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"WE'RE OUT IN THE DEEP," BUT "THIS IS THE LIFE. WE SHOULD FIGHT FOR THE

LIFE.": A STUDY OF L2 INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THEIR FIRST UNIVERSITY

SEMESTER DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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"WE'RE OUT IN THE DEEP," BUT "THIS IS THE LIFE. WE SHOULD FIGHT FOR THE LIFE.": A STUDY OF L2 INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THEIR FIRST UNIVERSITY SEMESTER DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation, the process it took me to arrive here,
and the road where it will take me to
my Lord God and Savior Lord Jesus Christ, My Creator and Redeemer.

"There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind
that the God who started this great work in you
would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish
on the very day Christ Jesus appears".

Holy Bible, Philippians 1:6

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Abstract

This study sought to explore L2 international students' perspectives about what challenges and accomplishments impact their academic acculturation process and success while studying in a bridge program during their first semester of university amidst the coronavirus pandemic. The findings showed that pandemic safety protocols, study habits, language proficiency, religious practices and racism were challenges. In many instances, students found workarounds to accomplish their academic goals. These findings were interpreted using Ryan and Deci's (2000) basic psychological needs (BPNs) of competence, autonomy, and relatedness as explained in their Self-Determination Theory. This study also combined denotative and connotative concepts of academic success (York et al., 2015; Cachia et al., 2018) for one collective understanding of academic success. Students' behaviors indicated that they fulfilled their BPNs to meet the definition of academic success. Support networks also contributed to successful academic and social learning environments.

Keywords: L2 international students, university, higher educational institute, bridge program, Self-Determination Theory, Basic Psychological Needs, academic success, acculturation process, acculturation challenges, acculturation success

Chapter 1: Introduction

According to *World University Rankings* (2020), eight out the 10 top universities worldwide were in the United States (U.S.). Similarly, *CEOWorld Magazine* named 18 of the top 25 universities in the United States (Ireland, 2020). These two surveys are among several identifying U.S. higher educational institutions (HEIs) as the most preferred globally. Influencing these favorable rankings are factors such as numerous degree options for students, flexible course offerings, highly degreed professors, applied programs are supported by modern technology, and research prospects with potential funding. Access to library resources, small class sizes, and accredited pre-college programs also top preference-ranking influences. Overall, the academically excellent reputation of U.S. HEIs entices international students to study in the U.S. (Vioreanu, 2020). Indeed, enrollment statistics indicate international students prefer U.S. HEIs to other study destinations (Institute of International Education, 2020c). For this reason, it is crucial to understand what types of challenges L2 international students face particularly as new English language learners and how those challenges affect their academic cultural adjustment and success. Therefore, the purpose of this study sought to explore L2 international students' perspectives about what challenges and accomplishments impact their academic acculturation process and success while studying in a bridge program during their first semester of university during the coronavirus pandemic. Through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, more specifically the basic psychological needs, the research question that guided this study was per the students' perspectives, what challenges and accomplishments impact the academic acculturation process and success of L2 international students in a bridge program during their first semester of university amidst the coronavirus pandemic?

Preparatory college programs associated with many public and private U.S. HEIs, known as Intensive English Programs (IEPs), equip Second Language Learners (L2), many of whom are international students, with fundamental collegiate language and academic preparatory skills. These IEPs help L2s improve their English language proficiency to pass HEI entrance exams (IDP Education, 2020; Kim, 2015; Skinner et al., 2019; Vioreanu, 2020). After passing these exams, incoming L2 students can attend their first university semester through a bridge program, earning degree credit by taking core courses structured to meet their academic and language competencies.

HEIs have become dependent on such transitional programs to support L2s linguistically and academically, as well as to encourage L2s to choose to study on HEI campuses in subsequent semesters (Turner, 2020). As a result, over the past few decades, a nearly steady incline in L2 international student enrollments has caused many HEIs to rely financially on these students. For example, from the academic years 2015/2016 through 2019/2020, international students totaled more than one million students annually, making up 5.5 percent of U.S. universities' student bodies. This includes 2019/2020, the first year of the coronavirus pandemic (Institute of International Education, 2020c). However, in the second year of the pandemic in 2020/2021, international students' enrollment fell below 915, 500 comprising only 4.6 percent of the overall U.S. student enrollment. Subsequently, 2021/2022, the third year of the pandemic, there was slight upswing, with to nearly 950,000 international students constituting 4.7 percent of U.S. HEI student enrollment (Institute of International Education, 2022).

While the pandemic may not be the only reason for enrollment fluctuations, it is the primary suspect (Saballa, 2021). Notably, the uptick in international students in the third year of the coronavirus pandemic highlights international students' attraction to U.S. HEIs, while the

sheer number of students enrolling emphasizes the need for and the benefit of their presence on HEI campuses.

Student and University Benefits of International Students at U.S. HEIs

Communication and Intercultural Awareness

The world-renowned notion that *any* U.S. HEI prepares students for today's highly competitive global market has encouraged international students to attempt U.S. college degrees. Most importantly, employment potentiality in their home job markets increases for U.S. HEI international graduates (IDP Education, 2020; Vioreanu, 2020). New student orientations, training, workshops, and campus clubs promoting a welcoming atmosphere provide culturally diverse networking opportunities where L2s can practice communication skills and build life-long friendships (Kim, 2015; Skinner et al., 2019; Vioreanu, 2020). These potential benefits draw students from various global regions, including China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and Mexico to earn U.S. university degrees (Saballa, 2021).

U.S. universities benefit from the culturally diverse experiences international students bring with them (Institute of International Education, 2020a). International students' interactions in academic and social spaces demonstrate their varied cultural backgrounds. Through bringing their own culturally developed viewpoints to the classroom, international students widen topical discussions to include more perspectives in learning, fostering broader and deeper thinking. As widespread technology and media proliferate making varying global ideas and actions accessible, international and domestic collaborations on U.S. campuses prepare students for diverse global careers and enrich intercultural communication, an academic goal of various U.S. universities (D. G. Smith, 2009).

International students also promote practical world language learning opportunities among domestic and other international students and HEI employees. L2 international students challenge U.S. local students with practical language opportunities, including piquing students' interest in learning a few catchphrases. Contextualizing the languages within various shared social spaces, domestic learners' encounters with L2 students enhance language experience. Formal and informal authentic language occasions build relationships and cultural understanding by taking lessons beyond studying textbook grammar and limited language phrases. These cultural and linguistic opportunities academically affirm the need for L2 international students to physically be on HEI campuses to stimulate broader thinking and boost global relations (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2021b).

When domestic and international students connect, develop, and expand shared interests among linguistically and culturally diverse cultures, these interactions nurture intercultural awareness and competence, effectively eroding different types of biases (Institute of International Education, 2020b, 2020c; Skinner et al., 2019), which have been created and cultivated through previous and current long-term sociocultural messages. Interactions among students from diverse and domestic backgrounds in varying academic and social safe spaces can use respectful communication to discover commonalities and build relationships enhancing international students' cultural adjustment process and promoting academic success.

Continual positive interactions between people with diverse backgrounds allay cultural stereotypes, renegotiating previously believed ideas about specific cultural groups and their members. These constructive, positive connections through repeated affirmative interactions help combat negative thoughts and expand positive opinions about culturally diverse societies and their group members (Institute of International Education, 2020c). Person-to-person positive

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encounters help humanize international students, encouraging American classmates and friends to value individuals for their personalities and skills.

Economic Benefits

In valuing international students, many HEIs often first refer to students' economic contributions. Three jobs are created for every eight international students attending U.S. HEIs, and fifty-five percent are of these jobs on higher education campuses nationwide. Local economies are also stimulated through more residential money circulation and improved job creation when international students, similar to domestic students, set up living places and spend their money on food, necessities, public transportation, and entertainment (Institute of International Education, 2019; NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2020; *NAFSA International Student Economic Value Tool*, 2020). The economic impact of international students' spending is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

International Students Studying in the U.S. and Their Financial Contributions

Academic Years	International Students	% Change	Billions Spent	Jobs Created
2018/2019	**1,095,299**	**0.05**	**$41.00**	**458,290**
2019/2020	1,075,496	-1.8	$38.70	415,996
2020/2021	914,095	-15	$28.40	306,308

Note. The Open Doors Team, 2021; NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2019, 2020, 2021.

