual characteristics or previous experiences. The concept of context has to do with the individual's relationship to the transition and their role in the change that is occurring (Schlossberg et al.). For instance, is the transition the result of the individual's choice or someone else's? Finally, the notion of impact involves not the change or transition itself, but rather "the degree to which the transition alters one's daily life" (Schlossberg et al., p. 33). Each of these factors was important to consider in examining the experiences of the population being studied as the choice to attend an institution in the United States may have been made by them or for them, and the impact of the transition may have been widely different from one participant to the next depending on previous experiences.

Having an awareness of one's place in the transition process is also necessary for understanding the coping mechanisms employed by the individual. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) discuss the transition process as one of moving in, moving through, and/or moving out, where the starting point of a transition could be considered either moving in or moving out. When an individual is "moving in" to a transition, such as starting college in a new environment, they "need to become familiar with the rules, regulations, norms, and expectations of the new system. Institutions need to devote a great deal of time to orientation, a process designed to help individuals know what is expected of them" (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 45). Support provided during the "moving in" phase of the transition can have a significant impact on the individual's willingness or ability to remain in the new situation or environment (Schlossberg et al.), and in the context of this research, was believed to have had an impact the participants' persistence through the first year of the undergraduate experience. The "moving through" phase is characterized by individuals' acceptance and understanding of the new rules by which they are governed (Schlossberg et al.). For instance, a student who has completed an orientation program and begun to operate within the new campus environment may be seen as "moving through." Finally, "moving out" is seen as "ending one series of transitions and beginning to ask what comes next" (Schlossberg et al., p. 45). In the context of this study, the focus on participants' experiences fell mainly in the "moving in" and "moving through" phases, as they were either in their second, third or fourth year of study at a university in the United States and were recalling a period of transition that occurred in the past.

Taking Stock of Coping Resources: The 4 S System. The elements of the “4 S System” introduced by Schlossberg are Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). These factors represent the potential assets and/or liabilities an individual has for coping with change and they must be considered in the context of how the individual perceives their transition situation – positively, negatively, or neutrally (Schlossberg et al.). Once an individual has determined whether the transition is positive, negative, or irrelevant, the individual can begin to consider available coping resources in order to effectively navigate the transition (Schlossberg et al.)

Situation. Several factors account for an individual’s coping resources within the realm of the situation, including,

Triggers, or those things that initiate the transition; timing, or the relationship of the transition to the individual’s “social clock;” control, or the aspects of the transition that are within the individual’s control; role change, or the possibility that the transition affects the individual’s role (e.g. going from a single person to someone’s husband or wife); duration, characterized by the permanent or temporary nature of the change; previous experience with a similar transition; and other stressors also being faced by the individual in transition. (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995)

Each transition encountered by an individual will be different, but understanding each of these factors related to the particular situation will assist the individual in having an awareness of the coping responses needed for a successful transition.

Self. After better understanding the situational factors that impact the individual's coping resources, one must consider what personal resources the individual brings to the transition. According to Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995), each individual has personal and demographic characteristics that have a significant impact on their ability to deal with transition. These factors include, their socioeconomic status, viewed as a position of advantage or disadvantage in dealing with a change that is either anticipated or unanticipated; gender, which may better prepare males or females for certain kinds of transition based on how they have been socialized to manage emotions, communicate, etc.; age and stage of life, which may make individuals more or less able to negotiate a transition that is happening during a time of life or personal development in which it is or is not expected; state of health, which may be an additional stressor in conjunction with certain transitions; and ethnicity, which may or may not provide certain coping skills based on one's cultural values or beliefs.

Additionally, Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) point to certain psychological resources that must be considered for individuals in transition. These include ego development, outlook, and commitment and values. Ego development, or maturity level, can make individuals more or less well equipped to handle the transition. Outlook – optimism and self-efficacy – can cause a person to be more optimistic or pessimistic about the transition and its outcome, and speaks to their ability to exercise their own influence and control in negotiating the transition. Finally, commitment and values suggest that “an individual's major commitment – whether it lies in his/her relationships (interpersonal), in working for others (altruism), in self-improvement

(competence/mastery), or in survival (self-protection) – determines his/her vulnerability” (p. 65); and that one’s values either contribute to or detract from one’s ability to assimilate to new environments or situations.

Support. In addition to what the individual brings to the transition experience, outside forces affect the process. Support comes from various sources, most notably, “intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and the institutions and/or communities of which people are a part” (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, p.67). According to Schlossberg et al., one’s intimate relationships provide an important source of support by virtue of the level of trust and sharing inherent in these relationships. Furthermore, family members and friends provide a significant source of support for an individual in transition, and for those separated from this important group of people (for example, the Chinese student attending a university in the United States), the loss of, or distance from, this support system can be extremely difficult (Schlossberg et al.). The institutions and communities to which individuals belong can also either help or hinder the transition process, and it is in this area that I incorporate Museus’ (2014) Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (CECE Model) in an effort to understand the impact of the campus environment on participants’ transition.

Strategies. The final component of the 4 S System deals with the strategies individuals use to move through a transition. In short, as explained by Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995), strategies are the coping mechanisms employed by an individual in transition, and these fall into three general categories. First, one may try to exert control over the situation by taking steps to actively alter it or its outcome. Second,

one may try to alter the meaning of the situation by making it less relevant or stressful. Third, one may try to control the stress caused by the situation either through avoidance or some activity. Schlossberg et al. also suggest that some individuals may cope with a stressful situation by either attempting to alter it, or simply finding ways to minimize the impact of a situation that cannot be significantly changed. In the case of Chinese undergraduates studying in the United States, one might have reasonably expected that many students would have considered their situation difficult or impossible to change, and may have exercised coping strategies that would simply have made it more manageable.

The final aspect of Schlossberg's (1995) Transition Model, Taking Charge: Strengthening Resources, simply moves forward from an assessment of the coping strategies at the individual's disposal. Once one has evaluated the available resources using the 4 S System, identifying areas where types of support or skills may be lacking can begin. Additionally, they can determine what types of support or coping strategies are already being employed and could be strengthened to further aid in the transition (Schlossberg et al.).

Museus' Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model (2014)

In response to the call by several scholars in higher education for new theoretical frameworks that address the needs of racially diverse student populations, as well as an increasing body of research showing the bias that many racially diverse students experience on campuses throughout the United States, Museus (2014) developed the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model of College Success Among

Racially Diverse Student Populations. The model's purpose is to provide a framework for student success among diverse populations of students. The need for this new framework was born, in part, by "a substantial body of existing empirical research [that] offers compelling evidence that the racial and cultural realities within college and university environments shape the experiences and outcomes of racially diverse student populations" (Museus, 2014, p.192). The CECE Model (Figure 1) was developed using the four primary critiques of Tinto's (1987/1993) theory of student departure as well as other perspectives of college student engagement, and incorporating the voices of diverse populations into the discussion of college success (Museus, 2014).

Tinto (1993) proposed that a student's level of commitment to the institution and personal goals was strongly connected to their level of integration within academic and social arenas at the institution, and vice versa. In his research on student persistence based upon this proposition, Tinto likened a student's integration to the campus environment to a cultural process whereby the individual must separate from his or her past communities/institutions; transition to the new environment by learning its culture and norms; and then become integrated or incorporated by adopting those norms as their own (Tinto, 1993).

Museus (2014) points out that the implication of this theory is that students who do not break from their own cultures and adapt or assimilate to their new environment's culture will be less likely to succeed in completing college. The four main critiques of Tinto's theory used in developing the CECE Model were the cultural foundations critique, the self-determination critique, the integration viability critique, and the

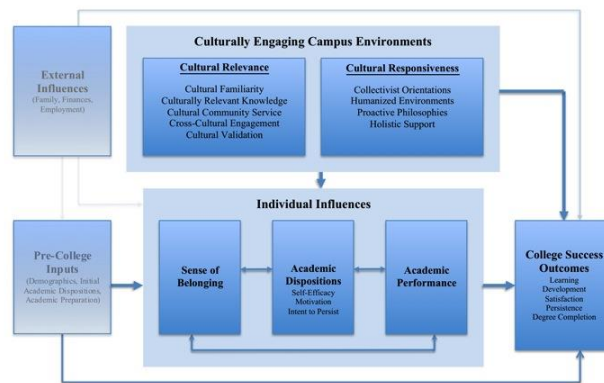


Figure 1. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model. Adapted from: Museus, S. D. (2014). The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model: A new theory of college success among racially diverse student populations. In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*. New York: Springer.

psychological dimension critique (Museus, 2014). Scholars espousing the cultural foundations critique have suggested that Tinto's integration model (1993) is biased against students of color, and suggest that rather than suggesting students of color separate from their cultural origins in order to succeed, institutions should consider the positive ways in which their values and norms affect the campus culture and vice versa (Museus, 2014). Through the self-determination critique, scholars have noted Tinto's emphasis on the responsibility of students to succeed in their institutional environments with little responsibility placed upon the institutions to provide needed support for the endeavor (Museus, 2014). The integration viability critique suggests that the value placed on the concepts of social and academic integration as indicators of student success in the academic environment may not be warranted, and that these constructs are also culturally biased to the benefit of White students over students of color (Museus, 2014). Finally, in

the psychological dimension critique, scholars suggest that the psychological connection students have to their institution, set forth as an essential part of Tinto's model (1993), is difficult to understand because students from different cultural backgrounds may experience and/or perceive the same activities, programs, or events experienced by White students in very different ways (Museus, 2014). Using these critiques as a foundation, Museus developed the CECE Model to identify ways in which the responsibility for student success, regardless of race or ethnicity, can be more intentionally assumed by the institutions admitting them.

The CECE model posits that a variety of external influences (i.e., finances, employment, family influences) shape individual influences (i.e., sense of belonging, academic dispositions, and academic performance) and success among racially diverse college student populations. The model also suggests that college students enter with precollege inputs (i.e., demographic characteristics, initial academic dispositions, academic preparation) that influence individual influences and success. (Museus, 2014, p. 207)

The critical focal point of the CECE Model (Figure 2), however, highlights the environmental and individual influences that affect student success, and “suggests that the degree to which culturally engaging campus environments exist at a particular postsecondary institution is positively associated with more positive individual factors and ultimately greater college student success” (Museus, 2014, p. 207).

While the external influences and individual influences identified in the CECE Model are certainly significant to student success, this study specifically used the factors associated with the Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (rather than the external and individual influences, and precollege inputs, described in the model) to complement Schlossberg's (1995) Transition Model in the conceptual framework. Museus (2014)

proposes nine indicators of a Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (CECE), the presence or absence of which can significantly impact racially diverse students' success on a college campus:

Cultural Familiarity. According to Museus (2014), the first indicator of a CECE is the ability of students to connect with faculty, staff, and other students who share a similar background to their own, demonstrated in previous research to be significantly associated with student success for racially diverse students.

Culturally Relevant Knowledge. The next indicator of a CECE is that it offers students opportunities to “cultivate, sustain, and increase knowledge of their cultures and communities of origin” (Museus, 2014, p. 210). Examples of how these opportunities may be present are ethnic studies classes, programs or events with a focus on the students' culture, or culturally-oriented student organizations.

Cultural Community Service. The third indicator of a CECE proposes that community service focused on the student's culture is associated with student success.

Museus (2014) indicates that access to

activities aimed at spreading awareness about issues in their respective communities, engaging in community activism, participating in community service and service-learning opportunities, or engaging in problem-based research projects that aim to solve problems within their cultural communities,” (p. 211)

can have a positive impact on student success.

Opportunities for Meaningful Cross-Cultural Engagement. The fourth CECE indicator theorizes that institutions that provide a means for students to have positive and intentional interactions with students from different cultures can positively affect student success (Museus, 2014).

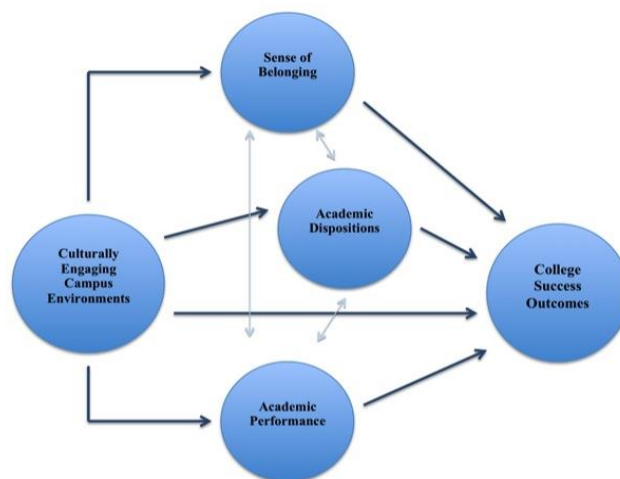


Figure 2. Focal Point of the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model. Adapted from: Museus, S. D. (2014). *The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model: A new theory of college success among racially diverse student populations.* In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research.* New York: Springer.

Collectivist Cultural Orientations. The fifth indicator of a CECE suggests that students experiencing campuses with a more collectivist (rather than individualistic) orientation have greater levels of success (Museus, 2014).

Culturally Validating Environments. The sixth CECE indicator posits that environments in which students “are surrounded by postsecondary educators who validate their cultural backgrounds and identities will have more positive experiences and be more likely to succeed in college” (Museus, 2014, p. 212).

Humanized Educational Environments. The seventh indicator of a CECE is that the stronger the presence of institutional agents who care about and develop meaningful relationships with students, the more likely students are to succeed (Museus, 2014).

Proactive Philosophies. The eighth indicator of a CECE is that the more proactive faculty and staff are at providing resources and information to racially diverse students on their campus, the more likely those students are to succeed (Museus, 2014).

Availability of Holistic Support. The ninth and final indicator of a CECE is that the accessibility of holistic support for students is associated with positive outcomes for students (Museus, 2014). In other words,

the extent to which institutions provide their students with access to one or more faculty or staff members that they are confident will provide them with the information they seek, offer the help that they require, or connect them with the information or support that they need (p.213-14)

can have a significant impact on student success and persistence.

As is demonstrated in a review of the literature, research has shown that many international students have experiences similar to those of domestic minority students. As a result, I chose to supplement Schlossberg's Transition Model (1995) with the indicators of the Culturally Engaging Campus Environment Model (Museus, 2014) in order to examine the support structures in place at institutions in the United States to aid in the transition experiences of Chinese undergraduates. Furthermore, since the CECE Model takes a positive approach in identifying factors that promote student success rather than seeking out factors that hinder it, the model aligned perfectly with the positive approach being used for this research.

Values and Norms of Chinese Culture

Culture is defined as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede, 1997, p. 270). Though every nation has its own culture, and the characteristics can often

be similar, the elements of Chinese culture and American culture often clash (Hofstede, 1997). As a result, in addition to the models already described, another important and complementary element of the conceptual framework for this study was the set of norms and values inherent in Chinese culture regarding relationships and education. These two areas are especially relevant for the experience of Chinese students since the motivation to attend U.S. institutions is largely rooted in familial relationships and expectations, as well as an emphasis on education that is an important part of Chinese culture.

Five key characteristics are used to describe Chinese values and norms: 1) an emphasis on the concrete; 2) no development of abstract thought; 3) emphasis on specifics rather than generalizations; 4) the importance of practicality; and 5) a concern for balance and harmony (Chan, 1999). These characteristics derive from Confucianism, the primary philosophy of the Chinese, which is an essential element of modern Chinese culture and affects students coming to the United States through a variety of important tenets (Chan, 1999). First, Confucianism identifies five cardinal relationships: ruler-minister; father-son; husband-wife; elder-younger brother; and older-younger friends (Yu, 1996), that are foundational to the development of relationships (e.g. parent-child, teacher-student) and the roles of individuals within them, and provide stability for Chinese society (Hofstede & Bond, 1988).

Second, the main concerns of Confucianism are attaining virtue, doing meritorious service, and scholarship (Yu, 1996). As a result of these concerns and the importance of the cardinal relationships, achievement goals are essential in Chinese culture. As Yu (1996) describes it, “achievement goals involved such family or clan

interests as glorification of family or ancestors, family-line prolongation, strengthening, and social status...Clearly, Chinese achievement values and goals have a strong collective and social nature” (p.233). This assertion was supported in Yu’s study that compared Americans and Chinese with regard to academics. In the case of the Chinese, the primary motivation for success came from family and clan responsibility, and children were raised from a very early age “to pursue individual and group achievement in the name of group success” (p. 234). Chinese culture encourages children to “overcome their individuality” (Hofstede & Bond, 1988, p. 8), at least in terms of their actions, in order to maintain harmony and the honor of the family.

Third, the notion of “maintaining face” is extremely important in Chinese culture. This concept is connected to the value of harmony whereby one’s “dignity, self-respect, and prestige” (Hofstede & Bond, 1988, p.8) must remain untarnished in order for harmony to exist. Maintaining face on an individual level is critical because it actually affects the “face” of the family and larger community with which one is associated. This value manifests itself in the classroom through the potential loss of face for poor performance or misconduct on the part of either the student or the teacher (Chan, 1999).

Fourth, beyond the push for group success, the pedagogical methodologies associated with Confucianism play a major role in the way Chinese children are raised and the resulting difficulties they may encounter in a U.S. educational environment (Chan, 1999). Modern Chinese education still promotes the rote memorization of large quantities of information with little emphasis on original thought (Chan, 1999).

Additionally, students in China have been trained to “respect wisdom, knowledge and

expertise of parents, teachers and trainers. They have been socialized to respect highly those who provide the knowledge and to avoid challenging those in authority” (Chan, 1999, p. 298). As a result, the Western style of education is often problematic for Chinese students who are not accustomed to the more interactive classroom environments (Chan, 1999). Additionally, considering the importance of face, it is reasonable to assume that Chinese students may fear a loss of face for answering incorrectly or speaking out to express an opinion that differs from that of the instructor, which may account for a lower level of participation on the part of these students (Tan & Weidman, 2013).

The emphasis on concrete knowledge, little abstract thought, and practicality tend to steer Chinese students toward areas of study that are in keeping with these values – sciences, engineering, and business (Chan, 1999). As previously noted, many reputable programs in these fields of study are available in the United States, and draw students from China in pursuit of a degree (Goodman & Gutierrez, 2011). However, the Chinese values highlighted here, when considered collectively, can lead to difficulties for Chinese students in a U.S. higher education context. The strong cultural differences require Chinese students to adapt to the pedagogical methods of U.S. classrooms in order to be successful (Hofstede, 1997).

Rationale for Conceptual Framework

In order to gain an understanding of the experiences of Chinese undergraduate students during their first year in the U.S., I chose Schlossberg’s Transition Model (1995) because it provided a solid base for exploring both the internal and external resources that might have aided in the transitions to their new environments. In an examination of the

Transition Model, I found that its design lent to supplementation with other models that might address specific resources, such as Support. Because the study focused on students from a minority population at their campuses, and in light of the literature revealing a similarity in experiences between international and domestic minority students (as will be discussed in the next chapter), I recognized an opportunity to incorporate the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (Museus, 2014). Furthermore, because the population being studied represented a specific culture with unique values and norms, I made the decision to highlight elements of those values within the framework.

“Support” in Schlossberg’s Transition Model (1995) consists of external resources such as family, friends, or communities. For the purposes of this study I viewed participants’ institutions as their communities. The CECE Model (Museus, 2014), addresses specific aspects of the institution that represented potential sources of support. Moreover, the CECE Model also has a connection to another transition theory, as it was developed in response to Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Independent Student Departure. Tinto’s theory asserted that in order to succeed, students must assimilate and adjust to their new environment through a transition period from their old environment to their new one. The CECE Model (Museus, 2014) breaks with Tinto’s theory by placing the burden for student success on the institution and the support it provides. As such, though the newer model does not specifically address transition, it complements the transition model by delineating critical elements of the primary potential source of support for students entering the campus environment.

Among factors noted in the resource identified as “Self” in Schlossberg’s Transition Model (1995), are an individual’s values. Incorporating Chinese values and norms into the framework simply allowed me to have an increased understanding and awareness of the particular cultural values that may have played a role in the transition experiences of participants. As Chinese values and norms differ significantly from American values and norms, I felt it was important to be mindful of the influence they may have had on participants both before and during their transitions.

As will be described in more detail in Chapter Three, I used the conceptual framework as a guide in both data collection and analysis. The four resource domains indicated in Schlossberg’s Transition Model (1995), Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies, served as a foundation for the research questions driving the study. During the analysis stage, the individual factors noted for each domain, incorporating the CECE Model’s (Museus, 2014) nine indicators in the realm of Support, were referred to in coding the data and looking for patterns across participant experiences. The components of the conceptual framework, therefore, worked in tandem to shape the study and to provide a comprehensive examination of the factors that influenced participants’ transition experiences during the first year of college in the U.S.

Summary

This study explored the experiences of first-year Chinese undergraduate students at U.S. institutions of higher education in an effort to understand factors that aided in their transition to and, ultimately, their persistence on campus. The rationale for focusing

on this population was simple, as it represents the largest and fastest growing population of international students choosing the United States for the attainment of college degrees. While there is some competition from other English-speaking countries in recruiting these students, the United States remains a popular destination for international students. Some research, however, has shown that students may have doubts about studying in the United States because “many campus support services, for example, tend not to cater to the unique needs of international students despite the greater needs that they have compared with native students” (Lee, 2008, p. 314). Hence, a disparity between the expectations and realities international students experience related to the support they will receive at the host institution can be quite significant. One study showed that, compared to domestic students entering college, international students perceived there to be a lower level of support services (particularly academically oriented services) provided by their host institution (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). As such, a study focusing on factors that aid in Chinese students’ transition to and, ultimately, persistence at U.S. institutions, is timely and provides useful information about what programs and services would be most useful to this population during their educational experience.

The next chapter provides an examination of the literature regarding the experiences of non-native English speaking international students at host institutions in primarily English-speaking countries. I begin with a review of the literature on international student expectations for their experiences at the host-institution, followed by an exploration of the literature documenting their actual experiences, including issues of adjustment and acculturation, discrimination and bias, and campus climate. I conclude by

discussing the limited literature on international student persistence in the United States. This comprehensive review of the literature reveals several gaps that this study aims to address.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Having provided an overview of international student mobility issues in the previous chapter, I now move on to an exploration of the literature surrounding the experience of non-native English-speaking international students at institutions in English-speaking host countries. As little research exists about the experiences of international students in the United States it is necessary to rely heavily on the available research from other English-speaking countries (in particular, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Canada) whose higher education institutions host a large number of non-native English-speaking international students. Additionally, since the literature is even more limited with regard to students at the undergraduate level, it is necessary to consider research focusing on the experiences of students at all stages of both the graduate and undergraduate levels. I begin with an overview of the literature examining the expectations held by international students regarding their experiences in their English-speaking host countries. Next, I analyze the literature regarding the reported actual experiences of international students in English-speaking countries, issues of campus climate, and their adaptation and adjustment to the campus environment. Finally, I explore the literature regarding the persistence and retention of international students.

International Student Expectations

In a blog from the British publication, *The Guardian*, Raimo (2013) states that “International students need and deserve a level of personalized support and service commensurate with the level of investment they’re making by coming to our [United Kingdom] universities – not just in monetary terms, but in life chances, too” (Raimo, 2013, para. 6). Raimo suggests that international students come to foreign institutions with expectations that are often colored by their arrival on campus absent previous knowledge of the university or the local area other than what they have heard from a recruiter, learned from a personal recommendation, or seen on the internet (Raimo, 2013). As discussed previously, a number of push-pull factors motivate international students to choose destinations outside of their home country for attaining their degrees. One of the expectations inherent in the motivation of Chinese students to pursue degrees in certain English-speaking host countries is a better education than they could receive in China, leading to better jobs, greater prosperity, and more happiness in the long term (Marriott, du Plessis, & Pu, 2010). In addition to the quality of education associated with many institutions in English-speaking countries, the experience of obtaining a degree from an English-speaking institution is also desirable in an increasingly globalized marketplace. Part of the highly anticipated and expected education experience, particularly for non-native English speakers, is the formation of friendships with local, domestic students (Marriott et al., 2010). That said, according to the same study there is “a significant gap between the expectation of, and the actual experience of, socialization” (Marriot et al., 2010, p.35).

International Student Experience

Several factors have been identified that account for the majority of difficulties experienced by international students entering U.S. institutions, these include: “country of origin (related to language and cultural issues), lack of social support from host country nationals, difficulties in forging friendships, and associated negative experiences in the host country” (Lee, 2010, p. 68). Gu, Schweisfurth and Day (2010) also suggest that several factors, including unfamiliarity with local societal structures and norms, contribute to international students’ feelings of being unwelcome in or even rejected by the host environment. Russell, Rosenthal and Thomson (2010) echo these issues and further assert that homesickness, lack of familiarity with academic methodologies, and unrealistic expectations on the part of the student and their families contribute significantly to difficulties experienced by international students. Much of the literature about the experiences of this population seems to suggest that any difficulties experienced are the result of a failure by the students to adapt to the host culture adequately or timely. This line of thought implies that though they enter the campus community at a deficit, they must simply persevere and find a way to overcome their difficulties in order to ultimately assimilate to the host culture at which time they will be successful. Furthermore, this approach puts the burden fully on the international students and discounts responsibility of host institution for any negative experiences students may suffer (Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007).

Accounts of students who faced obstacles specifically related to language and social isolation are common in the literature on international student experience (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010; Lee, 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Furthermore, accounts of these students banding together with other international students (either from their home country or another), in order to find support, are also common and may lead university officials to wrongly believe the students are not experiencing problems that require institutional support (Lee, 2010). As word of mouth recommendations are a strong factor in institutional choice for many international students (Mazzarol & Souter, 2002), the experiences of international students at their host institutions can certainly be a factor (negative or positive) affecting future enrollment (Lee, 2010).

Relationships and social interaction. Cultural (and values driven) issues are often to blame for the difficulty international students experience in making friends with domestic students in their English-speaking host countries. For students from Asian countries, this seems to be even more prevalent as the collectivistic societies in which they have grown up do not mesh well with the more individualistic nature of Western cultures (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The research suggests that “international students from collectivist cultures may desire to maintain their heritage sociocultural behaviors and values, whilst local students may desire international students to assimilate or integrate their attitudes to align with the host culture” (Smith & Khawaja, p. 704). The need to assimilate or integrate into the host culture in order to be accepted by domestic students can be especially challenging for non-native English speaking international students in an English-speaking environment. An October 2009 article by Keller in the

Chronicle of Higher Education highlights the important issue for international students of adjusting to life at an English-based institution. In his article about Arab students coming to study at institutions in the United States, Keller shares the experience of a Saudi student who came to the United States in 2006, “He remembers the weeks after his arrival in America as both “a dream come true” and “incredibly scary.” He spent much of his time meeting other Saudis, dozens of whom had holed up in a hotel close to campus while they searched for a place to live” (p. B21). This story exemplifies a recurrent theme from the literature whereby international students seem to be segregating themselves from the larger community out of fear and a desire for familiarity (Eisenchlas & Trevaskes, 2007; Huang, 2008; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013; Taras & Rowney, 2005).

The example from Keller (2009) gives the impression that international students just want to be together with other international students, and there is some literature to support that inference (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). That said, there is a greater body of literature suggesting that international students have a desire to meet and form friendships with domestic students, but find it extremely difficult to do so (Eisenchlas & Trevaskes, 2007; Huang, 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In Huang’s research on international students’ social experiences in the United Kingdom, the author indicates that most students report finding British students difficult to get to know and, as a result, have friends primarily from their home country and other countries of origin outside the United Kingdom. Likewise, numerous exit interviews and surveys conducted at an Australian institution reveal the disappointment of international students who

expressed a strong interest in forming close bonds with Australian students but found it nearly impossible to do so (Eisenclas & Trevaskes, 2007). A study conducted in New Zealand revealed that “Ninety-one per cent of [international] students expected to make friends with New Zealanders. However, the actual proportion turned out to be only half that” (Marriott, du Plessis, & Pu, 2010, p. 35). Some research suggests that international students establishing relationships with other international students does result in an important support system based on a shared experience, but other research suggests that students who did not form social connections with students from the host culture were more likely to experience “feelings of anxiety, social isolation and negative perceptions of American host nationals” (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013, p. 415). Language barriers pose the primary impediment to social interaction between international and domestic students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). One unfortunate outcome of this isolation, based largely on language proficiency, is its resulting impediment to in-class interaction (Eisenclas & Trevaskes, 2007).

Language issues. A U.K. study conducted by Gu, Schweisfurth and Day (2010) to examine the intercultural adaptation of international students at four institutions revealed that most participants felt it was more difficult to adapt to a different academic environment than to a new social environment. The reasons for this challenge begin with students’ concerns regarding language. In one survey for the study, nearly half of respondents indicated, “feeling embarrassed if unable to answer questions in class” (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010, p. 14), and/or were concerned about “speaking up in class discussions” (p. 14). These results support earlier work done on language issues in the

classroom. Taras and Rowney (2007) suggest that language difference is the “most obvious obstacle for cross-cultural communication” (p. 68) in the classroom. The authors elaborate that this is true for all members of the class, both domestic and international students, as well as the faculty member. Some of the key factors Taras and Rowney identify as contributors to language difficulties are, “unfamiliar terminology, switching between dual languages, speech acts, uncertainty about who is being addressed, or lexical inferences” (p. 68). They add to this list the grammatical structure and pace used by a speaker, and provide the example that an English speaker may make assumptions about an Asian student’s level of English proficiency if the Asian student speaks more slowly or structures sentences differently. In fact, the cultural norms associated with a speaker’s native language may require different sentence structure, making them appear confused or unprepared when they are simply applying their own communication norms to a different language. In order to overcome some of these difficulties and improve their grasp of the language, international students are frequently encouraged to partner or speak with native-English speakers, but research suggests that many times local students are not receptive to these attempts as they deem the international students to be less competent specifically because of their language skills (Andrade, 2006). It seems clear that the learning outcomes for all students are affected by the assumptions being made about international students’ levels of knowledge and/or language proficiency, because these assumptions lead to the marginalization of the international students in the classroom and do not allow for an exchange of knowledge among all members of the academic environment.

Faculty members are also cautioned about the language difficulties for international students in the English-speaking classroom (Ryan & Viète, 2009). Ryan and Viète (2009) admonish that little attention is given to the “intense difficulties and frustrations for new language learners, even when they have a high-level command of everyday English” (p. 306). For these authors, the academic environment requires a different level of language skill and knowledge, and they call attention to the fact that international students must be able to engage in classroom dialogue in order to “become full members of the learning community, and indeed, to learn” (p. 305). Certainly this is the goal for all students, domestic as well as international. Additionally, international students often feel that they do not have a voice in the classroom because they do not have sufficient time to formulate responses to questions in English (Ryan & Viète, 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In turn, they fear being seen as less intelligent by their peers or professors because they do not participate frequently in class. This is a vicious cycle that serves to reinforce the marginalization of international students within the classroom environment. Furthermore, there is often a perception on the part of students and faculty members that international students are not as credible or well prepared for class if they do not contribute regularly to discussions (Taras & Rowney, 2007). The end result is that not only will international students be left out of the discourse, but they may also be at a marked disadvantage in their evaluations, resulting in lower grades (Taras & Rowney, 2007; Ryan & Viète, 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

The difficulties regarding language in the classroom are not confined to oral communication; written work in the classroom also presents numerous challenges for

international students. Devita (2000) points out that the structure and style of acceptable written work is different from one culture to another and that not all languages use the same linear construction that is common in English. As a result, the written work of international students may seem disorganized or unstructured when, in fact, it simply does not conform to the accepted British-English or American-English structure of writing. As such, it is the responsibility of faculty members to provide the necessary guidance to international students if they are expected to conform to English norms (Devita, 2000).

Zhang and Mi (2010) also address the written work of international students, listing it among other difficulties reported by international students as related to “an insufficient command of the second language” (p. 372). Beyond grammatical issues and those related to lexicon, faculty members need to be aware of international students’ voices and intentions in their writing in order to accommodate their needs in the context of the institution (Tran, 2009). The results of Tran’s (2009) research with Chinese and Vietnamese students studying at an Australian institution indicate that the students felt a need to compromise between their own values and the requirements of the institution in their written work. For one student in this study, conforming to the institutional norms was a way of exercising agency and showing that she knew the system. For another student, following the institutional norms meant that her own form of creative expression was suppressed and she had to consider the wishes and personality of her professor in order to write what would be considered acceptable work. This level of compromise and assimilation to the host culture is not the kind of learning outcome U.S. institutions

should expect for international students. Tran suggests that there ought to be some middle ground and that it is important for faculty and international students to reach a level of mutual understanding with regard to written work.

Pedagogical issues. Other language related difficulties have been identified that go directly to issue of curriculum and pedagogy in international students' communication experiences in English-based institutions (Kim & Kim, 2010; Zhang & Mi, 2010). Devita (2000) addresses issues related to pedagogy and the formal curriculum by stating,

for some international students, interactive lectures, participatory-based classes and group work may represent a totally new way of learning as previous education experiences in their home country may have featured only the traditional, lecture-based, tutor-centered approach (p. 174).

While these unfamiliar pedagogical practices may cause some international students to be a bit apprehensive in the classroom, Devita points out that most often they do not feel comfortable participating out of fear that they will not be understood or that they will be ridiculed by their peers or professors. This opinion is reinforced by an example from Barna (1994), in which an international student shares her experience as a member of a class group:

I was surrounded by Americans with whom I couldn't follow their tempo of discussion half of the time. I have difficulty to listen and speak, but also with the way they handle the group. I felt uncomfortable because sometimes they believe their opinion strongly. I had been very serious about the whole subject but I was afraid I would say something wrong. I had the idea but not the words (p. 338).

It is clear from the work of both Devita and Barna that language proficiency plays a role in the ability of international students to adapt to a new pedagogical style in an English-speaking institution.

Devita (2000) also uses concerns raised through his work to provide guidelines for making intercultural communication an intentional component of what he refers to as a multicultural classroom. In his article, Devita states that language is a prominent feature of every culture and that verbal communication, in particular, can clearly lead to confusion for international students in the classroom. Issues of pronunciation, pace of speech, the use of idioms, colloquialisms, analogies and metaphors are all raised by the author as potential sources of confusion or misunderstanding for international students. As such, he advises faculty members to be mindful of the students in their classrooms and to be intentional about not making any assumptions with regard to their level of comprehension. This advice seems appropriate with regard to all students in the classroom as the various experiences these students bring with them related to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other identities can all impact their level of comprehension.

With regard to learning styles, although Tran (2009) asserts that international students may have and/or prefer to use different cognition and learning styles based on the cultural norms with which they were raised, Ryan and Viète (2009) indicate that it is clear that international students are expected to conform to the institutional norms of the host academy. Reconciling these issues has often been left to the students, but Ryan and Viète seem to suggest that it is time for the host institutions to play a role in this academic adjustment.

Discrimination and bias. The lack of proficiency in English may be one of the greatest obstacles for international students in both academic and social situations

(Huang, Thomas, & Chui, 2009). One study indicates that students have reported feelings of exclusion, being ignored, and being marginalized by domestic students within the classroom environment (Ryan & Viete, 2009). This has occurred as a result of language difficulty and, in many instances, stereotyping. Stereotyping is the act of “categorizing a group of people on the basis of false preconceptions that are developed to degrade others as a way of strengthening our own self-image” (Devita, 2000, p. 169), and is especially destructive in the classroom environment. Devita’s (2000) assertion is that stereotypes lead to distortions in how we communicate and interact, and can hinder the building of trust amongst peers. One outcome of stereotyping is the segregation of groups within the classroom, as described by Ryan and Viete (2009). A student participating in their research describes a situation in which her class was asked to form small groups and the domestic students intentionally grouped themselves together leaving the international students to form their own group. The international students perceived this division as a serious gap between domestic and international students and reported that class interaction was quite challenging as a result.

This difficulty in interacting within the class is also documented by Eisenclas and Trevaskes (2007) who show how the cycle is continuous. These authors state that the lack of social interaction between domestic and international students inhibits in-class interaction, “creates resentment and reinforces stereotypical views” (p. 415). As a result, domestic students believe that international students do not contribute to the classroom environment or dialogue, and international students believe that their domestic peers do

not value them. Clearly, this is a cycle that must be disrupted in order for learning to occur fairly and consistently for all students, whether they are domestic or international.

Based in part on language issues, international students report that U.S. students' "negative attitudes and a lack of cultural sensitivity" (Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002, p. 613) are among the most commonly perceived barriers to their intercultural communication while in the United States. One account of the experiences of international students at an institution in California suggests that these students experienced discrimination on the basis of "their language proficiency, foreign accent, race, ethnicity, and gender" (Ee, 2013, p. 72). The author of this report draws comparisons between these experiences and the longstanding discrimination against domestic minorities in the United States because of their accents (specifically identifying African American English), as well as their races (Ee, 2013).

International students from Asia, Africa, South America, the Middle East, and other non-English speaking regions attending institutions in the United States report more perceived discrimination than their domestic peers or international students from European countries (Smith & Khawaja, 2010). The results of a study conducted by Lee and Rice (2007) show evidence of perceived and actual discrimination in the forms of: feelings of inferiority, disrespect, negative stereotypes based on race or ethnicity, being ignored or excluded by domestic students in the classroom environment, verbal insults from professors and domestic students, exclusion from or restrictions on employment, and physical attacks. The challenge for many international students is that coming to the United States from societies where this kind of discrimination may not exist, or where

they are members of the majority, they are not prepared to handle the verbal and sometimes physical attacks to which they may be subjected as visitors in the host country (Ee, 2013; Lee & Rice, 2007).

In addition to more overt forms of discrimination reported by non-Native English speaking international students, microaggressions commonly experienced by their domestic minority peers are frequently encountered (though not necessarily understood as such) by this population (Kim & Kim, 2010). The primary source of microaggressions among non-native English speaking international students is, not surprisingly, related to language. As in the case of microaggressions experienced by Black and Latino students where, as a result of their speech, “an ascription of intelligence that attributes to them lower intelligence and competence than Whites” (Kim & Kim, 2010, p. 175) is made, Asian international students tend to experience the same sort of ascription of lesser intelligence in spite of the “model minority” stereotype prevalent with regard to Asian American students. Other types of microaggressions experienced by non-native English speakers include: an assertion of White privilege with regard to students’ voice in the classroom (either being ignored/dismissed by faculty or students, or lacking the ability to be heard at all); an assumption of homogeneity among international students, resulting in a generally negative attitude toward all “foreign” students and invalidating the unique attributes of individual international students; exclusion by domestic peers both inside and outside the classroom; feelings of invisibility in interactions with American students both inside and outside the classroom; and a generally negative campus climate that

promotes, for instance, a commodification of Asian students on the U.S. college campus (Hanassab, 2006; Kim & Kim, 2010).

Factors Affecting International Student Persistence/Attrition

According to Lee (2010), “while student retention is frequently used to measure the quality of educational experiences, retention rates may not be the best indicators for the experiences of those from abroad” (p. 68), because it does not “capture the difficult experiences and unusual resolve of those individuals who persist in their studies” (p. 68). Given the great number of difficulties that may be experienced by international students, it is important to consider factors that aid in their success. Even before the recent increase in international undergraduates in the United States, researchers were calling for institutions to take a closer look at factors that affect the retention of these students (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002).

Campus climate, as it relates to diversity, is critical because of its impact on the persistence and retention of domestic minority students at U.S. institutions (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999). Cabrera et al. (1999) suggest that a hostile climate that supports discrimination both in and out of the classroom is a significant factor in the attrition rates of minority students. Further, they suggest that, “this climate of prejudice and discrimination creates disincentives for the minority student to interact with non-minority students, faculty and campus administrators” (p. 136). It is possible, given this understanding of the impact of campus climate on domestic minority students, to extrapolate similar outcomes for international students based on the previously cited literature suggesting that they experience discrimination and an

unwelcoming environment that often leads them to limit their interaction with domestic students, faculty and staff.

Specific examples of discrimination and stereotyping in the classroom that contribute to a hostile campus climate for domestic minority students were identified in a study by Ancis, Sedlacek and Mohr (2000), and include “limited respect and unfair treatment by faculty, teaching assistants, and students, and pressure to conform to stereotypes” (p. 183). This kind of classroom experience is also common for international students who may choose not to participate in classroom discussions as the result of a lack of respect from their faculty members or peers (Devita, 2000). The stereotypes present in the classroom environment, while a component of the overall campus climate, also contribute to the learning and development of students. In a social context, research shows a correlation between how international students perceive their social network (friendships made and general social contacts) and their successful adjustment to the U.S. campus environment and resulting persistence (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002). Based on this information, the researchers suggest that an investigation of what international students believe contributes most to their social network could have a significant impact on the development and provision of appropriate programs and services for this population.

Summary

International students unquestionably represent a valuable population for U.S. universities, from the financial resources they bring, to the cultural diversity and global perspectives they provide on campus and in the classroom (Krishnan & Vrcelj, 2009).

Given the important roles these students play, it is essential to understand the issues facing them during their time at U.S. institutions in order to maximize their experience and encourage retention and future recruitment through their recommendations (Brown & Jones, 2013).

International students come to the United States seeking degrees for a variety of reasons and they arrive at our institutions with expectations just as do their domestic counterparts. Much of the literature focuses on the negative experiences faced by international students. Some of these experiences stem from unmet expectations of the experience to be had at a U.S. institution. Disappointment in the institution or its academic programs is one such unmet expectation, and is explained to some extent by a selection process that relies heavily on word of mouth recommendations and/or rankings and rarely includes any direct knowledge of the institution (Lee, 2008). Another frequent expectation that often results in disappointment is a belief that international students will have a high level of social interaction leading to friendships with domestic students (Marriott, du Plessis, & Pu, 2010; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). In spite of these expectations often being unfulfilled, international students do adjust and persist in the pursuit of their degrees. In fact, these experiences represent but a few of the many negative issues faced by international students.

The variety of negative experiences reported by international students through exit interviews and/or scholarly research includes issues that might be anticipated for any population of students entering a foreign environment. Issues of difficulty adjusting to the host environment, especially with regard to academic approaches and general social

interaction, are heavily tied to differences in language and culture as well as a lack of familiarity with local customs and norms (both inside the classroom and out) (Eisenclas & Trevaskes, 2007; Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Huang, 2008; Lee, 2010; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013; Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Taras & Rowney, 2005). As Lee (2010) points out, the burden for addressing these issues appears, in the research, to be placed upon the students who are encouraged to adjust and assimilate, often with little institutional support.

Unfortunately, some negative experiences for international students at host institutions in English-speaking host countries are out of the hands of the students themselves and must be addressed by the domestic students, faculty, and administrators of the institutions. Instances of discrimination are prevalent in the record of international student experiences in both academic and social settings. Discrimination and bias is encountered in many forms, ranging from feelings of inferiority, to social isolation and marginalization by domestic students and faculty (both inside the classroom and out), to verbal insults, and physical attacks (Lee & Rice, 2007; Ryan & Viete, 2009).

Microaggressions are another form of discrimination commonly identified among international students in United States in particular (Kim & Kim, 2010). Comparisons are drawn, in the research of Kim and Kim (2010), to the similar experiences of domestic minorities in the United States. In fact, the negative experiences of international students are often shockingly similar to the results of research on the experience of domestic minority students. Research shows a high incidence of reports of social and cultural isolation, alienation, and discrimination, as well as difficulty forming friendships and

being encouraged to assimilate to the dominant culture at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Hawkins & Larabee, 2009). Unlike the case of international students, however, these issues are addressed much more readily and visibly for domestic minority students through the implementation of programs, education, and other forms of support. Given the significance of international students to U.S. institutions, and the push to recruit them to our campuses, we have an obligation to provide adequate support to assist them during their tenure on our campuses (Anderson, Carmichael, Harper, & Huang, 2009; Brown & Jones, 2013).

Persistence and retention of students through graduation is a commonly understood goal of universities, regardless of their location. Whatever motivates international students to attend institutions outside their home countries, it is safe to assume that they enter those institutions with the expectation of having a satisfactory educational experience culminating in the awarding of a degree that will aid them in obtaining a good job. As the United States is the top destination for international students to obtain those degrees, it is incumbent upon our institutions to provide support to ensure that their experiences are, indeed, satisfactory and do, in fact, lead to degree completion. Data on international student persistence rates in the United States is virtually impossible to obtain, and research on persistence of this population, particularly at the undergraduate level, is scant. In short, “with a significant number of international students coming to the United States for undergraduate study, it is important for college administrators to be aware of what factors play a major role in the retention of these students” (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002, p. 15).

While the imperative of Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002) was issued more than a decade ago, the need to consider the factors aiding in undergraduate international student retention still exists - perhaps more than ever in light of the current and increasing numbers of international students at this level in the United States (“Open Doors,” 2015). Given that the international student population is highly heterogeneous, bringing unique cultural values and academic experiences to their U.S. higher education experience, it should not be studied as a homogenous group. Furthermore, as Chinese students now represent the highest percentage of international students in the United States (“Open Doors,” 2015), it is logical to begin an investigation of factors that aid in the transition experience and, ultimately, the persistence and retention of “international students” by beginning with this sub-population. The next chapter details my methodology for carrying out this study which attempts to fulfill this charge.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

As discussed in the preceding chapters, international students are recruited heavily by institutions in the United States, yet little research has been done to understand the experiences of this student population once they matriculate. As Chinese students make up the largest percentage of international students in the United States (“Open Doors,” 2015), the purpose of this study is to understand the transition experiences of these students during their first year at an institution in the United States and how those experiences effected their persistence from the first to the second year of college. The following primary and secondary research questions guided the study:

How do Chinese undergraduate students experience the first year of college at an institution in the United States?

- 1. How do they describe their motivations for pursuing a degree in the U.S.?*
- 2. In what ways do they feel they were prepared to navigate the new environment?*
- 3. How do they describe the support they had from the institution?*
- 4. What strategies were most helpful in their transition process?*

Since there is a gap in the literature regarding international student experience at U.S. institutions of higher education, this research provides information that will assist in establishing a foundation for student support services that are responsive to the needs of

this student population. The goals of this research project are achieved through the use of a qualitative hermeneutical phenomenology design. A qualitative methodology is most appropriate for this study since,

In contrast to quantitative research, which takes apart a phenomenon to examine component parts (which become the variables of the study), qualitative research can reveal how all the parts work together to form a whole. It is assumed that meaning is embedded in people's experiences and that this meaning is mediated through the investigator's own perceptions... (Merriam, 1998, p. 6)

Qualitative research allows for an in-depth, detailed study of issues (Patton, 2002), and represents a constructivist approach where "the researcher collects open-ended, emerging data with the primary intent of developing themes from the data" (Creswell, 2003, p. 18). The philosophy of phenomenology underpins all qualitative research (Merriam, 2009), and a phenomenological study concerns itself with "the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience" (Patton, 2002, p. 106). According to Creswell (2007), a phenomenological study is intended to examine the lived experiences of several individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon and then identify what they have in common. Since the goal of this study is to identify common themes that emerge through the analysis of the individual experiences of a particular population, phenomenology is the most logical choice of qualitative methodology.

Hermeneutical Phenomenology

The point of phenomenological research is to "borrow" other people's experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience... (van Manen, 1990, p. 62)

Creswell (2007) outlines two main approaches to phenomenology: transcendental or psychological phenomenology, and hermeneutic or hermeneutical phenomenology.

These approaches have in common “the lived experiences of persons, the view that these experiences are conscious ones, and the development of descriptions of the essences of these experiences” (p. 58), but they also differ in some significant ways. Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy derived from the work of the German mathematician Edmund Husserl, who “saw this method as a way of reaching true meaning through penetrating deeper and deeper into reality” (Lavery, 2003, p. 23). Husserl’s version of phenomenology, also known as transcendental phenomenology, is dependent upon the removal of personal biases by the researcher (Kafle, 2011; Lavery, 2003; van Manen, 1990). In transcendental phenomenology, the removal of bias is done when the researcher “brackets” personal experiences (called ‘*epoche*’) in analyzing the experiences of those being studied (Creswell, 2007; Kafle, 2011; Lavery, 2003; van Manen, 1990). Husserl believed that if the researcher suspended personal thoughts or feelings through bracketing, they would be able to uncover the true essence of the experience in question (Kafle, 2011). According to Lavery (2003), “Husserl proposed that one needed to bracket out the outer world as well as individual biases in order to successfully achieve contact with essence” (p. 23).

Heidegger, a philosopher and student of Husserl’s, however, believed that bracketing of this sort was not possible, and introduced hermeneutical phenomenology (Kafle, 2011; Lavery, 2003, van Manen, 1990), which is also known as “interpretive phenomenology” (van Manen, 1990, p.180). For Heidegger, interpretation is an essential part of the process of understanding the experiences of individuals, and more critically, all interpretation is “influenced by an individual’s background or historicity” (Lavery,

2003, p. 24). As such, the acknowledgement and incorporation, rather than elimination, of these influences is a fundamental component of the hermeneutical phenomenological approach (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1990). While the aim of this research is to uncover the essence of the shared experiences of Chinese undergraduates in their first year at an institution in the U.S., I do not believe that removing my personal biases or history by employing the method of transcendental phenomenology is a feasible, or even prudent, approach. The impetus for conducting this research is rooted in my personal experiences of working and communicating with international students at different stages throughout my professional career. As a result of these interactions, I have formed opinions about what I have perceived as problematic for these students. It would be difficult for me to completely disregard the anecdotal knowledge I have acquired and the judgements I have made regarding their experiences in the process of carrying out the study. Hermeneutical phenomenology embraces the history and experience of the researcher and,

...asks the researcher to engage in a process of self-reflection to quite a different end than that of phenomenology. Specifically, the biases and assumptions of the researcher are not bracketed or set aside, but rather embedded and essential to interpretive process. The researcher is called, on an ongoing basis, to give considerable thought to their own experience and to explicitly claim the ways in which their position or experience relates to the issues being researched. (Laverty, 2003, p.28)

In light of the fact that my personal experiences working with the population being studied have caused me to form opinions about what might have supported or hindered their transition experience, it would be nearly impossible to completely remove those biases or assumptions from the research process. Though I entered this study with a certain set of preconceived ideas about what the experiences for the study participants

may have been like during their first year in the U.S., I maintained an awareness that I needed to listen to the stories they shared without allowing my biases to interfere. During the interviews, my focus remained on actively listening to the responses and information being shared and asking follow-up or clarifying questions that related to their unique experiences. Once entrusted with their stories, however, I used the conceptual framework and reflected on my previous assumptions about international student experiences in the U.S. in order to guide my analysis and shape the categories and themes that emerged from the data. Among the assumptions that remained salient for me in the analysis process were the idea that participants might have negative feelings about the support provided by their institutions or that they would have had negative experiences in the classroom. Furthermore, I assumed that their persistence might have been heavily influenced by the Chinese values with which they had been raised. Later in this chapter, I address other assumptions that contributed to my analysis. Throughout the process, although I had entered the study with a focus on identifying factors that contributed to the success of these students through their first year of college in the U.S., I found myself giving equal attention to the negative factors they had shared. Though I was initially resistant to allow these factors to emerge as significant in the experiences of these students, through reflection I recognized that this impulse was due, in part, to my desire not to contribute deficit-based findings that my previous experiences and research had shown were the norm in this research. As hermeneutical phenomenology not only allows for researcher biases to be acknowledged, but considers them to be “key contributors to the research process” (Laverty, 2003, p.28), I moved forward in my analysis and

interpretation by allowing all of the identified factors, whether supporting or hindering the success of these students, to become part of the narrative around the shared experiences of these participants.

A hermeneutical phenomenological approach is also complementary to the conceptual framework being employed for this study. As the framework comprises Schlossberg's Transition Model (1995) and Museus' Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (2014), as well as Chinese values related to family and education, it has at its core, an interest in the lived experiences of the study participants and the interpretation of how those experiences shaped their transition. According to Kafle (2011), hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on "illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives" (p. 191). Because transition experiences comprise a number of factors involving the individuals' situation, self, external sources of support, and coping strategies, an awareness of the details that combined to create their broader experience is necessary in order to interpret the way those factors interacted with one another. Armed with a career-long assessment of support given international students and a deep review of existing literature on the subject, I examined the experiences shared by the study participants. I drew from that mix of rich data a series of recommendations for improvement of support programs for first-year international students.

Recruitment Processes & Participant Selection

Participants were selected for this study using a purposeful sampling method, which is "based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand,

and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). The selection of participants was done using criterion-based sampling, which requires the researcher to make a list of attributes that each participant must have in order to be eligible for the study (Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

For this study, the initial criteria for participant selection was as follows:

The participant had to be a current Southeastern University² student:

1. who was a second or third year undergraduate student;
2. who was a Chinese citizen; and
3. who did not attend high school in the United States.

Although this research focuses on the first year transition experiences of the population being studied, that does not necessarily imply that the first year of college for participants was the traditional “freshman” year. As a result, and with the focus of this research being the transition experience of Chinese undergraduates in their actual first year, I chose to amend the IRB proposal in order to expand recruitment to include students in their second, third, or fourth year of the undergraduate degree to attract students who may have transferred to a U.S. institution after their freshman year. This change was necessary since hermeneutical phenomenology is a reflective approach and “a person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through the experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10). Since a student in their fourth year of the degree may actually have been in their second year of college in the U.S., excluding fourth year students

² The names of institutions and participants referenced in this study are pseudonyms. An institutional profile is provided later in this chapter.

unnecessarily limited the already meager pool of qualified participants, thus the decision was made to revise the criteria to include them.

There is no clear guideline for the number of participants needed for conducting a qualitative study, but Merriam (2009) suggests that, “What is needed is an adequate number of participants, sites, or activities to answer the question posed at the beginning of the study” (p. 80). Seidman (2013) states that in order to determine how many participants are “enough” the research must consider sufficiency, and saturation of information. Sufficiency refers to the number of participants sufficient to reflect the population adequately. Saturation, refers to the point at which the interviewer has spoken with enough participants that they begin to hear the same answers repeated in the interviews (Seidman, 2013). Lavery (2003) also indicates that “the number of participants generally necessary for studies of this type [hermeneutical phenomenological] will vary depending on the nature of the study and the data collected along the way” (p. 29). In short, “‘enough’ is an interactive reflection of every step of the interview process and different for each study and each researcher” (Seidman, 2013, p. 58). Given the availability of a relatively small population meeting the above criteria, I hoped to interview between four and ten students, with a preferred number of six. I planned to provide participants who completed the three-interview series a \$25 gift card as a token of appreciation for their participation. Due to difficulties encountered during the initial recruitment process, however, the compensation for participation was adjusted, as I explain below.

I had initially intended to recruit participants for the study by emailing the Chinese Student Association, a registered student organization for Chinese students at the university, as well as posting recruiting notices on the organization's Facebook page and in the office of International Student and Scholar Services on campus. I also planned to email all undergraduate students who met the criteria for the study by requesting a list from the Office of the Registrar. Interested students would then be asked to contact me via email to receive further information and a link to a brief eligibility questionnaire to be administered through Qualtrics. After identifying one or more initial participants meeting the study criteria, I intended to move to snowball sampling to identify additional participants as necessary until reaching saturation in the interview data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

During the IRB process at the study site, restrictions on accessing protected directory information caused me to adjust my recruitment approach. Working with the Office of International Student and Scholar Services, I was able to have my recruitment email (Appendix A) sent by members of the office's staff to all students meeting the participation criteria, and to have recruitment flyers (Appendix B) posted in the office. Additionally, rather than having interested students contact me for access to the eligibility questionnaire, the recruitment email included the link to the Qualtrics survey (Appendix C).

Emails were initially sent only to potential participants attending the smaller of the two campuses at Southeastern University where there is a high concentration of Chinese students. This effort resulted in one qualified participant being identified after

completing the eligibility survey. Interviews were completed with this participant and efforts to recruit additional participants through snowball sampling were made but resulted in no additional participants. In addition to the amendments previously discussed, additional revisions were made to the IRB allowing for an increase in the compensation amount to \$75 per participant. Upon receipt of approval for all of the IRB revisions, the updated recruitment email (Appendix D) was sent out by the Office of International Student and Scholar Services, but this time was sent to all qualified students at both campuses of Southeastern University. This resulted in the identification of an additional five students who were eligible for participation in the study. Attempts at snowball sampling continued during the interviews with each of the additional participants, but resulted in no additional participants. Using Seidman's (2013) and Laverty's (2003) position on saturation for guidance in determining the sufficient number of participants, and finding that I had reached saturation with the data gathered from the six initial participants, I made the decision to suspend further recruitment efforts.

Sample and Institutional Context

According to Open Doors (2015) data, Southeastern University (SU) currently receives the fourth highest number of international students in its state (which ranks seventh in the nation as a destination for international students), with the highest percentage of international students in the state (18.8%) coming from China. SU's international, and, specifically, Chinese student population, are quite representative of national trends in enrollment of this student population as described in Chapter One, making it a good location for conducting the study ("Open Doors," 2015). Furthermore,

my position as an administrator at this institution afforded me access to other campus administrators who could assist in recruitment, and placed me in a position of respect when approaching students from a culture that values position and title.

Southeastern University is a large, public institution serving primarily students from the state within which it is located. The university has two principal campuses located approximately thirty-five miles apart (the smaller North and larger South [Main] campuses), as well as several smaller campuses in surrounding communities.

Southeastern also claims a campus in China since its School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, located at the North Campus, has a partnership program with a university near Beijing. This partnership allows Chinese students to transfer to Southeastern in their junior year, and allows domestic students to spend a semester or year at the Chinese institution. In addition, Chinese students are awarded degrees by both institutions upon graduation from Southeastern. As a result, Southeastern University's North Campus has a fairly high concentration of Chinese students compared to the South Campus. Though only one participant in the study came to SU directly through this partnership program, the institution's reputation in China is likely bolstered by its connection to a well-respected Chinese institution. As was suggested in the literature, for students already intending to pursue a degree in Hospitality, such as the participants in this study, the reputation of the program would be a major draw (Lee, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pang & Appleton, 2004).

A total of six students meeting the eligibility criteria were identified through the recruitment process and agreed to participate in the study. Four of these students spent their first year of college in the U.S. at Southeastern University, but all of them had transferred from other institutions outside the U.S. (two in China, and one each in Switzerland and Panama). The other two participants began their college careers in the U.S., but transferred to Southeastern University during or after their sophomore years. As such, their first-year experience in the U.S. was actually their freshman year, and took place for one student at a very small private school on the west coast of the United States, and for the other student at a large, public school on the east coast of the United States. An overview of the participants is provided in Table 2, and complete profiles are presented in the next chapter.

Procedures

Face to face, in-depth interviews were used to collect the data for this study, as they offered the best opportunity for participants to share their stories through conversation, and they are regarded as one of the principle methods of data collection in qualitative research (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). I chose to employ Seidman's (2013) three-interview series model for the study because it, "allows both the interviewer and the participant to explore the participant's experience, place it in context, and reflect on its meaning" (p. 20). In addition, meeting with participants over three separate interviews provided an opportunity for trust to be built between myself and the participants, which Seidman suggests is important when there are differences of race or ethnicity between interviewer and participant. Seidman states that, "by returning to the

participant three times, an interviewer has the opportunity to demonstrate respect, thoughtfulness, and interest in that individual, all of which can work toward ameliorating skepticism” (p. 102).

Table 2

Participant Overview

<i>Student Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>City of Origin</i>	<i>Transitioned from Other Institution</i>	<i>U.S. Institution Type</i>	<i>Year in College at Transition</i>	<i>Major</i>
<i>Ada</i>	Female	25	Shenyang (North)	Yes; Switzerland	Large Public (S.U.)	3 rd Year	Hospitality & Tourism Management
<i>Chino</i>	Male	24	Guangzhou (South)	Yes; Panama	Large Public (S.U.)	3 rd Year	International Business & Finance
<i>Kat</i>	Female	21	Inner Mongolia (North)	No	Small Private (West Coast U.S.)	N/A	Marketing
<i>Lucy</i>	Female	21	Beijing (North)	Yes; China	Large Public (S.U.)	3 rd Year	Hospitality & Tourism Management
<i>Skye</i>	Female	23	Qingdao (North)	Yes; China	Large Public (S.U.)	3 rd Year	Hospitality & Tourism Management
<i>Tianyao</i>	Male	21	Nanjing (South)	No	Large Public (North East U.S.)	N/A	Finance

In this case, since I had an awareness that Chinese culture encourages respect for authority and places a high value on saving face (Chan, 1999; Hofstede & Bond, 1988), it was important for me to follow a process that would give the participants a chance to become familiar and comfortable with me over the course of our conversations in order

for them to be open about their experiences, even when recounting those experiences might cause discomfort.

Since the in-depth interview is “intended to combine structure with flexibility” (Legard et al., 2003, p. 141), semi-structured interviews were conducted, using an interview guide to focus on the key topics to be addressed. Key questions were determined ahead of time (Appendices E-G), but, as recommended by Legard et al. (2003), I allowed follow-up questions to flow organically based upon participants’ responses to my questions. This approach is supported in the hermeneutical phenomenological design, where, according to Lavery (2003), “the specific question asked is generally very open in nature, with follow-up discussion being led not so much by the researcher, but by the participant” (p. 29). Questions for the semi-structured interviews were developed based upon the conceptual framework and the literature on international students’ motivations for seeking a degree in the United States and experiences at institutions in non-English speaking countries. For example, in exploring an element of Schlossberg’s Transition Model around the individual’s role in initiating the transition and the impact it can have on navigating the transition process [related to the resource termed “Situation”] (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995), I asked: *What made you decide to pursue your undergraduate degree in the United States?*, with a follow-up question of: *Was this something you had planned to do?* “Support” was also identified by Schlossberg et. al (1995) as one of the resources important to individuals in transition. As I was interested in understanding more about the Institutional Support available to participants during their first year, I based another question on the Culturally

Engaging Campus Environments Model's indicators related to Cultural Familiarity and Culturally Relevant Knowledge (Museus, 2014). The question, *Would you say you saw your culture reflected in the campus environment through programs, organizations, or other avenues, or that you were able to stay connected to your culture? How/In what ways?*, was intended to explore any opportunities the participants had to connect to institutional agents and/or fellow students who share cultural backgrounds, and/or to engage in opportunities that "cultivate, sustain, and increase knowledge of their cultures and communities of origin" (Museus, 2014, p. 210). I also inquired about sources of personal (rather than institutional) support by asking: *What were the greatest sources of support to you during your first-year experience?* To my surprise, though I had expected responses to fit neatly into the framework around "Support" (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995), in analyzing the data, I discovered that several "Strategies," also noted by Schlossberg et al. (1995) as a resource for moving through transition, emerged as a result of this question.

Three separate interviews were conducted with each of the participants, for a total of eighteen interviews, in various locations on the Southeastern University (SU) campuses and, in one case, at my home (at the participant's suggestion). Interview locations at Southeastern University included private study rooms in the library at the south campus; my office in the student union at Southeastern University's north campus; and an empty administrative office in the student union at Southeastern University's south campus. The interviews ranged in duration from approximately thirty to seventy minutes, with the second interview in each series being the longest. The advantage of

using this model was that it allowed for a relationship to be established with each participant over the course of the three interviews that took place with a space of approximately one week between them, as well as giving participants the opportunity to tell their story more fully over the course of multiple conversations (Seidman, 2013). According to van Manen (1990), this approach is very important in hermeneutical phenomenological research as “the interview may be used as a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience” (p. 66).

In the first interview with each participant, we discussed personal and family background, as well as motivations for pursuing a degree in the United States and any expectations they may have had for their experience. The Informed Consent Document (Appendix H) was also reviewed and signed by the participant at the beginning of this session. In the second interview, details of each participant’s actual experiences during the first year of college in the United States were discussed. In each final interview, participants had an opportunity to reflect on the experiences discussed in the previous session and share how they viewed their entire first year as an international student in the United States.

Each interview was audio recorded using a tablet device. Recording interviews is a common practice in qualitative interviewing (Merriam, 2009), and was especially helpful in interviewing participants for whom English is not a first language (Seidman, 2013). Handwritten notes were also taken to supplement the recordings, and field notes were written immediately following each interview to take down observations about participant demeanor, as well as my own reactions and personal reflections on each

interview, and the nature of the relationship between myself and the participant (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2013). Although I had expected to transcribe the interviews myself, due to time constraints, upon completion of the interviews all of the audio files were sent to an internet-based company for transcription. Once the written transcripts were returned, I listened to each audio file while reviewing each transcript individually to ensure their accuracy and make any necessary corrections. According to Seidman (2013), “interviewers who transcribe their own recordings come to know their interviews better” (p. 118). I employed a service to do the bulk of the initial transcription, but the time I spent listening to each recording and correcting the corresponding transcript was invaluable to me in beginning my analysis of the data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis using the hermeneutical phenomenological approach is described as a “hermeneutic circle” (Laverty, 2003, p. 30). Through this process, “parts of the text are understood in relation to the whole text and vice versa. Then, the individual texts are understood in relation to all the texts and vice versa” (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000, p. 72). By using this process, the researcher is able to understand and interpret how small pieces of data influenced the greater experience of the individual and group being studied, as well as to understand and interpret how the overall experience has influenced the same small pieces of data (Cohen et al., 2000). After an initial read-through of the interview transcripts while listening to the audio recordings, the analysis process began with an in-depth reading of all of the corrected transcripts. I was attempting to reconnect and reacquaint myself with the participants’ stories, and my use of the hermeneutic circle

began at this stage. I focused on each of the transcripts for the first interview session, then the second, and then the third, in order to understand the motivations and expectations; actual experiences; and sources of support and strategies as distinct units of the participants' experiences. At this stage, I made general notes in the margins to begin to interpret pieces of data in a general sense. For example, in the second interview session, one participant commented on the way classes were structured in China, and I noted "class format in China different than U.S./cohort." As I moved through the other transcripts from the second interview session with each participant, I noticed that this was repeated by others as they spoke about their classroom experience. This led to the creation of codes as I moved into a more in-depth analysis through first cycle coding.

Open coding allows the researcher to consider all of the data being reviewed without strict parameters guiding the process, such that categories and themes emerge through an analysis of the material being reviewed (Merriam, 2009). Seidman considers this an important aspect of data analysis, and states that, "the researcher must come to the transcripts with an open attitude seeking what emerges as important and of interest from the text" (p. 119). Content analysis in qualitative inquiry also focuses on the emergence of categories or themes from the interview data as it is reviewed (Merriam, 2009).

Utilizing open coding and content analysis, coding for this study took place in two levels: first cycle coding, where codes were assigned to give meaning to items of interest in the data; and second cycle coding, where the first cycle codes were analyzed further, synthesized, and grouped into categories (Saldaña, 2009) or "clusters of meaning" (Creswell, 2007, p. 61) using the conceptual framework as a guide.

During my next reading of the interview transcripts, I began to delve deeper into the text and did first cycle coding using both “Attribute Coding,” which was applied to demographic information, and “Descriptive Coding,” which summarizes the basic idea of a passage, sentence or other unit of the interview document. I began this stage by loosely applying a set of predetermined codes taken from the conceptual framework, but allowed the majority of codes to emerge in the analysis process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Predetermined codes included such terms as “Motivation,” “Outlook,” and “Support,” drawn from Schlossberg’s Transition Model (1981/1995), and “Cultural Familiarity,” and “Campus Environment,” drawn from the CECE Model (Museus, 2014). In the previous example of the format of Chinese versus U.S. classes, codes that emerged organically included “Class Format,” and “Building Relationships.” Participants who spoke about how the Chinese class structure had them moving through the same set of classes with the same group of students each day, as opposed to the U.S. structure, which saw them taking different classes with different students, expressed difficulties in creating relationships with their peers because they were not always together. Therefore, although “Class Format,” had obvious implications for their academic transition to a new pedagogical style, considering it in the context of their larger experience showed that it had an even more significant impact on their social transition in terms of being able to build relationships. Other codes that emerged independent of the conceptual framework included “Jokes,” “American Slang/Idioms,” “Difficulties with Reading Comprehension,” “Difficulties with Spoken Comprehension,” “Practical Vocabulary,” and “Needed Translation.” Each of these codes was connected to the participants’

command of English, so a primary code of “Language Proficiency” was identified and each of the related codes were then categorized as sub-codes of “Language Proficiency.” At the end of first cycle coding using this process, I had identified a total of 34 primary codes and 230 sub-codes.

Once first cycle coding had been completed, I transferred each of the codes and sub-codes to paper in order to create a master list. I then moved into second cycle coding using “Pattern Coding,” a process that pulls together several data items into thematically linked categories, and “Focused Coding,” which looks at the most frequently applied codes in order to distill the most meaningful themes from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2009). Using Pattern Coding, I first reviewed the sub-codes to identify themes or shared characteristics. For example, the sub-codes of “Language Proficiency” described above (along with others not listed) appeared to fall into two main categories, with some falling into both categories. The code of “Jokes,” for instance, was used in connection with experiences in social settings, and the code of “Difficulty with Reading Comprehension” was used in connection with academic experiences. The codes of “American Slang/Idioms” and “Needed Translation” tied to both social and academic experiences shared by participants. As a result, the 15 total sub-codes that had been identified for “Language Proficiency” in first cycle coding were ultimately reduced to two sub-codes, “Academic” and “Social,” with several experiences falling into both.

Focused coding was also used to look for patterns and themes based on the number of times a code was used. For example, in considering participants’ motivations for studying in the U.S., I looked at the number of times the codes for “Personal Interest,”

“Future Opportunities/Happiness,” “Desire to see the world,” “Previous Experience Abroad,” “Parents,” and “Obtain a Good Job,” were cited. Based on those counts, I reduced the sub-codes of “Motivation to Study in the U.S.” to “Personal Motivations” and “External Motivations,” noting an almost even number of references to factors based on the individual students’ motivations, and those of their parents. Further explanation of these motivation factors is provided in the next chapter.

Ultimately, second cycle coding resulted in the reduction of initial codes to a total of 24 primary codes and 45 sub-codes, with an additional attribute of “positive” or “negative” that was assigned as appropriate to several of the codes and/or sub-codes. In some cases, both negative and positive attributes were assigned. For instance, being fully funded by their parents was viewed favorably by participants in most cases, but there were instances where the accompanying sense of obligation hindered students and had a negative impact. As such, the code “Parental Support” was assigned both positive and negative attributes. A sampling of the codes resulting from first and second-cycle coding is provided in Table 3.

Once this stage of coding was completed, the newly refined set of codes and sub-codes were transferred to individual pieces of paper that were arranged and re-arranged into themes that were based upon the research sub-questions. These general themes were motivation, preparation, support, and strategies, and were connected to factors identified as part of the “4 S’s” (Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies) from the Schlossberg Transition Model (1995). At this point in the analysis, I also moved transcript excerpts, with their accompanying codes and sub-codes, into an Excel spreadsheet. Using this

software permitted me to sort and manipulate data across a multitude of factors in order to identify specific examples from the words of the participants. For example, though “Language Proficiency” is not one of the attributes assigned to “Self” in Schlossberg’s Transition Model (1995), I viewed it as a uniquely personal attribute that should be considered as such. Furthermore, I determined that the domain of “Self,” which consists of the coping mechanisms an individual brings to their transition (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995), related directly to the question of participants’ preparation for their transitions. Using this information, I filtered my spreadsheet for the theme of “Preparation,” and the code of “Language Proficiency” to create a baseline for interpretation of this item. I then applied an additional set of filters that allowed me to sort interview excerpts for the sub-codes of “Academic” and/or “Social,” as well as positive and/or negative attributes, in order to identify experiences that represented the absence or presence of this attribute for participants. Repeating this process for each of the themes, and filtering for various code and sub-code combinations allowed me to create a comprehensive picture of the experiences of these six participants as they moved into and through their first year of college in the U.S.

Trustworthiness

Ensuring the trustworthiness of findings is important in the research process, but tends to be more challenging in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). The credibility and ethics of the researcher also contribute to the overall trustworthiness of a study (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002).

Table 3

Sample of Codes Identified through Data Analysis

First-Cycle Descriptive Codes	First-Cycle Sub-Codes	Second-Cycle Pattern Codes	Second-Cycle Sub-Codes
<i>Expectations for College in the U.S.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Academic - Social Experience - Language - Housing - Make Friends - Get Practical Experience 	<i>Expectations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ex: Academic (+ or -) Ex: Social/Personal (+ or -) Ex: Negative
<i>Language Proficiency</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding Prof. - Needed Translation - American Slang/Idioms - Practical Vocabulary - Jokes 	<i>Language Proficiency</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> LP: Academic (+ or -) LP: Social (+ or -)
<i>Living Situation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supported by Parents - Public Transportation - Needed Car 	<i>Living Situation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> LS: Housing Problems LS: Housing Arrangements LS: Driving/Transportation LS: Financial Situation
<i>Housing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Roommate Problems - Required to Live On-campus - Forced to Live Off-campus - Found Roommate via Internet from China 		

Credibility. Merriam (2009) argues that assessing the validity of observations in qualitative research is not itself a valid concept and suggests, “though qualitative researchers can never capture an objective “truth” or “reality,” there are a number of strategies that you as a qualitative researcher can use to increase the “credibility” of your findings” (Merriam, 2009, p. 215). Among these strategies is the member check (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2013). In a member check, the researcher solicits feedback from the participants as transcriptions and early analysis are completed in order to verify that the researcher’s initial interpretation accurately reflects their comments. According to Merriam (2009), “participants should be able to recognize their experience in your interpretation or suggest some fine-tuning to better capture their perspectives” (p. 217).

Member checking in this study was done while interviews were being conducted, since I often found it necessary to clarify information or try to encapsulate an idea during an interview session as a result of language differences. For example, I frequently restated or rephrased information back to the participant at the end of a section related to a certain topic (e.g. expectations) in order to ensure that I was capturing the participant’s meaning correctly in my note taking. As several interviews were being conducted within the same week, and due to the short time between each interview (approximately one week), I was unable to complete transcriptions before the following session. Instead, I listened to the recordings and reviewed my notes before the next meeting with a participant and at our next meeting, prior to proceeding with the interview topic for that day, I asked any questions that arose from my review of the previous meeting’s data in

order for them to provide any necessary clarification or correction. I also started each interview by giving the participant an opportunity to clarify anything shared in the previous conversation after further reflection. I also asked them if they had any other information they had thought of in the days following that interaction. This process aided in building rapport and trust with my interview participants as it demonstrated my level of seriousness for the research and my interest in accurately reflecting their thoughts and experiences (Patton, 2002). The member checking conducted within the context of the interviews as they were being conducted confirmed that the participants felt they had been fairly understood. Participants rarely felt the need to add any additional or clarifying information from the previous interview session.

Another strategy for ensuring credibility is researcher reflexivity (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). Taking the time following each interview to record my personal observations, biases, and assumptions was critical to ensuring credibility in the study (Merriam, 2009). According to Patton (2002), failure of the researcher to complete this step and to record process notes as part of the data collection “seriously undermine[s] the rigor of qualitative inquiry” (p. 384). As such, I took a few moments after each interview to note my observations about the participant’s demeanor and my thoughts about the session. In general, I noted the participants’ apparent comfort levels while sharing information, as well as how I felt about our rapport.