As seen in Table 1, in the academic year 2018/2019, nearly 1.1 million international students spent $41 billion in the U.S., thus, directly and indirectly supporting 458,290 jobs in the U.S. In the academic year 2019/2020, around 1.075 million students, a slight decrease from the previous year, spent $38.7 billion supporting 415,996 jobs. However, in the academic year 2020/2021, the number of international students studying in the U.S. decreased to about 914,000, declining 15

percent from the previous academic year and resulting in expenditures of only $28.4 billion

causing a 26.4 percent international service job reduction in the U.S. The difference in

international financial contributions between 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 equals $10.3 billion.

Ninety-one percent of this difference, $9.4 billion, results from the COVID-19 pandemic

(NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2021a).

Regarding dollars spent in the U.S., although some international students may have been

granted university scholarships, 83.9 percent of undergraduate international tuition and expenses

were paid personally (by self or family). In comparison, 5.4 percent of undergraduate

international tuition and fees were paid by the students' countries or foreign companies (*2020*

Open Doors Report, 2020). Because education costs must be guaranteed before attending

universities, universities are highly likely to receive their semester payments promptly after

students have enrolled in courses. These tuition amounts are usually based on out-of-state

university costs (Durrani, 2020b).

With many states reducing the amount of educational funding awarded to public HEIs

and annual international tuition dollars having become reliably robust, some universities have

become significantly dependent on international students' tuition dollars (Daiya, 2020; NAFSA,

2020). Many educational institutions cannot afford to lose these full-time tuition-paying students

(Dickler, 2020). International student financial contributions are required for these HEIs to keep

their doors open or prevent significant job loss. Without these funds, HEIs may need to appeal to

state governments for financial assistance to stay afloat until there is a renewed considerable

flow of international students to HEI campuses. In a brief released by NAFSA in 2021, an

organizational advocate for international education recommended to the U.S. Congress to

seriously consider setting aside funds for all public HEIs who may otherwise have to close their

doors or downsize tremendously because of the loss of international student funds as a result of COVID-19 (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2021b).

If internationals cannot or choose not to attend U.S. higher learning institutions in the future, the temporary impacts of 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 could indicate more permanent dire results. A reduced financial flow could lead to budget cuts that include quality staffing losses and diminishing resources, impacting why international students rank U.S. universities higher than other universities worldwide. These cuts could then ultimately weaken academic program integrity affecting the degree programs most selected by international students, including engineering, business, medicine, math and computer sciences, physical and life sciences, and agriculture (Dickler, 2020). Non-academic programs could also significantly feel the impact, including sports and social clubs (*2020 Open Doors Report*, 2020; Di Maria, 2020; Institute of International Education, 2020d). As well as U.S. universities, local communities could experience general job reductions (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2021b).

While the economic impact would be substantial with reduced international student populations on HEI campuses, the most significant loss would be the immeasurable effect on cultural diversity. Academic and social spaces would be void of the internationally diverse cultures represented by these students. Lack of cultural diversity dulls opportunities for faculty and students to develop and hone cultural sensitivities and broaden cultural perspectives. The highly beneficial presence of international students diversifies thinking and "catalyzes academic competition" (H. Wu et al., 2015, p. 1). The absence of L2 international students perpetuates homogenous thinking and encourages academic and social hegemony. L2 international students bring valuable, diverse academic and social perspectives as representatives of unique global groups.

Nevertheless, although the pandemic has ushered in circumstances that threaten international students' choice to attend U.S. colleges and universities, more than 900 thousand international students are still choosing to accept HEI's invitations to study on those campuses for high quality education that gives them a competitive edge in the job market, research-resource accessibility, global networking, and language and cultural development (Institute of International Education, 2021). The significant presence of these international students on HEIs' campuses emphasizes universities' ethical responsibility to provide academic support. In the case of a potentially health-compromising situation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, HEIs must initiate and regulate a safe environment that fosters an educationally successful environment where academic needs identified by L2 international students have a chance of being met.

Thus, understanding how international students effectively acculturate to their new educational environment under pandemic-response conditions is one responsible way to help these students academically succeed. With information about academic challenges, successes, and adaptation, HEIs can intentionally allocate limited resources, such as services, personnel, and funds to support the needs of these valuable numbers of the university community. Therefore, this study aimed to explore how first-year L2 international students in university bridge programs acculturated to their university learning environment during the pandemic and to probe their perceptions of how their acculturative process affected their academic success.

This group of students is particularly significant to research because their first foundational year of university was directly affected by the pandemic and their subsequent years continue to be influenced by changes caused by COVID. Understanding students' acculturative experiences in their first year is vital because the first year can set the tone for the student's entire collegiate career, having the most substantial impact on their academic success (Trivette,

2020). This is because the year students establish language proficiency and study habits,

experience the most acculturative challenges, make American friends, and learn socially and

culturally. In the case of these students, all of these were especially hampered by the pandemic.

Rationale for Research

To achieve academic success, L2 international students must adapt to their unfamiliar

sociocultural surroundings, such as the educational and social environments, and turn setbacks

and challenges into success. The process of adaptation to a different culture is known as

acculturation (Brown, 1994). The adjustment process to a new academic culture is described as

academic acculturation. Because academic acculturation has been linked to academic success

(Berry, 1997; Cheng & Fox, 2008; Lane et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2002), acculturating to a

variety of HEI educational and social expectations can frustrate or enhance the L2 student's

ability to achieve their goals and, in turn, their motivation whether positively or negatively. How

well someone adapts to HEI expectation is affected by factors that include language development

to proficiency (Schumann, 1978; Keefe & Padilla, 1987; Gee, 2015), connections to support

systems (Gee, 2015; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Scanlon, Rowling, and

Weber, 2007; Leki, 2001), educational style adaptation (Conway, 2009), and experiences with

ethnic discrimination (R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Factors such as these can impact individuals positively or negatively depending on how a

person chooses to adjust to the host HEI environment expectations. Choices about how to cope

with external and internal factors will influence the next steps during this acculturative

adjustment process. For example, when a student is language proficient, engaging in intercultural

interaction in that second language encourages a student's self-perceived communication

competency, which in turn encourages a person to demonstrate more confidence and therefore

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ask for academic help or engage in social interactions. This cycle can enhance a student's perception of adjustment in the host environment (Xing & Bolden, 2019b; Zimmermann, 1995).

Contrastively, if a student has a perception of communicating in the second language with much difficulty or finds it overly challenging, then the student's perception of language ability could impede the acculturative process in the same way perceived linguistic competence contributes to cultural adaptation. Unable to communicate effectively can hinder one's sense of autonomy, competence, and belonging in the unfamiliar environment (Xing & Bolden, 2019b), all of which play a role in a student's motivation to persevere through the adjustment process.

Beyond HEI expectations, other factors affecting international students' cultural adjustment in their unfamiliar environment are how students respond to differences that manifest between students' own learned cultural practices and beliefs with those in the host culture. Each difference initiates, at the very least, an internal conflict, which can affect psychological and sociocultural adaptation to the new host culture. Adverse intercultural interactions can frustrate participants' social and psychological adjustment. The distress caused by *intercultural conflict* can vary among individuals (Sam & Berry, 2010).

In addition to these acculturative factors, which are a part of the normative college experience, are *the not normative* and unprecedented experiences associated with COVID-19. With the added anxiety of the coronavirus pandemic overlaying the academic culture students are already navigating, international students could be deterred from achieving their educational goals. Responses to the pandemic threat and safety protocols could at least frustrate students' academic encounters. Pandemic-preventative conditions viewed as acculturative stressors that have potentially adverse effects include social distancing and wearing masks in educational and

social settings, quarantining at home while attending classes online instead of in-person, limiting the number of people at gatherings, and reducing or eliminating social gatherings.

Other less obvious, but nonetheless potentially harmful acculturative stressors include non-immigrant policy changes put into action at the onset of the pandemic in the U.S., limited access to essential resources while in the U.S., and the inability to travel home at will to visit family (Daiya, 2020; Dickerson, 2020). International students in the U.S. may refuse to go home for a short time, frightened that they will not be allowed to return to the U.S. (Chikaonda, 2021). Both the pressure of feeling *stuck* in a foreign country or deciding to return to a home culture can weigh on a person's mental health (Gallagher, 2021). In some other cases, as a result of U.S. embassies delaying and canceling student visa appointments for renewal visas, students may be stuck in their own countries, unable to return to continue their studies in the U.S. (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

These additional stressors coupled with more normative acculturative factors can substantially adversely impact retaining current international students and recruiting future students. Because international recruitment relies strongly on word-of-mouth advertisement (Dempsey, 2018), international students who invest time and money but do not achieve their academic goals nor have positive educational acculturative experiences will not recommend studying abroad for their friends or family members (Skinner et al., 2019).

Thus, universities inviting international students to their campuses would benefit culturally, academically, and financially in understanding the challenges of L2 international students whose presence has become a valuable part of the HEI scene. Without culturally diverse students continuing their studies in the U.S., HEIs face potential economic repercussions. Additionally, "if the culture of the institution… does not serve to validate and support [L2

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international students],” there might be a higher turnover of these students in the university, affecting international retention (D. G. Smith, 2009, p. 67).

Other more significant detriments cannot be measured in dollars and cents. The loss of culturally diverse perspectives and cross-cultural socialization could limit the critical thinking development of and exposure to diverse perceptions associated with U.S. universities. Class discussions and social spaces would be void of varying global mindsets, stifling the richer academic and social experiences on U.S. university campuses.

Exploring what students are facing and how they are adjusting to their new academic environment during the pandemic is the beginning of understanding how to help students succeed academically to retain these invaluable students on U.S. campuses. Understanding the problems that students are enduring currently may provide useful data for HEIs to maintain their current L2 international students and may help in U.S. global recruitment efforts (Skinner et al., 2019).

In addition, although there are several vaccines now available, other strands of COVID-19 and similar viruses continue to be a reality. Safety protocols are recommended in the learning environment across campuses, potentially interfering with academic acculturation. Gathering information about how L2 international students perceive universities meeting their academic expectations during health situations could provide further insight for ways universities can support students’ academic acculturation.

Research Question

Investigating L2 international students’ experiences during their first university semester in a bridge program could reveal how students are adjusting to their host academic culture, thus providing insight into how HEIs can support international students academically. HEI’s

intentional provisions in various forms, such as educational, social, and legal supports and specially-trained personnel for L2 international students, can perpetuate student retention and recruitment. With research representing international students' voices, HEI funding could be more purposeful toward meeting students' actual needs resulting in more L2 international student graduates.

For these reasons, this study explored one main research question: Per the students' perspectives, what challenges and accomplishments impact the academic acculturation process and success of L2 international students in a bridge program during their first semester of university amidst the coronavirus pandemic?

The open-endedness of this research question is designed to extend agency to students in expressing their perspectives about their adaptative conditions and how these environments affect academic acculturation. More specific research questions would yield data constrained by my perspective and would not sufficiently nor accurately probe the hurdles or achievements that occur during this acculturative process. No foreclosure should be placed on the voices of the students themselves. The particularistic lens of emphasizing only those academic acculturative variables noted in previous literature or focusing only on pandemic conditions would hinder the research's trustworthiness.

Should HEIs want to retain and attract L2 international students by tailoring services to these students' needs HEIs need to be able to shape their responses around the most accurate data possible. Therefore, the broad nature of this one research question permits multiple emergent reactions from students to share their own experiences from their academic context.

Probing if and how L2 international students perceive themselves overcoming acculturative challenges to experience success speaks to if and how students academically

acculturate to their host learning environment. Academic acculturation increases the potential for scholastic success (Berry, 1997; Cheng & Fox, 2008; Lane et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2002). This knowledge could aid universities in retaining their global students as active participants in U.S. university campuses and improve HEI recruiting services through positively impacted efforts based on understanding students' needs. In addition to and more importantly, those changes at the university level could improve future international students' overall academic and social well-being, contributing positively to their acculturative psychological adaptation.

The following chapters explain the proposed study in further detail. Chapter two reviews literature defining topic-related terms and presents some challenges international students have encountered during their acculturative process based on previous literature. This chapter also includes the gap in the literature that has led to this study and offers a theory that may account for research findings. Chapter three details how I conducted the study and analyzed the data. Chapter four focuses on the results that emerged during this study. Finally, chapter five discusses significant outcomes and their future implications.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I define relevant terms and describe key concepts from the literature that undergird this research.

Key Concept 1: L2 International Sojourners' Goal is Academic Success

In this section, I discuss the terminology generally used for international students who study at an HEI in the U.S. and the varying conceptions of what constitutes academic success.

L2 International Sojourners

Typically, the term *sojourners* is associated with travelers on a short-term vacation, such as tourists stopping in a location to sightsee – who pass through another culture but do not permanently reside there (Hunter-Johnson, 2016). In many cases, the vacation region embodies another culture. However, for this research study, the term *sojourners* (as applied in academic writing) refers to non-immigrant L2 international students who typically reside in a university learning environment from six months to five years (Anderson & Guan, 2018; Ward et al., 2001) with the intention of returning home after they complete their studies (Anderson & Guan, 2018). Most students will return home soon after graduation, although some may continue to pursue graduate degrees or internships in the U.S. (International Consultants for Education and Fairs, 2022).

Some L2 international sojourners begin their university journey by studying academic English language and basic collegiate preparatory skills in an Intensive English Program (IEP). Time in the IEP takes approximately one year. After this time, to assist with acclimating themselves to an HEI's more strenuous academic demands before transitioning to mainstream university classes, students may spend their first semester in a university bridge program. After

this first semester, in specially supported courses, these sojourners will transition to mainstream classes to complete a degree in the next three and half years.

Academic Success

Because the primary purpose of L2 international sojourners is to graduate with a college degree, understanding how universities and students define academic success is key to comprehending if students are reaching their short-term educational goals to attain their ultimate degree objective. Even though the term *academic success* is freely used in HEIs, its meaning can vary, making it difficult to clearly comprehend. Thus, for many people, defining academic success by GPA results or grades on assessments or completing a degree during the academic experience are final determiners of student success. However, other people may equate academic success as simply learning more than previously known (Cachia et al., 2018; York et al., 2015). Therefore, this section will investigate the denotation of academic success per researchers and its connotation per L2 international students.

Researchers' Denotation

Researchers tend to approach the concept of academic success more abstractly and have sought to define it through various published works (DeFreitas, 2012; Kinzie et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2008; McLain, 2008; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Even though definitions of academic success may contain some overlapping internal components, the different definitions offered in research *only sometimes* agree. In an attempt to provide a consolidated, evaluative definition of *academic success*, York et al. (2015) conducted a thorough investigation of multiple studies analyzing the defining notions of academic success. The researchers sought to validate or invalidate Kuh et al.'s (2006) definition of academic success, which states "[S]tudent success is defined as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities,

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satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance" (p. 5).

The coding and comparing various definitions and ways of measuring academic success, York et al. (2015) found that "Kuh et al.'s (2006) definition of success [was] inclusive of the multitude of nuanced definitions present on academic success" (p. 5), except for one important subtle distinction. The concept of *student engagement* mentioned in Kuh et al. (2006) falls under the psychological desire or motivation for a student to participate in learning. For this reason, York et al. (2015) view student engagement as a link to academic success instead of as a part of the defining element. Thus, they offer a slightly different wording from Kuh et al. (2006). According to York et al. (2015), academic success is "inclusive of academic achievement, attainment of learning objectives, acquisition of desired skills and competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and post-college performance" (p. 5). They also report *student success* and *academic success* as interchangeable terms in the literature they examined. In keeping with this terminology, I will likewise use these terms compatibly in this research study. This definition, then, is the research-based formal perspective of academic success.

Although York et al.'s (2015) definition provides a scholarly reference goal for this study, the additional purpose is to understand more about students' own perspectives of success. Therefore, this includes the necessity of exploring how students define their academic success.

Students' Connotation

Cachia et al. (2018) conducted a focus group of L2 international students to study students' perspectives of academic success. In this case, students defined their ideas about academic success as "[feeling] that you are achieving and growing as an individual" and "knowing who you are…and how you impact…other people" (p. 436). Involved in this

achieving, growing, knowing, and *impacting* process, students described self-management habits such as coping with difficulties, being self-aware, and taking personal responsibility as well as aspects they perceived as HEIs' responsibilities.