Credibility of the researcher. Linked to the credibility of the researcher is their ethics (Merriam, 2009). While there are many safeguards in place around the ethical execution of research studies, notably the Institutional Review Board approval required

before data collection commenced, actual ethical practices are ultimately in the hands of the researcher (Merriam, 2009). Credibility in qualitative research, in particular, relies heavily on the ethics of the researcher because the data collection methods of interviewing and observation ask participants to open themselves to sharing details of their personal lives which can carry potential risks and benefits to the participant (Merriam, 2009). The analysis stage also carries considerable potential for ethical problems as the researcher decides what is valuable or not and may exclude information that does not fit their hypothesis or that contradicts their point of view (Merriam, 2009). Conducting a study in an ethical manner is essential to its credibility and it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that he or she operate in an honest, responsible and ethical manner at every stage of the process, from interviewing to reporting their findings (Patton, 2002).

Role of the Researcher

According to Patton (2002), “the researcher is the instrument in qualitative inquiry” (p. 566). As a result, positioning myself as the researcher in the study is critical to its success. In my current role as Director of Campus Life at a large, public institution, I have not had the opportunity to interact closely with international students on a regular basis. In previous roles as an Exchange Program Coordinator on the same campus and at another large, public institution in the same state, however, I worked closely with international students from various countries who attended the institution on J-1 exchange visitor visas for up to one academic year. In those positions, I witnessed, first-hand, the difficulties experienced by students who were on campus for a short stay yet

had the support of my office and other campus resources in order to be successful in the five to ten months they were on campus. As my department in one of these positions was located in the same office as the International Student and Scholar Services department that attended to the needs of matriculating international students, I observed the lack of support and resources for these students beyond visa compliance issues. At another, small, private institution located in the Rocky Mountain region, in which I worked as an Assistant Director of Campus Activities, I was able to connect with international students through campus events and relationships built with the International Student Services office on that campus. The anecdotal information I gathered from speaking with students while in that position demonstrated that matriculating international students did not believe they were receiving the level of programming and services that they believed were afforded to domestic minority students. For instance, they were aware of specialized workshops that were developed to provide resources and support to specific populations of domestic minority students, but were unaware of programs offered to provide similar support to international students on the campus. This collective information led to my interest in understanding, from a more positive perspective, what factors did contribute to the success of international students attending college in the United States, as they seemed to persist irrespective of the difficulties they faced.

In spite of my interest in understanding and supporting this community, I assumed that my identity as a White, American woman, as well as my position of authority as a campus administrator could be a significant negative factor in the development of relationships with the participants in this study, and would have an impact on the way

participants chose to respond to me. I was pleasantly surprised that all of the participants seemed quite at ease during each of our interviews and did not hesitate to share details of their experiences – both positive and negative. Regardless of their apparent comfort levels, I remained mindful of my identities and the preconceived notions I had about the experiences of international students on U.S. college campuses, based on my review of the literature and my personal observations at various institutions, while both conducting the interviews and analyzing the data.

Among the preconceived notions with which I entered this process were a combination of positive and negative assumptions about the experiences of Chinese students in the U.S. One of these was that the participants might have felt frustrated upon their arrival in the U.S. by a perceived lack of concern for their well-being in the part of the institution. At one of my previous institutions, I was aware that international students were forced to find their way to campus and/or their accommodations without any assistance. These students often took rides from complete strangers because public transportation was unreliable and taxis were unavailable when they arrived to the airport. In light of this anecdotal information, I anticipated that one of more participants might have shared feelings of anger or disappointment with the institution for leaving them in a similarly vulnerable position at the beginning of their enrollment. I also anticipated that students would have shared stories of negative experiences in the classroom environment. Based on the literature about international students' difficulties in adjusting to different teaching styles and written assignments (Devita, 2000; Taras & Rowney, 2007; Tran, 2009; Zhang & Mi, 2010), I expected that students might share similar experiences from

their first year. I had also heard stories at one of my institutions about Chinese students being excluded by domestic students in group projects where the students assembled their own teams, and the literature suggests that this type of discrimination is commonplace for non-native English speaking international students because domestic students perceive that they are less intelligent or well-prepared (Andrade, 2006; Ee, 2013; Eisenclas & Trevaskes, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007; Ryan & Viète, 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2010; Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002). Additionally, based on personal knowledge from past institutions, I assumed that students would have found ways to connect with other Chinese students prior to their arrival in the U.S. to seek assistance with tasks that could not be managed while they were still in China. These sorts of assumptions, all based on experiences of which I was personally aware or had discovered in a review of the literature, remained present in my analysis of the data.

Post-interview reflection was essential to me as the researcher in order to be consciously aware of “the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of [my] own perspective and voice as well as – and often in contrast to – the perspectives and voices of those [I] observe and talk to” (Patton, 2002, p. 299). Since I do not currently work in a department connected with international student services, I believed the population being studied would be more open to speaking honestly with me about their experiences as there would have been no reason to perceive that the information they shared could negatively impact services they still required in order to remain in good standing on campus. That said, I spent some time at the start of interview session one explaining my role on campus in detail in order to assuage any such concerns at the

outset, and maintained an awareness of how my position as a campus administrator may, nevertheless, have been intimidating to students who were raised in a culture that so strongly values hierarchy and respect for those in positions of authority (Bond, 1991). As mentioned previously, none of the participants seemed uncomfortable sharing their experiences, and my position of authority as a campus administrator did not appear to dissuade them from being candid about both positive and negative experiences during their first year of college. And though few of the interviews were able to be conducted without a heavy reliance on the interview guides to keep them moving, I did find that most of the participants became more relaxed and conversational as the interviews progressed, sharing more information than was specifically asked for in any given question. The level of candor and vulnerability displayed by the participants throughout the interview process made me keenly aware of my position of privilege in conducting this research and the amount of trust they were placing in me. I kept this in mind throughout the process of analysis as I allowed the collective story of their transitions emerge from their words.

Researcher Reflection

Throughout the processes of data collection and data analysis, I found myself in the position of needing to manage tensions that arose for me as the researcher. First, as I noted previously, was my desire to focus on positive experiences in order to provide recommendations based on things that were already working well for the participants. To that end, I entered the study with an asset-based perspective, using interview questions designed to elicit more positive responses. I discovered, however, that their negative

experiences could not be ignored and were as critical to understanding the transition experiences of these students as were the positive experiences – if not more so.

Second, I experienced tension around the independent nature of the participants. I chose to undertake this study because of my perception (supported in large part by the literature) that Chinese undergraduate students were having experiences that did not support their academic and/or personal success during their time studying in the U.S. Though anecdotal information told me that their experiences were often negative, both in the classroom and out of it, I was hopeful that learning about their positive experiences would provide with me the insight to begin to develop programs and services that would better support them. What I learned from these students' negative experiences, however, was their high level of independence, and their need and desire to advocate for themselves and solve their own problems. The negative experiences they shared exposed clear gaps in institutional support, yet I also recognized tension between what I believe is the institutional responsibility to provide proactive support and services to this population, and their need to exercise their independence. In spite of their negative experiences, often the result of institutional failures to provide adequate information or services, these students simply found ways to adapt or assimilate to their environment in order to persist. In some ways, I was surprised about this because I had anticipated that any negative experiences I heard about would have resulted in a higher level of frustration for the participants. Instead, although some participants did share feelings of frustration or disappointment about certain challenges they faced, it seemed that they were not surprised to have had to overcome such obstacles to their transitions and found

ways to work through - or around - them. Though I never assumed that Chinese students would feel helpless during their first year, I did assume that any negative experiences that were the result of someone else's failure to provide information or services would have been more problematic for participants. The revelation that they had such high levels of self-efficacy and self-advocacy to work through negative experiences was counter to my preconceived ideas about how Chinese undergraduate students would respond to such challenges.

Through the process of reflection, I recognized that in spite of my asset-based approach to addressing the needs of this population, it is necessary to honor their challenges as well as their sense of responsibility for being their own advocates. Several participants noted that they had chosen to take part in the study because they hoped that sharing what they experienced might help future Chinese students have an easier time. As such, I realized through this process that there is a balance to be struck between providing adequate support and allowing the students to do for themselves and exercise their independence throughout their transition processes as a means of managing transitions.

The use of a hermeneutical phenomenological design offered me the ability to bring all my previously held assumptions about the Chinese undergraduate experience in the U.S. into the research process, from data collection through analysis. The tensions I experienced between those assumptions and the actual stories shared by participants helped to shape the findings of this study by pushing me to be more critical in my analysis. I considered each piece of data independently (as it was shared by the participant), as well as through the lens of my own assumptions. I believe this process of

analysis, and analysis through reflection, provided a more nuanced understanding of the data and forced me to be sensitive to not only the positive experiences I was hoping to learn about, but the negative experiences that so significantly shaped the first year for these students. The use of this methodological design allowed me to acknowledge and incorporate my personal biases and assumptions into the process and, ultimately, honor each participant's full experience through my interpretation of their stories.

Limitations

One potential limitation of the study was my race/ethnicity as a White, American/Western woman. Since Chinese students place a high value on trust within their close, inner circle of family and friends (Bond, 1991), I anticipated that entering into a dialogue about their backgrounds and experiences may have been challenging because it would be difficult to establish a trusting rapport in which participants were willing to share their experiences with relative stranger. The Chinese concern with maintaining face makes it important to avoid opening oneself to a possible betrayal by those outside of their inner circle, as the results of damaging one's reputation can be far reaching (Bond, 1991). In order to mitigate this issue, I worked with the Office of International Student and Scholar services throughout the recruitment process. I believed that since the staff members in that office had already established trusting relationships with the students being invited to participate, their willingness to vouch for me may have made it more comfortable for students to take part. As a result of this vetting, and my candor with the students, I believe these participants felt comfortable enough to share their stories. That said, I did feel that the information they shared was mostly limited to the questions I

asked and it was sometimes difficult for them to engage in more organic conversation. Ultimately, I don't believe this had a negative impact on the study, but having had a research partner with greater knowledge of Chinese culture may have garnered even richer data than I was able to glean as a White, American/Western, woman.

Another potential limitation of this study was the uneven entry times of the participants. The result was a disparity of transition experiences. For the students who attended an institution outside of China prior to their U.S. enrollment, this would potentially have involved language and culture transitions similar to what they experienced in coming to the United States (even if the language at the institution was not English). Though several of the participants in this study had such an experience prior to coming to the U.S., none of them mentioned their previous experience as they related their first year U.S. experiences. That said, I maintained an awareness that the previous experiences of these students may well have affected the way they managed and understood those that related to this study. Since there was no discreet acknowledgement of those previous experiences by the participants, it is not possible to determine their impact.

A further limitation is that the current geo-political relationship between the U.S. and China was not considered in conducting this research. Failing to take into account the broader social, political, and economic motivations behind the desire of both China and the U.S. to have so many Chinese students at our universities may be a limitation to this study. Although the push-pull factors identified in Chapter One are based in large part on these issues (greater job opportunities for Chinese with U.S. degrees, relaxed immigration

processes, etc.), the magnitude of the relationship between our countries as allies on the world stage, and the importance of maintaining a balance in furthering the interests of both countries was not considered in terms of the motivations or persistence factors driving these participants to study in the U.S.

Finally, this study centered on a very particular sample from the population of international students. This was done because the international student community is quite heterogeneous and I believe it should not be considered as a whole. Though having focused on such a small population makes it more difficult to generalize the findings to international students in a broader sense, limiting the study to Chinese undergraduates allows for an evaluation of the experiences of a unique population that represents the fastest growing segment of international students on U.S. campuses and I believe there was value in conducting this research with such a focused population.

As a result of the limited amount of literature available about the experiences and persistence rates of international undergraduate students in the United States, some may argue that conclusions drawn about this population are premature. I would argue, however, that given the increased number of international undergraduates in the United States, and the documented experiences of non-native English-speaking international students' difficulties in adjusting to Western academic environments, this research is quite timely. Disaggregating the experiences of any sub-group of international undergraduate degree-seekers from the larger population of international students (across all countries and degree levels) allows this sub-population to be addressed for its unique needs and attributes. Being proactive in understanding what factors aid in the successful

transition and persistence of this student population can assist in the development of relevant programs and services that may be generalized to the international student populations on campuses throughout the United States.

Summary

Using a phenomenological approach, this study examined the first-year transition experiences of six Chinese undergraduate students attending universities in the United States. After completing the transcription process, First and Second-Cycle coding processes were done to identify key categories and, ultimately, themes in the data. The findings of the analysis of my series of three-interviews with each of these students are presented in the next two chapters. Chapter Four offers profiles of each participant and findings related to their motivations and expectations for attending college in the United States, as well as the multiple transition types that emerged through analysis of the data, while Chapter Five presents the findings related to the students' actual experiences during the first year, including the ways in which they were prepared, the sources of institutional support that aided them, and strategies they found helpful in making their various transitions throughout their first year at an American university.

CHAPTER FOUR: COMING TO AMERICA

This chapter provides an introduction to each of the participants in this study, including background information about the students and their families, their programs of study, and the kinds of institutions they attended for their first year of college in the United States. Hermeneutical phenomenology is concerned with the lived experience of the individuals being studied (Lavery, 2003), so it is useful to present information about their backgrounds and the environments in which they first attended college in the U.S. in order to contextualize their experiences. Since each of these participants entered their first year of college in the U.S. with unique backgrounds, perspectives, and expectations, their experiences within the first year of college do not stand in isolation from the rest of their lives and provide such context for the telling of their stories, which is one of the goals of hermeneutical phenomenology (Kafle, 2011). I have also included information about the interviews themselves and my general impressions of each participant from those interactions. Since the research design of hermeneutical phenomenology encourages the inclusion of assumptions and interpretations made by the researcher (Lavery, 2003), it is also appropriate to share this information.

In order to safeguard the privacy of the participants they were asked to select a pseudonym for the purposes of the study during our first interview session. References to exact institutions attended are intentionally avoided except in the case of Southeastern

University. In addition to the profiles of each participant, this chapter includes findings related to research sub-question one, *How do they [Chinese undergraduate students] describe their motivations for pursuing a degree in the U.S.?* I conclude the chapter by summarizing the findings connected to their expectations for the experience of studying in the United States.

Ada

Ada is a twenty-five-year-old female nearing graduation from Southeastern University. We met for each of our interviews in my office at Southeastern University's north campus. I shared a bit about myself and the purpose of my research and she seemed pleased to be participating in something that could help other Chinese students. Our rapport was almost immediate, and she quickly shared that she was born and raised in Shenyang, a large city in northern China and has no siblings. Both of Ada's parents are college-educated professionals, with her mother working as a nurse and her father as an engineer. She indicated that her parents always expected her to go to college as that is considered the norm in the Chinese culture. In China, Ada attended an international high school that operated in cooperation with a school in Canada and that followed a curriculum set in Canada. As such, she shared that her high school experience in China was not typical. The diploma from her school made it possible for her to easily attend an international university without having to take an entrance exam along the lines of the SAT and, as a result, upon completion of her high school requirements, Ada chose to attend college in Switzerland. She made no reference to her parents' influence on her choice of major or choice to study outside of China. She did share that she chose

Switzerland because she had decided to study Hotel Management and found a program that looked good through internet research. After three years of college in Switzerland, Ada had the opportunity to take part in a 12-month Hotel Management internship program in Key West, Florida. During her time at this internship, although she had not completed her diploma at the university in Switzerland, she decided that she did not want to return and would instead look into a degree program in the U.S. When I asked her about the decision to come to the United States to complete her degree rather than returning to her program in Switzerland, she explained that while the money was better in Europe, she felt the U.S. offered greater opportunity in the long run.

In hopes of pursuing those opportunities, Ada researched programs in Hospitality and Tourism offered at institutions in the United States and narrowed her search to two programs with the best reputations in locations she felt had robust hospitality industries. Ultimately, it was the recommendation of a friend made during her internship that led her to apply to Southeastern University (her friend's alma mater). I noted that Ada's selection of a U.S. program was based on a word of mouth recommendation. That is in keeping with the findings of Mazzarol and Souter's (2002) research, which indicated that this kind of recommendation was a strong factor in institutional choice for students coming to the United States from China and other Asian countries. Ada returned to China at the end of her internship in Florida having already applied to S.U. and was at home for a year before being accepted and returning to the U.S. to begin her coursework.

Ada eagerly shared stories about her experiences throughout her first year of college in the U.S. and frequently spent time making comparisons to the educational

system she had grown up with in China. Though she had also attended college in Europe prior to coming to the U.S., she never made references to her experiences there or drew comparisons between her transition to being a college student in Switzerland and being a college student in the U.S. In spite of the fact that nothing was shared about her time in Europe, I did remain mindful of the fact that she had already been through a transition to a culture quite different from that of her home country and the ways in which that experience may have affected her ability to transition more easily during her first year in the U.S. Because she had worked in the U.S. for a short time prior to starting college here, she talked a lot about the experiences of her peers and I found myself regularly having to bring her back to her own experience in order to maintain the integrity of the study. Regardless of her previous transition experience in Switzerland, and in spite of her propensity to share anecdotal information about others' experiences, I was encouraged that she was willing to speak so candidly about the issues facing not only herself but her peers during their transition to college in the United States.

Chino

I first met Chino, a twenty-four-year-old male born in Guangzhou, a large city in Southern China, at the Southeastern University library on the south campus. We had arranged to meet in a private study room that he reserved in order to ensure a quiet location for conducting and recording the interview. Although this location had been pre-arranged with the student, I still worried that he might feel reserved in such a setting with a stranger, but I was surprised to find him very open and eager to speak with me. His

open demeanor remained unchanged throughout our subsequent interviews which were held in an administrative office in the student union at S.U.'s south campus.

In our first meeting, Chino shared with me that at the age of eleven, he moved with his parents and one younger brother from China, where he grew up with his grandparents, to what he described as an “Asian neighborhood” in Colon City, Panama. Neither of Chino’s parents, nor his grandparents, completed a secondary school education in China, but his parents own a small retail business in Panama in which he worked throughout his schooling. He made the decision to go to college without any urging by his parents, but despite that they provided financial and what he described as “spiritual” support. As Chino put it, “Asian people, they just never support you, like, verbally. If you want to do it, you do it yourself.” When he decided he wanted to go to college, first in Panama and then in the U.S., he told his father his plan. He shared that although his parents did not tell him they supported his choice, because it was what he wanted to do and he knew they would not tell him that he could not, he felt spiritually supported by them in undertaking the endeavor.

Chino began college at a university in Panama that he chose because of its relationships with several institutions in the United States. He shared with me that the quality of university programs in Panama (apart from some medical schools) is generally not considered to be very good, so he knew from the start that he wanted to go elsewhere. In his own words, “I decided to, I did two years in Panama. I'm like, I want to go out and see the outside world. So I told my dad I wanted to transfer here to the States.” Though he did have the opportunity to visit each of his Panamanian university’s partner campuses

before making a decision, the climate – which is similar to the climate in Panama – the modern style of the campus, and the higher ranking of the program in International Business and Finance led him to transfer to Southeastern University. A combination of institutional selection factors identified in the literature were noted in Chino's choice of a U.S. institution. In particular, Chino was motivated by a lack of a quality education in the home country and the availability of highly regarded programs in majors such as business in the U.S. (Altbach, 2004; Goodman & Gutierrez, 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002); and the reputation of the academic program at a particular institution (Goodman & Gutierrez, 2011; Lee, 2008). Though he did not have personal recommendations to support his decision, the institution's ranking in conjunction with his visit to the campus made Southeastern University the best choice for Chino in pursuing his business degree.

Chino was the first male student to join the study and I was anxious to have his participation in order to bring a different gender perspective. He was also the first student who identified his place of origin as being in Southern China, and he noted throughout the study that there are significant differences in culture between the North and the South. Among these differences he routinely mentioned levels of conservatism (higher in the North), as well as language differences. I found his perspective on differences in conservatism especially interesting since, over the course of the study, Chino revealed himself to be perhaps the most conservative participant, or, at least, one of the most bound by the values of his culture. He also indicated that his first language is Cantonese and, although he does know Mandarin, he's less comfortable speaking with those for whom it is the first language/dialect. These issues brought to light by Chino led me to

consider how this study could be conducted on an even more granular level by studying students from different regions in China to see how similar or dissimilar their experiences are based on regional differences in culture, expectations, and motivations. I noted this in my post-interview notes as a possible path for future study.

Additionally, as Chino also had the experience of having lived in Panama for ten years before coming to the United States, he brought a unique perspective to his experience as a first year student in the U.S. I remained mindful of this difference in his prior experience compared to most of the other participants and how this affected his transition to the American environment. Overall, Chino was confident and friendly during the interviews. He talked a great deal about his being Chinese and/or Asian, using the two interchangeably and never identifying something as one or the other, but instead using each in very generalized ways, and as a result I was both honored and grateful that he showed so much vulnerability in what he was willing to share with me throughout the process. I found myself surprisingly emotional at the conclusion of our final interview as I recognized the weight of my responsibility in sharing the experiences of Chino and all of the other participants who so willingly entrusted them to me.

Kat

Kat, a twenty-one-year-old female from Inner Mongolia (Northern China), met me for our first meeting in an administrative office at the student union on Southeastern University's south campus. Although she initially seemed a bit shy and quiet, once I told her about my research and began the interview she seemed to settle into the conversation and freely shared information about herself and her experiences. Kat shared that she is an

only child because of the Chinese government's restriction on the number of children per household. She also shared that her parents had both attended what she described as a "lower level" of college, akin to a technical or trade school, and her father is currently a businessman in the accounting field. When I inquired about the influence her parents may have had on her decision to attend college, Kat stated, "Yeah, definitely, because in China, I would say family – they are pretty – they want kids to be the *best*, and also in that environment if you don't go to college, it's so hard to find a good job."

While it was a certainty that Kat would attend college, she did not make the decision to go to a university in the United States until she was in high school. She made the choice in February, and although her language level was still elementary, she began the application process immediately. Her first year was at a small, private institution in the Bay Area in California. She was accepted conditionally and started her first year of college in an English Language Institute. She advanced out of the ELI after one semester and began regular courses. She declared her major as Finance because that was what her father wanted her to study.

The institution she attended was the only school to which she applied, a suggestion of her father's colleagues. As was the case with Ada, the basis for Kat's choice of institution was in keeping with the research of Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) who noted the importance of word of mouth recommendations in selecting a school in the United States. In addition, her selection supported the assertion by Lee (2008) that many students choose their institutions sight unseen and based solely upon reputation. In this case the institution's reputation was vouched for by Kat's father's colleague who had

direct knowledge of the quality of academic programs at the institution. Kat's school, which has academic programs in business and psychology, is located approximately thirty minutes from San Francisco and, according to Kat, had a total of around 700 people on campus (including faculty and staff) during her time there. Another factor in the selection was her parents' knowledge of people in the area (her father's colleagues who had recommended the institution), and they had been told that the school was small and in a safe area, a big concern for them given Kat's age –seventeen-years-old at the time – and the distance from home.

As a result of scheduling difficulties, Kat and I had our second meeting at my home. She suggested it since it was located in a more convenient area for her than either of the Southeastern University campuses on the days she was available to meet, so in spite of my hesitation, we went forward with the meeting in that location. The interview went as well as our first meeting and she was just as at ease in my home as she had been in an office on campus. Our final interview was back in the administrative office at S.U.'s south campus. Based on the experiences she shared with me, I could see that Kat must have matured since her first year in the U.S. and gained quite a bit of confidence. We had a cordial and easy time communicating, and I enjoyed that as she recalled experiences from her past, she was able to find humor in situations that were undoubtedly quite difficult for her at the time.

Lucy

Lucy, a twenty-one-year-old female from Beijing (Northern China), was the first student I interviewed for this study. We met for all three of our interviews in my office at

Southeastern University's north campus after her classes finished for the day. Based on my previous interactions with Chinese students, and my knowledge of their cultural inclination to be cautious of sharing personal information with a stranger, I expected Lucy to be quite reserved. I explained the purpose of the study and a bit about my background before we began the interview, and she seemed to be quite at ease. Although none of the interviews with Lucy ever became organically flowing conversations and I was forced to follow my interview guides very closely to move the interviews along, she seemed happy to provide information on every subject about which I inquired. Following our first interview, after the recording had been stopped, she shared that she very much enjoyed the relaxed style of interview and looked forward to the rest of our meetings.

Lucy has one younger sister and shared that neither of her parents attended college. She began college in China, though she did not indicate whether her parents had any expectation that she would attend a university. When I asked what caused her to transfer to a program in the United States, she shared,

Because in my first year in China college, I take part in the work and travel program in USA and I was housekeeping in the Holiday Inn of Virginia. And, that experience made me feel like I like America and I want to go here and come here and learn more about Hospitality Management. (Lucy)

Lucy chose to apply for the Hospitality and Tourism Management degree at Southeastern University based on an internet search she conducted which indicated that the school was highly ranked for that major. As was also the case for other participants, Lucy's choice of institution was influenced by the ranking of the school for the particular major she

planned to pursue. Her selection of a U.S. institution for this reason is consistent with the research of Mazzarol and Souter (2002) and Lee (2008) which indicates that international students frequently make the decision about which school to attend based solely on institutional reputation or ranking. After using a service to assist with her application, she waited about six months before coming to the U.S. to begin her studies.

Skye

Skye is a twenty-three-year-old female studying Hospitality and Tourism Management at Southeastern University. Although I had a good rapport with all of the participants in the study and found them to be open and easy to talk to, Skye struck me differently when we first met. There was something particular about her demeanor that I did not observe in the other participants; an air of confidence, self-assuredness, and maturity that she possessed from the start of our conversation and which made her very easy to interview.

An only child, Skye is from Qingdao, a large city in Northern China which, she shared proudly, is famous for a beer that is available in the United States. Both of her parents attended college in China and are practicing lawyers. As such, not only was there always a clear expectation that Skye would attend college, it was also expected that she would study to become a lawyer. Furthermore, her father had been encouraging her to consider studying in the United States since she was in middle school. Skye began college in China pursuing a major in law, but quit her program after one semester because she found it boring. Friends had encouraged her to consider the hospitality field because of her love of working with people and her outgoing personality. When she looked into it

on her own, she decided this was the major she wanted to pursue and her parents were supportive of her choice because it made her happy. Skye identified a university in China that had a well-regarded Hospitality and Tourism Management program and that would automatically allow her to transfer to a partner institution in the U.S. (Southeastern University) for the last two years of her degree and earn diplomas from both institutions upon graduation. When she discovered through her internet research that the S.U. program was highly ranked for her chosen field of study, she made the decision to attend the Chinese institution with the knowledge that no further application would be required to come to the U.S. to complete her degree.

Skye's decision to attend both her program in China and, ultimately, her program in the U.S. was consistent with two major pull factors identified in the literature about institutional selection. First, the decision to choose her institution in China based on the knowledge that it would allow her to finish her degree at a highly ranked program in the U.S. aligns with the pull factor of institutional selection based upon ranking or reputation described by Mazzarol and Souter (2002) and Lee (2008). The reputation of the U.S. school drew Skye to her institution in China, which gave her access to a degree at the highly ranked U.S. program at Southeastern University. The partnership between the U.S. and Chinese institutions also aligns with one of the pull factors identified in the literature, in this case, the recruitment of international students to the U.S. (Bodycott, 2009; Glass, Buus, & Braskamp, 2013; Lee, 2010). Though she had made the decision to study in the U.S. based in large part on her parent's influence, as will be explored in the next section of this chapter, Skye's ultimate decision to attend the institution at which she

matriculated was aligned very clearly with the factors identified in the literature as having a significant impact on international students' choice in coming to the U.S. for their education.

Tianyao

Tianyao is an outgoing, extremely personable twenty-one-year-old male from Nanjing in Southern China. Although he was the second of two male participants I met for the study, and also the second of two participants from Southern China, I found Tianyao to be dissimilar to Chino, the other male from Southern China, in both in character and outlook. These differences are illuminated further in the next chapter.

All of our interviews were held in an administrative office in the student union on the south campus of Southeastern University. When Tianyao arrived for our first meeting, I was pleased to find him excited at the opportunity to be part of this study. I came to understand over the course of our interviews that he is an extremely friendly and optimistic young man who looks for the best in every situation and seems to find it. He was happy to share with me that his hometown is known as “Stone Town” for its numerous historical places and that it is extremely cold there during the winter, so he was happy to be at S.U. enjoying the more temperate climate.

Tianyao shared that he is an only child owing to the government one child per family policy. Although only his father went to college, both his parents work in the banking industry, with his father serving as the Director of one of the banks in China. It was always expected that Tianyao would go to college and his major, Finance, was influenced by his parents' profession. In fact, he noted that prior to their retirement, both

of his grandparents were also in banking. While he knew he would go to college one day, Tianyao had never thought about attending college in the United States, though, he said, his parents had it in mind for him for some time. He handled the process of choosing a university in the U.S. with the aid of a placement agency, to which Tianyao and his parents provided all of his documents and test scores. Since he has an aunt living on the east coast of the U.S., they limited the search geographically to allow him to be close to this extended family during his time in college. He applied to five universities, and his choice was based, ultimately, on the ranking of the business programs at that institution. That Tianyao based his selection on the U.S university's reputation or ranking aligned with the literature on pull factors that influence international students' decisions about where to matriculate in the U.S. (Mazzarol & Souter, 2008).

Tianyao attended a large, public university in the Northeastern U.S. He was enrolled in classes on the main campus (of the institution's five campuses), located in a small town approximately forty-five minutes from the state's capitol. The school, one of the top public research institutions in the U.S. (according to its web site) enrolled approximately 30,000 students at the time he attended, with about five percent being international students.

Summary

These students had their own motivations for attending college in the U.S., and their decisions about which institutions to attend were consistent with many of the push-pull factors (Mazzarol & Souter, 2008) identified in the literature. The reputation of higher education in the United States, and of specific institutions in particular, seems to

have been the most frequently cited factor in choice of institutions by these participants, with Chino, Lucy, Skye, and Tianyao all indicating that this was a significant pull factor in their choice of U.S. institution. As indicated in Chapter One, many international students will select an institution they have never visited, or about which they know very little, based solely on the reputation (Lee, 2008) or ranking (Goodman & Gutierrez, 2011). In addition, personal recommendations of family and friends were identified by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) as significant in influencing the choice of institutions in the United States by students from a number of Asian countries, including China. In Ada's case, a friend who had previously attended the institution recommended that she pursue her degree at Southeastern University; and for Kat, it was her father's colleagues who were pivotal in her selection along with the major her father wanted her to pursue, Finance. Other factors played into their motivations to come to the U.S. for college to begin with, and those are explored in more detail in the following sections.

Motivations for Studying in the United States

Research sub-question one explored the motivations of participants for pursuing a degree in the United States. As their profiles show, each of the participants in this study had a variety of factors influencing their decision to leave China and enter a university in the United States. These motivating factors can most easily be separated into external and personal motivations, and each of them aligns with one or more of the push-pull factors identified in the literature. This section will provide a more detailed look at how those motivations led these six students to college in the United States.

External Motivations. The motivations of each of the students in the study to come to the U.S. for their college degree varied, but external motivators were frequently cited. Common among these motivations were the influence of parents or the prospects of greater job opportunity. Although job prospects are also noted among personal motivations, I include them here as an external factor as compared to, say, job satisfaction, which I believe is distinctly subjective.

Tianyao's parents had been planning his college education in America for some time before revealing these plans to him during his sophomore year of high school.

My parents, they started planning this even when I'm in middle school, but I didn't even know, but until the sophomore year in my high school. They just suddenly told me that, and for my last year in high school, I didn't go to school. I just prepared for my TOEFL test and everything like the documents, like preparing those stuff, yeah. (Tianyao)

Tianyao expressed no hesitation or concern about coming to the U.S., and simply accepted it as what would happen. Once he knew he would be attending college in America, he participated in the selection, as noted in his profile, and he developed expectations for what the experience would be like. Still, he expressed no personal interest for studying in the U.S.

Both Kat and Skye indicated that their parents encouraged them to pursue their college degrees in the United States. While she was still in middle school, Kat's father, who traveled to California on occasion for work, was asked by one of his U.S.-based colleagues if he had any interest in sending her to America for college. Her father

presented her with the idea and she was initially reluctant, recalling that on being asked if she'd like to go, "I said, "No! Who is going to United States? Where is it?" Though Kat did, ultimately, come to the States for college, the final decision was the result of personal motivations described later in this section. Skye told the story of how her parents had encouraged her to study in the U.S., and made that desire known to her from an early age.

When I was in primary school I think, my father tried to persuade me to come to America to study. I don't know why; because he wants to live in America. He really enjoys the life here. It's very relaxed, free, and not too much pressure. There are so many people in China and there's so too much pressure to us. But I don't want it because when I was very young I focus. I'm a sensitive girl, so I have to say, I put my relatives, family, friends at a really high level. I focus on them; I don't want to leave them. (Skye)

Like Kat, the ultimate decision to study in the U.S. was made by Skye for personal reasons described in the next section. It is impossible to know if either of these students would have come to the U.S. of their own accord had their parents not already encouraged and supported them to pursue the opportunity, so the impact of external motivations on their choice cannot be discounted. Though parental influence was not explicitly indicated as a push factor in students' decisions to come to the U.S. for their degrees, Bodycott (2009) did indicate that the desire by both parents and students themselves for better job opportunities was, indeed a significant factor in the decision to leave the home country.

The push factor of enhanced job opportunities (Alcott, 2004), coupled with the pull factor of U.S. higher education quality/institutional reputation (Bodycott, 2009), demonstrated by the expressed belief that an American education would lead to greater job opportunities, was another external motivator revealed in the data. After three years of college in Switzerland, an internship experience in the U.S. caused Ada to transfer from her first college. Despite losing credits in the transfer and liking the European lifestyle better she favored the opportunities available in the U.S. “I think Europe, if it's for live or for vacation, that's better. But if you want to have your own, you know, career or job or finish your dream, I think America is better. Because there's more opportunity” (Ada). Lucy also made the decision to come to the U.S. to complete her college education after spending time in America for a work and travel program. That experience made her feel that a career in Hospitality Management was what she wanted and could best be achieved by learning more about it in the United States. She did internet research and identified the program at Southeastern University as one of the top ranked in the country. She decided to transfer and had the full support of her parents to do so. If not for an experience in the U.S. that highlighted the potential opportunities for a good career, neither of these students may have come to America for their degrees, so the external motivation of job prospects must be acknowledged.

Personal Motivations. While many of the participants in this study indicated that their parents expected them to go to college, not all of them expected to go to the United States for their college education and cited personal motivations for making that choice. Even in cases where parents had been the initiators of the idea of studying in the U.S., as

previously discussed, some students indicated personal motivations for making the final decision. Considered in the examination of such factors were overtly stated personal desires to study in the U.S. and the process of selecting an institution.

Ada's experience in her international high school motivated her to leave China for her college education initially, but it was the perception that an American education would lead to greater job prospects that pushed her to transfer to a U.S. institution. For this student, what began as a strictly personal motivation was later influenced by an external factor. Chino made the decision to study in the United States on his own because he was aware that the quality of education available to him in Panama was limited. Though he did not specifically mention job opportunity as a motivating factor, the fact that he was considering the quality of the institution in making his selection suggests that he had this in mind and is consistent with the pull factor related to quality of U.S. higher education identified by Goodman and Gutierrez (2011). Choosing an institution that allowed him to transfer to partner schools in the U.S. after two years was definitely intentional for Chino. He stated that, "It was all by myself that I wanted to go out and see how it is outside other than Panama. I didn't like Panama at all." He said that although his parents did nothing to encourage him to go to college in the U.S., or at all, they would never have told him that he could not go and they have supported him financially throughout his college education. This support affected his experiences in the first year, and that will be addressed in the following chapter. Ultimately, it seems, each of these students was motivated by greater opportunity for long-term career prospects.

As noted previously, both Kat and Skye had parents who pushed them to attend college in the United States, and both were hesitant to leave the familiarity of home and their families in order to do so. During high school, however, Kat had the chance to travel to the U.S. as part of an intensive two-week English-language program that involved a homestay. She shared that,

The decision to be here, it's just when I traveled to Los Angeles; you know, Hollywood is there. When I sit on the bus, and I see, I go on a highway – that's totally different than China. Like how those street view is, I was so exciting, I was like in a movie. I feel so exciting over that time, and I talk a lot with homestay.

(Kat)

Because of the excitement she felt from that trip, she made the decision to study in the U.S. and wasted no time in applying for admission at the school her father's colleagues had suggested she consider. Skye's parents also wanted her to come to the U.S., but it was only after her experience attending college in China for one semester that she realized that despite her good grades, she was not happy and wanted to pursue something that gave her pleasure. In this case, the intrinsic motivation of job satisfaction was a factor in pursuing her degree outside of China. She identified a Chinese university that had a partnership with Southeastern University because she wanted to go to the best school for her major in Hospitality and Tourism Management and her research had led her to the American institution. Access to a better quality higher education abroad, especially with regard to a specialized field of study, is another push factor for Skye (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Altbach, 2004). She also indicated that by starting at the

Chinese university, it was easier to transfer to S.U. because the grade requirements were less than if she had applied directly to the American university. Again, the decision to come to the United States was motivated largely by the pursuit of happiness for these two students, but they had the support and encouragement of their parents.

Only Tianyao had no personal motivation for choosing to study in the United States as his parents had made the decision for him without his input. For Tianyao, coming to America meant an opportunity to improve his English and meet people from many different cultures, so his participation in the selection of an institution that would afford such opportunities was important. In settling on a U.S. university to attend, apart from the ranking of the business majors, the other critical selection factor was the population of Chinese students at that institution. According to Tianyao,

...I said before, it's in my motivation. I don't want to find a school with many of the Chinese who are there, like UCLA in California. They're like a second China Town. That, I don't want to go to a place full of Chinese people because there's no difference when you're walking out of the campus, you saw like Chinese people all around the campus, you feel like you're still in China. (Tianyao)

So, although Tianyao and Lucy had no distinctly personal motivations for coming to the U.S. for college, they were both intentional about the selection of their institutions.