In describing those responsibilities, one participant stated, "[H]igher education, it should be something that makes you willing to keep on going, keep on researching. keep on informing yourself" (p. 436). While not specific in description, this statement reveals HEIs' responsibility to support students' desire to accomplish academic goals. One HEI research aspect identified as important for student success was the support provided by teachers, tutors, peers, and other social networks. Teacher support was described as presenting informative lecturers, showing concern about needed resources, and explaining errors on exams and coursework. Tutors checking in regularly also was reported as bolstering academic progress. Additionally, students perceived that interactions with teachers, peers, and tutors propelled academic success by fostering competence and confidence. Notably, among students' recognition of stable supporters were immediate family members who provided tutoring instruction, advice, and a connection to home (Cachia et al., 2018).

During Cachia et al.'s (2018) focus group, L2 international students also identified themselves as essential to their academic success reporting that individuals should be responsible for learning, dealing with challenges, and using their skills. Implementing organization skills to manage their time and resources was recognized as prominent to student success. "Time management is…giving time to some things that you want to do, and organization is making yourself do something, making a choice" (p. 436). Setting short- and long-term learning goals and time management strategies, were results of being interested in learning. L2 students also claimed that developing communication skills and professionalism, which can also be associated

with HEIs' responsibility, were vital. Overall, sojourners believed they contributed to their own university academic success through those items described above as well as by managing their spending, maintaining financial stability, controlling their resources, and developing academic skills (Cachia et al., 2018).

In summary, the international students in Cachia et al.'s (2018) recognized academic success as a process with an end goal, describing how short-term goals lead to long-term achieved. They linked professional competence with academic competencies. These students also assumed responsibility for their proactiveness in learning and recognized their need for academic and social support.

Relevance to this Research

Because international students must adhere to the university's established system of academic expectations in order to succeed and graduate, yet students own perceptions of success are central to this study, it is therefore beneficial to integrate York et al.'s (2015) formal definition of academic success with the students' perceptions (Cachia et al., 2018) in investing the topic of this study. Therefore, for the purposes of this study in using the terms *academic* or *student success*, I am defining this concept to combine York et al.'s (2015) denotative concept, "academic achievement, attainment of learning objectives, acquisition of desired skills and competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and post-college performance" (p. 5) and Cachia et al.'s (2018) concept of students' perception as a "[feeling they] are achieving and growing as an individual" and "knowing who [they] are…and how [they] impact…other people" (p. 436), which involves self-management habits and perceived HEI responsibilities.

Summary

At the beginning of this section, I defined the population on which this study is based. L2 international sojourners and then explored researchers and students' perspectives of academic success. After York et al. (2015) set out to validate and invalidate Kuh et al.'s (2006) definition of academic success, York and his collaborators presented an evidence-based definition of *academic success* stating it is "inclusive of academic achievement, attainment of learning objectives, acquisition of desired skills and competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and post-college performance" (p. 5).

Cachia et al. (2018) conducted research exploring L2 international students' perspective of academic success. Students in this study identified university academic success responsibility as being both with the HEIs who had invited them to study on their campuses and with the students themselves. In their opinion, students recognized that HEIs play a role in nurturing students' desire to learn. Students also depended on HEI teacher and tutor support but recognized they were responsible for the larger onus of learning, naming self-management skills such as time, organizational, and financial management as a basis for learning. Acting upon deliberate short-term steps helped to ensure long-term goal academic achievement. Students also valued developing professional and communication skills through classroom instruction and social interaction. Taken together, the conception of academic success in this study includes aspects from both the formal and students' definitions as explained on page 20.

Key Concept 2: Factors That Affect Academic Success

In this section, I discuss factors that inhibit or encourage academic success including educational styles, language proficiency, racial discrimination, and support systems. The first and most important hurdle is legal and language requirements discussed below.

Academic Success Begins with Legal and Language Requirements

Before applying for mainstream university enrollment, students must adhere to strict

qualifications to retain a visa to study in U.S. HEIs and develop academic English language

proficiency in IEPs. Then, students are eligible to transition to their university's bridge program

for their first semester to take credit bearing core courses in a regulated, supportive environment.

Visa Requirements

L2 international students hold a required F-1 visa, specified for non-immigrants studying

in full-time HEIs with intentions of earning a degree (NAFSA, 2010; U.S. Citizenship and

Immigration Services, 2020). Although international students may later choose to reside legally

in the U.S., the presumption upon granting an F-1 visa is that L2 international students choose to

temporarily live in the U.S. while studying, and then return to their home countries after they

graduate. Thus, the terms *non-immigrant and sojourner* refer to L2 international students.

While in the U.S., F-1 visa students are required legally and strictly to adhere to

attendance policies established by language programs and HEIs (U.S. Immigration and Customs

Enforcement, 2020b). F-1 visa holders must maintain up-to-date passports and other mandatory

documents with signatures from HEI personnel and departments who have invited international

students to participate in their college programs (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement,

2020b).

Intensive English Programs

Some sojourners need to improve their English language proficiency and academic

readiness skills – competencies required for academic success – before being accepted in HEIs,

Intensive English Programs, as accredited bodies (NAFSA: Association of International

Educators, 2010), provide English language training and fundamental academic skills useful in

passing university entrance exams and acclimating students to basic HEIs' academic expectations (Education USA, 2014). Although most IEPs are classified as profit-making entities and directly associated with HEIs' campuses (NAFSA, 2010), IEPs are generally not part of the mainstream university setting and provide different cultural contexts.

Below are some brief descriptions of available features in IEP settings.

a) Courses mainly focus on academic language competencies of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and grammar and are not usually for college credit (*IEPs: Questions and Considerations*, 2021; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2020). Typically, these courses prepare students for collegiate settings and aid students in passing university English-language entrance exams, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) (Education USA, 2014; *IEPs: Questions and Considerations*, 2021; International Language Institute of Massachusetts, 2022).

b) IEP classes are generally 18 to 22 hours weekly in 4- to 8-week sessions or in 16-week semesters. Different length programs allow for varying language proficiency levels adopted from the American Council for Teaching Foreign Languages (2012) or the Council of Europe (2021).

c) IEP courses are usually taught by language-teaching specialists holding a Master of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (MATESOL) and are not trained content specialists (*IEPs: Questions and Considerations*, 2021).

d) IEPs hold their own cultural events generally in their own physical space and are planned and hosted by IEP faculty, staff, and administrators. Some events, such as on- and off-campus field trips, occur outside this space, including visiting local tourist attractions.

e) Other than language and basic academic skills, IEPs' primary purpose is to be a gateway for L2 international sojourners to enter HEIs (Education USA, 2014), which assists with diversifying campus populations (Algren, 2016; *IEPs: Questions and Considerations*, 2021). For this reason, when possible, IEPs work with university bridge programs preparing students for the next steps in their university careers.

With an F-1 visa and sufficient language training, L2 international sojourners are now ready to begin their university careers. Some universities offer a bridge program as the next educational step to encourage academic and language competency and autonomous growth.

University Bridge Programs

After L2 international sojourners have attained college language entrance test scores, they can apply to a U.S. HEI and enroll in university credit-bearing courses (Turner, 2020; Zept, 2018). Some universities offer core courses through their bridge program. "The goal of bridge programs is to sequentially bridge the gap between the initial skills of individuals and what they need to enter and succeed in postsecondary education and career-path employment" (USLegal, Inc., 2022, n.p.). Bridge programs have been designed to assist L2 sojourners in university preparation by making "all university resources, amenities, services, and housing" available while students are transitioning to higher academic expectations (Turner, 2020, n.p.). For these reasons, L2 sojourners typically enroll in a bridge program during their first university semester.

As an indirect benefit of a university bridge program, L2 sojourners can improve their academic English language competencies under the guidance of course content teachers aware of students' language needs (Turner, 2020; Zept, 2018). During classes and through instructional support, course content specialists reinforce students' language proficiency while fostering HEI

academic expectations, a main benefit of the bridge program (Turner, 2020; U.S. Department of Education: Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2012).