Summary

The various motivations identified in the data for these students to pursue their degrees in the United States all align closely with the literature. In particular, a number of the push-pull factors identified in the literature seem to have been shared across this

group of participants, especially the push factors of lack of access to quality higher education in the home country (Altbach, 2004; Mazzarol & Souter, 2002), and enhanced job opportunities for U.S. degree holders (Altbach, 2004; Goodman & Gutierrez, 2011). They were most evident in the cases of Chino, Ada, Skye, and Lucy. Furthermore, the pull factor of institutional reputation for U.S. institutions of higher education (both generally and with regard to specific institutions) (Lee, 2008; Goodman & Gutierrez, 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) was apparent in the case of the same four students, as well as with Tianyao, and the added influence of recommendation by family members or friends to attend a U.S. institution identified as significant by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), was evident in the cases of Kat and Ada. Regardless of their motivations for coming to the U.S., expectations about the experience of attending college in America were shared by each of the participants in this study.

Expectations for the U.S. College Experience

The literature reveals very little about specific expectations held by international students with regard to studying in the United States. General expectations for students from China were identified by Mariott, du Plessis, and Pu (2010), who noted that students had expectations of receiving a better education than would be available to them in China (leading to improved job prospects and long-term satisfaction), as well as the formation of meaningful relationships with domestic students. When asked about their expectations for what college would be like in the United States, a limited number of ideas were shared by the participants in this study. Initially, the two students who were coming to college in the U.S. to begin their freshman year, Kat and Tianyao, indicated that they did

not really have expectations prior to their arrival in the U.S. Upon reflection, however, both shared some of what they had hoped they would experience during the first year in the U.S., and their expectations were largely aligned with those of the students transferring from other institutions outside the U.S. In keeping with the literature, an analysis of the data resulted in the emergence of two general themes for these expectations that can best be described as academic and social/personal. Each of these themes revealed positive and negative expectations, and a small number of expectations were shared by both the academic and social/personal themes.

Academic Expectations. Although most of the students indicated that they did not have definite expectations because they lacked familiarity with the U.S. educational system, a few did talk about experiences they thought or hoped they would have regarding the academic experience. Since Ada had already been to college for three years in Switzerland, she had experienced something other than the Chinese system and as a result indicated that she did not have a lot of expectations for what she would experience academically at Southeastern University, and only thought about what classes she might take. She indicated that she was interested in learning more about tourism and expected that she would have an opportunity to learn more practical information about areas of her major in Hospitality and Tourism Management that she had not studied as a Hotel Management major in Switzerland. Skye related a similar expectation. She hoped to gain more practical experience. She shared that, "...because I know the major hospitality of [Southeastern University] is very famous, so I trying to, I want to learn not just focus on the book, the knowledge. I want to go outside I mean, in America hotels. I want to learn

more experience.” Clearly, Skye was less concerned with the actual classroom experience and focused more on internship experiences available through the institution. One student who had an expectation related to the classroom experience was Lucy, who indicated that she thought the classes and their format would be similar to those in China, based on the only college level experience she had. She explained that, “in China, we take class like Class one, Class two,...like that. We are a group together to take the same class” (Lucy). In addition to having an expectation that she would be moving through her courses as part of a cohort, as she had in China, Lucy also expected that the classes themselves would follow a similar format in that “we have a discussion about the topic and we have homework.” For Kat, the academic expectation for her college experience in the U.S. was simple – she wanted to study something and not waste time getting her degree. She mentioned that she felt colleges in America were more “academic,” and expanded on this idea by stating, “in college or university in China, except, like, at the top level (like Harvard here), like, top level university, others, like, they don’t care about students that much; like, about academic things” (Kat). Kat went on to explain that she had heard that classes in China were so large that if a student was called on by name to answer a question, they could ask a friend to respond for them because the professor wouldn’t recognize one student versus another. She stated, “I feel like that’s not the college I want to go to. I want to study something, at least” (Kat). Being in an environment where professors would “care” about student achievement was something Kat looked forward to in the U.S. None of the students specifically expressed any negative expectations related to their academic experience in the U.S., yet one area

shared by both the academic and social/personal themes did fall into the negative category. I will address that issue in a subsequent section.

Social/Personal Expectations. Participants had positive expectations on the whole about social and personal life in the United States and focused on the ability to make relationships in the campus environment. Ada said that her only impression of American college life before her arrival was dorm life as portrayed in the movies, so that was her expectation. She shared, “Before I never been to, like, Switzerland or America, I only see the student life, the campus life in the movie. Yeah, it’s, like, crazy, like the movie they show. But after I come here, because I didn’t stay in the dormitory, so I think I’m missing that part, too” (Ada). Similarly, Lucy expected to have an active social life based in her residence hall on campus. She shared that, “Before I come here, I expected that I will improve my English very fast, because I will live in a dormitory with international friends and we will speak English every day” (Lucy). Skye and Tianyao anticipated making many friends on campus, in particular friends from different countries and cultures, though they did not see a residence hall as a way to foster those relationships. Skye expected to make friends through internship opportunities, an extension of her academic expectations. She stated that she anticipated these opportunities would afford her “more time to know different culture. I mean, especially different culture because you’re now in America” (Skye). Tianyao’s expectation for “social life” at his U.S. institution was, “I really hope I can meet different people from all over [the] world.” Tianyao had chosen his institution in part based on its demographic

profile, so he expected the “international” composition of its students to provide opportunities for social interaction with a wide variety of people.

Only one student expressed all negative expectations for their social/personal life in the context of the U.S. university, stating,

The expectation was just mostly negative... being alone in a different country. It's going to be difficult to make your presence somewhere you don't know anybody.

The fear of making new friends, 'cause it's very different for Asian people to make friends as [opposed to] Western Culture. (Chino)

In fact, Chino was direct in stating that all of his expectations of U.S. campus life were negative. He attributed some of these expectations to the fact that he was from Southern China and did not expect to encounter others from his place of origin, as well as what I have interpreted as his “Asian-ness.” Throughout our interviews, Chino routinely attributed Asian characteristics as the reason for his approach to various situations or difficulties he encountered. I explore this further in the next chapter.

Shared Academic and Social/Personal Expectations. Some expectations fell into the discreet categories of either academic or social/personal expectations, but a few seemed to bridge the two. With regard to positive expectations, most students anticipated having the opportunity to interact with a variety of students from different cultures and backgrounds. Tianyao and Kat also expected it to be easy to handle new situations, and easy to become involved in various settings. While they both expressed excitement about these anticipated opportunities, the expectation was well expressed by Kat, who shared that,

Actually, before I went out, I don't have that much time to think about what it's gonna be, but I didn't – I didn't really expect that to be very hard; I think I will be, like, easy to get involved in there. I don't know where the confidence come from, but I think I should be okay with this, and I was exciting when I got there. (Kat)

The most frequently cited expectations were shared across the academic and social/personal themes and also fell into both positive and negative expectations; all of these were related to their command of the English language. Some students felt confident of their language skills prior to arriving in the U.S., largely based on their Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores, but others felt far less certain about their ability to keep up in both academic and social settings. Tianyao reported that, "I expect like everything here is going to be perfect for me, because since I have a higher TOEFL score." Chino, on the other hand, stated, "I thought I wouldn't be able to catch up because when I studied... when I would do my TOEFL test, I would barely understand a word what the thing was saying; I barely catch a word." Other students had positive expectations regarding language, but these centered on being able to improve their language skills both in the classroom environment and through social settings.

Summary

A variety of motivating factors and expectations shaped the processes of the study participants' journeys to the United States in pursuit of their college degrees. Among the motivations, each of which aligned with push-pull factors identified in a review of the literature about international student motivation for studying in the U.S., were the external factors of parental influence and the desire for greater job opportunity as a result

of obtaining a U.S. degree. In addition, personal motivations were clearly responsible for the decisions of several of these students to come to America. Those personal factors included the desire to “see the outside world” and to experience the excitement of being in a place so different from China.

In light of these motivations, a variety of expectations for what the American college experience would be like were revealed. These expectations ranged from positive hopes for both the academic and social experience -- such as having opportunities to gain practical experience through internships or taking part in a lively residence hall environment that would facilitate friendships with American students -- to negative ones related to language ability and difficulty meeting or making friends. As was the case with their motivations, the expectations of the students in this study also align with the expectations of international students as identified in the literature. According to Marriott, du Plessis, and Pu (2010), international students cited expectations that their experience in the U.S. would provide them with a better education than they could have received in their home country, which would lead to greater job opportunities and long-term prosperity. This was reflected in the expectations of Ada and Skye, who expected to gain more practical experience in the U.S. that would directly affect their future careers. Another expectation cited by Marriott, et al. (2010) and reflected in the expectations of study participants was the formation of meaningful friendships with domestic students. Other expectations shared by participants in this study were more specific to their perceived language proficiency and how it would influence their experience, as well as how they anticipated having opportunities to improve their language skills.

Although I had anticipated exploring the first-year experience of college in the United States for these students in a more general sense, their motivations and expectations exposed three separate, often intersecting, transitions that each student would experience throughout the first year of college in the U.S. – linguistic, academic, and social/personal. Interestingly, although two of the students entered their institutions as first-time-in-college (FTIC) freshman, neither their expectations nor their transition experiences seem to have differed significantly from those of the participants who had attended college previously, regardless of where those students had studied. As such, no distinction is made between the transition of FTIC and transfer students in this study.

In the next chapter, I share findings related to the experiences of the participants in the three transition types identified through their expectations. These findings address the primary research question, as well as sub-questions two, three, and four:

How do Chinese undergraduate students experience the first year of college at an institution in the United States?

2. *In what ways do they feel they were prepared to navigate the new environment?*
3. *How do they describe the support they had from the institution?*
4. *What strategies were most helpful in their transition process?*

CHAPTER FIVE: LIVING IN AMERICA

The previous chapter provided information about the participants in this study, and addressed findings for research sub-question one, an exploration of their motivations for pursuing a college degree in the United States, and for their expectations for the experience ahead. In this chapter, I share the findings related to the primary research question, *How do Chinese undergraduate students experience the first year of college at an institution in the United States?*, and research sub-questions two, three, and four, related to the students' preparation for navigating their new environment, the sources of support they received from their institutions, and the strategies they found useful in their transition process. Additionally, preliminary discussion and implications for the findings are woven throughout this chapter, with a comprehensive discussion of the findings and implications for practice provided in Chapter Six.

Each of the research questions was loosely based on the primary framework for this study, Schlossberg's Transition Model (1995). As indicated in Chapter One, Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) view a transition as "not so much a matter of change as of the individual's own perception of the change" (p. 28). While these participants clearly experienced changes in geographic location, academic environment, and social interactions, how they perceived the changes is at the heart of this research. Additionally, I chose to take a positive approach in conducting my research, with the aim of seeking out information about what worked well for these students during the

transition process of their first year of college in the United States. A positive approach, in this case, means that I framed both the research questions and the questions used in my interview guides from an asset perspective, asking about the people, programs, or situations that aided or supported the transition experience during the first year, rather than inquiring about deficits or negative aspects of the experience. For example, one question used during the second interview with each participant asked: *How would you describe the general environment on your campus? (Prompts: Were students/faculty/staff friendly? Helpful? Welcoming?)* As I discovered, despite my intention to seek out positive information in order to build on what worked well for these students, their responses frequently turned to their negative experiences.

I ultimately focus on the positive data and make suggestions for how this information can be used to enhance or implement programs and services that better support the needs of Chinese undergraduates attending college in the U.S. However, I believe that the negative experiences of these students are a critical part of the story and must be shared. Furthermore, as indicated in the previous chapter, the data revealed that rather than simply experiencing a general transition to the U.S. college environment during their first year, transitions were happening for these students across several dimensions. Therefore, in this chapter I present findings that emerged for each of the identified transition types (linguistic, social/personal, and academic), along two broad themes, factors that supported their successful transition, and factors that hindered or challenged their transition. These findings are presented as they relate to each of the

research sub-questions, though a significant amount of overlapping is evident among them.

Preparation for Navigating the Environment

A number of factors contributed to the successful transition of these students in moving through their first-year. Some of these factors were internal to the students and others were more tangible “things” to which they had access. On the other hand, there were a few critical areas where these students, across the board, were significantly unprepared or underprepared and which had a major impact on their experiences. Fortunately, the positive factors were enough to carry them through the first year. In order to always end with the positive in mind, I begin with the negative.

Preparation Factors Hindering Successful Transition. Two primary themes emerged related to the factors that challenged or hindered these students in their successful transition through the first year of college in the U.S. The first of these was culturally based and what I refer to as “Asian-ness,” as a result of my conversations with Chino, who regularly referenced his “being Asian” as a reason for certain concerns, behaviors, or strategies. For example, Chino indicated that his difficulty speaking with people outside of the Chinese and/or Asian community was due to his culture being different from Western culture where people “talk to everybody.” Kat and Ada also cited their culture as a reason for certain difficulties they faced in making friends. This is consistent with the literature that suggests international students from non-Western countries have an especially difficult time making friends with local students as a result of differences in both language and culture (Lee, 2010).

Also attributed to Chino's "Asian-ness" were feelings of conservatism and closed-mindedness, and a desire to not do "unnecessary" things and stay focused on the task at hand, or, in his words, "just get stuff done." Interestingly, Chino seemed to refer to being Asian and/or Chinese interchangeably and with no explanation of any characteristics he specifically attributed to one or the other. And while I would not generally categorize one's reliance on cultural norms as being negative, Chino's operationalization of those norms was, in his case, detrimental to his social/personal transition. This issue was so significant in Chino's experience, and so wholly counter to one of the success factors identified in this study (a positive outlook or attitude), that it bears explication. I believe that a dependence on adhering to the norms of the Asian culture, even in cases where a student expressed interest in adapting to American customs or ways of life (as Chino did), may have left these students unprepared (or under-prepared) to deal with rough patches in their social/personal transition that were directly related to differences in values and norms between the two cultures.

The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model suggests, among other things, that "undergraduates who encounter more culturally engaging campus environments are more likely to exhibit a greater sense of belonging" (Museus, 2014, p. 210). In this case, had Chino's institution espoused certain CECE indicators, he may have had an opportunity to capitalize on positive and/or supportive aspects of his culture in order to ease his transition. The indicator of Cultural Familiarity, for example, suggests that opportunities for students "to physically connect with faculty, staff, and peers with whom they share common backgrounds...is associated with greater likelihood of

success” (Museus, 2014, p. 210). Chino indicated that he did not really see Chinese faculty or staff members on his campus at all, and he chose to avoid his Chinese peers in part because he didn’t want them to exacerbate his already conservative attitude. This concern arose from his awareness that the Chinese students he encountered were predominantly from Northern China. According to Chino, who is from Southern China, “we have really different cultures” and they are “even more conservative.” Additionally, their first language is Mandarin, whereas his is Cantonese, and although he can speak Mandarin he said he is not comfortable doing so. Had Chino encountered students, faculty, or staff from Southern China, it is possible that he would have found a community with which he felt he had more in common and which could have supported him through his transitions rather than leading him to isolate himself. The differences in culture between Northern and Southern Chinese students are highlighted again later in this chapter.

The CECE indicator of Culturally Relevant Knowledge is another one that could have aided Chino’s transition. According to Museus, “the CECE model indicates that postsecondary institutions that offer opportunities for their students to cultivate, sustain, and increase knowledge of their cultures and communities of origin can positively impact their experiences and success” (2014, p. 210). For Chino, the ability to connect in a meaningful way with his culture of origin may have made a difference in his transition. Though he was raised in a Chinese household, growing up in Panama caused him to be physically separated from his culture of origin and limited his contact with it to what was passed on by his parents. The opportunity to learn and share more about his culture in the

context of his campus environment could have provided Chino with outlets for making friends who shared his cultural background or were interested in knowing more about it. Opportunities in line with this indicator could have helped Chino find a way to establish his presence not in spite of his Asian-ness, but because of it.

Beginning with his expectations about what it would be like to attend college in the U.S., Chino expressed concerns because of his culture (as mentioned above), sharing that he worried it would be difficult to make friends since, “I’m like, really Asian and Chinese.” This was a theme that carried through all of our conversations and highlighted this student’s lack of cultural preparation to be open to meeting new people who might aid in navigating his new environment along all three transitions - linguistic, social/personal, and academic. He went on to explain that before he arrived, his chief concern was related to how he would “make [his] presence somewhere you don’t know anybody,” and cited culture as the primary reason.

The fear of making new friends, ‘cause it’s very different for Asian people to make friends as [opposed to] Western Culture; it’s very different because we’re more used to talking to our own community instead of, like, Western people that just talk to everybody – like, “Hey, how are you? How are you doing today?” -

We’re more conservative and more quiet than other people. (Chino)

Chino’s experience mirrors that of a male participant in a study of Chinese student experiences in Canada, in which that individual indicated that his difficulty in making local friends was directly related to the differences in their cultural backgrounds (Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Once he was in the U.S. university environment, the experiences shared

by Chino suggest that he was hindered by his “Asian-ness,” and instead of simply fearing that he would have difficulty connecting with new friends (as expressed among his expectations), he made the choice to actively avoid contact with members of the Chinese Student Association on campus, in his words, “Because I know that if I hang out with Asian people, I would be even more conservative. I’d be even more closed-minded. Because I know we are closed-minded and we are very conservative.” (Chino) As mentioned previously, Chino made no distinction between being Chinese and being Asian when referring to the cultural attributes that presented challenges to him in his new environment. Although it was not explored in our conversations, I am left to consider the possibility that because he spent ten years living in what he described as an “Asian” neighborhood in Panama, his perspective on cultural norms and stereotypes was shaped by being part of a generalized Asian community – with, it would seem, no distinctions made between individual cultures of the countries represented in that community – while living in another country. In this case, he chose to avoid connecting with students who shared his culture out of a concern that they would only exacerbate a cultural attribute that he already viewed as a hindrance to his transition. The end result was that Chino chose social isolation over attempts to engage with anyone else, whether they shared his culture or not. I will explore this further later in this chapter.

Difficulty connecting with new friends because of her “Asian-ness” was also an issue for Kat, who stated, “It is like; even now, I think Asian people is more, not shy; it’s like, we don’t like to talk to more people.” In Kat’s case, this issue was combined with

the second factor that presented itself as a major challenge for all of the participants in the study, a lack of adequate language preparation.

Lack of Language Preparation. The combination of not liking to “talk to more people,” and not feeling she had the vocabulary to even try, was a significant hindrance for Kat in both her social/personal and linguistic transitions during her first year of college in California.

So it is hard to start a conversation with them [American students]. Sometimes they are, like, making jokes, some will say something like what is that. It is like they use their – they use some language like – what is that called? Slang? Yeah.

Like this. I was like, “what is that?” I don’t know, because I never learned that in China. So, sometimes it is embarrassing like “what are you talking about?” (Kat)

Tianyao recalled a time when he was on an outing with the members of a student organization he had joined, all of whom were American. He had difficulty keeping up with what they were saying. “They’re talking so fast and the jokes they’re talking about, it’s really hard to understand, but they had fun with them.” (Tianyao) Lack of knowledge of American slang or idiomatic expressions was a problem for most of the participants, and this issue crossed the boundaries of social communication and the academic environment.

Chino recounted a time when the professor in his class mentioned that it was “raining cats and dogs” outside and he had to ask someone what the phrase meant. Had the difficulties with language preparation been limited to social encounters, these students may have had a better overall experience though their social/personal transitions would

still have been significantly affected. Unfortunately, however, each of the students indicated that they had difficulty with every facet of the English language experience (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) in the academic realm.

With the motivation for attending a U.S. college being a better education and better job prospects, it is troubling that more emphasis was not placed on English language preparation. Kat was admitted to her institution conditionally and had to go through an English Language Institute (ELI) before fully matriculating to the college, but shared that while the conversation they used in ELI classes improved her English overall, it did not sufficiently prepare her for “real academic things,” and she had difficulty understanding her professors once she got into her regular classes. She went on to indicate that reading one page of a textbook might take her up to two hours. Ada also said that she entered the university thinking her English was fairly good, and definitely better than most other Chinese students on campus because of her past experiences using English in her internship. But she quickly realized that although her speaking was good, she struggled with the reading assignments for her English and Logic classes. Tianyao had a similar experience because he had received a high TOEFL score and felt that he would be able to handle his classes well as a result, but when he got into class he found the writing assignments especially difficult.

These difficulties seemed to come as a surprise to many of the students as they believed they were well prepared and likely had not anticipated the linguistic transition to be quite so challenging or to have had such a significant impact on their social/personal

and academic transitions. According to Kat, when she applied to her institution, after taking English in China and participating in an intensive program,

I thought my - when I know, decided to go to college here - I thought my English is pretty good, 'cause I always get a nice score, like B or A-, like, that range. I think I'm good student, and my English is good, but when I actually applied to use it, it's like, "Okay, I know nothing," like that. (Kat)

Chino shared that he taught himself English because he could not afford to take preparation classes and he already knew "broken English" from living in Panama. Though he got a high enough score on the TOEFL to transfer to his American university, he noted,

I had a little trouble in my first couple classes. Because my professors, I just couldn't understand much what the professor says and I could not stop the professor every time he says something, like, "What do you mean by this?" The first couple months was hard for me and I had to study a lot. It was hard for me the first two months here. (Chino)

Lucy did not share specific examples of language difficulty in or out of class, but she did mention that since her English was not "so frequent or curated" she sometimes felt afraid to speak to people.

Clearly, a lack of adequate language preparation was a fairly universal problem for these participants and speaks to the need for greater attention to be paid to this issue. Though achieving a certain score on the TOEFL is viewed by U.S. institutions as an acceptable measure of students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking ability, it was

obviously not sufficient to predict the success of these participants in being able to participate fully, either academically or socially, at their U.S. institutions. One wonders what more could be done to give students coming to the U.S. a clearer understanding of the linguistic demands of the environment in order to succeed both academically and personally, as well as what could be done to support them through this transition once they arrive. Tianyao and Kat both agreed that the preparation they received in China was far from sufficient for them to be really successful in their new environment, either in the classroom or out. Kat suggested that more practical English for surviving outside of the classroom should be taught so that students coming to the U.S. would be able to order food or have a simple conversation with a new friend. Tianyao summed up his feelings about his level of language preparation based on what he learned in China and his score on the TOEFL in this way, “It’s just the academic score for you but in the real life, they do nothing. You need experience from the college, and you can’t do like the normal conversation with people.” In welcoming international students to our American campuses, institutions must be mindful of the realities of their actual language abilities and not make assumptions about what the TOEFL represents. Faculty members in particular, must be attentive to the needs of these students in their classrooms. Devita (2000) pointed out the need for this kind of attention from faculty members and encouraged that they not make assumptions about the language level of international students in their classes because of the many factors affecting comprehension (including pace, pronunciation, and the use of idioms and colloquialisms). This admonishment to faculty members also related to written work, where Devita (2000) suggested that

appropriate guidance be provided in order to support international students in adhering to norms of the English language.

The academic transition for these students had its own challenges and sources of support (described in a subsequent section), but the challenges seem to have been significantly exacerbated by the steep learning curve with regard to the linguistic transition. For students who had believed that their language preparation was sufficient to be successful in the academic environment, like Ada, Tianyao, and Kat, the reality of their lack of preparation put them at a distinct disadvantage as compared to their peers and required a level of effort to achieve academic success that none of them seemed to have anticipated.

Preparation Factors Supporting Successful Transition. Three themes emerged in the realm of factors supporting the successful social/personal and academic transitions of these students during the first year of college in the U.S. The first of these has to do with access to tangible resources or financial support. The second theme deals with the self-reliance demonstrated by participants in navigating challenges and supporting themselves. The third theme relates to the positive outlook or attitude displayed by a number of the students.

Tangible/Financial Resources. International students must demonstrate financial support sufficient to cover annual costs associated with travel, tuition and living expenses, as determined by the host institution, in order to obtain a U.S. visa (“Student Visa,” 2016). Not surprisingly, this is a substantial amount of money, and in the case of all of the participants in this study, was fully provided by their parents with no support

coming from scholarships or from entities in their home country. Although the financial support of their parents did have negative implications for some of the participants (which will be addressed in a later section of this chapter), it allowed them to access the basic necessities of life and provided a level of comfort that permitted them to focus on their academic pursuits.

One of the most important ways that financial support contributed to the success of many of these students with regard to the social/personal transition, in particular, was by enabling them to have access to a car for reliable transportation. All six students pointed to the poor or limited public transportation available to them at their respective campuses. For the female students, however, as soon as it became clear that public transportation was not sufficient to get them either to and from their classes in a timely manner, or simply around their living areas to get groceries and other necessities, their parents purchased them a car. The two male participants got full financial support from their parents, but not for a car, and had to find other ways to navigate their worlds.

Neither Chino nor Tianyao elaborated on why their parents did not provide them with access to cars, but it caused me to wonder if gender played a role in the decision. In addition, it raised the question for me of how much is taken for granted in dealing with this population of students, as I (and others, based on my past conversations with administrators throughout my career), have often assumed that international students come from financially well-off families who can provide almost unlimited resources. As I mentioned previously, however, for at least one participant, there were some negative experiences associated with full financial support coming from their parents (described in

the next section), and it is not unreasonable to assume that the parents of students without cars may have had more modest financial means and were already at the limit of what could be provided.

Regardless of the circumstances that led the female participants to have the ability to buy cars, the access to their own mode of transportation seems to have been very helpful to them in their social/personal transition. According to Ada, “I didn’t think that car is necessary, but [at Southeastern University], if you don’t have a car that means you don’t have legs.” Skye echoed that sentiment: “Yeah, because I know [this area], especially the public transportation in this [city] is not so good. The second day when I arrived in America, my father and I went to buy a car.” For Kat, who was at a small campus in the Bay Area of California, the problem was the same.

So, some Chinese parents, they don’t understand why every time we came here, we all like study; we all need to buy a car. Some students – I know like – they are buying car just for show off, but mostly for me I told my dad every time I go to supermarket to buy water, buy food to eat, I need to ask friend to take me to there. So I don’t want to do it all the time, so I needed to. And he said, “oh, okay yes.”
I just learned, and he got a car for me. (Kat)

Lucy also talked about the need to have a car in order to not have to rely on others in order to get around, but difficulty with the driving test delayed the purchase. With her parents’ financial support, after about two months in the U.S., she was able to buy a car. The availability of this critical resource was instrumental in the successful social/personal transition of these four young women as it gave them open access to their institutions and

the surrounding environment without having to depend on others. This kind of self-reliance was the second theme identified as a factor supporting success for these students.

Self-Reliance. Many of these students demonstrated self-reliance even before they arrived in the United States. The need for self-reliance at this stage seems, in most cases, to have been the result of a lack of institutional support at the earliest stages of the students' connection to their universities. For those in need of housing not provided by their campus, for instance, using internet resources available to them from China was the common practice. For Kat, who needed assistance when she arrived, though housing was provided by her institution, social media was also a means of connecting with people who could assist her when she arrived. With China's restrictions on the use of U.S. social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, etc.), Lucy, Skye, and Ada all used Chinese social media in an effort to seek out roommates and/or apartments in the U.S. Using sites such as QQ (a Chinese news and information site that provides chat rooms for students to connect within China and with other Chinese students studying abroad), and Ren Ren (a site described to me by Kat as a Chinese version of Facebook, for students only), and/or apps such as WeChat (a group texting app that is available internationally, including in China), they identified groups connected to Southeastern University to connect with potential roommates. For Lucy and Ada, this is, in fact, how they found roommates and apartments near campus. Skye was able to make a connection with someone referred to her by another Southeastern University student who had visited her Chinese partner institution, but not before attempting to use social media to search for a roommate. Though Kat had housing provided by her school, she used Ren Ren to connect with a Chinese student

already at her host institution and he picked her up from the airport and helped her get settled into her residence hall. In this case, as no support was provided by their U.S. institution for either identifying housing or, in Kat's case, for getting to campus upon her arrival, these students took it upon themselves to find other resources. This kind of self-reliance continued to be demonstrated by these participants once they were at their U.S. institutions, and was also exhibited by each of the other participants in the study.

When asked about sources of information and sources of support upon which they relied during their first year in the U.S., each of the students cited a reliance on themselves in one way or another with respect to both social/personal and academic transitions. For information about where to get groceries or find tutoring support on campus, although friends and/or classmates were often mentioned, some of the students said it was their own observation or intentional inquiry that led them to answers. Ada talked about how she found places to get groceries without asking for assistance.

Because the place I'm renting, in the front of they have a plaza - a Winn-Dixie Plaza, so, I know that. And because before, in the plaza nearby school, there's Publix so after comparing I know Publix is expensive and Winn-Dixie is cheaper.
(Ada)

Ada also found academic resources on her own. She explained that no one had told her that laptops and headphones could be borrowed from the library, and it was only because she noticed someone checking them out one day that she learned these materials were available. Since she had a heavy computer, this was very useful to her and she took advantage of the resource she had been observant enough to identify. Tianyao identified

tutoring on his campus in a similar fashion. “You don’t have to do it on purpose like when you pass by, you’re looking for empty tables, you just saw it over there and they have big letters writing there and the Q Center.” (Tianyao). Rather than leaving it in the hands of the students to discover such important resources, especially for those dealing with transitions related to language and pedagogical styles in a new country, ensuring they were aware such a service existed could have saved time and frustration for students in need of individual guidance. In an environment exercising Proactive Philosophies as described in the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model, this kind of information would be provided at the outset of the student’s experience (Museus, 2014). That said, although it was perhaps not so surprising to find that self-reliance was used as a source of obtaining information, I did find it interesting that, regardless of the age of the student or their previous experience (or lack thereof) with similar transitions in a foreign context, many of these students also demonstrated self-reliance as a source of support.

Institutional agents, other students, and family and friends at home were commonly noted sources of support for various issues in both social/personal and academic spheres (which will be discussed in the next section of this chapter), but when asked about the primary sources of support for them during their first year, a number of the students said that they depended mostly on themselves to get through. Skye, who, as I noted in her profile in Chapter Four, was mature and self-assured, told me, “I have nobody to depend on, to rely on; I just can be myself. If I was still trying to ask questions, I don’t think I can stay here now.” She credited her success at persisting in a foreign environment, through both her social/personal and academic transitions, to her

ability to navigate the environment on her own. That is not to say that she never sought information or support from others, but she recognized that, ultimately, she had to do things for herself in order to get through. Skye's attitude seems to have been related to her age when she arrived in the U.S. to continue her degree (she was nearly 22), and how others might have perceived her if she was asking for information. She acknowledged that there were mostly English and Spanish speakers on her campus, and that Chinese was not the most common language, but said that as early as her first days at her host institution, she felt,

...shy and awkward to ask so many questions. Because I feel so stupid because they have already known, but I'm new here...if I was young, I think it's okay I was asked those questions, but in this age, it feels not very smart. I don't want people to judge me. (Skye)

Her turn to self-reliance, then, may have grown from a desire to "save face," a Chinese value that has implications not only for the individual, but for their family and community (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Since Skye's father was with her for the first few weeks of her transition to life in the United States, a desire not to appear foolish or to lose face in front of him may have been at the root of her need to fend for herself and avoid this possibility. Though Kat also acknowledged the importance of self-reliance in her transition, her rationale seems to have been based more on the premise that even though she could seek information or support from others, she quite literally had to rely on herself with regard to taking action.

I think most important thing is myself, actually, rather than friend. Because, they just help you, they tell you how to do it, but actually I need to do that by myself. So, you need to take - as international student - first year leave home, you need to be a strong, like you have to support yourself, to get through all the difficult things. So, everyone can give you advice, they can encourage you, but you need to do it by yourself, like what I did. (Kat)

Chino also recognized the role that self-reliance played in his adjustment to the new environment, sometimes taking this to an extreme that hindered his success because it was so isolating. A study by Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) on the social interactions of international students in the U.S. suggests that social isolation is “a serious barrier to the adaptation process at the host institution” (p. 415). Chino’s experience seems to support this. Fortunately, Chino also understood that asking for assistance was not a bad thing and shared that by the end of his first year he had come to this conclusion.

So at the beginning I just wanted to do everything by myself but I realized I just can’t. There is no way I can do everything by myself, because you have to rely on somebody else’s strengths also because what if they want to do everything by their self too. (Chino)

While I have categorized it as a positive factor in successful social/personal and academic transitions for these students, the self-reliance demonstrated by these three students, in particular, raises some questions about how they had this kind of “preparation” for the transitions within their new environments and why it was necessary

for them to be reliant on themselves to a greater degree than other possible sources of support.

It may not be surprising, for instance, that Skye and Chino, who had both attended college previously (in China and Panama, respectively) may have brought that approach to their experiences in the U.S. For instance, it would not be unreasonable to expect that experiences at those institutions taught them that self-reliance was necessary in order to be successful in those environments. I find it surprising, however, that Kat found that reliance on herself to get through difficulties she encountered was the best course of action. This was interesting for a seventeen-year-old who had never lived anywhere other than her parents' home, and who had only been away from them on her two-week study tour to California in the year before she began college in the U.S. The question is, was this something innate for Kat (or even for Skye and Chino)? Or, rather, was it something she discovered out of necessity either because she did not find the kind of support she needed in her new environment or she was afraid to ask for it?

Like many other participants in the study, Kat did seek the support of her family and friends at home, but noted that though they could offer advice, it was ultimately she who needed to persist through the difficulties she encountered and it was something she found within herself to do. Schlossberg, Waters and Goldman (1995) suggest that an individual's level of self-efficacy, and their outlook, whether positive or negative, are parts of the coping mechanisms representing the "Self" in their Transition Model. In the model, self-efficacy is described as an individual's ability to exercise their own influence and control in negotiating a transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). In the cases of these

students, relying on themselves as a means of coping with their social/personal and academic transitions was a demonstrable example of self-efficacy. As Lee (2010) pointed out, however, it is possible that institutions may view international students' self-reliance as a sign that they do not need to provide additional support for this student population. This is concerning because it is equally possible that these students have turned to self-reliance as their best source of information and support in the absence of reliable information and support from their host institution. It is, therefore, necessary to problematize and bring this issue to the attention of institutional agents who could ensure that these students are finding the kind of support they need. In the case of these participants, though self-reliance was essential to their successful transitions, reliance on others was also important and will be explored further in the next section of this chapter.

Positive Outlook/Attitude. Finally, the third theme that emerged as a factor in the success of these students during their first year was a positive attitude or outlook. Only one of the participants in the study, Chino, directly expressed a negative outlook as he recalled entering and moving through his experience at an American university, sharing his early concerns about how he would establish a "presence" in his new environment and his conclusion that the first year had lived up to all of his negative expectations. Kat mentioned her early fears about being able to connect with people in her new environment, but ultimately found that her own self-reliance got her through her transition. Ada, in spite of admitting that she sometimes felt helpless or lonely when problems arose during her first year, was very quick to share that she never considered going back to China "because I think I have a really strong personality." This self-

awareness was shared by the other participants, for whom an optimistic outlook underpinned the first-year experience at their U.S. universities. Tianyao entered his first year feeling “like, really curious about everything, and really excited.” Similarly, Lucy expressed excitement even in the face of difficulty, stating, “I think when I occur some difficult and I will face it and try to deal with it. So, I think everything to me is exciting.” This sense of excitement and curiosity helped these students to stay optimistic when faced with challenges both in and out of the classroom, which helped them get through their first year. Finally, though Skye described her first year as “full of challenge” she concluded that statement by saying, “I like that! So, I think that’s a part of my characteristic.” Acknowledging the role of her personal characteristics as one of the means by which she made it through her first year suggests that Skye, and likely the others exhibiting a more positive outlook, understood the importance of such an attitude in transitioning to a new environment. In their Transition Model, Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) highlighted an individual’s outlook, including their level of optimism, as one of the resources of “self” that an individual might bring into a transition experience. For the participants in this study, a positive outlook does seem to have played a significant role in the way they approached and moved through each of the various transition types they experienced during the first year.

Each of these factors, whether negative or positive, substantially affected the first-year transition experiences of the participants in the study. With the exception of issues of language preparation, the positive factors seem to have been more widely shared by members of the group. Interestingly, it seems that the factors related to self-reliance and a

positive outlook had the most significant positive impact on student experience with regard to social/personal and academic transitions and was recognized as such by the students themselves. This is not something that can be taught or programmed, but I believe it is a notable finding. It suggests that the students who entered their first year of college in the United States with a higher level of self-efficacy and/or a positive outlook, two elements of the “Self” in Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman’s (1995) Transition Model, may have been better equipped to handle their various transition experiences than those who did not. Since all of the participants in the study found ways to persist through their first year, however, it might also suggest that a reliance on the other resources identified by Schlossberg et al, (1995), namely “Support” and “Strategies,” compensated for limitations on personal resources categorized as “Self” in moving through transition.

Sources of Institutional Support

Research sub-question three asked: *How do they [Chinese undergraduate students in their first year of college in the United States] describe the support they had from the institution?* For the purposes of this study, institutional support was viewed as any opportunity (or challenge) upon which the institution or its agents had a direct impact. The CECE Model was used as a framework for examining the institutional support either provided or lacking, and was coupled with Schlossberg’s Transition Model to address the coping resource identified by Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) as Support. For example, opportunities for Chinese students to have meaningful interaction with domestic students may not be directly influenced by the institution or its agents (faculty, advisors, etc.), but their admissions practices do directly affect the number of other Chinese

students (or international students), with whom students may interact. In examining the campus environment this issue is especially relevant, and one of the indicators of Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE), specifically, Cultural Familiarity, speaks directly to the need for students to have an opportunity to connect with not only faculty and staff, but student who share their cultural background (Museus, 2014). As with the previous section, factors that both hindered and supported student success were identified as they relate to this research sub-question, and I begin by sharing the findings that seemed to hinder the transition process for the participants in this study.

Institutional Support Factors Hindering Successful Transition. When a lack of adequate institutional support seems evident, three themes emerged from the data. The first of these directly related to the academic experience on campus. The other two related to support services missing or deemed inadequate based on the experiences of these students.