In relation to this study, the L2 international sojourners who participated in this research were enrolled in the university's bridge program after passing their language entrance exams and completing the university's IEP. After the bridge program, these non-immigrant students intend to complete their undergraduate degrees within the next three and half years and then return to their home countries or re-apply to U.S. HEIs for graduate degrees.

The Challenges of Cultural Adaptation

In order to understand the challenges or cultural adaptation, it is first necessary to have a working definition of what is meant by culture as used in this study. Matsumoto and Juang (2004), well-known psychologists who have extensively researched culture in various settings, claim that the concept of culture can appear extremely extensive, inherently complex, and obscurely abstract. As a solution to the challenge of describing this complicated concept, they offer the following definition.

> Culture is a dynamic system of rules, explicit and implicit, established by groups in order to ensure their survival, involving attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors shared by a group but harbored differently by each specific unit [individual or subgroup] within the group, communicated across generations, relatively stable but with the potential to change across time (p. 10).

Helpful for this research study, Matsumoto and Juang's (2004) definition of culture focuses on the following three main points: a system of rules involving attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors; established and shared by subgroups and individuals within the group for generations; and the aspect of culture's dynamism, all of which I will elaborate on.

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Defined as a "System of Rules Involving Attitudes, Values, Beliefs, Norms, and Behaviors"

Culture is not sporadic or haphazard (Soudijin et al., 1990). Instead, aspects within a culture are related and organized. Culture never occurs in isolation (Spacey, 2021). The connections among individual and seemingly disparate elements engender culture's shared meanings (Matsumoto & Juang, 2004), which becomes a culture's system of rules, also known as *cultural norms* (Gelfand et al., 2011). These norms are based on a culture's values and beliefs (Hall, 1976; LaScotte & Peters, 2021) and are systematized (Gelfand et al., 2011). For most people, culture norms are considered the same as a culture's behaviors because they are easily observable. However, these behaviors visually represent abstract attitudes, roles, assumptions, and desires that are shared by the cultural members (Gelfand et al., 2011; Goodenough, 1981; Hall, 1976; LaScotte & Peters, 2021).

Cultural norms are regulated by *if* and *how* individuals follow these rules of living (Shiraev & Levy, 2004), referred to as "the hidden program" because individuals are not cognizant of this "program" unless the rules are broken (Hall, 1976). Hall (1976) claims that "the part of man's nervous system that deals with social behavior is designed according to the principle of negative feedback" (39). Shiraev & Levy (2004) concur that these norms would not exist in societies if sanctions were not attached. Examples of these prohibitions range "from physical punishment to friendly criticism, from material rewards to verbal appreciation" (p. 297).

Each culture's system of rules establishes and maintains societal stability by "providing a framework of social order" (Matsumoto & Juang, 2004, p. 11). This system balances the needs and desires of individuals and subgroups within the cultural group. Because culture embeds deeply within its societal members and is regulated within and by those individuals, culture is

considered a sociopsychological construct (Matsumoto & Juang, 2004), which indicates that culture cannot exist in isolation.

Established and Shared by Groups and Individuals

Each culture belongs to its society, subgroups, and individuals who established it because each community has its cultural norms reflecting its beliefs and values. As a result of culture norms being shared by a society as a whole and its members, each culture is passed on over a long period of time through learned behaviors (Goodenough, 1981). This is known as *enculturation* (Matsumoto & Juang, 2004) and defined by Kramsch & Widdowson (1998) as "a process by which a person [*internalizes*] the conventions of behavior imposed by a society or social group" (p. 131). In sum, the cyclical effect of behaviors reinforces a culture's same values and beliefs from one generation to another (Matsumoto & Juang, 2004).

Lindsay, Robins, and Terrell (1999) explain that culture is "a system that drives everything that [a person does] as part of a society. It is not only a reflection of who [a person is] to the outside but who [a person is] deep down" (26-27). Through socialization, culture is nurtured from birth into a person's inner self. Over a lifetime of learning and adopting beliefs, values, and practices within one's culture, a person's ideas, actions, beliefs, and viewpoints are shaped. These deeply imprinted repetitions influence each person's decision-making processes (Hall, 1976; LaScotte & Peters, 2021).

To metaphorically explain how deeply enculturation embeds itself, anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1976) compared culture (attitudes, behaviors, and values) to an iceberg. Although Hall did not provide an image in his writing, he describes cultural elements in such detail that others interested in cultural fields (for example, anthropologists, sociologists, and

educators) have offered their pictorial renditions. See Figure 1 below as one of the countless

visual images available on the internet offered to explain Hall's Cultural Iceberg Model.

Figure 1

The Cultural Iceberg
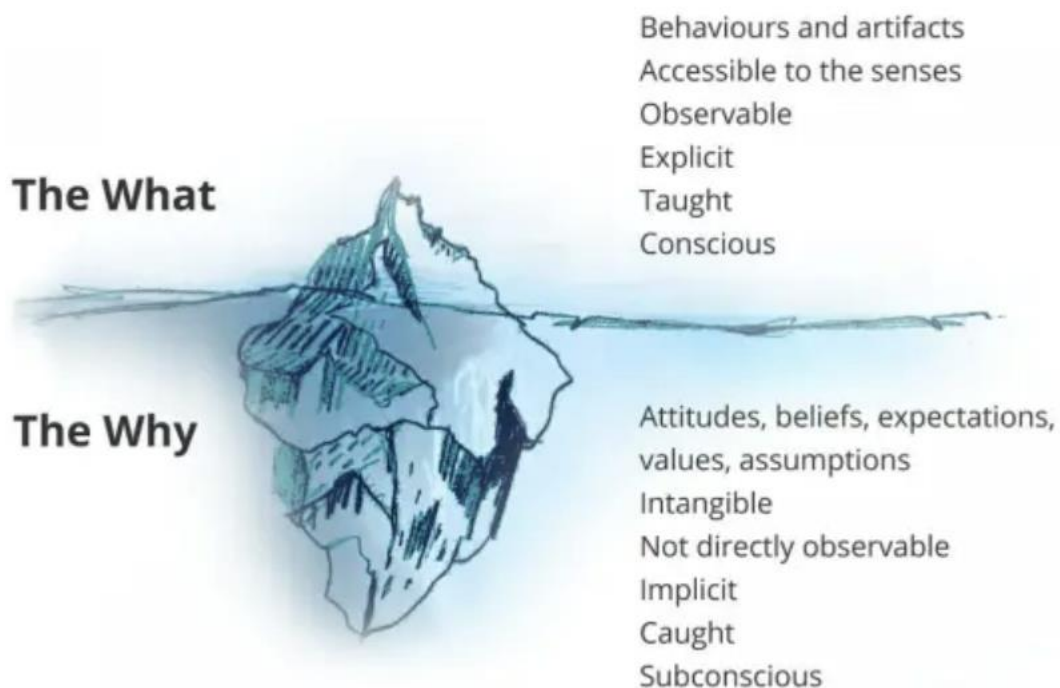
Note. The Cultural Iceberg, adapted by Sheri L. (2016) from work by Edward T. Hall (1976). Art

by Anna Seeley and Abby Smith. From *The Cultural Iceberg: What You Need to Know about*

Cross-cultural Communication, by G.S. Love (2019, April 5). *Go. Serve. Love*.

Hall (1976) proposed that an iceberg has visible and invisible sides as does culture. As

the tip of an iceberg is viewed, prominent features of one's culture are also easily recognizable,

such as language, dress, food, and customs. The iceberg's perceptible tip represents about 10

percent of a society's culture, whereas a large, unseen portion of approximately 90 percent of the

iceberg represents less discernible culture. Abstract concepts stemming from certain beliefs,

values, and attitudes, including religious beliefs, family roles, ethics, priorities, biases, assumptions, and perceptions (Hall, 1976) have been implicitly learned from one's surrounding culture(s), making them more subconscious and subjective and providing insight into cultural influences on societal and individual behavior (Matsumoto & Juang, 2004). Storytelling and religious beliefs, examples of enculturated abstractions, linger between the visible surface and the murky deep. Submerged incredibly subconsciously, some values and beliefs are challenging to observe altogether, even obscure to individuals themselves holding the values and beliefs (Hall, 1976).