Pedagogy and the Classroom Experience. Students experienced their first challenge to first year success in the classroom. That experience affected academic, social/personal, and linguistic transitions. A number of issues factored into these experiences, but the most obviously problematic were difficulty understanding American pedagogical styles, and test-taking or written assignments. Two of the three of these directly related to the students' own language proficiency, and in some cases that issue was mitigated by understanding faculty members, but the issues still received a considerable amount of attention for these students and therefore warrant mention.

With regard to American pedagogy, challenging issues that arose for study participants included difficulty in selecting classes, failure to understand appropriate classroom behavior (such as interrupting the professor to ask a question), or knowing what to study. The experiences reported by participants were similar to pedagogical issues identified in the literature. For instance, Devita (2000) pointed out that international students often feel apprehensive in the classroom because they are not accustomed to an academic environment in which students are encouraged to participate and ask questions. Another challenge for participants was the actual arrangement of classes as it affected relationship building with other students.

Both Chino and Ada expressed surprise and confusion at the idea of selecting their own courses, uncommon in China. Ada shared, “Yeah, for the first year, I think I get so confused about choosing class, because I don’t know what class I’m going to choose and because I’m transfer student, so you know, I get really confused.” Although she eventually spoke with an academic advisor and made some changes, she seemed not to understand that advisors were available to assist her from the start. As a result, she asked the friend who had suggested she apply to Southeastern University initially, to register her for her classes by giving him her account information and asking him to sign her up for four classes he thought she would need. Chino managed to register himself and sought out advising assistance from the start, but said that the American system was a total departure from what he had experienced in China or Panama.

When I got here, I’m like – “you choose your classes in the University?” I’m like, “Wow!” I never had this. So, you can literally choose what class you like to do

and you have electives! I'm like, "What is electives?" It's whatever classes you like to do. (Chino)

Since Chino had shared that an aspect of Asian culture he identified with strongly was not doing "unnecessary" things, the idea of electives as part of his degree requirements was a bit unsettling initially and led to some confusion about what he needed to be taking. On a positive note, as already mentioned, he did seek out the guidance of an advisor to make sense of this concern.

The experiences of these students suggest that their institution did not do a sufficient job providing information about the role of academic advising in selecting and registering for classes. Likewise, institutional support was not immediately present to help participants make decisions that support a successful academic transition and progress toward the completion of their degrees. This is another failure on the part of the institution to demonstrate Proactive Philosophies that would ensure students had necessary information before they ever had a need to ask for it (Museus, 2014).

For several students, a point of difficulty in the classroom environment was not understanding that raising your hand to ask questions or seek clarification, or engaging in discussion with the professor, was the U.S. norm. Kat and Chino both mentioned that though they had difficulty following the professor in their first semester, neither felt they could ask for clarification because it would have disrupted the whole class. Kat stated, "it's hard to raise your hand, 'can you say it again? I don't understand,' like this. I cannot do that to interrupt what professor is saying." Chino echoed this sentiment: "I just couldn't understand much what the professor says, and I could not stop the professor

every time he says something, like, "What do you mean by this?" Tianyao expressed his own concerns about classroom participation:

Most of the time, I'm afraid of answering the questions, because most of the people over there, Americans, they feel free. Nobody will treat you like talking about what they want. Sometimes, not really focused on the topic but still, like, they can say like, "blah blah..." (Tianyao)

Lucy also had difficulty understanding what was acceptable in the classroom and said fear of contributing "wrong ideas" prevented her from participating in classroom discussion or answering questions. As most students indicated, faculty members were generally helpful. A brief conversation with the professor about classroom norms at the start of the semester might have allowed each of these students to avoid this discomfort, save them unnecessary frustration, and generally improved their academic transitions.

Another point of frustration and challenge for some of the participants was the disconnect between what they believed was the topic of discussion for a class and what was actually being covered, as well as what was being taught versus what was being tested. Chino, who had already expressed his hesitation to interrupt a professor to ask questions, shared that,

Sometimes the professor doesn't even cover the book. They just talk about something and that would be the topic of the day, and I would just be like, it's way off from the topic from what I read from the book, and I have to try to understand why is he doing this and why are we not covering the book... why are we doing something else? I would be very confused after the class. (Chino)

Related to Chino's frustration, Tianyao expressed agitation over this kind of disconnect. "What you learn is this part and you reviewed all of the material. I feel like I know everything. At the exam, actually it's this part; it's not connected," Tianyao said.

Issues with test-taking were not confined to the subject matter, however, as other students spoke of difficulty with different styles of exams directly related to their linguistic transition. Kat said that multiple choice tests were much easier for her because even if she did not understand every word of a question, if she could identify key words as they related to the multiple choice answers, she had a better chance of making a correct choice. By contrast, when presented with open-ended short answer or essay questions, she was sure to struggle. Kat used the word "horrible" to describe the prospect of an exam in a short-answer format. Tianyao also complained that written assignments were the most difficult for him in spite of his perceived strength in English.

The other aspect of American pedagogy that some students perceived as a hindrance, especially those for whom on-campus housing was not an option, was the general arrangement of classes and its impact on their ability to establish relationships with peers. Both Ada and Lucy noted that in China, the same students are together all day and it is the professors who move through the classroom because if students are in a certain program, they are all taking the same courses. As a result of this format, one is able to make many friends and form meaningful bonds with classmates. By contrast, in America, since you register for whatever classes you want or need on your own individual timeline, there is no opportunity to create close connections with friends in class. According to Lucy, "...in China we take class like class 1, class 2, like that. We are

a group together to take the same class, but for here every class will have different classmates, so it's very hard to make relationships and make friends." Combined with a lack of campus housing in which Chinese students may have had the opportunity to interact regularly with American students, this appears to have been perceived as a notable detriment to the social/personal transition during the first-year experience.

Housing. The next factor identified as a hindrance to the first-year experience related to institutional support was the matter of housing. Each of the study participants indicated some negative experience or aspect associated with housing during their first year. This universally-shared challenge hindered the social/personal and linguistic transitions for these Chinese students and is an area of serious concern that falls fully within the scope of institutional support, since the availability and/or assignment of housing is managed by the institution. The first challenge related to housing was shared by Lucy, Ada, and Skye, all of whom attended the north campus of Southeastern University during their first year of college in the U.S. As this institution did not have an on-campus housing option for the north campus at the time they entered their institution, these young women were forced to make independent arrangements, in each case with total strangers found online, and not having met their new roommates until they moved in to their respective dwellings. The lack of an on-campus housing option presented numerous challenges for these students, ranging from cost issues, to identifying reliable roommates, to making informed choices about the location in which they would be renting relative to the campus itself. As previously noted, each of these three students found it necessary to buy a car soon after their arrival because public or other forms of

transportation were limited or unreliable. While they may have found it desirable to have a car even if on-campus housing had been available, the lack of an option made it necessary and added to the already large expenses of their first year at an American college. In addition to these very practical concerns, the lack of a residence hall significantly affected the experience of these students by leaving them unable to interact with American students outside of the classroom to form friendships and/or improve their English. A missed opportunity to improve language skills is identified as one of the main drawbacks of not having had on-campus housing demonstrates the importance of the linguistic transition for these students. Since this had been a shared expectation for most participants, it led to considerable disappointment for the overall experience. According to Lucy, “Before I come here I expected that I will improve my English very fast, because I will live in a dormitory with international friends and we will speak English every day.” Though her experience with Chinese roommates was generally positive, she lamented, “I really want to have an American roommate to, like, know more about the culture and meet more foreign friends.” For Ada, not experiencing the movie depicted college life that arose from living in a campus residence hall was a disappointment. Before she came to the U.S, “I only see the student life, the campus life, in the movie. Yeah, it’s like, crazy, like the movie they show. But after I come here -- because I didn’t stay in the dormitory, so I think I’m missing that part, too.” Skye had also hoped to improve her English by having American roommates on campus because she acknowledged that spending her time with Chinese friends and roommates would encourage them all to continue only speaking Chinese. This was an aspect of the

experience over which none of these students had any control and which fell squarely on the institution to provide. In the absence of providing an on-campus housing option, it seems that the institution would have provided, at a minimum, sufficient resources for these students to be able to identify appropriate alternatives for their housing needs. If international students are being recruited to U.S. institutions, access to affordable housing is a basic necessity that must be provided. That said, even in cases where housing was provided by the institution it did not guarantee that the experience would meet expectations, or that it would be without difficulties.

In the cases where the institution did provide housing, whether it was required or optional, each of the participants still faced difficulties. For Kat, her assignment to a residence hall with an American roommate should have been helpful to her in improving her English, but her lack of confidence with her language level left her unsure about what to say, so she stopped trying to start conversations with her. Making matters worse, she shared an actual bedroom with her roommate, and their cultural differences led to discomfort for Kat.

Sometimes she has boys over, and sometimes, even, like, stay overnight. That is kind of, I feel uncomfortable since I live there, too. Beds were in the same room, but separate beds. I know that she has boys over and you know that is like awkward. (Kat)

She also shared that her American roommate would frequently take things that belonged to her, such as bottled water she had purchased for herself and that she kept on her side of the room, but she did not have the confidence to approach her about this. After several

weeks, it seems, her roommate realized Kat was upset about it and made an effort to replace the bottles she had taken, but she expressed disappointment with herself that she was unable to address the issue directly. This difficulty in communication is not unusual, and was cited in research by Smith and Khawaja (2011) who noted that language barriers are one of the main barriers to social interaction between international and domestic students. Because of the roommate difficulties encountered during her first semester, Kat made the choice to change rooms in her second semester and was able to get a Chinese roommate. Though the new arrangement was not completely free of problems, she preferred it because she found it much easier to address concerns as they arose, sharing, as they did, language and culture.

For Chino, it was a relief to get a space in the residence hall at Southeastern University's south campus because although public transportation to and from the campus proved to be limited, he did not have the means to purchase a car. Living off-campus would have been nearly impossible without a car. When he was taken off of the waitlist and assigned to a space in a campus residence hall, he was surprised to be placed with three roommates, two of whom were members of the university's basketball team, but said he felt lucky and would not complain because he had a place to live. His contentment was short-lived, however, as his experience was marred by major cultural differences between himself and his roommates.

They barely study and they just have fun every day. They always have this loud music going on. It was not fun at all in my dorm. Every time I go into my dorm, I have a headset on me and listening to some drama or anime, or I would go out. I

would not be in the dorm, because they were really loud. That was the only thing of my first year experience, *really* not fun. (Chino)

Though they each had their own bedroom, they shared a common space, kitchen and bathrooms. Chino went on to explain that his roommates regularly left all of the shared spaces a mess after having parties with lots of alcohol and girls, and he found himself acting as a maid in their room. These cultural differences were never resolved for Chino and his roommates, and he chose not to complain to his Resident Assistant or other housing officials because he would have felt uncomfortable not having been able to confront his roommates directly. As was the case with Kat and her American roommate, Chino's hesitation to address problems directly with his roommates supports the research of Smith and Khawaja (2011) regarding language barriers as an impediment to social interaction between international and domestic students. Furthermore, the cultural differences between Chino and his roommates also corroborate the findings of Smith and Khawaja (2011) who asserted that students from collectivist cultures (like China) often have a limited interest in aligning their values with their host culture in spite of a desire by local students to have them conform to those norms. Clearly, for Chino, the experience of living in a residence hall was not positive, but in this case he had no option other than to take what he could get from the institution. Because he often left his room to avoid the loud music, he also did not have an opportunity to form relationships with any other students in the hall. Given Chino's generally negative outlook on connecting with others because of his culture, as described previously, it is hard to judge whether different roommates or another housing arrangement would have had a more positive outcome.

Nonetheless this situation had a significantly negative impact on Chino's first-year experience with regard to both his social/personal and linguistic transitions.

Tianyao's housing experience was probably the most positive of all the participants, but it still did not provide the supportive environment that would have best aided him in his first-year experience. Tianyao's institution required first-year students to live on-campus, and he was assigned to a room with a student from Australia. Although he had nothing negative to say about his roommate experience, Tianyao's complaints were about the general environment of the residence hall and were based largely on cultural difference.

People there, they're just crazy, and sometimes, the thing they did, it's unbelievable. Yes, and especially on Friday night, I saw a lot of drunk guy on the hallway, which is annoying. Yeah, and also, it's kind of difficult for you to have some real conversation with them. (Tianyao)

As a result, Tianyao shared that he did not really make any American friends in the residence hall during his first year. Though his placement with an English-speaking roommate may have supported his linguistic transition, he appeared not to have established a significant relationship with his roommate or benefitted from this assignment beyond indicating that he was a nice person. He focused instead on his difficulty in connecting with American students in his residence hall. Clearly, housing – its availability or the lack thereof by the institution – was a source of some dissatisfaction for all of the participants. As I found nothing in the literature specifically addressing the role of housing in the experience of international students in non-native English-speaking

host countries, I was surprised to find it playing such a significant role in the linguistic and social/personal transitions of these students.

Inconsistent Orientation. Though participants unanimously shared negative factors related to institutional support of housing needs, the factors were split regarding the efficacy of orientation programs. I address the positive aspects of orientation in the next section, but it bears noting that inconsistencies in orientation programs contributed to challenges experienced by some participants throughout their first year. Notably, several participants could not recall whether they had attended an orientation that was for all new students or specifically for international students. Further, those who did recall attending an orientation program of some kind could not recall whether it had been mandatory. Students entering their first-year of college in the United States as true first-year students (in this case, Kat and Tianyao), are typically required to attend a freshman orientation program, and it stands to reason that these participants may have been invited to attend orientation programs for new international students, as well. For students transferring from other universities, a general orientation for transfer students, as well as one for new international students, may have been optional. In the cases of these participants, however, including the four who all attended their first year of college in the U.S. at the same institution, there seems to have been no consistency regarding what was offered and what students were expected to attend. Though Chino had no memory of an orientation program at Southeastern University, Ada, Kat, Lucy, Skye, and Tianyao all recalled attending some form of orientation in which they received basic campus information (maps, information about paying tuition, etc.), as well as their university ID

cards. Some mentioned receiving breakfast and “playing some games” with other students to get to know each other. While this opportunity to connect with other students was viewed as useful on some level, it is troublesome that students coming from other countries were unsure about the purpose of attending an orientation, or if they even needed to.

But I remember on the list, they had something in the afternoon, like welcoming things, they have activities, but I didn’t go. Because I saw that, and that’s already finished...I asked my friend “What is orientation?” She said, “Oh, just go get your ID card.” I don’t understand on that time. When I asked my friend, “that’s just like activity where people talk and they provide some food, and you can go to talk to people.” I said, “oh, forget it; it’s already passed.” (Kat)

Many of the challenges faced by these students - identifying needed resources, connecting with other students, solving institutional problems - could have been mitigated by a clearly explained and mandatory orientation program that provided practical information about life both on campus and off.

In spite of these factors that certainly hindered the first-year transition experience of these participants at their American universities, the institutions were able to provide greater support in other areas that were greatly appreciated by the students. The overwhelming majority of comments about how the institution or its agents supported students were positive. Those positive factors are presented in the following section.

Institutional Support Factors Supporting Successful Transition. Three themes around the institutional factors supporting student transition in the first year became apparent through analysis of the data. The first of these, Programs, has to do with the kinds of programs or services participants identified as helpful or positive during their first year. The second, People, focuses on the individuals and/or venues through which, participants built supportive relationships. Although fellow students are not representatives of the institution, per se, I have included their role in the experiences of these participants in this section because the institution was responsible for their presence within the campus community through their recruiting and admissions practices. Finally, Environment, has to do with the overall campus climate experienced by the participants.

Programs. As discussed in the previous section, the failure of institutions to provide clear and complete information about the purpose and importance of orientation programs led to some of the participants not being aware of what they should attend. On the other hand, for those students who did attend some or all of an orientation program, it provided useful information that helped them with at least some of their needs during the first year. The information provided ranged from the general – details about the local area - to specific campus resources, for example. In Skye’s case, she recalled that, “They show about some rule, some departments here, so some information in [the city], like most or the good place you can hang out, the good restaurant.” Tianyao remembered more details of his orientation program, which was specifically for new international students, recalling that before the students were split into smaller groups with a peer mentor, “...they just introduce some basic information of the campus. They gave you a portfolio;

there's some like maps, introduction, and some paper inside that leads you, just give you some basic scene." Lucy also remembered receiving some practical information about the campus at her orientation, and being introduced to someone from the International Student and Scholar Services office before having some breakfast and joining in some activities. Several students remembered playing games or taking part in activities where they got to meet other new students after the informational portion of their program. It seems that this opportunity to connect with other students was meaningful to some participants, with Skye offering that she is still friends with some of the students she met during orientation because of the bond they began forming during that experience. While some of the participants missed portions of their orientation programs because of ambiguity about its purpose, the general feedback suggests that this was an important component of the first year experience for these participants. In reflecting on her first year, Skye spoke to the important role that her orientation program had played,

I mean the whole first year is not very hard for me because from the beginning, the campus provides the orientation. Many information, and they introduced about the department and major different building, different facilities in the campus; is very helpful. (Skye)

Also helpful in their social/personal transition were the cultural references on campus, which included signs and symbols of their culture visible in different areas of the campus, as well as, programs planned by the institution or by student organizations. For many of these participants the most meaningful programs provided on campus were those that celebrated their culture. Kat, Lucy, and Tianyao each recalled holiday celebrations

offered by either departments (though it had not been clear to them at the time which departments or student organizations) were involved. Lucy spoke positively about the social events her academic department hosted featuring different cities or regions of China. Although she did not elaborate on the content or frequency of these events, the connection to something familiar was welcome. Additionally, Lucy was pleased to see Chinese words on miscellaneous flyers posted within her academic area. Since her academic area had a partnership program with an institution in China, it is encouraging to hear that they made efforts to embed elements of the culture into their physical space. Gestures of this sort demonstrated to the Chinese students, or at least to Lucy, that they were valued and fostered a sense of connection to the institution. Lucy did mention other events, though, that held greater significance during her first year. Since both Lucy and Kat shared that the times they felt most lonely during their first year were around the Chinese holidays when they would normally be celebrating with family, the availability of holiday celebrations on campus seemed to help bolster their moods. Kat recalled both a Chinese New Year and Middle Moon Festival on her campus, and Lucy was pleased to find a Spring Festival and Moon Cake Festival at Southeastern University. Tianyao also shared that his institution hosted an “Asian Night” each year to celebrate various Asian cultures, and that the Chinese Student Association partnered with the International Dining Hall on his campus to serve typical Chinese foods during the Chinese New Year. While he had few flattering words about the quality of the food, he was both surprised and “impressed” that they made the effort to do this. He also recalled that, “they have some flag, or the poster on the wall to make the environment more like your culture.” The

efforts made by departments or student organizations at their institutions were meaningful to these students, and provided a sense of comfort and familiarity that supported their experiences during the first year, but they are still relatively superficial compared to what could be provided to alter the environment and provide significant enrichment to all students. This sort of programming is meant to demonstrate an institution's cultural awareness and sensitivity to the diversity of its student population, but does not do anything to show a long-term commitment to supporting these students. More meaningful gestures might be the display of menu items in Chinese throughout the year, or to add a station in the cafeteria offering authentic Chinese and other international food choices year-round. Both of these options would demonstrate to Chinese (and other international) students that they are valued members of their campus communities while also providing an opportunity for domestic and other international students to learn more about different cultures.

In addition to events with cultural relevance, the opportunity to take part in general activities sponsored by the institution was significant for some students. Tianyao, for instance, spoke of a weekly event hosted by his school in the student union. This event, which featured free food, free movies, novelties, and lots of free giveaways, was, "kind of my important experience every Friday." Attending this weekly event with a mix of his Chinese and Chinese-American friends was a way to find common ground that did not rely on language or culture, and to share an experience that was new for all of them. Skye found similar activities on her campus, recalling how much she enjoyed the weekly events she encountered that provided free food and giveaways. In addition to the

programs on the campus itself, both Skye and Ada spoke positively about excursions, planned by the International Student and Scholar Services office and other departments on campus. These excursions took international and/or domestic students to local attractions, beaches, gardens, and amusement parks. These were activities the students could enjoy with other Chinese friends, Americans, and other international students. For students, like Tianyao, who took part in activities designed for the general student body, or those, like Skye and Ada, who enjoyed programs created for international students but that welcomed the participation of domestic students, the opportunity to interact with students from all backgrounds in these situations were strongly positive. The CECE Model specifically identifies these “Opportunities for Meaningful Cross-Cultural Engagement” (Museus, 2014, p. 211) as a hallmark of the culturally engaged campus. This kind of programming provides “opportunities to engage in positive and purposeful interactions with peers from disparate cultural origins” (Museus, 2014, p. 211) and is what institutions should be striving to provide in order to enhance the educational environment for all students and to promote successful academic, linguistic, and social/personal transitions for international students. Though none of the Chinese students in this study mentioned making friends through their participation, the availability of these activities themselves contributed to a positive experience.

Finally, the chance to volunteer, either for work experience or to give back to the local community, was an opportunity that many students took advantage of and viewed as a positive aspect of their first year. Chino, who had been very open about not getting involved at school during his first year, came across a program through his campus’s

Center for Leadership and Service that awards a medallion to students completing a certain number of community service hours. He recalled that his first volunteer experience at Southeastern University was for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service. He was part of a group that went to a local elementary school to do some painting. He did not know anyone in his group, and he did not make any lasting friendships through this experience, but noted that, “I was pulled by the medallion because I wanted to get it. I thought, I want to get something when I graduate.” Since he had previously said that his cultural background led him to only do things that were “necessary,” it was interesting that he chose to take part in community service projects that did not provide skill sets related to his studies. The medallion, however, provided a tangible reward that was appealing to Chino, so he focused on working toward achieving the goal he set for himself to have that medallion by the time he graduated.

Other students took part in volunteer experiences specifically for the purpose of gaining skills relevant to their majors. Lucy spoke of volunteering at a major hospitality related event sponsored by her academic department, while Ada recounted her volunteer experience at a local art show. In both cases, these students were drawn not by the possibility of connecting to others, but by the opportunity to gain practical experience in their field. Though the students’ motivations for participating may have been different, the availability of such volunteer opportunities provided by the institution was an important part of the first-year experience for each of them and contributed to their successful academic and social/personal transitions. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model asserts that “Cultural Community Service” (Museus, 2014, p. 211)

has a positive impact on the experiences of students from diverse populations. In this case, though the volunteer efforts in which these students took part were not focused on their cultural community, they did serve their respective local communities (in Chino's case, the community surrounding his institution, and in Lucy and Ada's cases, the community created by their shared academic major). That these experiences were viewed so positively by the participants suggests that participating in volunteerism of any sort had a positive impact on the success of these students as it provided "stronger connections to their respective campuses" (Museus, 2014, p.211).

All of these programs and activities contributed substantially to the first-year experience of these students and reflected positively on their institutions and the support they provided. As Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) indicated, the support provided by an individual's community as they move through a transition experience can either help or hinder them in the process. It is encouraging to find a number of sources of institutional support that assisted these students in their academic and social/personal transitions. Furthermore, one of the most significant means of institutional support reported by these participants aligned with the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model indicator related to "Meaningful Cross-Cultural Engagement" (Museus, 2014, p. 211), which suggests that their institutions are providing intentional opportunities for students across cultures to engage with and learn from one another. Though very few of the participants mentioned the formation of relationships as a result of these experiences, their interactions and relationships with individuals on campus were critical to their success in the first year.

People. The individuals these students encountered on campus had an impact that was even more significant than the programs offered by the universities. Important relationships were developed through involvement opportunities, with other Chinese students, and with the faculty and staff at the institutions. Peers, Chinese or domestic, were an influential and important source of support. That said, I viewed support as something provided or available to participants rather than something sought out by them, so tapping into those relationships was seen more as a coping strategy for participants and is addressed as such in the section related to strategies.

Involvement opportunities that resulted in the formation of supportive friendships included membership in student organizations for some of these participants. According to Kat, “We have a lot of like club, like here the association, but I am only in the Chinese one because no matter if you are in or not they will ask you to go to activities.” Although she kept to herself during the first year, as a result of her automatic membership in this organization, Kat found community with the other members of the organization and developed her friend network by taking part in their outings and activities. Tianyao also became active with the Chinese Student Association at his institution. He did not understand, at first, that the members were all Chinese-American students for whom English was the first language, but commented about the organization, “That one, I’m much more closer to me, because people over there, they’re born here but they looked like Chinese and they speak English.” In this case, Tianyao bonded with these students around their shared culture, even though most of the members spoke little or no Chinese. Since one of his motivations for studying in the U.S. was to improve his English and not

be in an environment with too many other Chinese students, this suited Tianyao well. In order to get a more varied experience, however, he also joined the Wildlife Society, an organization composed of “mostly White people.” While he found that language differences often resulted in difficulties communicating, Tianyao never hesitated to ask questions if he did not understand something. He indicated that he found his membership in this organization to be rewarding and the other members to be welcoming and encouraging of his involvement with their volunteer efforts and other activities. In this example, the cross-cultural engagement opportunity that took place within the parameters of a student organization was not created by the institution but rather by the students who created the organization. This reinforces the notion of students as institutional agents and also aligns with the imperative of the Culturally Engaging Campus Environment that institutions provide intentional cross-cultural engagement opportunities for all students (Museus, 2014).

While not all of the participants in the study were able to connect to friends through involvement in organizations, either because of time constraints or lack of knowledge about how to get involved, for the students who did, this kind of involvement provided a positive environment for making connections across some mutual experience or interest. That said, it is concerning that some students failed to identify opportunities for engagement similar to what Tianyao experienced because they did not have information about how to get involved. This raises questions about how information was provided to these students in cases where they did not specifically seek it out. Lucy indicated that she thought there were many clubs to join on her campus, but she did not

know how to find them. When asked if she had sought out information about how to join any of the clubs, she said, “I asked my advisor once or twice, and they told me to there is one social to try, and give me a business card; but I find I will need to pay every month so I didn’t join it” (Lucy). I inquired further if Lucy was aware of there being an office of Campus Activities at her campus and she said that she was but did not know what it was for. According to Museus (2014) institutions exercising a Culturally Engaging Campus Environment use “Proactive Philosophies” (p. 213) in their approach to providing information and support to students. In essence, institutions following this practice do not wait for students to ask for information before making it available. In taking these extra steps they increase the chances of student success (Museus, 2014). Though Lucy did not make meaningful connections through involvement, she did find opportunities within the classroom environment.

Although some participants made friends with Chinese students through involvement opportunities, most who chose to form connections with other Chinese students did so through their living situations – forming friendships with their own roommates as well as the extended friend networks of those individuals - or with other Chinese students they met on campus in their classes or through social media outlets. Because the structure of classes is different in the U.S. than in China, some participants remarked that it was hard to make friends because the group of students did not stay together and changed from class to class. Others, however, felt that this allowed them to meet many more people which increased the chances of making friends. Lucy was able to capitalize on classroom interactions in order to build friendships. She stated, “Because in

class I also have some Chinese classmates and we also joined together to do the quiz, to do the presentations and share our notes. After class we always be together to eat something and cook some Chinese food.” Skye also shared her perspective on the ability to connect with other students because of the arrangement of classes, “And the students are different every class, so you make new different friends and you share different culture, different behavior, and ask questions...” Though Skye valued meeting people from different cultures in her classes, Lucy found it helpful to build friendships with other Chinese students who could help each other in class and share experiences outside of class.

For both Kat and Ada, efforts at making friends at their respective institutions came through involvement on social media before they left China. While searching for potential roommates, Ada recalled how she connected with other Chinese students, some of whom later became friends,

It’s like -- we call it the QQ, but it’s like Facebook. So, there’s a lot of groups so you just join like [Southeastern University] student, [S.U.] Chinese student, [S.U.] student like 2013. So, I find a group and then I just asked them randomly like “who needs a roommate?” (Ada)

Kat connected in a similar fashion with the friend who helped her get settled on campus after her arrival. She used QQ and Ren Ren, since Facebook is not accessible in China, and though they had not met before she got to her campus, they remained friends throughout her first year (and beyond). The connection to other Chinese students, in particular, was very important to these students as they navigated their first year in the

U.S., and is discussed further in the section on strategies that supported success. In the context of the campus environment, however, the relationships formed with other Chinese students aligns with the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model indicator of “Cultural Familiarity” (Museus, 2014, p. 210), which asserts that students who are able to make connections with those from a shared background are more likely to succeed. For these students, this was certainly true and these connections contributed to their social/personal and academic transitions.

The final group of people who were important to the success of many participants was the group of institutional agents with whom they were able to connect for information and support. Students found support from professors, teaching assistants, advisors, and other institutional representatives, and the relationships they developed proved to be some of the most impactful during their first year. These relationships were largely geared toward the academic transition but, for one student in particular, made a significant impact on his social/personal transition.

Almost all of the participants mentioned the support they found from their professors. Kat enjoyed her professors’ “free style” approach, which encouraged access and conversation. Lucy and Skye, who were in the same academic program, had positive experiences with their professors, as well. Lucy found that her professors were always “very helpful,” and Skye elaborated that, “They told us every time, if you have any questions, don’t be afraid to contact us and we sent emails to them or text them. They replying so quickly, try to help us. They are so kind.” For Chino, the value in connecting

with faculty members was less about their helpfulness and more about making a personal connection. The connection he found with one of his professors was especially strong.

We speak in Spanish, so it's like more connection and he told me how he came here, what were his experiences. I learned from him. He told me about his experience living here. How long he has been here and how is living here and things like that. (Chino)

Because Chino felt isolated by his living situation, his own choice to avoid interaction with other Chinese students, and his difficulty making new friends because of his “conservative” personality, finding personal connection with his faculty members and one of his advisors was critical to his success. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments indicators of “Culturally Validating Environments” (Museus, 2014, p. 212) and “Humanized Educational Environments” (p. 213) were both observed in this case and were impactful for Chino. The faculty member who connected with this student based on shared culture (notwithstanding its Latin American basis), and who showed an interest in creating a meaningful relationship with this student beyond simply providing answers to class related questions, demonstrated the principles inherent to a campus environment that is interested in promoting the success of students from diverse backgrounds (Museus, 2014). Not all students found their professors as accessible or helpful as Chino did, however, and turned more often to their teaching assistants. Though Tianyao was less concerned about a personal connection and sought out faculty for more academic support, he indicated that since his professors were generally only available for questions immediately after class, the “TA plays a really important role in your study. When you

have questions, you just go ask them.” Regardless of whether it was a faculty member or a teaching assistant who provided the support, most participants identified members of their teaching teams as a valued resource throughout the first year.

Beyond faculty members, advisors were another significant source of support for participants with regard to academic, immigration, or personal issues. Ada found advisors and other staff at her institution friendly and helpful. In particular, she identified her advisor in the International Student and Scholar Services office as helpful, sharing, “they're really nice to me and every time I have visa problem - I need to renew my I-20 - so they have all the information and they're professional” (Ada). Because immigration issues can often cause stress for international students, she found this to be helpful and appreciated that she could count on her advisor to provide good and timely support. Ada also found needed support from her academic advisor, explaining that,

Every time I have a problem with my education, or the class (I want to change this) – and, as an international student, especially me, I’m a transfer student - I am confused a lot with my credit. Like, how much credit I need to graduation? How much I have now? And so I always go to adviser’s office. (Ada)

Ada relied on the assistance of her advisor and counted this among the most supportive relationships she developed during her first year at college in the U.S. Similarly, Chino found his academic advisor to be extremely supportive and perhaps the most important relationship of his first year at Southeastern University. Though he went to the advising office for assistance with academic issues, his advisor made an effort to get to know him

as a person and to inquire about his family, his transition, and how he was getting through his first year in the U.S. As Chino described the development of the relationship,

My academic advisor, she doesn't speak Spanish, but she is so nice. She was the first person that I tried to share about my things, because she was the first person who I met on campus that I talked [to] by myself, because I had talk to my academic advisor no matter what because they want to know how you're doing in the campus and how you are doing in the classes. I don't know, she kept talking about her lifestyle, like how she was doing during the day and then she talk about her husband and I was like, "Wow, she is talking about her husband!" and we just don't talk about these things. You just don't talk about your family, that's what my parent told me. Then she just start talking, I am like, "oh yeah." Then she will start, "Are you international student? You are from Panama?" "Yeah." "And how you like it here?" And she start asking me questions like "how is my experience so far in [Southeastern University]?" ... So yeah, it was my academic advisor that helped me a lot. (Chino)

Chino went on to share that even though this interaction took place with someone who was not his assigned academic advisor, he would always ask to see her and would wait as long as necessary to see her for whatever issue he had. This relationship was absolutely invaluable to Chino's successful social/personal (and academic) transition in the first year and, like the one with his professor, was based on the personal connection these individuals were willing to make with him. Though not an experience shared by most of the participants in this study, Chino's experience stands out as a model of positive

support from the institution. The support provided across academic and social/personal transitions for these students, and especially for Chino, aligns directly with several indicators of the Culturally Engaging Campus Environment Model. Institutions employing faculty and staff who students feel they can count on to seek help or information contribute to an environment of “holistic support” (Museus, 2014, p. 214), an important component of the model. Furthermore, the model suggests that students are more successful in environments where institutional agents “validate their cultural backgrounds and identities” (Museus, 2014, p. 212), and “care about, are committed to, and develop meaningful relationships with their students” (p. 213). I would argue that these institutional agents need not be limited to faculty and staff members, but can also include students in leadership roles.

One such student leader acting as an institutional agent, and who played an important role for one of the participants, was the Student Body President at Kat’s institution. Given the small size of her college, Kat shared that it was not unusual to feel as if you knew everyone on campus even if they were not actually your friend. When she was having roommate issues during her first semester, one of Kat’s Chinese friends suggested she talk to the Student Body President since her job was to advocate for her fellow students. Though a Resident Assistant would probably have been a more appropriate person to go to for her issues, Kat did speak with the President and remembered that while she worried that her poor English would constrain the conversation, she found the President open and eager to assist. She said she was sure the President spoke with her American roommate about her concerns, and that this helped her

tremendously. She went on to share that, as a result of her contacting the Student Body President, this individual regularly checked in with Kat to make sure she was doing alright throughout her first year. Perhaps the small campus size made this more possible than at an institution with a larger student population. In any case, although she did not refer to the Student Body President as a friend, the student's personal outreach and interest in Kat's experience was meaningful to Kat and demonstrated a proactive approach to assessing her needs without waiting for her to share other concerns. This is consistent with the Culturally Engaging Campus Environment.

Clearly, these students had different kinds of support from and connection with members of the institutions at which they spent their first year. Whether it was friends made through organizations, friends made through classes or living situations, involvement with cultural and other programs provided by the institution, or significant relationships with institutional players, each of these played a critical role in the success of the participants. Each of these relationships align with the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model in terms of the roles institutional agents play in creating environments that support student success.

Environment. The programs and people with which participants were able to connect during their first year were vital to their success, but the environment in which they existed was also important. As mentioned previously, cultural references existed in the realm of programs as well as signs and symbols visible on the campus. These references contributed to a welcoming environment that was appreciated by the students. Lucy remembered seeing posters with Chinese words displayed in different areas within

her academic unit. Since her institution has a partnership with a Chinese institution (the same program from which Skye transferred), the department has a commitment to supporting Chinese students, and recognized the value in making them feel welcome within their academic space. Tianyao cited the use of flags and posters displayed in the International Dining Hall for the Chinese New Year Celebration that helped to make Chinese students feel more at home during this event.

Chino had a more complicated situation than the other participants because he had spent much of his life in Panama. Though he did not identify himself as Panamanian or Latin American and he demonstrated an obvious alignment with his Chinese/Asian background, the cultural references he connected with most strongly on campus were those associated with Panamanian (or Latin American) rather than Chinese culture. Since he actively avoided contact with Chinese students, he took solace in being able to go to the Latin coffee shop located in Southeastern University's student union food court. Seeing the menu board written in Spanish and recognizing that the ladies who worked there spoke more Spanish than English meant that he knew he could engage in a brief conversation in Spanish without any the pressure of getting to know people very well (which, as shared previously, he felt was difficult for him as a result of his Asian cultural background). In Chino's case, having Spanish references such as these around him on campus provided a significant level of comfort.

The presence of other Chinese students on campus, though not a primary selection factor for any of the participants in choosing their institution, not only added to the overall environment, but made it possible for these students to identify individuals with

similar backgrounds and language who might aid in their social/personal transition process. As will be explored further in the final section of this chapter, support of other Chinese students was essential to the successful transition for most of the participants in this study. And while Tianyao chose his institution in part because it had a relatively small population of Chinese students (around 800 at the time he entered, according to his recollection), he still found it helpful to connect with these students as he moved through his first year of college. While many factors weigh in admissions decisions, admissions offices must be mindful of the ways in which those decisions can contribute to the success of these students. By being intentional about creating communities of culturally similar students on their campuses, I believe that institutions can generate conditions that will help these students support one another and, ultimately, succeed in the social/personal and academic transitions through their first year. That said, I also believe it is essential that institutions not rely on the existence of these communities as sources of support and information for their members in order to avoid having to directly providing holistic resources themselves.

In addition to the appreciated presence of other Chinese students on campus with whom to form friendships, many of these students said they experienced campus environments that generally made them feel welcomed. This feeling was helpful to them in connecting to their institutions and wanting to be part of the campus community. All of the participants in this study commented on how friendly the people on their campuses were and how good that made them feel. For Kat, though it was initially surprising to her

that strangers acknowledged or greeted her, she came to embrace this American cultural norm.

People are welcoming. For me, like, different for me, like between here and China, even we don't know each other, while I walk around campus, I see some[one], while we have some eye contact. Not on purpose, but when you see someone, they are going to, like, smile to you. They gonna say "good morning" to you. Even like, they don't know who you are. (Kat)

Ada had a similar experience on her campus, and attributed it to the smaller number of people in the U.S. than China. She stated that China is not a bad place, but the people in America are generally much friendlier and she enjoyed the environment on her campus as a result of that.

In addition, all of the students spoke of how helpful and encouraging people were on their campuses, irrespective of the size. For Kat, on a campus with, as she described it, 700 people total (including faculty and staff), she enjoyed knowing she could talk to everyone even if she did not know them. Though her language proficiency prevented her from doing so, it was the idea that everyone was familiar that she appreciated. For Chino, on a campus with around 30,000 students, although it would be impossible to speak with everyone (even in passing), he felt that everyone he encountered, from students to staff, encouraged him to be involved and invited him to take part in activities and events. Tianyao, who was also on a campus of nearly 30,000 students, had a similar observation about the American students, faculty and staff he encountered daily. "They don't mind you of from different country. They're really interested in you, actually," he said. This

sentiment was also shared by most of the other study participants, who indicated that they appreciated the high level of curiosity about Chinese culture that they encountered from Americans (students, faculty and staff) with whom they interacted on campus. The experiences of these students represented a significant departure from the literature in which international students, particularly non-native English-speakers in English speaking environments (not exclusively in the United States), have recounted experiences of bias, discrimination, marginalization, and incidents of verbal or physical attacks at their institutions (Lee & Rice, 2007; Ryan & Viète, 2009). Regardless of their difficulties in establishing meaningful relationships with domestic students based on language or cultural differences, participants in this study did not report any incidences of bias or discrimination either inside or outside the classroom. On the contrary, Ada recounted her experience as part of a group project for class by sharing, “My teammates were really nice to me. They help me and they fix the cards for me when the presentation and told me, “Not worry and speak slowly and we’ll understand you. And if you have a mistake don’t worry, we’ll fix it.” Kat also noted that her classmates were understanding and did not discriminate against her in the classroom environment. She explained, “So, they did not treat me differently like, “oh, you are international student, we should treat you in different way.” This is encouraging because much of the literature is over five years old, and the institutions to which international students are coming in the United States may have recognized the need to take measures to be responsive to these issues for both domestic and international students. Additionally, since most of these participants

attended institutions in fairly diverse communities, domestic students on their campuses may have been less inclined to discriminate based on ethnicity or country of origin.

Though not as deeply significant as the personal relationships developed as a result of institutional efforts, a welcoming campus environment was vital to a successful first year experience for the participants in this study. Whether that positive environment was the result of the presence of other Chinese students, the visibility of references to their culture, the friendly and helpful support of students, faculty, and staff on the campus, or some combination of these factors, the institutional support provided through these outlets made an impact that promoted their success throughout the first year of college in the U.S. across several dimensions.

Among the sources of support identified by Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) as helpful resources in an individual's transition process are the institutions and/or communities to which the individual belongs. In examining the types of institutional support provided to the participants in this study, it became clear that many of their experiences aligned with the Culturally Engaging Campus Environment Model which asserts that when students experience campus environments that value and support their "diverse cultural backgrounds or identities" (Museus, 2014, p. 210), they are more likely to be successful. As was demonstrated through the data, several of the nine indicators of such campuses were present in the experiences of these students: Cultural Familiarity, Opportunities for Meaningful Cross-Cultural Engagement, Culturally Validating Environments, Humanized Educational Environments, Proactive Philosophies, and Availability of Holistic Support (Museus, 2014). And while the volunteerism in which

these students participated was not specifically oriented toward their cultural communities, it was still a positive contributor to their first year experience and a sense of connection to their institutions. Recognizing the critical role of Support for individuals during transition (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995), and in the context of students experiencing transitions across multiple domains, it is of paramount importance that institutional support be provided in a way that is attentive to the needs of the unique populations experiencing those transitions.

For these participants, the institutional support they received was, for the most part, attentive to those needs. Regardless of the impact that support had on the experience of these participants, each of the students had to find ways to cope with transition issues related to the academic, social/personal, and linguistic domains. In the next section I share findings related to the strategies these students employed that either challenged or supported their experience navigating the first year of college in the United States.

Strategies for Moving through First Year Transition

In addition to the external factors that affected the experience of the Chinese undergraduate students in this study, a variety of coping mechanisms were implemented by the students to help them move through the first year. This section presents findings related to research sub-question four: *What strategies were most helpful in their transition process?* As was the case with the findings presented in the previous sections, analysis of the data identified strategies that challenged the students in their transition, as well as those that supported them.

Strategies Hindering Successful Transition. It may seem counterintuitive for the study participants to have engaged in strategies that actually served to hinder them in their academic, social/personal and/or linguistic transitions through the first year of college in the United States, but the data did reveal one theme where this was the case. A coping mechanism employed specifically by two of the participants can best be described as social isolation. The literature suggests that this strategy is not unusual among international students, particularly in cases where language is a factor (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). Though the strategy was employed for different reasons and in different ways, it acted as a hindrance to transition in social/personal situations.

Kat recalled the process of trying to make American friends when she got to her campus. Although she noted that she did not consider herself shy, she was not used to talking with many people and was envious of her Chinese friends who had made many American friends. Her experience was not the same and was based – at least in part – on her language level.

...for me, because I try to – when I meet American people, I try to talk to them. I want make friends with them, but sometimes when I say something, they will like “what?” I was like, “Ahhh! Never mind.” It is like embarrassing. I think I should be better to talk to them. I think I explained what I want to, but they do not understand. So it is hard to start a conversation with them. (Kat)

In response to the frustration and embarrassment Kat suffered in trying to start conversations with American students, she ultimately stopped trying to talk to them during her first year and said that she essentially spent her first year by herself, with the

exception of a small number of Chinese friends. Examples of this sort of self-segregation leading to interaction with students from the same country or cultural background are common in the literature and are not always viewed negatively since these relationships provide needed support in the face of anxiety and feelings of isolation (Keller, 2009; Lee, 2010; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). Avoidance of the kinds of situations described by Kat became her coping mechanism because the stress of feeling embarrassed was worse for her than being by herself.

But, when I came here, I tried to – I really tried to avoid those embarrassing situations. So, I don't know if this happened to all Chinese, but for me, I feel that's bad or I feel upset when people don't understand me, so I try to avoid those so I don't need to thinking about that. (Kat)

This fear of being embarrassed extended beyond just social interaction, however, as Kat shared that for the first several weeks at her U.S. institution, she would only go to the cafeteria for food if she had someone to go with. She feared that her poor English would not be understood by the cafeteria staff and with a line of people waiting to be served, it would embarrass her and frustrate those around her. To avoid this situation, she would go with a friend whose English was better and simply ask for the same thing they ordered, like it or not. One day, she was unable to find anyone to go to the cafeteria with her, so she chose not to eat anything rather than face embarrassment. She did not know why she was so afraid, she said, and that it did not last for long, but it was significant enough on this occasion that she preferred hunger over humiliation. By isolating herself as she did, Kat eliminated two potentially important sources of support during her first year,

American students and staff members at the institution. Eventually, as Kat settled into her new environment, she was able to go to the cafeteria on her own, but she never moved past the fear of embarrassment in seeking out social connections during her first year. Fortunately, this fear did not prevent Kat from seeking the help of her peers in class when she had difficulty following the professor, but it is very troubling that concerns about her language level – even while she was in an English Language Institute (ELI) program at her host institution – caused her to go hungry for even one day. This is an example of how non-native English-speaking international students are sometimes brought into a new environment and not provided with the basic survival tools. Particularly in the case of students like Kat, who are admitted conditionally and required to attend an ELI program before fully matriculating, steps should be taken by the institution to ensure that they have the tools and/or access to resources that would prevent such situations. The practice of Proactive Philosophies, which is described in the Culturally Engaging Campus Environment Model as providing information and support before it is asked for (Museus, 2014), could have made both Kat’s linguistic and social/personal transitions much less stressful.

Chino had a far more negative overall experience throughout his first year of college in the United States and this was primarily because of the way he chose to isolate himself. When asked how he would describe his personality during the first year he was at school in the U.S., Chino said he was “quiet” and “conservative to another level.” As a result of these attributes (previously labeled “Asian-ness”), he had a hard time meeting and getting to know new people. Although he was aware of Asian student organizations

on campus, groups that might allow him to be among peers with a similar background and set of cultural values, he made a conscious decision to avoid them.

I didn't find a need to hang out with Chinese people because at the end of the day I would be speaking Chinese instead of speaking English. So my main purpose was to learn English, so I forced myself to not hangout with Chinese people even though I knew there was a Chinese club at the school. So, even when I found out, I didn't talk to one of them. I didn't go to the meeting or anything. (Chino)

While the premise of choosing not to interact with other Chinese or Asian students was an effort to improve his English, his cultural values, "quiet" and "conservative" personality, and lack of trust also prevented him from interacting with English speakers.

So one of the things is the comfortability of sharing my thoughts, sharing my experience was one of the difficulties that I had back then. Just don't feel like sharing it all back then because I know I am a foreigner, so for me everyone is a foreigner to me, stranger to me. So I don't know who to trust, who to not trust; but I just didn't have those judgments to deal with that. You can't really tell how someone talks, so back then the only thing that I knew was just avoid. Avoiding was one of the things that worked the most. (Chino)

And though he had American roommates, with whom he may have had a chance to practice his English, the negative experiences he had with them caused Chino to be further isolated during his first year. As he explained, regarding his strategy for dealing with his loud and difficult roommates, "So I just packed my stuff - laptop, whatever I need - take my bag and go to the library. (Chino)" That Chino seemed to find comfort

speaking with the Spanish-speaking women at his campus coffee shop, it is puzzling that he did not seek to form relationships with Spanish-speaking students at his institution if he did not want to befriend other Chinese students. His focus on wanting to speak and improve his English seems to indicate that Chino's desire to advance his linguistic transition took priority over his social/personal transition when, in fact, they could have supported one another. As previously mentioned, Chino seemed to identify more strongly as Chinese (or Asian), especially with regard to his personality and values, but to feel more connected and comfortable in the context of the Latin American culture in which he grew up, as evidenced by the connection with his faculty member and the women in the coffee shop. That said, he also chose to actively avoid the formation of relationships with students from either of these cultures, as well as American students at his host institution, which causes me to be curious about deeper identity and development issues that may have made an impact on Chino's experience.

In addition to the self-isolation related to relationship building, Chino felt further isolated by his financial situation. He encapsulated his situation in a general sense in this way,

I didn't have friends. Five months here and you don't have friends? That's weird. What can I say? I don't have friends because I don't hang out at all and my roommate keeps giving me this bad impression of partying all day. And, back then, I still didn't want to spend money on going out, spend money on liquor... spend money on things that I don't need to have. (Chino)

Chino was not the only student who felt a sense of obligation to be responsible with money because all of their support was coming from their parents. But, he was the only student who indicated that his experience was significantly inhibited by his reluctance to spend money unnecessarily.

Although both students were able to successfully navigate their first year of college in the U.S. through a combination of other largely external factors, their self-imposed isolation hindered them significantly. Fortunately, the majority of study participants found coping strategies to help them make the transition through the first year in a more positive way.

Strategies Supporting Successful Transition. As discussed previously, the development of relationships, with other Chinese students as well as institutional agents of the campuses at which these students matriculated, was important in the successful academic and social/personal transition experiences of most study participants during their first year of college in the U.S. In most cases, the data revealed that the strategies that seemed to best support the success of these students were also associated with their personal relationships both on campus and at home in China. Finally, acknowledging that finding ways to adapt to the local environment would ultimately aid the transition process was a strategy shared by some study participants.

Personal Relationships. Whether related to academic or social/personal issues, many of these students indicated that they routinely sought information from the individuals with whom they had personal relationships. For instance, Ada turned to her friends from class when she was unsure about the least expensive ways to obtain

textbooks for class. When she had questions about buying gas or getting her car fixed, she asked her Chinese friends who had been in the area for a longer period. She also sought assistance from her Chinese friends with regard to finding the best prices on groceries. Kat shared that she also solicited advice from her Chinese friends about grocery shopping, and acknowledged that, although academic advisors are helpful in registering for classes, it was her Chinese friends who could be counted on to give practical information about where to go shopping or how to open a bank account. Lucy said that she, “found the resources, most of them, from the Chinese students who have been here for more than one year.”

In addition to the information participants sought from their friends, they also relied heavily on their Chinese friends made in the United States as a means of support. Ada said that if she needed support for anything related to her life in America she could always count on her Chinese friends at school because they had a shared background, language, and experience. Even before her arrival, Ada sought support and assistance from other Chinese students already at her campus in the U.S. She suggested that this was the best approach because, from her perspective, “it's always Chinese people help Chinese people.” Lucy also expressed this sentiment of Chinese supporting other Chinese, indicating that her strategy for dealing with difficult situations throughout her first year was to seek out the assistance of her Chinese friends at school, and that she relied on these friends to provide support especially around Chinese holidays when she felt homesick. She said that during the first year she missed being with family members for traditional celebrations, so to get through these periods “We have some other Chinese

friend that we gather together and we make some dumplings; we do some delicious food to celebrate it. It makes me feel better.” Kat also spoke of the importance of her Chinese friends throughout her first year.

If you have really get into a difficult situation, you can go ask your teacher for that, but you cannot ask them, “Do you know how to open a bank account? Do you know where should I take this? Can you take me to...?” So, friend is really helpful to be, like, on campus. So that’s why we are like looking for friends all the time. (Kat)

This approach is also seen in the literature on international student experiences, especially for students coming from non-Western countries into Western environments. Research conducted by Andrade (2006) asserted that as the result of difficulties making domestic friends, or simply a matter of preference, many international students develop friendships with students from their same country/background. Likewise, Lee (2010) noted that in her research conducted in the U.S., “many international students have learned to find non-institutional forms of support (e.g. international networks and friends from their home country)” (p. 68). As such, it is not surprising to find that the participants in this study also tended to turn to their Chinese peers at the host-institution when in need of information or support. Tianyao also relied heavily on his friends on campus for support with academic and personal issues, and indicated that he could count on both his American and his Chinese friends made in the U.S. equally, and regularly looked to them for support during his first year.

In addition to relying on their Chinese friends on campus, study participants stayed closely connected to their families and friends at home in China and sought support from them throughout the first year. Maintaining regular contact with his parents was helpful to Tianyao, and he reported that he never felt homesick because he and his parents talked all the time using the Chinese version of the “Face Time” app. For Chino, who was almost completely alone during his first year of college in the U.S., staying in regular contact with his family was a critical strategy for his success in moving through the transition, especially during the early months. He recalled that “I pretty much called my mom every day. My first month, every day; then the second month, once or twice or three times a week. That was the first semester only, though.” (Chino) Skye also reported that she relied heavily on contact with her parents for support, and because of good access to the internet, they were able to speak at least twice per month throughout her first year. Even Ada, who had already spent a considerable amount of time away from her parents while she was studying in Switzerland and working in Key West, sought the support of her parents and indicated that she would often Face Time with them “like three times a week.” The availability of reliable sources of communication to remain in contact with family members and friends at home was helpful in minimizing levels of homesickness and feelings of loneliness for these students. However, a Canadian study showed that while access to these modes of communication is often helpful to international students during their transition to a new environment, some students may actually be hindered in developing relationships in their host environment by the frequency of contact with family and friends at home (Zhang & Zhou, 2010). While most

of the participants in this study mentioned some kind of friend network at their host institution and regular contact with family and friends at home, Chino seems to have relied most heavily on communication with his family and friends at home. In addition to his frequent calls home to his family, Chino recounted that,

Most of the time, instead of going out on a Friday night or Saturday night and meeting up with some friends, I would just hang out on Skype with my friends from Panama. I just hang out with my friends on Skype; we talk, we play video games online, and we just laugh. I laugh more with my friends online than actually with people here. That's weird. (Chino)

Though regular communication with family and friends at home seems to have been a generally positive strategy for the majority of participants, Chino's case suggests that there can certainly be a down side to the frequency of contact students have with those at home. If he had not been able to have as much contact with his friends, for instance, it is possible that Chino would have been forced to interact socially with students at his institution. On the other hand, given his self-disclosed predisposition to be somewhat reserved in meeting people and establishing friendships, it is equally possible that access to this level of contact with individuals at home is what made it possible for him to persist in his foreign environment.

Though they were able to communicate frequently with family members and friends in China, and actively sought their support, study participants seem to have been far more selective about what they shared than they were with their friends in the U.S. as a strategy for not causing them concern as they worked through any difficulties. Ada said,

“I never told them like when I’m getting sick or the hopeless. I don’t want them to worry, but every time I get some reward, some good things happen, I will tell them.”

Skye also kept difficulties to herself. “But I don’t like to talk so much about [roommate problems] and to my parents. They will worry about me. I just try to keep tell them I’m very good here, we have so many friends,” she said. This strategy helped her to stay connected with her family, which provided needed support, without causing them what she considered to be unnecessary worry. As she noted, since they were in China, there was nothing they could do to help, so there was little point in causing them concern. Kat employed a similar strategy with her parents, but relied on her friends at home in times of difficulty like her first few weeks at her school in the U.S.

I didn’t call [my parents]. I called my friend, almost like two hours per day in the first week. My friend – she is very nice – she is like grew up with me when I was in middle [school], and she encouraged me a lot, and she talked funny things with me, and she helped me to go through those first tough week... (Kat)

Skye also shared more about her struggles with her friends at home than with her parents, but she tempered those conversations as well, telling them that she felt “so tired” when she was actually feeling like she might want to give up and go home to China. The reason for this choice may be culturally based, as one study regarding the experience of Asian international students suggested that a “tendency to keep problems and challenges to oneself may be associated with cultural stigma and shame associated with emotional expression” (Heggins & Jackson, 2003, p.388). A more recent study, however, identified this as common among Asian international students who “may be reluctant to speak to

family members and friends in their home country about how they are feeling for fear of burdening them with their problems” (Smith & Khawaja, 2011, p. 705). Though Skye was not completely forthcoming with her friends in these situations, just speaking with them, she said, “will give me the confidence and the energy and I can hold onto that.” (Skye) She also said that overcoming any difficulties she encountered was usually managed by having a phone conversation with one of her Chinese friends rather than seeking out a professor or advisor. For her, it was important to be able to speak with someone who could cheer her up and encourage her. Reliance on existing support systems may not appear to be a coping mechanism or strategy, but these students were obviously exercising control over their situations rather than waiting for support to be offered. This was evidenced by the fact that choices were made about what information or support to seek from certain groups and what information to withhold from or share with certain individuals.

Adaptation. Reaching out to and relying on family and friends at home was important for many of these students, but both Chino and Tianyao also acknowledged the importance of trying to adapt to their environment as a strategy in navigating their first year. For Chino, this was not simply a strategy, but a means of survival. Asked about the experience of being an international student, he described the first year experience in this way,

It’s more like, foreigner trying to find a way to learn something; something new that they were not used to and try to adapt to that something new. And it’s more like, for us, I would say survival more as an international student, because you are

not from the culture, you are not familiar with what they used to do and just finding a way to survive in that culture. And adapt. If you can survive you want to adapt, so you have to adapt. (Chino)

The notion that entering his new environment led Chino to feel that he had to learn to survive in the space is very powerful. For most of the other students, finding their way in the new environment seemed to be less about the primal need to survive and more about simply learning how to navigate the space. Only Chino saw the transition as a life or death situation, which causes me to wonder about his experiences in Panama after moving there from China. I also question the extent to which Chino's self-imposed social isolation affected his feeling of needing to survive in his new environment as opposed to navigating the landscape like the other participants in the study. Surely, a local support network of any kind, the absence of which was previously discussed as a hindrance to Chino's social/personal transition and the presence of which was seen as one of the most helpful strategies for other participants, could have aided him in the overall transition to his new environment. In fact, meaningful friendships (whether with local or other international students) have been shown to have a significant impact on international student adjustment to their host environment (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002).

Similarly, Tianyao spoke of the need he recognized to adapt to in his new environment in order to be successful.

And you need to figure out your own way to put you in the environment in there. It's a long process and you have to adjust. Through that process, you still have to deal with some problems, like when you're going to miss your family or because

most times, since you're an international student, although Chinese people are majority over there but you're still going to feel lonely or homesick. That's the problem you're going to deal with, but I did a really good job. (Tianyao)

Though Tianyao entered his first year of college in the U.S. with a much more positive outlook on the experience than Chino did, both of these students had an awareness of their own role in navigating the first year and, though they sought the support of friends and family, employed a strategy of adapting to their environment as best they could rather than simply getting by in a new place.

The strategies that either supported or hindered these students through their academic, social/personal, and linguistic transitions in their first year of college in the United States are reflective of resources identified by Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) as important to an individual's transition process. Among these resources are the positive coping strategies implemented by the participants which allowed them to exercise control over their situation and, in some cases – like the choice to not share complete information with their family members and friends at home – make certain situations less stressful by altering their meaning (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Some students also chose to implement one of the less positive strategies suggested in Transition Model by avoiding stressful situations (like Kat, who chose not to go to the cafeteria alone in order to avoid stress and humiliation of not being understood) (Schlossberg et al., 1995). In addition to these coping strategies, the reliance on individuals who could provide support (another of the resources identified in the Transition Model) was a strategy used by these participants. In particular, a reliance on

intimate relationships from family and friends were critical to these students. Though many of the participants relied heavily on communicating with their families and friends at home for support, almost all of them also developed trusted networks of friends who shared their background and culture at their host institutions in order to fill the void created by geographical separation from their families in China (Schlossberg et al., 1995)

Summary

This chapter presented findings related to the questions of how the study participants felt prepared for their first year of college in the U.S., the sources of institutional support that were available to them, and the strategies they found helpful in managing their transition through the first year. A number of themes emerged in response to these sub-questions, each of which reinforced the primary research question, *How do Chinese undergraduate students experience the first year of college at an institution in the United States?*, and several notable findings stood out among these.

First, on a macro level, although I approached the study from a positive perspective and with an intention of focusing on factors that supported the students' successful first-year transition experiences, analysis of the data revealed a significant number of factors that actually hindered these students' experiences as well. The fact that participants experienced so many challenges to their success was disheartening as I had hoped to be able to focus and build upon experiences that had supported and encouraged their success. That is not to say that I expected all of their experiences to have been positive or that I did not anticipate that they had faced some difficulties, but the kinds of challenges that arose were concerning. In spite of the many positive experiences that

supported each of their transitions, Chino may have summarized it best. “As international student, overcoming, like, a lot of obstacles.”

One of the primary obstacles, which had a significantly negative impact on both the linguistic and social/personal transitions for these participants, was related to their housing arrangements. Students who did not have access to on-campus housing also received no guidance from their institution about where to look for housing or how to connect with students who were already enrolled at the institution in order to identify potential roommates. These students were left to their own devices and relied on the social media resources to which they had access in China in order to connect with other Chinese students already at their institution. Since, as Ada pointed out, “It’s always Chinese people help Chinese people,” these students made the best of their situations and relied upon themselves and their extended community to identify roommates who they moved in with without ever having met, and apartments that they moved to without ever having seen them. This situation also resulted in the added expense of these students needing to purchase cars in order to get around not only to conduct daily activities, but simply to get to their classes, since public transportation was unreliable. For the students who did have on-campus accommodations the experiences in their residence halls were no better. Chino and Kat had serious issues as a result of differences in language and culture with their American roommates, and Tianyao had difficulty connecting with the American students in his residence hall, finding their drinking and partying distasteful. Chino also had difficulty with some daily activities as a result of the unreliable public transportation and lack of a car. For instance, when he needed groceries, he had to

calculate the weight of items and plan multiple trips so that he would be able to carry everything he needed in the twenty-minute walk (in tropical summer heat) back to his room.

With respect to each of these participants, the institutions seem to have made many assumptions on behalf of the Chinese students who were entering their campus communities. These assumptions included: the resources available to them to find appropriate accommodations off-campus (if needed); the level of cultural and linguistic knowledge/comfort they might have before being partnered with American roommates who were clearly unprepared or uninterested in supporting them through their first year transitions; and the financial resources available to them to cover unanticipated expenses like purchasing a car in order to get to class or buy groceries. Furthermore, these institutions failed each of the participants by not providing the conditions to have meaningful cross-cultural engagement opportunities in their living spaces or to aid them in the linguistic transition that was so critical to their overall success, and failed the students who lived on-campus by not ensuring they had the means to access necessities without significant hardship. On hearing about Chino's situation, it is perhaps not too difficult to understand why he summarized his first-year experience as one of "finding a way to survive."

Another notable finding was the failure of institutions to provide conditions that would have supported the linguistic transitions of these participants. The interplay of the various transition types – linguistic, academic, and social/personal were all hindered by this lack of support. Though these transition types must be considered independently in

order to more fully understand them, it is impossible to disaggregate them when considering their combined impact on the total experience. For instance, each of these participants noted specifically academic transition issues, but the linguistic transition was often involved in terms of understanding professors in a lecture, taking certain types of exams that challenged reading comprehension, or completing written assignments. Similarly, the social/personal transitions these participants experienced were often challenged not only by cultural differences between themselves and their domestic peers, but by their level of language proficiency and frustration they experienced in trying to be understood. While some students did have the opportunity to live with American roommates who could, theoretically, have supported their language transition, cultural differences and a lack of common ground, coupled with anxiety about their speech, made it difficult for these participants to attempt conversations in the first place, which resulted in lost opportunities. For those who were not afforded the opportunity to live on-campus, their minimal contact with domestic students outside of class, and the American class structure that resulted in different classmates for each course, limited their access to support in the linguistic transition as well as the social/personal transition. Although support for each of these transitions needs to be addressed by the institution, a focus on addressing the linguistic transition needs of this population could go a very long way to improving the rest of their experience.

Another notable finding, which may represent a starting point for addressing some of the other issues, was the inconsistency of orientation programs for these students. That most students were unable to recall who hosted their orientation (an International Student

Services office, or a New Student Services/Orientation office), or if the orientation they attended was mandatory, is concerning. As a result of the inconsistent information students received from their institutions, they, again, relied on their network of newly made Chinese friends already at the institution, and received incomplete or inaccurate information. For instance, Kat attended a new student orientation because a Chinese friend told her that was where she would get her I.D. card and pay her tuition, but she failed to attend the orientation for international students in the afternoon because she was not told by the institution that she needed to go and her friend had told her it was not important. There is no telling what information Kat may have received at that orientation that could have helped her with problems she encountered during her first year.

Orientation programs are an institution's first opportunity to exercise the Proactive Philosophies described in the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (Museus, 2014). The failure of these institutions to make clear to students what purpose the orientation program served, what kind of information would be provided, and whether the session was mandatory, represents a lost opportunity to provide these students with tools and resources to set them up for success in their multiple transitions through the first year.

Finally, regardless of the size or type of institution these participants attended and, with a few exceptions, regardless of their age, gender, area of origin, the experiences of these students - both positive and negative - were startlingly similar. Each of the students experienced challenges related to language, and most were surprised by this because they felt prepared when they left their homes to come to the U.S. Even Ada, who had spent

time working in the U.S. and believed she had a linguistic advantage over other Chinese students at her school as a result, had issues in the classroom related to language. All of these students had issues related to housing, even if it was provided by the institution. All of these students relied on their families and friends at home for support and, with the exception of Chino, developed networks of Chinese friends at their institutions to provide additional support and information. Although they attended schools representing three different geographic regions, and ranging in size from 700 students to over 30,000 students, all of these participants reported that they perceived their campuses as friendly and welcoming. In considering the challenges and supports to their transitions throughout the first year of college in the United States, I am encouraged that, since their experiences were so similar, there is an opportunity for meaningful improvement to be made at U.S. institutions, regardless of size or type, and for programs and services to be provided that will be useful to these students across age, gender, and area of origin.

In the following chapter I offer a discussion of the findings in the context of the literature and the conceptual framework. I also provide recommendations for programs and services that build on the positive factors identified from the experiences of these students, as well as those that address the deficits in existing programs and services that can work to remove obstacles currently facing this student population. Finally, I provide implications for theory and areas for future research.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to understand the first-year experiences of Chinese undergraduate students pursuing degrees in the United States. My intention was to explore how the participants in this study persisted to their second year of college in the United States by examining their experiences in the context of my conceptual framework, which was comprised of Schlossberg's Transition Model (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) and the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (Museus, 2014). I chose a hermeneutical phenomenological approach for this study because it not only allows for, but encourages the researcher's biases and assumptions to become part of the interpretive process of data analysis (Laverty, 2003). Maintaining an awareness of my previous knowledge, experiences, and assumptions, was an integral part of the process of examining the data, through which I identified a number of themes addressing the ways in which these participants called upon both internal and external resources to move through the first year. Based upon the findings of this study a number of implications for practice, for theory, and for research arose. The implications for practice align with the spirit of the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (Museus, 2014), and support the transition types identified in the data. Implications for theory highlight ways in which both key components of the conceptual framework can be expanded to address the needs of non-native English speakers. Implications for research propose areas for

further exploration identified throughout the study process. Before sharing the implications for theory, practice, and research, I begin with a review the study's research questions and the ways in which the findings helped to answer each of them.

Approaching the Transition

Research questions were based on the actual transition experiences for participants, but since an individual may enter a transition a number of ways, understanding how the individual's transition began is helpful to understanding how they were able to move through the experience (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Each of the participants in the present study had an opportunity to prepare for an American college experience, making their transitions "anticipated" or expected (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Furthermore, multiple transitions were identified for these participants within the larger experience of attending college in the United States – social/personal, academic, and linguistic. As participants alluded to each of those transitions in their expectations for the first year of college in the United States, each of them can be viewed as having been anticipated, as well. The concepts of relativity, context, and impact are also important in understanding how an individual moves through a transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). With regard to relativity, the way a transition is perceived by the individual may be based in part on any previous experiences they have had with a similar transition. In this case, although each of the participants had some previous experience with one or more of the multiple transition types identified in the study, they all seemed to perceive the various transitions they experienced in similar ways and there was no notable distinction among the participants in this regard. For

instance, each of the participants experienced challenges with the language transition, regardless of their previous exposure to the language. Furthermore, the experience of having studied at another university (in or out of their home countries) did not significantly distinguish the transition experiences shared by Ada, Chino, Lucy, and Skye, from those of the first-time-in-college participants, Kat and Tianyao. Each participant had similar academic transition experiences with regard to course format, pedagogical styles, and test-taking. Context and impact represent the individual's role in the change they are experiencing, and the amount of change to their daily life as a result of the transition, respectively. On these dimensions, no discernable difference in the way participants experienced their transitions was evident. Each participant was involved in the ultimate decision to come to the U.S. for college, and most were also involved in the selection of their institution. Furthermore, each participant understood that moving to the United States for school would change their lives and would involve some level of adaptation.

The individual's place within the transition process is also important, according to Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995), because it provides a context for understanding the coping mechanisms being employed by the individual. For instance, individuals in the "moving in" phase of a transition are attempting to learn the rules and norms of the new environment. Different coping mechanisms might be relied upon in this phase than once they have gone into the "moving through" phase, at which point they will have begun to accept and understand those rules (Schlossberg et al., 1995). In the case of these participants, as I had anticipated at the beginning of the study, each could be

considered to have been positioned within the “moving in” and, to a lesser degree, the “moving through” phases of their transitions. For much of the first year, these students were trying to learn the rules and norms of their new environments with regard to the academic landscape, making friends and dealing with roommates, and understanding their skill level and use of the English language, and relied on a wide variety of coping mechanisms to assist them in those processes. As the year progressed, many of them became more comfortable seeking help with their classes, or approaching faculty members or teaching assistants for assistance with academic issues, demonstrating that, in some areas, they had learned how to find their way in the new environment and were making use of that knowledge to advocate for themselves.

With an understanding of how these participants approached their various transitions, and where they were in their processes, I focused my analysis on the data gathered in response to my primary research question and the four related sub-questions developed from the “4 S System” (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) and the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (Museus, 2014). In this section I present a discussion of the findings related to each question beginning with the sub-questions and concluding with the primary question.

Research Sub-Question 1: How do they describe their motivations for pursuing a degree in the U.S.?

Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) identified “Situation” as one of the areas in which an individual may have assets or liabilities in coping as they move in and through the transition process. The first sub-question sought to uncover information about

the motivations these participants had for pursuing U.S. degrees, each of which connect to elements of the “Situation.” Among these elements were how the transition was initiated or triggered, the students’ control over their situation, and previous experience with similar situations (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goldman, 1995). As I indicated earlier, each of these students had a hand in the decision to seek a college degree in the U.S. The students who were motivated to come to the U.S. for personal reasons demonstrated a level of control in the situation as they were the drivers of the decision. Those who were encouraged or, as in Tianyao’s case, directed, by their parents, were still involved in the decision making process, however, suggesting that they had some level of involvement, if not control, in the transition(s). Additionally, since most of the participants had either started college elsewhere outside the United States (and in some cases in countries outside of China), and/or had been to the U.S. for work or short-term study tours, some level of previous experience prepared them for the kind of transition experiences they would face in coming to college in America. Tianyao was the exception in this regard having had very limited influence over his situation and never having been to the U.S. before. Nevertheless, he was able to call upon the other coping resources identified in Schlossberg’s Transition Model (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995), through the domains of Self, Support, Strategies (as will be explained in subsequent sections) in order to navigate his transition experiences in the first year of college.

Internal and external motivations were identified that coincided with Schlossberg’s Transition Model (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995), and not only supported the literature about the choice of international students to study in the U.S., but

expanded upon it. Several push-pull factors identified in previous studies were also mentioned as motivations of students and/or their parents in the present study. Among these: parental influence on children to go abroad for their degrees; the good reputation of particular U.S. programs or institutions; and the desire for greater job opportunity as a result of earning a high quality degree in the U.S. (Altbach, 2004; Bodycott, 2009; Goodman & Gutierrez, 2011; Lee, 2008; Mazzarol and Souter, 2002; Pang & Appleton, 2004). Though most of the motivations aligned with these push-pull factors, I discovered one very personal motivation not discussed in the literature. More than half of the participants in this study cited a desire to go to college in the U.S. in order to see new and different parts of the world or to return after having visited the U.S. for vacation or some other short-term program. As more international students have chances to visit America through short-term study and work programs (like Ada, Kat, and Lucy), or on vacations with their families (like Skye), personal motivations to pursue degrees in the U.S. may continue to be influenced by these experiences.

Research Sub-Question 2: In what ways do they feel they were prepared to navigate the new environment?

The question of how participants felt they were prepared to move into and through the academic and social/personal landscapes into which they were entering addresses the coping resources of Schlossberg's Transition Model (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) defined as "Self." Characteristics of "Self" include the individual's: socioeconomic status; gender; age; ethnicity; maturity level; outlook; and commitment and values (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Though not all of these potential coping resources

were identified as significant, participants were prepared for their transitions in some ways and unprepared or underprepared in other ways that do connect to the model.

Age. Surprisingly, age was not shown to be a significant factor in the preparation of these participants to move through their transitions. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 23 at the time they began their first year of college in the U.S., yet shared very similar experiences, none of which seemed to have been influenced by age. For example, Kat, who began college in the U.S. as a first-time-in-college student at the age of 17, shared stories about her experience that bore remarkable similarities to those of Ada, who entered her program in the U.S. as a transfer student from a foreign university at the age of 23. This was the case across participants and suggests that these students had a similar level of preparation, in terms of personal development and maturity, on which age had no bearing.

Culture/Ethnicity. Cultural values (connected to both culture and ethnicity) were identified as the most common factor to hinder participants' success, particularly with regard to the social/personal and linguistic dimensions. As Lee (2010) pointed out, students from non-Western countries tend to have a much more difficult time making friends with local students as a result of differences in both language and culture. Smith and Khawaja (2011) also stated that this issue seems to be even more common for students from Asian countries who are accustomed to collectivist societies and have a desire to maintain "their heritage sociocultural behaviors and values" (p. 704). The results of this study supported the research of both Lee (2010) and Smith and Khawaja (2011), as Chino, Kat and Ada, for example, reported having difficulty connecting with their

American peers because it was not in keeping with their culture to strike up conversation with those outside of their community and “talk to everybody” (Chino) as Westerners are comfortable doing. This hesitancy to interact with new people was based, for Chino, on his feelings of conservatism and closed-mindedness, and the culture in which he was raised that emphasized the importance of focusing on the task at hand and getting things done. According to Chan (1999), the importance of practicality is a core Chinese value, so Chino’s conservative approach and beliefs about staying focused and not seeking out relationships or activities that he considered superfluous to his purpose (getting his degree), are in line with Chinese cultural values that, in Chino’s case, hindered him from finding ways to be supported in his transitions across every dimension.

Language Preparation. A lack of adequate language preparation to aid them in either the academic or social/personal transitions was the other preparation factor that had the most significant negative impact on these participants’ transitions. While not identified by Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman, (1995), this factor was consistent with the literature on the experience of non-native English speaking international students attending school in Western countries (Andrade, 2006; Taras & Rowney, 2007). Each of these participants noted the difficulty they had understanding professors and peers both in and out of class, because of their use of slang and idioms, and their rate of speech. Seven years ago, Ryan and Viète (2009) suggested that based upon their research, faculty members often pay little attention to the frustrations that may be experienced by non-native English speaking students in their classrooms and should be more attentive to this issue in order to facilitate learning for these students. Unfortunately, according to the

experiences of these participants, faculty members do not seem to have moved the needle on this issue, and the burden continues to be on the students themselves to enter the U.S. academic space with a greater command of the English language rather than the institutions being responsive to the realities of their skill level. These participants expressed similar language difficulties in reading and writing in the academic realm. Kat said it could take her several hours to read one page of a textbook and Ada recalled her struggles with reading for her English and Logic classes. Tianyao remembered having had serious difficulties with written assignments for his classes. Kat talked about how horrible it was to take an exam with short-answer responses because with multiple choice exams she could look for familiar words to help her identify a correct answer, but with short-answers, she had no cues and had to write articulate responses. Devita (2000) also identified these sorts of difficulties faced by non-native English speaking international students in the English-speaking classroom, and made a recommendation similar to that of Ryan and Viete (2009), that faculty members provide appropriate guidance and support to help these students succeed in their classes.