Dynamic, Harbored Differently by Individuals, and Potentially Changing

Semantically threaded with the concepts of transformation, Matsumoto and Juang's (2004) definition of culture uses phrases such as *a dynamic system, harbored differently,* and *potential to change across time*, indicating the need for culture to adapt to ensure its continuation. The inability to adapt puts culture at risk of disintegrating. "[T]he formation, maintenance, and transformation of culture over time" is known as *cultural dynamics* (Kashima, 2019, p. 123).

Each system of rules is culturally dynamic. Adjusting to the push and pull of the influences inside and outside a culture, group members reframe socialized rules into shared meanings. How smoothly or roughly a society transitions its enculturated system is beyond the scope of this study. However, relevant to this study is the idea that when individuals encounter a new host culture causing an ebb and flow of new cultural influences, how much of the individual's own enculturated actions, beliefs, and values will the person maintain or reject or keep fluid (LaScotte & Peters, 2021).

Summary

This section explained Matsumoto and Jung's (2004) definition of culture as a set of repeated cultural norms based in a society's beliefs and values. Each society enculturates their group members through socialization, passing on these norms from generation to generation. When an individual breaks those cultural norms, others within the culturally internal system of checks and balances will correct the person to attempt to steer them on the road of the culturally acceptable with a hidden program of negative feedback.

Likewise, when an individual practices their cultural norms, others within the culturally internal system of checks and balances will accept their behavior, making the person perceive acceptance into the cultural system. However, being culturally dynamic, a society's culture can ebb and flow as individuals negotiate the shared meaning of values, beliefs, worldviews, and traditions. On an individual level, this negotiation maintains a person's connections with their own culture. When an individual resides in a unique culture from their own, a person's enculturation faces challenges.

Relevance to this Research: Culture's Summary

During their bridge program semester, L2 international sojourners will likely face dilemmas that influence their academic success, whether that success is defined according to the university's academic standards as explained by York et al. (2015) or the students' perceptions of academic success as explained by Cachia et al. (2018). Challenges emerge when L2 international students encounter differences between their heritage culture (enculturation) and the U.S. HEI host culture. These differences are known as *acculturative stressors* or *stressors,* and the conflict they propel is referred to as *intercultural conflict or acculturative stress* (Berry, 1997; Sam & Berry, 2010), characterized by "[the] ambiguity, or the confusion about how to handle or define the conflict" (Grothe, 2020, n.p.). Importantly, acculturative stress can distract

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students from their short-term goals affecting their long-term academic goal to complete their degree (Ahmed et al., 2020). This stress initiates *acculturative strategies* designed to ameliorate the conflict, but which can also affect success. I will discuss this process further in the next section.

Where the idea of acculturative stress and stressors is relevant here is that intercultural conflict is likely to occur quite frequently (Ahmed et al., 2020; Berry, 1997). Individuals within a society, in this case the host U.S. HEI culture, often view culture as innate (instead of as socialized) and, as a result, feel that culture is predictable. As a result, anyone breaking the societal norms or demonstrating non-predictable behavior is suspected of being irrational, irresponsible, socially incompetent, or simply inferior (Hall, 1976). When L2 international students interact in their new host environment, they will act initially based on their enculturated ways of reasoning and behaving. Consequently, when their interactions do not align with the host's culture's ways of acting, "the principle of negative feedback" (Hall, 1976, p. 39) will set into motion correction that informs the L2 student that their behavior is out of the relative normal behavior.

Because culture is dynamic and harbored in individuals differently (Matsumoto & Juang, 2004), L2 students can negotiate the shared meanings of their own enculturation to stay connected to their culture while making connections to their new culture. As a result, when L2 international students understand and learn from the host culture's *hidden program* of negative cultural feedback, sojourners choose whether or not to adjust their behavior to align with accepted host cultural norms (Hall, 1976). Aligning behavior with the host culture results in an affirmative host culture response, causing the international students to appear and reportedly feel more accepted in their host environment (Brislin, 1981). This repetitive conditioning "could

influence [students'] overall performances, thus reducing efficiency and productivity" (Ahmed et al., 2020, p. 202) and affecting their success goals. The cycle of learning to adjust to another culture is termed cultural learning (Landis & Brislin, 1983) and describes the cross-cultural adjustment process known as the *acculturation process* (Ward et al., 2001).

The Acculturative Process

Berry (2005) defines "[a]cculturation [as] the dual process of cultural and psychological changes that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their members" (p. 698). Per Berry's (2005) definition, cultural and psychological changes are outcomes of intercultural conflict. This conflict emerges out of an intrapersonal dispute between what Berry terms as *cultural maintenance* referring to the degree to which a person willingly sustains their own culture and *contact and participation* referring to how much an individual involves themselves in new culture.

Intercultural Conflict, Acculturative Stress, and Acculturative Stressors

Acculturative adaptation is a result of continual intercultural conflict (Berry, 1997, 2005). *Conflict* is defined as "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, [scarce] resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals" (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018, p. 11). Intercultural conflict extends conflict's definition to apply to struggles instigated between cross-cultural group members who recognize notably different perspectives and approaches to situations. Intercultural conflict is likely to occur quite frequently as acculturating individuals continue to encounter the new culture (Ahmed et al., 2020; Berry, 1997). Each time intercultural conflict occurs, it has the potential to distract students from their short-term goals effecting their long-term academic goal to complete their degree (Ahmed et al., 2020).

The impetus behind intercultural conflict is acculturative stress, normally perceived as unfavorable. Case in point, for several decades, the term *culture shock* was used to describe the initial stage of the acculturation process (Oberg, 1960). Noting shock usually connotes severe negative reactional change, such as the type of PTSD inflicted from war, Berry (1997) provides the alternate term of *acculturative stress,* arguing that acculturation is more closely tied to psychological models of stress and well-being allowing for varying reactions. He adds "the source of the problems that do arise [is] not cultural, but intercultural, residing in the process of acculturation" (Berry, 1997, p. 13).

Per Hall's (1976) explanation of intercultural conflict, when beliefs and values are challenged, the results are deeply internal and potentially harmful. Acculturative stress can involve a spectrum of feelings from discomfort to more moderate responses, including demonstrations of anxiety, depression, and uncertainty (Berry, 1997, 2005, 2006). Ward and Kennedy (1999) concur stating that "… psychological difficulties in sojourners have been linked to a higher incidence of life changes, loneliness, stress, and avoidant coping styles" (p. 661).

Factors that emerge because of acculturative stress are known as *acculturative stressors,* or *stressors,* and likewise, normally hold negative connotations (Berry 2005, 2006). Stressors can include daily routines, food, style of dress, customs, religious beliefs and practices, social roles, and any other factors involved in enculturation. As a resident in a new culture with aspects of enculturation being challenged, each enculturated element can be an acculturative stressor and cause acculturative stress.

For example, L2 international students studying in Western English-speaking universities report extreme acculturative stress such as loneliness, depression, and adverse ethical decisions when their enculturation is highly different from predominant Western academic and social

culture (Taylor & Ali, 2017). In these cases, one of the possible stressors is known as *cultural distance,* referring to how strongly dissimilarities exist between distinct cultures (Berry, 1997). Students who experience extreme cultural distance may face more overwhelming difficulties in their acculturation process and, therefore, encounter more academic challenges. This could cause in interference with their academic goals; increased interference could result in decreased short- and long-term academic success.

Acculturative stress is also likely to affect cultural identity. Quantitative instruments used to measure social identity are useful in recognizing stressors associated with cultural identity, including the following:

"*[B]elongingness* (how much one feels part of a particular group), *centrality* (how important one's group membership is for a person's identity), and *evaluation* (positive and negative perceptions of one's group), and *tradition* (the practice of cultural customs and the acceptance of the group's long-standing traditional norms and values" (Ward, 2001, p. 415). Desiring to feel accepted, or belong, among the host cultural group members while negotiating one's own traditions, or enculturation, can affect an acculturating individual's psychological, social, and cognitive adaptation, distracting from academic achievement. While research mostly focuses on negative impacts caused by stressors, some research indicates that stressors can also lead to positive attitudes.