Socioeconomic Status. While the preparation factors that hindered successful transitions were significant in the overall experience of these participants, especially with regard to the linguistic transition, other factors meaningfully supported their transitions. For instance, socioeconomic status (SES), identified in the present study as financial support, was a significant factor in the preparation for these students as they each received full financial support from their families in order to attend college in the United States and each participant indicated that they felt comfortable with their financial

situation. The only exception was Chino and Tianyao who were unable to purchase cars in their first year (whereas the other four participants were able to do so). This exception raises several questions. First, it raises the question of how each of their families' SES may have affected that decision for their parents. Second, it begs the question of how gender may have informed that choice, as the four participants who did purchase vehicles were all female. What role geographic origin might have played is unclear. Chino and Tianyao were both from Southern China and the four female participants were all from Northern China.

Outlook and Self-Reliance. Outlook and self-reliance were the other factors identified as having supported transitions for participants, and these also align with characteristics of “Self” identified by Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995). A positive or optimistic attitude was seen as a success factor for most participants. Tianyao and Lucy shared their excitement for and curiosity about the new environments they were entering. Skye said that she liked the “challenge” of her first year and credited her personal characteristics for feeling that way. Ada mentioned her “strong personality” as one of the factors in her persistence through difficulties in the first year. Each of these students exercised control over their situation by channeling their inner strength and maintaining a positive outlook throughout the first year.

Several participants also exerted control over their situations by demonstrating self-reliance. Lucy, Skye, and Ada did so by taking it upon themselves to use limited social media channels in order to connect with other Chinese students already in the U.S. when they needed to find apartments and/or roommates. Kat also took this route to

finding contacts on campus who could help her get settled since she was not familiar with where she was going when she arrived at her institution. Once they were in the U.S., participants also stated that they identified resources both on campus and off through their own efforts. For instance, Tianyao found the Q Center on his campus in order to get tutoring because he had walked by it in the library. Ada found places to get groceries at good prices because she had driven by different stores and did her own comparison shopping. And even though they did ask their friends (both at home and at their new institutions) for information or support, participants ultimately depended most on themselves to get through things because, in Kat's words, "So, everyone can give you advice, they can encourage you, but you need to do it by yourself, like what I did." As I noted in the findings related to this topic, questions are raised about how these students came to have this sort of preparation for their transitions, and this will be explored further in a discussion of areas for future research.

Summary. The Chinese students who took part in this study were prepared in a variety of ways for the transitions they experienced during their first year of college in the United States. The kinds of preparation upon which they relied for coping resources were largely in line with Schlossberg's Transition Model (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995), and the characteristics of "Self" identified in that model. Areas where preparation was most lacking had to do with the students' level of language proficiency and/or Chinese cultural values that made it challenging for them to communicate with domestic students who had different backgrounds and values. Opportunities to mitigate

areas where preparation was lacking exist both at the individual and the institutional level and will be discussed in the recommendations section of this chapter.

Research Sub-Question 3: How do they describe the support they had from the institution?

Schlossberg's Transition Model (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) indicates "Support" as one of the coping resources available to individuals in transition. Support can come from a variety of sources, but for the purposes of this study, the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model (Museus, 2014) was used to evaluate levels of institutional support available to study participants. The CECE Model recognizes nine indicators, the absence or presence of which can significantly alter the experiences of racially diverse students on college campuses (Museus, 2014). The data revealed that in spite of the difference in institutional sizes (ranging from 700 to over 30,000 students) and types (public or private) represented by participants in the study, almost all of the CECE Model indicators were present to some degree in their experiences.

Proactive Philosophies. According to the CECE Model, Proactive Philosophies are described as those in which faculty and staff are proactive in providing information and resources to students (Museus, 2014). Participants shared stories that demonstrate how Proactive Philosophies were both present and absent at their institutions specifically with regard to orientation programs. Almost all of the students could remember having gone through some sort of orientation program, but many of them were unable to recall who had provided the program (International Student Services or New Student Programs,

for instance), and many reported not knowing whether it was mandatory. As a result, though students who could recall aspects of their orientation programs did find that they had received useful information, others had no idea what information may have been provided at the programs on their campuses because they simply did not attend. A lack of consistency concerning orientation programs, one of the most obvious examples of a Proactive Philosophy that can be executed by institutions, very likely played a role in the lack of information students like Ada had about the role and importance of academic advising when they first registered for classes. Furthermore, it is possible that a more comprehensive orientation program could have provided information to Lucy about how to connect with other students and student organizations. Though she knew such groups existed on her campus and sought guidance from an advisor (receiving information that was not, ultimately, helpful to her), this information should have been made available in a proactive manner, and the orientation program would have provided such an opportunity. Failure to provide clear information about orientation programs also led to a missed opportunity for some students to connect with and begin building a peer network by interacting with other new students going through the same kinds of transitions.

Cultural Familiarity. The indicator of Cultural Familiarity asserts that the presence on campus of students, faculty, and staff sharing a student's culture can positively influence their college experience (Museus, 2014). None of the participants spoke about a large number of Chinese students, faculty or staff on their campuses, but they all mentioned the Chinese students with whom they formed friend groups during their first year, and the support received through those relationships. Many participants

talked about their reliance on their Chinese peers during times of homesickness (particularly around holidays, like Lucy and Ada), or if they needed assistance, so their presence was clearly valued. Unfortunately, the participants did not see many Chinese faculty or staff on their campuses, however, which leads me to question how their experience of seeking out information about academic issues (like writing or test-taking) might have been improved by the presence of this group.

Culturally Relevant Knowledge. In addition to the presence of students, faculty, and staff who share a cultural background, the CECE Model asserts that the existence of programs, events, and student groups with a cultural focus on college campuses, classified as Culturally Relevant Knowledge, are beneficial to student success (Museus, 2014). Cultural programs and events that were meaningful to several students were identified in this study. In particular, Kat, Lucy, and Tianyao all mentioned holiday celebrations offered by different groups on their campuses, and Lucy mentioned the presence of flyers in her academic department that were written in Chinese. These cultural references, though not deeply embedded into the institutional fabric at any of their campuses, were highly valued by the students who appreciated the efforts of their institutions to highlight their culture in some way. Kat, Tianyao, and Chino also indicated the existence of Chinese Student Associations or Asian Student Associations on their campuses. Though not all students chose to be active in these groups, their existence did provide an opportunity for participants to have contact with students from a shared cultural (if not linguistic) background.

Meaningful Opportunities for Cross-Cultural Engagement. The opportunity for students from different cultural backgrounds to have meaningful and intentional interactions in the campus environment is another indicator identified in the CECE Model (Museus, 2014). Several students indicated that they experienced opportunities for such interaction through programs offered by either student groups or campus departments. In particular, Tianyao spoke about the importance of the weekly event he attended on his campus on Friday nights. These events that were open to the general student body allowed him to attend them with members of both his Chinese and Chinese-American friend groups, and enjoy activities that were not based on their shared culture, but which could be enjoyed by everyone. In his own words, this became “kind of my important experience every Friday” (Tianyao). Additionally, Skye and Ada spoke about the opportunity to go on excursions hosted by different departments at their campus and open to the general student body, and how positively they viewed the opportunity to interact with students from different cultures while attending these programs.

Where the opportunity for Meaningful Cross-Cultural Engagement was completely lacking, however, was with housing. Every participant in the study reported bad experiences with living arrangements. In considering the CECE Model, as well as the experiences shared by participants, housing seems to be most appropriately aligned with this indicator. Each student said that they either expected to have experiences that would support their transition as a result of interaction with students from other cultural backgrounds within a housing environment, or had experiences within their housing environment that were negative for them specifically because the interaction with

students from different cultural backgrounds was not intentional and supportive. For Lucy, Ada, and Skye, housing was not provided by their institution, and they were forced to find housing off-campus. Not having been provided resources for identifying appropriate housing options near their campus, they turned to other Chinese students identified through social media and found apartments and roommates who shared their cultural background and language. Each of these students had hoped to improve their language skills and to learn about a different culture by living with American students. In not making housing available, the institution failed to provide an important vehicle through which Opportunities for Meaningful Cross-Cultural Engagement would have existed for these students. On the other hand, for students who did obtain on-campus housing, it did not provide “intentional” opportunities for cross-cultural engagement so much as “coincidental” opportunities. For Kat, and especially for Chino, being placed with American students was a matter of convenience, not intentionality, and led to discomfort, misunderstanding, and disappointment. Not only did these students not have meaningful interaction with their roommates, the interactions they did have led them, in Chino’s case, to cope through self-isolation and avoidance, and in Kat’s case, to move to another room (with a Chinese roommate) after one semester. In Tianyao’s case, his Australian roommate did provide an opportunity to interact with an English-speaker from another culture, but his focus in talking about his housing experience was the clash of culture he felt with the American students who liked to drink and party every weekend and with whom it was difficult to make connections. In these situations, the failure of institutions to be intentional about the placement of participants with students from

different cultural backgrounds who were interested in supporting their transition was a missed opportunity to provide Meaningful Cross-Cultural Engagement.

Culturally Validating Environments. The CECE Model indicator of Culturally Validating Environments suggests that the presence on campus of educators who validate students' cultural backgrounds and identities supports the success of diverse students (Museus, 2014). In the experiences of these participants, as with the previous indicator, examples of both the presence and absence of this indicator can be seen at their various institutions. The most commonly noted absence of Culturally Validating Environments can be found in the classroom experiences shared by participants. Though participants indicated that faculty members were helpful in a general sense, the difficulties students experienced in adjusting to the pedagogical style of the U.S. classroom suggest that their faculty were not understanding of their cultural backgrounds in a way that would effectively support their learning. For example, Kat and Tianyao indicated that they did not feel that they could interrupt a professor to ask questions during a class, and Lucy feared speaking up in case she would share "wrong ideas," though they observed domestic students participating in these ways. This approach is in keeping with the pedagogical style in which they were raised, where students are trained to avoid challenging authority, and original thought is discouraged in favor of memorization (Chan, 1999). U.S. professors should be attentive to instances in which students from different cultures are not participating regularly in their classrooms and take proactive measures to engage them. Devita (2000) suggested this more than fifteen years ago, and

yet faculty members – on the whole – do not appear to be making their efforts to be truly inclusive of the different cultural learners in their classrooms.

On the other hand, Chino did share an important example of how he experienced a Culturally Validating Environment through the interaction he had with one faculty member in particular. This professor related to Chino by acknowledging his connections to the Latin American culture and his upbringing in Panama and spoke Spanish with him after class. The faculty member also shared personal experiences about having come to the U.S. himself, and formed a deeper connection with Chino than did his other faculty members. Though this professor did not specifically validate Chino's Asian cultural identity, he seems to have validated his Latin American/Panamanian cultural background which was vital to Chino.

Humanized Educational Environment. The presence of institutional agents who both care about and take the time to develop meaningful relationships with students is also identified in the CECE Model as a factor in the success of diverse students called the Humanized Educational Environment (Museus, 2014). The professor in the previous example, who provided a Culturally Validating Environment for Chino, also demonstrated the principles of a Humanized Educational Environment by taking the time to develop a relationship with him. Since Chino had isolated himself so much from his peers, this relationship was extremely important to him during his first year. Another invaluable relationship for Chino was the one he developed with his academic advisor. This advisor was the first person with whom he talked about his personal life because she took an interest and inquired about not only how he was doing in his classes, but also his

experience as an international student. Similar experiences were not shared by other participants, but the importance of this relationship to Chino's experience demonstrates the value of a Humanized Educational Environment for international students.

Holistic Support. The availability of trusted sources of information, assistance, and resources that support diverse students on their campuses is an indicator of the CECE Model called Holistic Support. For participants in this study, holistic support was available through a variety of institutional agents, from the Student Body President at Kat's institution, to Ada and Chino's academic advisors, to Lucy and Skye's faculty members. Skye said that her faculty members told students to ask questions and contact them if they needed help. Lucy, who was in the same academic program as Skye, also found her faculty members "very helpful." Kat, too, mentioned the accessibility of her faculty members and appreciated that she could go to their offices whenever she had questions. The Student Body President at Kat's institution became another trusted source of support for her when she had roommate issues, and continued to check on Kat throughout the year to make sure she was doing well. These individuals making themselves available to students for support and information played an important role in their transitions through the first year and demonstrated the merit of holistic support.

Cultural Community Service. The CECE Model indicator known as Cultural Community Service, suggests that the opportunity for students from diverse backgrounds to participate in community service focused on their culture can support their success (Museus, 2014). Chino enjoyed taking part in volunteer projects that served the community surrounding his campus and which would help him to earn a medallion from

the Center for Leadership and Service at his institution. Doing meritorious service is a value of Confucianism (Yu, 1996), so given Chino's deep connection to his Asian cultural heritage, his having opted to take part in volunteerism is perhaps not surprising. The availability of such opportunities, then, was essential to Chino's experience. It was also important to Ada and Lucy to be able to volunteer for events that related to their academic major since it allowed them to build skills related to their field. Though the community service and volunteer opportunities in which participants took part at their institutions were not related to their cultural communities, they did find value in the experiences.

Summary. Schlossberg's Transition Model established "Support" as a coping resource available for individuals in transition (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Furthermore, the Transition Model identified the institutions or communities to which the individual belongs among their potential sources of support (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Participants identified a number of ways in which their institutions either provided or failed to provide support to assist them through their academic, social/personal, and linguistic transitions during the first year of college in the U.S., and these aligned with many of the indicators of the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (Museus, 2014). Although the CECE Model was designed with diverse domestic minority students in mind, it is clear from this study that many of the indicators identified to support diverse students apply to international student populations as well.

Research Sub-Question 4: What strategies were most helpful in their transition process?

The “Strategies” identified in Schlossberg’s Transition Model (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) as those that may be employed by an individual in transition are considered coping mechanisms that may serve multiple purposes. Strategies may be used to exert control over the transition and somehow change its meaning or relevance; they may serve to control the associated stress of the transition; or they may provide a means by which the individual soothes him/herself when the situation that causes the transition is one that cannot be changed (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). As was the case with the previous sub-questions, the findings associated with this one also revealed strategies that both challenged and supported participants in their transitions through the first year of college in the United States.

Social Isolation. The strategy of social isolation was not widely used, but was extremely powerful in the transition experiences of those who used it. Though the literature points out that social segregation among, especially, non-native English speaking international students, is fairly commonplace (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013), the accompanying isolation had a negative impact on the social/personal and linguistic transitions for Kat and Chino. Kat became frustrated when trying to speak with Americans and had difficulty choosing the right words to communicate effectively, and she feared embarrassment greatly with regard to her language level. As a result, she chose instead to spend much of her first year alone or in the company of a small group of other Chinese students.

A more powerful negative experience of social isolation, however, was demonstrated by Chino. In his case, Chino actively avoided contact with not only American students (because he felt that he could not easily approach them due to the norms associated with his cultural background), but also with other Chinese or Asian students. He made this choice because he did not want his conservatism to be exacerbated by contact with this group, and felt that they could not contribute to his mastery of English. Chino was further isolated by a sense of obligation to his parents with regard to money. His sense of responsibility to not spend money unnecessarily caused him to decline the few social invitations he did receive from other friends who had also transferred from his university in Panama. The strategy of social isolation served to make Kat's linguistic transition less stressful for her, while for Chino, it was a means of exercising control over a situation that could not be changed. That said, I saw it as a negative strategy because it significantly hindered the social/personal and linguistic transitions for these students.

Reliance on Personal Relationships. A variety of personal relationships were identified as having played important positive roles both before and throughout their first year of college in the U.S. Rather than categorizing these relationships as "Support," as described in the previous section, I found that the reliance on these relationships was actually a strategy employed by participants to help them cope with their transitions. By seeking out guidance, advice, and encouragement from family members and friends (both those at home and those made at their institutions), participants were able to lessen the

stress of their situations. They were also able to exert control by adjusting the narrative of their experiences that they chose to share with these different groups.

Family members were a significant source of support for participants, and taking advantage of available technology allowed them to remain in contact on a regular basis. For some students, like Chino, Ada, and Tianyao, this meant daily or several times weekly phone calls or “Face Time” chats, and for others, like Skye, it meant speaking twice per month. Regardless of the frequency, however, students indicated that staying connected to their families helped them to get through their first year.

In addition to family members, participants reported that they regularly sought information and support from their peers. The friends identified by participants consisted of those in their home countries (China for most students, but Panama for Chino), as well as a mix of mainly Chinese but also some domestic friends and classmates at their institutions in the U.S. These friends provided guidance and support at every stage of the participants’ experiences, in some cases, such as Ada’s, beginning with the selection of the institution. The role of the peer group, regardless of their location, was significant for the participants in this study. For Chino, remaining in close contact with his friends in Panama via Skype, though adding to his isolation in the U.S. environment, sustained him throughout the difficulties encountered during his first year. For other participants, like Skye and Kat, communicating with their friends at home was a preferred strategy when experiencing difficulties in the U.S. Though they did not share all of their negative thoughts or problems with their friends, both of these students indicated that just

connecting with them and having their encouragement helped them through whatever difficulties they were experiencing.

Relying on the peer group formed in the U.S. was also important for these participants as they turned to them for guidance on a variety of issues. Ada counted on her local peers for practical information about buying textbooks or grocery shopping. Kat did so as well, but she and Lucy also noted that the help from friends was essential in seeing them through periods of homesickness around certain holidays. Tianyao noted that he found support from both the domestic and Chinese friends made at his institution, and indicated that the shared experience of attending his school's weekly Friday night programs with this friend group was very important to him throughout his first year.

Adaptation. In his Individual Theory of Student Departure, Tinto (1993), asserted the need for students to break from their communities of the past, transition to the new environment (which involves learning its norms and behaviors), and then become integrated into the new environment. This approach of adaptation, or assimilation, to the environment puts the responsibility for making those adjustments fully in the hands of the students, and has been critiqued, in part, for its failure to place sufficient responsibility on the institution for supporting student success in the transition (Museus, 2014). All of the participants in this study did physically separate from their previous culture in entering the new institution; by coming to the U.S. for their degrees, a conscious choice was made by each to leave their country behind. In spite of that physical separation, however, their values and culture accompanied them to their new environments. Though all went through a process of learning the norms of their campuses

in terms of both social/personal and academic realms, only Chino and Tianyao indicated that adaptation was one of their strategies for coping with the transition. These students observed their surroundings and adjusted their approaches to various aspects of their respective situations that allowed them to fit in better or make themselves feel more in control. This approach was both helpful and harmful. While, in some ways, it allowed them to become more comfortable operating in their new environments, it also forced them to deny or downplay aspects of their culture or values in order to do so. This was most evident in Chino's case, as he did not attempt to find a way to allow his culture to be part of his experience in the U.S., and instead simply tried to learn how things in his new environment worked in order to survive. Although taking control over their situation is a positive strategy, it is problematic that the institutional environments did not honor and respect their cultural attributes and their unique needs when in the new environment, as demonstrated by a Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (Museus, 2014).

Summary. The primary "Strategies" used by these participants to cope with their transitions during the first year are consistent with those described in Schlossberg's Transition Model, in that they were employed in an effort to exercise some control over their situation or soothe themselves in the midst of a situation that could not be changed (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Though I viewed the use of social isolation as, ultimately, challenging to their linguistic and social/personal transitions, it was a strategy that provided some level of comfort for the two students who used it to cope with their difficult linguistic and social/personal transitions. Turning to family members and friends was a highly effective positive strategy for adjusting to a new environment. Each of the

students cited the important role that family members and peers played as sources of information and support, particularly in their social/personal transitions. Attempting to adapt to the new environment was also viewed as a positive strategy employed by some of the participants who did so as a means of exerting control over their situation. That these students felt they had to adapt in order to have a sense of control, as opposed to entering an environment that was created to be supportive of their transition, however, demonstrates the need for greater institutional awareness of the needs of diverse student populations.

Primary Research Question: How do Chinese undergraduate students experience the first year of college at an institution in the United States?

The six students who participated in this study experienced their first year of college in the United States in terms of three separate but related transitions – academic, social/personal, and linguistic. Their transitions were supported and challenged by their preparation or the lack thereof; the institutional support that was provided or missing; and the strategies they employed to cope with their situations. Ultimately, each participant persisted through his or her first year and returned to their respective institutions to continue their degree, but the path was not always easy.

One of the most significant findings was the impact the linguistic transition had on both the academic and social/personal transitions for each of the participants. Difficulty with comprehension of spoken English was demonstrated in students' stories of having trouble understanding professors during lectures. Issues related to proficiency in reading and writing also slowed the academic transition and resulted in frustration

about how long it took to read texts, and anxiety about taking certain kinds of tests. In addition, concerns about their proficiency with spoken English were highlighted in stories about the difficulty and frustration several participants suffered when trying to communicate with domestic peers.

In the academic realm, participants experienced highs and lows throughout the first year. Beyond those associated with the linguistic transition, students also had to learn new pedagogical norms of their U.S. institutions. From choosing their own classes, including the completely unfamiliar concept of “electives,” to being with a different group of students in each class they took, students were faced with differences they had not anticipated prior to their enrollment. Participants also had a range of experiences with faculty members, some of whom seemed to be unaware of the students’ difficulty in keeping up within the classroom environment, and others of whom were described by students as kind and helpful. Attempting to narrow this range of experiences with faculty members in order to provide more consistency for Chinese international students in the future is addressed as a recommendation for practice. In spite of the experiences with faculty members, however, participants did report that their classmates were generally helpful and supportive. Asking classmates for assistance in class was mentioned by several participants, and though this did not typically translate into the development of friendships beyond the confines of the classroom, it provided a level of support for the academic transition.

The domain of social/personal transition also presented a variety of obstacles for participants. The literature suggests international students, on the whole, desire

friendships with domestic students but find it challenging establishing them (Eisenclas & Trevaskes, 2007; Huang, 2008; Smith & Khajawa, 2011). Most of the participants in this study had come to the U.S. expecting to make many American friends but were unsuccessful. Their difficulties in this area stemmed largely from their housing problems. Whether as the result of a lack of on-campus housing that forced participants to find and live with other Chinese students, or the lack of intentional housing assignments that would allow them to build relationships, all of the participants were negatively impacted. Their individual outlook, however, seems to have played a large part in how they worked through these issues. For students with a more positive outlook, like Skye and Tianyao, seeking out other opportunities for connection with domestic students, either through student organizations or volunteer and internship experiences, was a useful strategy. For those with a more negative outlook, like Chino, isolation from the domestic peers with whom he was placed in his residence hall was the preferred coping strategy. For all participants, however, it was their personal relationships that did the most to sustain them during the first year. Those relationships involved Chinese and some domestic friends made at their institutions, but were mainly based with family members and friends in their home country. Through all of their social/personal transition issues, though some students relied heavily on themselves, reliance on family and friends was essential to their success.

With experiences that ranged from challenging to fulfilling, a variety of strategies and sources of support were employed by participants in order to cope with their transitions through the first year. Chino described the first year as “surviving,” and

though he persisted and returned the following year, the negativity of his experience as a whole was not supportive or suggestive of such an outcome. At the other end of the spectrum, Skye spoke favorably about the overall experience of her first year and seemed to thrive in her new environment, describing it as “full of challenge” and recognizing her own strength of character in overcoming any obstacles because when it came to the challenge, “I like that!”

Though their individual personalities and strategies cannot be overlooked in understanding the way each student experienced the first year of college in the U.S., many similarities existed in the ways they coped with their transitions. Based upon the coping resources of self, support, and strategy demonstrated by participants in this study, in the next section, I make a number of suggestions to improve programs, services, and institutional systems to facilitate and support the transitions of future Chinese students coming to the United States. In addition, the experiences of these participants shed light on gaps that exist in the models used as a framework for the study. As these frameworks were developed to aid practitioners in understanding and assessing the needs of students, implications for expanding these models are also provided.

Implications for Practice

Lee (2010) asserted that the burden of addressing obstacles experienced by international students in their host countries seems, frequently, to be placed on the students themselves, often with little institutional support. In light of the ever increasing number of international students enrolling at U.S. institutions (“Open Doors,” 2015) and the numerous benefits they provide to the institutions recruiting them to their campuses

(financially and culturally) (Hanassab, 2006; Kim & Kim, 2010; Lee, 2008; Lee & Rice, 2007; Otten, 2003; Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005), it is time to put more of that burden on the institutions. Although this study focused on the experiences of only six Chinese students attending colleges in the United States, their experiences - both positive and negative, supportive and challenging to their transitions across the social/personal, academic, and linguistic dimensions – have important implications for practice. Following are several recommendations that would serve to better support Chinese and other international students coming to the U.S.

Mandatory Orientation. Based on the experiences of participants in this study, orientation programs were inconsistent with regard to content and delivery, and provided students with little clear information about who was providing the orientation, what their purpose was, and whether they were required to attend. Though most students knew they had been to some kind of orientation program, they could not remember much about what was presented or by whom it was presented, and none recalled the program being required. Since International Student Service offices must provide incoming students with critical immigration related information, and New Student Program or Orientation offices typically provide information about advising and registration along with other functional components (such as obtaining a student ID, attending presentations about campus resources, etc.), it would make sense for these offices to work together in the implementation of a unified orientation program for all new international students.

Content. Participants who commented on the value of orientation to their overall first year experience mentioned that they had received useful information and had made contact with other students who became friends they maintained throughout the year. Useful information included campus maps and general information about campus resources, but participants could not recall specific resources to which they had been directed. In order to connect with other students, they remembered playing games that allowed them to get to know one another during the program. Other students were unable to recall any details of their orientation programs, and none mentioned academic advising or cultural advising as parts of their program. Institutional agents who have the responsibility of welcoming and providing guidance to Chinese and other international students (especially non-native English speakers) must remain mindful of the variety of transitions these students face upon entering U.S. institutions and should tailor the content of orientation programs to those areas.

Academic. Focusing on the academic transition, content related to academic norms and the basics of American pedagogy should be provided to give Chinese students a foundation for their classroom experiences. For instance, students should be informed about: the structure of classes (i.e. individual students choosing their own classes rather than a cohort of students who move through the same courses as a group); appropriate class participation (i.e. asking and answering questions); how to appropriately interact with faculty and teaching assistants both in the classroom and during office hours; and the concept of participation in group projects/assignments. Information about how to access tutoring services and/or writing centers for help with written assignments should

also be provided to ensure that students have an awareness of these resources before they are needed. Furthermore, the important role of academic advising in helping students to choose appropriate classes for their majors should be clearly explained. This is especially important for students transferring from other universities outside the U.S. as they may not be fully aware of what courses will count at their American institutions, or they may be unfamiliar with the concept of “general education” or “common core requirements.” Providing this sort of information can not only help students to get on the right path academically, but can go toward the development of supportive relationships with faculty members, advisors, and peers.

Social/Personal. With regard to the social/personal transition, orientation programs should include content related to American norms of social interaction. Basic information about social greetings, eye contact, gestures, personal space, and timeliness, for instance, would give Chinese students a sense of the social “rules” of their environment. And although this information may not facilitate interaction with domestic students, faculty, or staff members, it would help these students understand social cues as they move toward more contact and connection with the local environment.

Identifying domestic students who are interested in meeting international students and serving as cultural peer mentors could also aid in the social/personal transition for Chinese and other international students by connecting them with students who have shown an interest in supporting them. Peer mentor programs provide an opportunity to engage both international and domestic students in cross-cultural learning while offering a level of social support to the foreign student as they navigate their new environment.

The implementation of such a program would support not only the social/personal, but also the linguistic transition for Chinese and other international students.

Linguistic. As was demonstrated through this study, the linguistic transition experienced by Chinese students has a significant impact on the other two transition types, with all three (and, likely, more on an individual level) happening simultaneously. As such, providing support in this area is critical and should begin in the orientation program. Participants in this study identified the need for practical English skills in order to navigate several basic aspects of life – from how to start a polite conversation with a classmate, to ordering food at the campus dining hall or a fast food restaurant off campus. Providing some very basic glossaries or “cheat sheets” with common phrases and idioms, local slang (including campus/institutional nicknames for buildings, etc.), and information about local foods would give Chinese students a starting point for communicating with their domestic peers or ordering food (on or off campus) with less fear or frustration. Such items need not be extensive to be very helpful, and focusing on common words and phrases would allow for such tools to be translated and made available in multiple languages.

Delivery Method. I suggest a multi-tiered delivery approach for the orientation program targeting international students. As the number of Chinese students entering U.S. institutions is increasing, (along with other non-native English speaking international students), and students enter their institutions with different levels of language proficiency, it would be beneficial to break up the program and/or provide components in a variety of formats so as to avoid overwhelming them and allow the

greatest opportunity for understanding. Providing alternative formats would also ensure that students who have language comprehension issues, whether with spoken or written English, have the opportunity to revisit materials more than once and on their own timeline.

Online. An online component for orientation that can be made available to students prior to their arrival would achieve multiple goals. First, it would provide students with information they need about their arrival to campus, such as where and when to report for orientation, what documents they need to bring with them, and how to find their way to campus for the first time. Second, it would allow students to identify resources that may need before their arrival with regard to housing and transportation. And, third, it would allow students to begin establishing a connection to the institution and seeing the department responsible as their primary point of contact as a trusted source of information and support before they ever arrive to campus.

The format of the online orientation could include video content in addition to written information. For example, a pre-arrival page on the International Student Services office web site could feature information about: where to go upon arrival to campus; date, time, and location information for an in-person orientation program; transportation information for getting to and around the campus; campus maps; contact information for other departments and useful resources on and around campus; and the “cheat sheet” of practical words and phrases (with translation to the students’ native language) mentioned previously. Some or all of the information, or even a simple welcome greeting, could also be made available in a short video on the page, which would provide it in a spoken

format to accompany the text. Making this kind of information available in an online format would allow students from non-English speaking countries to take their time reviewing it, and would also give them the opportunity to ask questions prior to arrival. In addition, this information would continue to be available even after they arrive as an ongoing resource.

In-Person. An online component to orientation would be helpful for students prior to their arrival, but an in-person orientation program should be an integral part of welcoming students to campus, and should be mandatory. Requiring students to attend the program in order to have their immigration documents validated, for instance, would ensure their participation and attendance. Furthermore, a collaboration between the International Student Services office and the New Student Programs office would be ideal for the in-person orientation so that content specific to international students (e.g. immigration/visa requirements) may be coupled with information that is valuable to all students who are new to the institution (e.g. registration, advising, how to locate resources on campus, etc.). This is an opportunity for entering international students to meet not only with institutional agents who can support and assist them, but also for them to make connections with other students with whom they can begin to form relationships.

As was evidenced through this study, the friendships created with other Chinese students were invaluable to the transition experiences of participants and supported them through their first year of college in the United States. Participants also indicated the desire to make American friends on their campuses, so combining the international orientation with a “standard” new student orientation program would allow students to

mingle and connect with both populations. Though the in-person orientation is important for allowing students to make connections with their peers and to meet essential staff, the amount of information shared in these programs can be overwhelming even for domestic students who do not have language transitions with which to contend. As such, making printed materials available to supplement and support the in-person program would ensure that students leave the program with resources to which they can refer on their own time.

Printed Materials. In order to ensure that students are leaving their orientation programs with information that is consistent and to which they can refer time and again after the program has ended, making printed materials available should be a standard element of the orientation program. For example, handouts with step by step guidelines for the registration process, or a detailed explanation of the benefits and purpose of meeting with an academic advisor, could be helpful for students who are overwhelmed by the amount of information they are receiving at an in-person orientation program. Much of this information can and should be made available to students on an ongoing basis through electronic formats that can be accessed at any time, but the only way for program providers to ensure the information has been received is to provide it in a printed format distributed during the in-person orientation. Furthermore, both printed and online materials could be made available in English with side-by-side translation to different Chinese dialects (e.g. Mandarin and Cantonese). Doing so would not only ensure clarity of the information being provided, it would also support linguistic transitions by helping students build their practical vocabulary.

Workshops and Ongoing Resources. Beyond the orientation program, institutions providing holistic support and adhering to proactive philosophies, as suggested by the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (Museus, 2014), should make ongoing support and resources available to students. Multiple delivery formats would be appropriate for these resources as well, and might include in-person workshops, informal gatherings, and additional online materials. Similar to the content of the orientation program, workshops should cover topics that support the academic, social/personal, and linguistic transitions being experienced by Chinese and other international students. For instance, workshops could provide role playing opportunities for Chinese students to interact with faculty members or their domestic peers; informal gatherings could partner students to practice their English skills in a social setting such as a campus coffee shop; and online materials could focus on preparation for taking the driver's license exam. Making such information and opportunities available on an ongoing basis would make it easier for students to get information and support for practical matters without having to ask for it or figuring out where to go.

Housing. As was clear in this study, housing is an area of with serious implications for the transition experiences of Chinese students. The failure of an institution to provide on-campus housing (or assistance in identifying off-campus options) created a major challenge for both the social/personal and linguistic transitions of affected participants. It forced them to identify potential apartments and roommates in their new cities by using a limited assortment of social media outlets available to them in China. This process connected them with other Chinese students already at their host

institutions, which resulted in difficulty making connections to domestic students who would have aided their social/personal and linguistic transitions. Additionally, it caused them to incur unexpected expenses, particularly with regard to the purchase of a car. Unfortunately, for the students who did receive on-campus housing, the situation was not significantly better than for those who did not. Students who did live in on-campus housing experienced one of two types of negative situations. Either students were placed with domestic roommates who did not show an interest in supporting them in their transitions and who, through clashes of culture, caused the students to avoid interaction and isolate themselves, like Kat and Chino; or they lived in environments with sharply different cultural norms that were not supportive of their transitions and did not lend themselves to connecting with other students, like Tianyao. There seems to be no simple solution with regard to housing, but it is an issue that demands attention on the part of every institution hosting Chinese and other international students.

On-Campus Housing Provided. In cases where on-campus housing is made available to Chinese students (or other non-native English speaking international students), institutions must make efforts to identify accommodations that are appropriate to support the social/personal transition of these students. Establishing “international residence halls,” or even “international floors” within residence halls, that are open to domestic students interested in being paired with international students would provide meaningful opportunities for cross-cultural engagement among willing participants. This sort of intentional effort would demonstrate the institution’s support of the social/personal and linguistic transitions of Chinese or other non-native English speakers

by placing them in environments, and among individuals, where they can feel welcomed and valued. In this arrangement, domestic students would have an opportunity to learn about the cultures of their foreign roommates and other hall-mates, and international students would have a chance to improve their language skills, make friends with domestic students (as well as other international students in their buildings), and learn about American culture and societal norms. Matching interested domestic students with their international peers would remove some of the pressure of initiating communication with American students that participants, like Kat, identified as an obstacle to building relationships in spite of wishing to do so. Domestic students applying for housing could be recruited for this kind of living arrangement based on their identified majors in fields related to foreign languages, cultural studies, international relations, or international business, for instance. Domestic students could also be recruited based on the majors identified by international students requesting on-campus accommodations, in order to provide support for the academic transition of these students in addition to the social/personal and linguistic transitions.

No Housing Provided. At institutions where no on-campus housing is available, there is still a responsibility on the part of the institution to provide information and resources to assist international students in finding accommodations. Though students local to the institution may have the ability to live with family members or find off-campus accommodations easily by using the internet, students coming from abroad may not have access to those options. For students from China, for instance, internet access to web sites hosted outside of the country is quite limited and forces them to use social

media outlets to locate and connect with students already at their institutions in order to get assistance. As such, providing a list of web sites may not be enough if restrictions on international sites prevent students abroad from visiting apartment rental sites or classified listings of local newspapers.

As housing is a basic need for students, and with the knowledge that there may be significant obstacles for students from certain countries in finding resources online, institutions could make it easier for incoming students to connect with those already in the U.S., both international and domestic, by establishing accounts on the social media platforms that are accessible to them abroad. For instance, International Student Services offices could create accounts on platforms like WeChat, that are accessible in a large number of countries abroad (including China), and direct incoming international students to a community with which they can connect with while they are still abroad. By creating such access points and sharing them as a resource, institutions would be taking a proactive step to connect incoming students with existing students, as opposed to leaving it up to the international students to seek out others at their American institutions who may be able to provide assistance. Establishing such a system, which bears no cost to the institution, would allow students who are already in the U.S. to share about vacancies within these social media communities, and allow those still abroad to inquire about opportunities. In addition to the access to housing information facilitated by this solution, it also offers an opportunity for students to begin forming friendships and creating community by communicating through the social media platform before the international students arrive to the U.S. Opening participation in such a platform to domestic students

would also encourage meaningful cross-cultural engagement for students who are interested in meeting and supporting incoming international students, and who would welcome the opportunity to have an international roommate. For Lucy, Ada, and Skye, had such a system been available at their institution, they may have been able to find American roommates who would have provided the kind of living experience they had hoped for, rather than forcing them to locate accommodations offered only by other Chinese students at their institution.

Institutional Planning and Preparation. It has been well established in the literature that U.S. institutions are actively recruiting international students at high levels. This is being done in an effort to not only increase diversity and internationalization efforts on campus, and to raise institutional reputation, but to close gaps in their funding created by sweeping budget cuts (Bodycott, 2009; Glass, Buus, & Braskamp, 2013; Hanassab, 2006; Kim & Kim, 2010; Lee, 2008; Lee, 2010; Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999; Saul, 2016; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). Since the early 2000s, researchers have called for university administrators to make efforts to better address the needs of these students in order to retain them (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002), and over a decade later, calls are still being made to meet the institutional obligation to provide appropriate support for these students while they are enrolled on our campuses (Anderson, Carmichael, Harper, & Huang, 2009; Brown & Jones, 2013). The results of the present study reinforce these calls to action and make it clear that institutions need to be more attentive to the international student population, and Chinese students in particular, who they are so eager to bring to their campuses. To that end,

recommendations for practice are offered for university administrators who can influence the strategic vision and planning for their institutions.

Vision and Planning. Recruiting and enrolling international students is not an endeavor that should be taken lightly by campus administrators. Though these students make significant financial contributions by paying full tuition, ultimately helping institutions close gaps in their funding, they are choosing to study in the U.S. for what our institutions can offer them academically and culturally. The literature has shown that a U.S. education is highly regarded by the Chinese because of the opportunity to gain cultural capital, learn English, and build networks important to the social, economic, and political growth of the country (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Xinyu, 2011). As increasing numbers of Chinese and other international students continue to come to the U.S., it is essential that an effective infrastructure for supporting them be put into place. I believe this can be achieved, in part, by administrators considering the missions and strategic visions of their institutions. Moreover, they must make decisions about how many international students to admit based on more than the financial ramifications of their enrollment.

Universities have an obligation to provide a quality higher education to all students, domestic and international, and must consider the overall impact of increasing international student enrollment. When domestic students, faculty, and/or staff are not prepared for interactions with international students, particularly those from very different cultural or linguistic regions – like China, the institution misses opportunities to improve the academic experience for its students, and the campus environment for

everyone. Placing caps on enrollment for international students may be a solution. Being intentional about the compositional diversity of the campus community, however, and then preparing all of its members to engage with one another in meaningful ways would benefit everyone involved.

Student Preparation. Preparing domestic students for meaningful interactions with Chinese and other international students should begin during their own recruitment and admissions process. The institution should make clear that welcoming and engaging with this student population is core to the university's mission, and is an expectation for all students. To ensure this interaction, beyond simply implementing global learning requirements that allow students to choose their opportunities for engagement, interaction with international students should be imbedded into the fabric of the domestic student experience. This can be done through residence hall assignments, blended orientation programs, and with the active participation of faculty. While the university may be benefitting financially from the presence of international students, the focus should be on the mutual learning that can take place for all students by creating an environment where meaningful opportunities for cross-cultural engagement are the norm rather than an *a la carte* option.

As was demonstrated in this study, and supported in the literature (Keller, 2009; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013), non-native English speaking students rely heavily on their peers for support and information. As was also shown, there is a strong desire to connect with domestic peers in order to improve language and learn more about the local culture, which is not often achieved to the satisfaction of the international

students (Eisenclas & Trevaskes, 2007; Huang, 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Developing programs, or creating space within the classroom, to allow domestic and international students to interact without impediment, can help to foster these mutually beneficial relationships. It may be challenging to prepare domestic students for these interactions in the same ways that might be done for faculty and staff, but creating space and encouraging the interactions in more intentional and organic ways could remove barriers for both student populations.

Faculty Preparation. As was noted by participants, faculty support was an inconsistent element of their first-year experience. The literature suggests that faculty are not attentive enough to the needs of the diverse learners in their classrooms (Devita, 2000; Ryan & Viète, 2009), so making them aware of ways they can adjust the academic space to be more welcoming is a straightforward solution to addressing this issue. Encouraging faculty to make their instruction more inclusive (by attending to diverse learning styles, for instance), has benefits for domestic students as well as international students.

Taking some time at the beginning of a semester to connect with Chinese and other non-native English speakers, either one-on-one or in a small group, to provide some information about norms of the classroom environment would help students in understanding what to expect from that particular instructor and be better prepared to do well in the class. Students could also be told about expectations with regard to participation in classroom discussion and group projects, as well as what the faculty member considers appropriate with regard to asking questions during a lecture. This

conversation would also give the faculty member an opportunity to gauge, very generally, the language level of the students in order to proactively connect them with support resources like the writing center and/or teaching assistants for the class. Simply making this effort would demonstrate to students that the faculty member has an awareness of their presence in the class and is committed to their success.

In addition, the use of quick and simple ice breakers within the classroom environment, during the first week or two of the semester, could be effective in fostering an environment where students feel more at ease communicating with one another. This step could provide a common experience for all students and ease the tension that both groups of students may feel in starting conversations with one another, especially for students who feel apprehensive or embarrassed about their language skill, or who do not feel they will have anything in common with their domestic peers because of their cultural differences. It would also allow the faculty member to set the tone for the class as that of a welcoming and inclusive environment where all students are valued for their individuality and what they bring to the classroom.

Finally, taking measures as simple as providing content in a PowerPoint while presenting a lecture orally could aid non-native English speakers who have difficulty keeping up with the pace of spoken English in the classroom. Offering this alternative format along with the spoken instruction would make the key points of a lecture available in print without slowing down instruction to the entire class. Coupled with the instructor's outreach about classroom norms at the start of the semester, this additional

step would give non-native speaking international students support for both their linguistic and academic transitions.

Staff Preparation. In addition to preparing faculty for working with and supporting the success of international students, staff members at every level of the campus community need to be better prepared for working with this population. It is not enough to rely on the International Student Services office to be the primary supporter of international students. As discussed in the literature, limited staff and heavily bureaucratic workloads related to immigration requirements and government regulations make it challenging for these offices to also be called upon as the sole source of information and programming for international students (Johnson, 2004; Urias & Yeakey, 2005). As such, it is imperative that staff members - from academic advisors, to student activities professionals, to mental health counselors, to cafeteria workers – be prepared to engage with and support them in their university experiences.

Human Resources departments typically offer a wide range of staff development programs and classes throughout the year. Providing workshops about different cultural norms, basic terms and phrases in various languages, appropriate resources for referrals, and cross-cultural communication skills could be easily incorporated into such offerings, and would better equip staff members for engaging with international students. Requiring a minimum number of such classes would ensure that all staff are gaining a skill set that prepares them to be active contributors to the success of a vulnerable student population.

Summary. None of the measures being suggested for implementation should carry a significant cost to the institution, as the structures to support them are already in

place for the most part. Even where a small investment might be needed, for instance in the enhancement of web sites, the return on investment could be significant. Students who feel valued and supported are likely to persist at their institution, leading to increased graduation rates for the institution. Additionally, given the important role of word of mouth recommendations to other potential students in the home country, a positive experience could lead to future enrollment of other international students. In short, the opportunity to provide an experience that is truly supportive of student success should be the goal of every institution and if that can be improved through these simple measures, only positive outcomes can be achieved for everyone involved.

Implications for Theory

Schlossberg's Transition Model (1995). Three specific transition types experienced by participants were identified in this study – social/personal, academic, and linguistic – with the linguistic transition being found to have had a significant impact on the other two transition types. Schlossberg's Transition Model (1995) was used as a framework for evaluating the coping tools individuals brought to their transitions during the first year of college in the U.S. The attributes associated with "Self" in the Transition Model include categories identified as "personal and demographic characteristics" and "psychological resources" (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, p. 58). Among the demographic characteristics are such attributes as socioeconomic status, gender, age, health, and ethnicity. In analyzing the experiences of participants in this study, it became clear that the personal or demographic characteristics identified in the framework did not include one of the most critical elements of their transitions – language. Furthermore, the

Transition Model (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) identifies attributes of “Support” in terms of sources of the support, specifically, “intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and the institutions and/or communities of which people are a part” (p. 67); and “Strategies” as the ways in which an individual seeks to cope with a transition by trying “to control the situation, ...control the meaning of the situation, ...or control the stress” (p. 75). An unanticipated discovery through this research was the significant overlap between resources categorized as Support versus those understood as Strategies.

The Role of Language. According to Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995), “the effects of an individual’s racial and ethnic background on his/her ability to navigate transitions are probably mediated through other factors such as value orientation and cultural norms” (p. 59). With this in mind, the role of Chinese cultural values in the social/personal and academic transitions of participants was intentionally considered in terms of “ethnicity,” from the outset of the study. Still missing from attributes of “Self,” however, is the role of language as an essential component in navigating a transition experience that occurs in an environment where one is not a native-speaker of the language. Participants in this study demonstrated the availability, or lack thereof, of “personal” coping mechanisms along the lines of socioeconomic status, gender, age, and their cultural values, each of which was accounted for by Schlossberg’s Transition Model (1995). They also demonstrated how their language proficiency, clearly an element of “Self,” as it is not an attribute that can be provided through external sources, either helped or hindered their transitions along both social/personal and academic domains.

Based on this discovery, it is appropriate to reconsider Schlossberg's Transition Model (1995) with regard to the role of language on an individual's transition. Though this framework was developed for use in counseling adults in transition, it has much wider application and is a core theory used in higher education. In light of the increasing number of international students coming to the U.S. from largely non-English speaking countries, and as demonstrated in this study, understanding and acknowledging the role of language in coping with other transitions is critical.

Support v. Strategies. In addition to the reevaluation of language as a potentially distinct attribute of "Self," my analysis of the data with respect to the resources of "Support" and "Strategies" available to participants revealed a need for the scope of strategies, as defined in the model, to be reconsidered. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) clearly delineate sources of support as those associated with individuals or groups of people who can provide support to an individual in transition by listening, offering guidance and/or advice, and being trusted confidants. Although these attributes of "Support" were present in the cases of most participants in this study, I found that the reliance on these relationships fit more appropriately in the category of "Strategies" because the students were active in making choices about engaging them.

It became apparent through this research that sources of "Support" may or may not be provided by individuals or groups, but obtaining or making use of this category of resources required no active participation on the part of the individual in transition. In other words, the institutions' provision of information, or lack thereof, about registration, accommodations, classroom norms, and other issues of importance to the students while

moving through their transitions was a source of support the students did not actively engage or seek out. The use of coping strategies, on the other hand, requires the individual in transition to be active in choosing to engage the resources at their disposal. In this study, “Support” in the form of personal relationships was sought out in intentional ways by the participants. Family members and friends were called upon to provide specific kinds of support, and students made choices about what information to share in order to control the meaning of their situation and/or to seek a certain kind of support to help them through the situation. As a result, I would argue that application of the element of “Strategies” identified in the Transition Model be broadened to take into account sources of support that are actively engaged rather than passively received.

Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (2014). The CECE Model was developed in order to provide a model of student success that takes into account issues of racial and ethnic diversity among students (Museus, 2014). That said, it focuses on racial and ethnic diversity in a Western context and fails to account for the many races and ethnicities represented by international students from around the globe who are enrolled at U.S. institutions. Museus points out that although all students entering college will experience some adjustment, students of color have reported having more challenging experiences as a result of “contradictory pressures to represent their respective racial or ethnic groups while simultaneously experiencing pressure to assimilate into the mainstream cultures of their respective campuses” (p. 191, para. 2). Furthermore, Museus notes that “campus racial climates and cultures influence the adjustment, engagement, and success of racially diverse populations in profound ways”

(p. 191, para. 3). I would argue that international students, and particularly non-native English speakers, have similar experiences in entering U.S. institutions and should be represented in models aiming to address such issues existing in the educational environment.

As the literature revealed, international students are heavily recruited in part for the cultural diversity they bring to U.S. campuses, and often experience the same kinds of bias and discrimination experienced by domestic minority students (Bodycott, 2009; Glass, Buus, & Braskamp, 2013; Hanassab, 2006; Kim & Kim, 2010; Lee, 2008; Lee & Rice, 2007; Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999; Ryan & Viete, 2009; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). As was demonstrated by participants in the present study, however, once they arrive to their U.S. institutions they are forced to find ways to adjust and assimilate to the predominant culture in order to succeed both academically and socially/personally. (Success, in this case, being viewed in the simplest terms of passing classes and persisting in their degree programs.) Moreover, some of them appear to have deployed avoidance tactics to prevent incidents of bias or discrimination. Using the CECE Model as a framework for analyzing the experiences of Chinese undergraduates during the first year at their U.S. institutions, it became clear that certain aspects of the model are appropriate for use beyond its initial audience of domestic minority students, while others do not seem applicable. It was determined that seven out of nine indicators of a Culturally Engaging Campus Environment proposed by the model were found to be related in some way to the experiences of participants in this study either through their absence or presence during the students' first year. Expanding the application of

appropriate elements of this model to include Chinese and other sub-populations of international students could help institutions in their efforts to increase enrollment and create welcoming environments that honor these students for their cultures and their contributions to the campus community. Furthermore, it can do so without forcing them to assimilate to the new environment by being responsive to and proactive about meeting their needs.

Areas for Possible Expansion. Of the indicators observed as present, meaningful, and/or desired in the experience of the participants in this study, Proactive Philosophies and Meaningful Opportunities for Cross-Cultural Engagement stand out as areas where the CECE Model (Museus, 2014) could be extended to more intentionally include international students. Recommendations for practice touch on both of these areas, as it was determined that providing thorough information before it is asked for (e.g. through orientation programs, online resources, etc.) and ensuring that accommodations are arranged in ways that offer intentional opportunities for learning, are critical to the positive and successful transitions of Chinese students in the U.S. In fact, these indicators could ultimately benefit the entire student population. Implementing and ensuring Opportunities for Meaningful Cross-Cultural Interaction relies on the participation of domestic students (from both majority and minority groups), as well as faculty and staff, in order to be successful. Though undertaken in an effort to provide support for domestic minority or, as I suggest, international students, the benefits of such opportunities would be realized by all students involved.

The Chinese students in this study, like other international students referenced in the literature, demonstrated that Opportunities for Meaningful Cross-Cultural Engagement were part of their expectation for pursuing their degrees in the U.S. Fostering such opportunities could not only provide for network building and language skill development, but could have the added benefit of connecting these students to sources of Holistic Support, and Culturally Validating or Humanized Educational Environments. In the absence of faculty or administrators to provide these sources of support, or as a supplement to them, domestic peers connected through intentionally designed programs should be viewed as essential partners in the development of welcoming and culturally responsive campus environments. Furthermore, it is important to consider the value of intentional engagement opportunities involving all members of the campus community in potentially reducing opportunities for bias and discrimination. For example, Kat indicated that she was uncomfortable attempting to communicate with domestic students, or ordering food in the cafeteria on her own because she feared embarrassment or ridicule for not knowing what to ask for. By choosing to isolate herself socially or to not go alone to the cafeteria, she used avoidance as a means of reducing her potential for being discriminated against by her domestic peers, or the cafeteria staff and/or others waiting in line. This example illustrates that there are opportunities for domestic students and staff to intentionally engage with Chinese or other non-native English speaking international students in the most mundane places – such as the campus cafeteria –in order to provide support and allow for a cultural exchange. I believe that extending the application of this indicator, even on the limited scale represented by this

example, could net useful results related to both theory and practice. Preparing and encouraging domestic students, faculty, and staff to interact with international students would serve to eliminate the kinds of fears expressed by Kat, and allow these individuals to learn about each other's cultures. More significant possibilities in this area undoubtedly exist, and additional research should be conducted to explore them fully.

Finally, the indicator of Cultural Familiarity suggests that the chance for students to “physically connect with faculty, staff, and peers with whom they share common backgrounds” (Museus, 2014, p. 210) leads to greater success for these students. The findings of this study suggest that beyond superficial contact with those of similar cultural backgrounds, the ability to connect in deep and meaningful ways - and to connect around language - had the most benefit. For instance, Chino's interaction with a professor who shared a common background related to his upbringing in Panama had a significant impact on his experience. In this case, it wasn't enough for Chino to have a passing connection to those around him who shared his background, he needed to have a deeper connection with the individual in order to realize any benefit. In the case of most other participants, they indicated that it was mostly other students with whom they shared a common cultural and linguistic background, and it was the relationships they were able to build with these peers that supported and aided them. I would suggest that the indicator of Cultural Familiarity must be expanded to consider the depth of the relationship, particularly for international students who also face linguistic challenges and may not be able to form the same kinds of relationships with faculty, staff, and peers who do not share a linguistic background. This indicator also relies on the institution to be intentional

about its recruiting practices for students, as well as faculty and staff, so that such interactions are more likely to occur.

Areas for Exclusion. Two indicators of the CECE Model (Museus, 2014) that did not seem to have particular relevance for the participants in this study were Cultural Community Service, and, perhaps ironically, Collectivist Orientation. Though some students did take part in community service or volunteerism, any connection to culture was absent in their experience. For these participants, the act of giving back to their new community (whether it was the local neighborhood or their institution/academic program) and/or gaining practical experience was what provided a benefit to them. It was neither a deterrent nor a motivation to these students that no component of the service project connected back to their cultural community. Perhaps they did not expect such opportunities to be possible for them as Chinese students in the U.S., but whatever the case, service, in and of itself, filled their need to give back in some way. This aspect of the CECE Model, therefore, seems less applicable to an international student population.

Counterintuitively, perhaps, for a population of students from a country with a highly collectivist orientation, nothing in the data from this study suggested that a campus with a Collectivist Orientation would have been more supportive. In fact, these students had such a desire for independence and the opportunity to express their individuality, that entering a Collectivist environment may have been counterproductive to them. Furthermore, any desire to find community in order to move through their transitions was achieved through contact with their cultural peer groups. As such, for international students, and Chinese students in particular, a generally Collectivist Orientation on

campus does not seem to be necessary for success. Should the CECE Model be adapted for use with an international student population, this is an area that may have limited utility for all international sub-groups, but might warrant additional research.

Implications for Future Research

As was noted previously, the focus of this study was intentionally limited to Chinese undergraduate students pursuing degrees in the United States. This was done since the population of international students coming to colleges in the U.S. is a heterogeneous group, and disaggregating students from distinct countries or regions in order to learn about their unique experiences may help to provide interventions specifically tailored to those sub-populations. That said, a number of areas for future research related to the study population were easily identified at the conclusion of this study.

First, an opportunity exists to narrow the sub-population of Chinese undergraduates even further by examining the experiences of students from various geographical regions of China on a more granular level. Though the reported experiences were not dramatically different across students from different regions, since two participants identified themselves as Southern Chinese and the other four as Northern Chinese, it may be worth exploring the existence of differences in preparation, motivation, and characteristics of “Self,” as noted by Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995), in a more purposeful way. This is especially important in light of the fact that one participant from Southern China referenced the cultural differences between himself and the other Chinese students he encountered on campus who primarily came from the north.

Second, narrowing the population should also take into consideration linguistic differences. As Chino pointed out, being from Southern China meant that Cantonese was his first language, but he also knew some Mandarin which he was aware was more widely spoken by his Chinese peers on campus. Researchers and practitioners must remain mindful of the linguistic differences present among the Chinese student population, especially as language is such a critical transition experience for these students. Just as these students represent different geographical and, by extension, cultural regions of China, they also represent significantly different linguistic regions. Each of these factors may impact the student's experiences. Additionally, it would be interesting to replicate this kind of study with international undergraduate students coming to the U.S. both from other non-native English speaking countries or regions, as well as English speaking countries, to look for any commonality of experiences that would inform practice on a larger scale.

In addition to the potential differences between students coming from different geographical/cultural regions within China, the impacts of gender and financial background on participants' experiences also bears further inquiry. The two participants in this study who were from Southern China were also the only two male participants, so it is difficult to determine whether their expectations and/or experiences were impacted in some way specifically because of their gender as opposed to their area of origin (or vice versa). As was previously mentioned, issues like the decision to not purchase a vehicle may have been impacted by financial circumstances, or they may have been influenced by gender. As such, attention to future participants' financial backgrounds would be

another interesting avenue for exploration. Though it is often assumed by American institutional agents that students coming from China have significant financial resources at their disposal, this is not necessarily the case. As was pointed out in the literature, some families will make considerable sacrifice to send their child abroad (Yeung, 2013). It would be useful to know how Chinese students' financial circumstances impact not only their transition experiences, but also their persistence in general. Further research on these matters is warranted.

In addition to further study on specific sub-groups of Chinese students indicated above, an examination of the geo-political factors impacting this population would be highly appropriate. As was discussed in Chapter One of this study, the U.S. and China share a very important political and economic relationship (Lampton, 2003; Swanson, 2015; Watkins, 2015). This relationship, and the global issues it influences (trade, technology, climate change, international security, etc.), may have a significant impact on not only the choice of these students to come to the U.S., but their persistence through graduation regardless of any difficulties they may encounter throughout their college experience. Research on the influence of this geo-political relationship would help to clarify more about this student populations' motivations for study in the U.S. and help institutions better prepare for the academic, social/personal, cultural and linguistic needs of the population in the context of their long-term goals.

This study focused only on the first-year experiences of participants, but two students had transferred as juniors from the U.S. institutions where they had each completed their first year to the study site, Southeastern University. As was indicated

through the findings, their experiences were not markedly different from those who transferred to Southeastern University as second or third year students coming from international universities, and they had been very intentional about institutional selection in coming to the U.S. to begin with. As a result, it would be interesting to understand what motivates Chinese undergraduates to transfer to a different U.S. university than the one to which they first matriculated.

The literature about Chinese values dates back to the late 1980s and 1990s and asserts that a strong collectivist orientation and connection to Confucianism are hallmarks of the culture (Chan, 1999; Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Yu, 1996). In spite of that, several of the participants demonstrated a high level of individuality and self-reliance in preparation for, and throughout, their first year in the United States. Further research should be done to explore the shift toward individualism in Chinese culture, particularly among the college-going generation, to better understand the role of Chinese values for this population and the impact of those values on the experience of attending college in the United States.

The role of peers is another area for future research. There are numerous examples, in the literature and in this study, of the important role peers have in Chinese students' decisions, experiences, and coping strategies both before and during their enrollment in U.S. colleges. Participants in this study connected with Chinese peers even before arriving in the U.S. to seek assistance with living arrangements, and both domestic and Chinese peers (at their institutions and at home) provided support and assistance throughout the first year. It would be interesting to understand why this group is so often

the preferred source of information and support over family members or institutional agents. Research should be conducted to unpack these relationships more, with the results potentially informing practice around the value in creating formal programs (peer mentors, for example) versus simply providing intentional opportunities for relationships to develop organically.

Research into the role of faculty and staff members in supporting international students in transition, as well as their preparation to do so, is also called for. This study sought, in part, to identify sources of institutional support that aided Chinese students through their first year transitions. Very little information was provided by participants about the role of faculty members in their first year. In fact, although several participants reported that they generally found their faculty members to be kind and helpful, they did not provide many examples of how their faculty members supported them, in particular, through their academic transitions. Rather, they referenced difficulties in following lectures, preparing for exams (i.e. knowing what to study), and taking exams in formats that challenged them linguistically. Similarly, while many participants found their advisors helpful and supportive when they sought out assistance, they did not offer examples of ways in which staff had anticipated their needs in order to provide assistance proactively. Based on these findings, and considering the recommendations for practice I have already made, I believe that research in this area is appropriate and necessary. With increasing numbers of Chinese and other international undergraduate students coming to U.S. institutions each year, faculty and staff preparation for supporting them should be studied in order to identify gaps in training that must be addressed for the good of all

students on our campuses. Moreover, focused research with Chinese students about the level and types of support they receive from faculty and staff, and its actual usefulness is warranted.

Areas discussed in the section on implications for theory also open the door for further inquiry into how current frameworks around transition and student success can be expanded to address the unique circumstances and needs of international students. Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1995) is one of the standard theories taught in graduate preparation programs for student affairs professionals. The theory has been included in the textbook, *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 3rd edition (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016), since it was first published in 1998, attesting to its ongoing value as a means of understanding college student transitions. As such, and in light of the limitations identified through this study, opportunities for further research exist with regard to an expansion and/or operationalizing of the attributes of "Self," "Support," and "Strategies" identified by Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995). With regard to attributes of "Self," I suggest research on the inclusion of an individual's language among the coping tools available to them during transition. With respect to "Support" and "Strategies," as previously noted, I assert that research leading to a more nuanced understanding of the roles of these resources and how they are employed be undertaken.

Additionally, although the CECE Model is still quite new, having been developed by Museus in 2014, an opportunity for further research on its design has been identified through the findings and recommendations from this study. The model was created for

use in assessing campus environments with respect to the experiences of domestic minority students, but recognizing its utility in evaluating the experience of Chinese undergraduates in the present study provides an opening for research on the utility of the framework for other sub-populations and/or international students in general.

Specifically, an examination of each of the nine individual indicators of the model in the context of a non-Western population of students would serve as a starting point for potentially extending the model's reach to be more beneficial to a wider audience.

Conclusion

Learning about the experiences of Chinese undergraduates pursuing their degrees in the United States is important for beginning to identify ways in which institutions can provide appropriate levels of support for their educational enterprise. It also represents a starting point for examining the experiences of the many sub-groups within the large population of international students coming to U.S. institutions from around the globe. This study focused on the experiences of only six Chinese students who attended different types of institutions and who came from different personal backgrounds yet had extremely similar experiences. In particular, the shared experience of three core transitions – academic, social/personal, and linguistic – was easily identified for these participants irrespective of where they came from in China, the previous experiences some of them already had either at other universities and/or in other countries where they had studied or worked, and a variety of other factors. Given the shared experiences demonstrated by this small sub-population of international students, I believe it is important to explore the experiences of other such groups in order to make

recommendations that are responsive to the unique needs of unique populations of international students.

Tinto's Theory of Individual Student Departure (1993) was developed with domestic students in mind, but has clear parallels to the international student experience, as they must physically separate from their previous communities, learn the behaviors and norms of the host country as well as the host institution, and seek to integrate into their new environment. That said, placing the burden of adaptation on these students and not providing the necessary support systems to ensure their successful academic, social/personal, and linguistic transitions is irresponsible and must be addressed on a systemic level. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model (Museus, 2014), which was also developed with domestic students in mind, provides a framework by which institutions can evaluate the extent to which they are addressing these issues for all students, whether they be domestic or international students. The findings of this study make clear that the presence or absence of almost all indicators of a Culturally Engaging Campus Environment had an impact on the overall experience for each participant. As such, institutions wishing to show a true commitment to the international students they recruit and welcome to their campuses must intentionally embrace and implement the measures identified in the CECE Model in order to support them in their transitions so they can move from surviving to thriving.

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APPENDIX A: ORIGINAL RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Student*:

My name is Kerrie Montgomery, and I serve as Director of Campus Life at FIU's Biscayne Bay Campus. I have previously worked in both the University of Florida International Center and the FIU Study Abroad Office as the international exchange program coordinator. In addition to my current role in Campus Life, I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at the University of Denver.

I am conducting a study to learn more about the experiences of Chinese students during their first year of study at a college or university in the United States. Using the information I collect, I plan to develop a programming model for staff at U.S. institutions in order to enhance the educational experience for these students. This study is being conducted as part of the requirements for my doctoral program, and is supervised by Dr. Judy Marquez-Kiyama, Assistant Professor of Higher Education.

If you meet the following eligibility requirements, I hope you will consider being part of this study.

1. You are an undergraduate student in your second or third year of the degree.
2. You are a Chinese citizen.
3. You did NOT attend high school in the United States.

The study will involve three 60-90 minute interviews. Participants who complete all three interviews will receive a \$25 gift card to a food or retail vendor of your choice. The first interview will focus on information about your background, your motivations for pursuing an undergraduate degree in the United States and your expectations for the experience; the second interview will concentrate on your experiences during your first year of college; and the third interview will focus on your overall experience and what you believe aided you in the process of transitioning to student life at a U.S. institution. Additionally, during the first interview I will invite you to share any blogs, journal entries, reflective papers/essays, photographs, or other artifacts from your first year experience that you would be willing to share with me for the study.

If you meet the eligibility requirements listed above, and are interested in participating, your insights will be extremely valuable to me in the study. If you do not meet the eligibility requirements but know someone else who might, I would appreciate you forwarding this email on my behalf.

I hope that you will consider meeting with me to share a bit about yourself and your experience obtaining an undergraduate degree in the United States. If you are interested in participating in this study, please visit the following site (*insert link to Qualtrics survey*) to complete a short questionnaire to determine your eligibility to participate. If

you have any questions about this study, please contact me at
kerrieamontgomery@gmail.com or 720.563.1782 (Cellular) or 305.919.5950 (Office).

Warm regards,

Kerrie Montgomery
Ph.D. Candidate
Higher Education Program, Organization and Governance Concentration
Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver
kerrieamontgomery@gmail.com
720.563.1782 (Cellular)/305.919.5950 (Office)

APPENDIX B: TEXT FOR PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLYER

Are you a Chinese undergraduate student who is currently in the second, third, or fourth year of your degree in the United States?

Would you like to earn a \$75 gift card and help improve the programs and services provided to other international students pursuing their degrees in the U.S.?

If you answered yes to these questions, you could be eligible to participate in a research study being conducted on campus. If you are interested in participating in or learning more about this study, please email Kerrie Montgomery (Director of Campus Life, BBC and Doctoral Candidate in the University of Denver's Higher Education program) at kerrieamontgomery@gmail.com.

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT ELIGIBILITY QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questionnaire was administered through Qualtrics. The participant recruitment email included a link to this survey.

Are you a Chinese/Taiwanese citizen currently classified as an international student (F-1 visa status) at Florida International University?

- Yes
- No

In what year of your undergraduate degree program at Florida International University are you currently enrolled?

- First Year (Freshman)
- Second Year (Sophomore)
- Third Year (Junior)
- Fourth Year (Senior)
- None of these

Have you attended any other school or university in the United States prior to your enrollment at Florida International University?

- Yes
- No

Did you attend any portion of high school (grades K-12) in the United States?

- Yes
- No

Did you attend college/university at any other institution in the United States prior to enrolling at Florida International University?

- Yes
- No

Prior to enrolling at Florida International University, did you ever live in the United States?

- Yes
- No

Have you completed at least one full year of college at FIU or another institution in the United States?

- Yes
- No

Do you identify as male or female?

- Male
- Female

Your Name (Given Name and Family Name)

Preferred Email Address

Phone Number

APPENDIX D: FINAL RECRUITMENT EMAIL
(AFTER APPROVAL OF IRB REVISIONS)

Dear Student:

My name is Kerrie Montgomery, and I serve as Director of Campus Life at FIU's Biscayne Bay Campus. I have previously worked in both the University of Florida International Center and the FIU Study Abroad Office as the international exchange program coordinator. In addition to my current role in Campus Life, I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at the University of Denver.

I am conducting a study to learn more about the experiences of Chinese students during their first year of study at a college or university in the United States. Using the information I collect, I plan to develop a programming model for staff at U.S. institutions in order to enhance the educational experience for these students. This study is being conducted as part of the requirements for my doctoral program, and is supervised by Dr. Judy Marquez-Kiyama, Assistant Professor of Higher Education.

If you meet the following eligibility requirements, I hope you will consider being part of this study.

1. You are an undergraduate student in your second, third, or fourth year of the degree.
2. You are a Chinese citizen.
3. You did NOT attend high school in the United States.

The study will involve three 60-90 minute interviews. Participants who complete all three interviews will receive a \$75 gift card to a food or retail vendor of your choice. The first interview will focus on information about your background, your motivations for pursuing an undergraduate degree in the United States and your expectations for the experience; the second interview will concentrate on your experiences during your first year of college; and the third interview will focus on your overall experience and what you believe aided you in the process of transitioning to student life at a U.S. institution. Additionally, during the first interview I will invite you to share any blogs, journal entries, reflective papers/essays, photographs, or other artifacts from your first year experience that you would be willing to share with me for the study.

If you meet the eligibility requirements listed above, and are interested in participating, your insights will be extremely valuable to me in the study. If you do not meet the eligibility requirements but know someone else who might, I would appreciate you forwarding this email on my behalf.

I hope that you will consider meeting with me to share a bit about yourself and your experience obtaining an undergraduate degree in the United States. If you are interested in participating in this study, please visit the following site https://fiu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_eXRpLzImDHawed7 to complete a short

questionnaire to determine your eligibility to participate. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at kerrieamontgomery@gmail.com or 720.563.1782 (Cellular) or 305-919-5950 (Office).

Warm regards,
Kerrie Montgomery

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APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDE (INTERVIEW #1)

1. Tell me a bit about yourself. (Prompts: Where did you grow up – rural or urban location? Describe your family. Did anyone else in your family attend university? Where did you attend school for your undergraduate degree?)
2. What made you decide to pursue your undergraduate degree in the United States? Was this something you had planned to do?
3. What made you choose your institution? (Prompts: Did you use a recruiter? Recommendations from family or friends?)
4. How would you describe the process of applying to your program? (Prompts: Did you receive much support from your institution?)
5. Had you travelled extensively or studied anywhere outside of your home country prior to coming to the U.S. for college?
5. What expectations did you have for your educational experience in the United States?

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW GUIDE (INTERVIEW #2)

1. How would you describe your financial circumstances during the first year of college?
(Prompts: Are you receiving financial support from anyone other than your family? Do you need to work part-time to stay in school?)
2. How would you describe your overall wellness during the first year at college?
(Prompts: Did you have any health concerns? Did you deal with feelings of anxiety, stress, or homesickness?)
3. How would you describe your personality? (Prompts: Are you more introverted or extroverted? Do you have a lot of friends or keep to yourself? Do you consider yourself to be resilient?)
4. How would you describe the general environment on your campus? (Prompts: Were students/faculty/staff friendly? Helpful? Welcoming?)
5. What do you remember about your orientation and welcome program when you arrived on campus?
6. Tell me about where you lived during your first year? (Prompts: On or off campus? With or without roommates?)
7. How did you like your living arrangements?
8. What was it like for you to be in the classroom? (Prompts: Teaching/learning styles. Group projects. Writing assignments.)
9. How would you describe your level of involvement in activities outside the classroom during the first year? (Prompts: Organizations? Work? Research? Volunteerism?)

10. Would you say you saw your culture reflected in the campus environment through programs, organizations, or other avenues, or that you were able to stay connected to your culture? How/In what ways?
11. Did you find many other individuals on campus who shared your cultural background? (Prompts: If so, were these students, faculty, or staff?)
12. How would you describe your involvement with students, faculty or staff from different cultural backgrounds than yours?
13. Tell me about your experience interacting with students, faculty and staff from the United States.
14. Is there anything else you would like to share about your first-year experience at college?

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW GUIDE (INTERVIEW #3)

1. Tell me about how your experiences during the first year met your expectations of attending college in the United States.
2. Now, tell me about how your experiences fell short of your expectations of attending college in the United States.
3. Could you tell me about how you found the resources you needed during your first-year experience?
4. Can you tell me about any times when you considered returning home and what led you to consider that option?
5. Can you talk about what being an international student meant to you?
6. What were the greatest sources of support to you during your first-year experience?
7. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your first-year experience as an international student in the United States?

APPENDIX H: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

ADULT CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY **The First-Year Transition and Persistence Experiences of** **Chinese Undergraduate Students in the United States**

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

You are being asked to be in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine the first year transition experiences of Chinese students obtaining an undergraduate degree at an institution in the United States. This study is being conducted by Kerrie Montgomery to fulfill the requirements for a doctoral degree.

NUMBER OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of not more than 10 people in this research study.

DURATION OF THE STUDY

Your participation will require you to complete a short online questionnaire to establish eligibility for the study, and if selected, attendance at three (3) one-on-one interviews with the researcher, each of which will last 60-90 minutes. Interviews will be conducted over the space of approximately three weeks, with about a week between each meeting.

PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in the study, we will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in three (3) 60-90 minute interviews, each of which will be audio recorded for transcription purposes.
2. Share any blogs, journal entries, reflective papers/essays, photographs, or other artifacts from your first year of enrollment that you feel comfortable including in this study.

RISKS AND/OR DISCOMFORTS

The risks associated with this study are minimal, but may include homesickness or feelings of emotional discomfort in recalling unpleasant experiences. If you experience discomfort you may discontinue the interviews at any time. We also respect your right to choose not to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable.

BENEFITS

Participation in this project is strictly voluntary. Benefits include the opportunity to reflect on and share your experiences as an international student in the United States. The findings of this study have the potential to aid in the development of more useful programs and services to support international students at institutions in the United States.

ALTERNATIVES

There are no known alternatives available to you other than not taking part in this study. However, any significant new findings developed during the course of the research which may relate to your willingness to continue participation will be provided to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The records of this study will be kept private and will be protected to the fullest extent provided by law. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher team will have access to the records. However, your records may be reviewed for audit purposes by authorized University or other agents who will be bound by the same provisions of confidentiality.

The steps that will be taken to maintain the confidentiality of your responses include the following:

- You will be asked to select a pseudonym, and all of your responses will be identified only by that pseudonym and will be kept separate from any identifying information.
- All interview recordings and transcriptions will be encrypted.
- A pseudonym will be used for the institution where the study is being conducted, as well as the name of your undergraduate institution (if different).

COMPENSATION & COSTS

Participants will receive one gift card, to a retail or food vendor (restaurant) of their choice, at the conclusion of their participation in the study. Participants who complete one of the three interviews will receive a \$25 gift card; two of the three interviews, a \$50 gift card; all three interviews, a \$75 gift card.

Though the locations for each interview will be coordinated with you in order to limit any potential costs to you, you will be expected to pay for your own transportation, parking, or childcare, if needed.

RIGHT TO DECLINE OR WITHDRAW

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to participate in the study or withdraw your consent at any time during the study. Your withdrawal or lack of participation will not affect any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The investigator reserves the right to remove you without your consent at such time that they feel it is in the best interest.

RESEARCHER CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions about the purpose, procedures, or any other issues relating to this research study you may contact Kerrie Montgomery at Florida International University, Department of Campus Life, Biscayne Bay Campus (WUC141), by phone at 720-563-1782, or by email at kerrieamontgomery@gmail.com.

IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

If you would like to talk with someone about your rights of being a subject in this research study or about ethical issues with this research study, you may contact the FIU Office of Research Integrity by phone at 305-348-2494 or by email at ori@fiu.edu.

PARTICIPANT AGREEMENT

I have read the information in this consent form and agree to participate in this study. I have had a chance to ask any questions I have about this study, and they have been answered for me. I understand that I will be given a copy of this form for my records.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date