Positive Attitude. Because of the potential acculturative adverse effects, the literature has neglected the positive attitudes reported by students experiencing acculturative stress. Resilience research in education has sought to add to this perspective of knowledge (Pan, 2011). Studies in this realm report that acculturating individuals are persevering and experiencing happiness (Abramovitch et al., 2000) and satisfaction during their acculturation process (Abdadi,

2000). Some researchers of cross-cultural adaptation describe acculturative stressors associated with self-identification, "including a sense of affirmation, pride, and positive evaluation of one's group as an involvement dimension relating to ethnocultural behavior, values, and traditions" (Ward, 2001, p. 415). According to Balidemaj & Small (2019), enduring acculturative stressors can increase individuals' self-esteem, positively assisting individuals in their acculturation process.

Currently, resilient research studies on L2 internationals in universities are sparce, creating a large gap in the literature. Reported positive attitudes would provide more insight into how acculturating individuals use stressors as catalysts for success and what stressors accommodate success. A recent quantitative research study with 92 male and female Middle Eastern undergraduate and graduate students indicated that based on age and a married support system, students were more likely to adjust culturally. Based on self-identifying responses to Likert-scale questions, participants, who were divided into three age groups, perceived themselves moderately to definitely academically and socially successful (Al Abiky, 2021).

Relevant to this research, students in this study (aged 18 to 25 years old) corresponded in age with students in Al Abiky's (2021) first group (aged 17 to 25 years old). Additionally, although no students in this current research were married, one student arrived with another family member and all identified some types of support system. Although most students in Al Abiky's (2021) study reported positive academic and social success, translating to positive cultural adjustment, several students in Al Abiky's (2021) study did not self-identify as academically and socially successful and did not adjust well culturally. Unlike the semi-structured interview nature of this study, Al Abiky's (2021) study was strictly quantitative and

did not afford an opportunity to investigate students' self-perceptions about their success and cultural adjustment.

Reporting the positive as well as the negative outcomes of multiple acculturating L2 international students builds the knowledge base about the acculturation process and develops the acculturating narrative more realistically. Before examining students' attitudes about their own acculturation, it is beneficial to know what stress factors the literature reports as contributing to the acculturative process.

Acculturative Stressors. Literature mentions several other areas of potential academic acculturative stressors. Most relevant to this study are related to *educational styles* (LaScotte & Peters, 2021; Taylor & Ali, 2017; Xing & Bolden, 2019a), *language proficiency* (Chen, 1999; Hu & Zhang, 2017; Liu, 2011; Xing & Bolden, 2019a, 2019b), *support systems and relationships developed and maintained within the new culture* (Cachia et al., 2018; Fox et al., 2014b; Lopez et al., 2002; Scanlon et al., 2007), and *racial discrimination* (R. T. Brown, 2020; Hanassab, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007; Park et al., 2017; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The following sections contain an elaboration on each of these academic stressors.

Educational Styles. Adhering to new collegiate expectations may feel so unfamiliar to some L2 international students that this remains misunderstood and seems overwhelming to master. Academic integrity, for example, is a "clear and essential expectation for higher education" (Hart et al., 2008, p. 223). However, the concept and practice of academic integrity may differ from one's heritage culture and the host culture. Knowing or not knowing or being aware or not being aware of the intricate practices involved in academic integrity is the first step

to learning how to interpret and apply this American collegiate expectation. A student who learns this difference has a higher opportunity for academic success in the host culture (Durrani, 2019).

Students familiar with U.S. HEI's understanding about academic integrity may apply the culture's program of negative feedback (Hall, 1976) to *teach* L2 international students how to avoid plagiarism and cheating to uphold academic integrity according to the university standards. Other academic dimensions also may not be transparent, requiring students to navigate elusive cultural expectations, such as instructional styles, classroom engagement expectations, and social norms in classroom and study groups.

Many parts of the world depend on centralized education controlled by the state or country in which one entity chooses the curriculum to be taught in varying schools around the centralized area on the same days. Most classes are conducted with a teacher-centered instructional approach (LaScotte & Peters, 2021). Students remain quiet and non-engaging (Xing & Bolden, 2019a) while relying on the teacher and the text to provide information.

Departments with U.S. HEIs having centralized guidelines for courses where multiple sections are taught, usually with little to no deviation in curricular goals, lessons, or expectations, may seem to be similar to centralized education in the beginning for L2 international students (LaScotte & Peters, 2021). However, for L2 students, taking notes may be an acculturative stressor. Taking notes is a separate academic skill related to language skills. Undeveloped listening proficiency combined with an inability to summarize and write simultaneously, students may struggle to take notes from professors' lectures. Also, accustomed to exams centered only around book content and less from class lectures and discussions, international students may be unaware of the need to take notes.

Student-centered discussions and team-building activities may also be unfamiliar to student newcomers (LaScotte & Peters, 2021). While situated in a large- and small-group discussions, L2 students may be required to solve problems while interacting with English-speaking peers. Relating to classmates while implementing problem-solving skills and expressing one's ideas in a second language among peers may be intimidating, especially if students have already experienced much negative feedback from their host culture. Likewise, engaging directly with professors and graduate assistants about one's own work and grades can present challenges related to unfamiliar academic sociocultural expectations (LaScotte & Peters, 2021). New to student-engaging scenarios, communicating with classmates, professors, and other academic staff may create acculturative stress that overwhelms or positively challenges L2 international students.

Per Taylor & Ali (2017), Western pedagogy typically centers around discussion, critical thinking, and debate. For Eastern enculturated students who are impacted heavily by the Confucian ideal of achieving harmony, the practice of confronting topics with direct authority is "threatening and perplexing" (p. 3) because such confrontational approaches are perceived as disrespectful to the instructor, the disseminator of knowledge. Instead, students from Eastern Asian pursue "a conflict-free and group-oriented system of human relationships" (Yu & Wang, 2011, p. 204). To maintain harmony, students will avoid conflict and disagreement, especially in the classroom. Assertiveness, as a Western practice, contradicts instilled beliefs of concordance. Therefore, Eastern students typically perceive Western style educational approaches as acculturatively stressful.

Language Proficiency. Demonstrated in the example about note-taking and academic interactions, language proficiency acts as a strong acculturative stressor for L2 sojourners. Low

verbal communication skills may frustrate or overwhelm students interfering with academic success (Chen, 1999; Xing & Bolden, 2019b, 2019a). "Students who have inadequate language proficiency are vulnerable during their academic acculturation because language difficulty causes stress and anxiety, which pose psychological obstacles" (Xing & Bolden, 2019b, p. 25) Struggling to communicate with peers, professors, and graduate students, L2 international students might feel helplessness and reluctance to participate in intercultural situations which can hinder relationship building (Chen, 1999; Li, 2004; Xing & Bolden, 2019b, 2019a) and contribute to intense loneliness (Chen, 1999), depression (Acharya et al., 2018) and feelings of communication incompetence and less confidence in general (Xing & Bolden, 2019b). In studies conducted by (Hu & Zhang, 2017; Xing & Bolden, 2019b), students with the inability to (quickly) communicate their desires report feeling less control over their academic and social choices.

An L2 sojourner, Liu (2011) journaled and later published her acculturative experiences. She addressed frustrations felt by inadequate language proficiency, confessing that the lack of fluent speaking hindered her talking with professors and classmates. Because of her low listening skills, she struggled to understand lectures. Undeveloped reading and writing skills created frustration while working through assignments. Further deteriorating the situation, she was too embarrassed to ask for help because of her low oral capacity. As a result of feeling communicatively incompetent, she also felt generally out of control of her daily academic circumstances.

Support Systems. Support has a bearing on self-esteem and academic success (Lopez et al., 2002). Additionally, it acts as "a coping mechanism for stress and distress, " including during acculturation (Lopez et al., 2002, p. 47). Literature conceptualizes social support in three

components (1) *support networks,* defined as a system of people who can be relied on for help; (2) *received support*, referring to the actions taken by the support networks; and (3) *perceived support*, defined as the support an individual feels they have received (Lopez et al., 2002).

When students transfer to a university, they have a *loss of* experience. This means they undergo *identity discontinuity* because these students have lost some support systems that help to define them. Developing new relationships through social networks is imperative for students' identity development and academic achievement (Fox et al., 2014b; Scanlon et al., 2007; Xing & Bolden, 2019b). Even though identity feeds academic achievement, a deep dive into student identity, per se, is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the focus is on academic achievement from the L2 international students' perspective. Therefore, identifying support systems and their influence on these students is relevant to this research.

For L2 sojourners, support networks spring from many sources, including classes, university social activities, and religious affiliations. Students can perceive support from parents, teachers, classmates, and close friends (Cachia et al., 2018; Lopez et al., 2002). Social friendships between co-nationals and host nationals promote social interaction contributing to academic achievement (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Fox et al., 2014b). Received and perceived support contributes directly and indirectly to academic success (Lopez et al., 2002).

Discrimination. "Discrimination denotes negative or destructive behaviors that can result in denying some groups' life necessities as well as the privileges, rights, and opportunities enjoyed by other groups" (Hanassab, 2006, p. 158). Discrimination can be based on physical appearance, dress, language, religious affiliation, or linked to social and political issues. Some students experience racial discrimination in differing forms, including harassment, verbal insults, and physical attacks initiated by negative cultural or ethnic stereotypes (Park et al., 2017; R. A.

Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Several studies (Hanassab, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007) have reported that students from Asia, Africa, India, Latin America, and the Middle East experiencing discrimination compared to domestic and European students (R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Social climate can ebb and flow with racial tension during times of disaster and trauma. Immediately after 9/11, reports about discrimination aimed at individuals, including L2 sojourners from the Middle East, increased dramatically (Lee & Rice, 2007). Asian Americans and L2 Asian students were ostracized, feared, and threatened as populations looked to someone to blame for the pandemic. The National Education Association issued a newsletter encouraging teachers to teach the facts about the virus spread to diminish racist acts that Asian students were experiencing (R. T. Brown, 2020).

Discrimination experiences can lead to lower self-esteem and depression (Taylor & Ali, 2017) and impact overall psychological well-being (Park et al., 2017) and social interaction (R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011a). Students who self-report low oral communication skills also associate with having experienced ethnic discrimination (Kunyu et al., 2021). L2 international students who have reported prejudicial experiences usually report that instigating individuals are fellow students, teachers, administrators, and community members (Park et al., 2017). These are the same entities needed as support networks.

Acculturative Adaptation

Ward (2001), whose work typically focuses on sojourners, recognized that acculturative stressors impact psychological, sociocultural, and cultural identity adaptations during acculturation.

Psychological Adaptation. Psychological adaptation centers around mental and emotional well-being (Ward & Kennedy, 1999) and is widely influenced by elements, including "personality, life changes, [acculturative strategies] and social support. For example, the psychological adjustment has been associated with personal flexibility, … relationship satisfaction, approach-oriented coping styles, and use of humor" (Ward & Kennedy, 1999, p. 661). An acculturating individual's attitude about their acculturation process can predict their psychological adaptation. People who experience negative attitudes, for example, distress and extreme depression are likely to choose to separate themselves from their host culture or engage only as much as is necessary to accomplish their goals. Likewise, people who approach acculturation with a positive outlook are more likely to adapt and achieve their goals (Ward & Kennedy, 1994) because they negotiate their own enculturation with the host culture. This example demonstrated how psychological adaptation is linked to sociocultural adaptation, which I will explain next.

Sociocultural Adaptation. Sociocultural adaptation refers to "the ability to ``fit in,'' to acquire culturally appropriate skills and to negotiate interactive aspects of the host environment" (Ward & Kennedy, 1999, p. 660) and, in cross-cultural transitions, relates to how an acculturating individual's social and cultural environment influences a person's behavior. Sociocultural adaptation is linked to cross-cultural learning and is influenced by individual's intercultural competence, how long they reside in the host culture, how and how much they interact with the host nationals (Ward & Kennedy, 1993), how different their own heritage culture is with the host culture (known as *cultural distance*) (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward, 2001), which acculturative strategies they choose (Berry, 1997; Ward & Kennedy, 1999), and how proficient their language communication skills are (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Ward &

Kennedy, 1999). Generally, sojourners' sociocultural adaptation follows a learning curve indicating swift improvement exhibited during the first several months of intercultural transition before gradually subsiding (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). How a sojourner interacts with the new socioculture interconnects to the person's cultural identity adaptation during the acculturative process.

Cultural Identity Adaptation. From a fundamental standpoint, cultural identification is how a person perceives themselves within a cultural society and how they process information about themselves and others who are outside of their culture, affecting an individual's identity perceptions within their enculturated and acculturative environments (Ward, 2001). Relevant to this research, cultural identity more deeply involves how much a person feels accepted or has a sense of belonging within the group.

Psychological, sociocultural, and cultural identity adaptations are interrelated but have a unique dimension of acculturation. Their distinctions are compartmentalized for research and insight, but these dimensions maintain an interdependent relationship. Acculturating individuals may experience these changes in tandem or subsequently (Ward, 2001).

Acculturative Strategies

The four proposed strategies for negotiating the enculturated self with an unfamiliar culture, known as *acculturative strategies*, potentially determine how a person will adapt to their new culture. (Berry & Annis, 1990; Dasen et al., 1988) *Marginalization* is described as little interest in or the possibility of maintaining one's own heritage culture or participating in the receiving culture. Berry offers reasons for this strategy, such as cultural loss (geared more toward forced acculturation as seen in refugees) and discrimination. *Separation* refers to the idea of highly valuing and maintaining one's heritage culture to the point that individuals avoid contact

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with those from other cultures. *Assimilation* is defined as (1) not attempting to maintain one's own heritage identity and (2) thereby being absorbed by the dominant cultures. *Integration* denotes the attempt to maintain "some degree of culture integrity," yet simultaneously seeking "to participate as an integral part of the larger social network" (Berry, 1997, p. 9).

Navigating intercultural conflict can influence a person's academic performance and ultimately a person's (student's) success (Ahmed et al., 2020). Reasonably, with this line of thinking, acculturative strategies used to cope with intercultural conflicts can positively or negatively influence academic goals achievement.

Relevance to this Research: Acculturation Process Summary

When acculturating individuals encounter host cultural aspects different from their own enculturation, the differences are known as acculturative stressors, or stressors. These *stressors* cause acculturative stress leading to intercultural conflict.

During acculturation in U.S. HEIs, L2 international sojourners have reported several acculturative stressors leading to acculturative stress, such as educational style, language proficiency, support systems and discrimination. In various studies, these stressors have interfered with the students' academic success. However, current resilient research has also shown that acculturative stress can produce positive outcomes even if the stressors themselves yield challenges.

The goal of this research is to understand what challenges and accomplishments L2 international students experience and how those experiences impact students' acculturative process and academic success. The most appropriate way to determine their thoughts about their acculturation is to ask the students. To understand more about students' lived experiences during their intercultural contact and acculturative process while studying in U.S. HEIs, L2 international

sojourners need to share their stories. To understand students' individual stories better and how these students navigate their acculturative process, it is useful to consider Self-Determination Theory. Therefore, I will explain Self-Determination Theory next.

Theoretical Framework

Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) helps to understand how "self" is intrinsically and extrinsically motivated. Although supported by six micro-theories, SDT at its essence focuses on the individual's need to reason, relate to one's environment, and make choices in interacting with one's environment. The Center for Self-Determination Theory (2022), a non-profit organization whose goal is to disseminate research and advancing practicing about Ryan and Deci's theory (2000), offers the following summative definition of SDT:

> [SDT]…focus[es] on how social and cultural factors facilitate or undermine people's sense of volition and initiative, in addition to their well-being and the quality of their performance. Conditions supporting the individual's experience of ***autonomy, competence,*** and ***relatedness*** are argued to foster the most volitional and high-quality forms of motivation and engagement for activities, including enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity (n.p).

Autonomy, competence, and relatedness are known as basic psychological needs (BPNs). Similar to Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, which posits that specific physiological needs must be met before the next hierarchal needs can be fulfilled, SDT posits that individuals' BPNs must be fulfilled before they can achieve the next set of goals. Per Ryan and Deci (2000), BPNs are "innate, organismic necessities" which "specify innate psychological nutriments that are essential for ongoing psychological growth, integrity, and well-being" (p. 229). Therefore, perceiving needs as being met indicates healthy, integrative, psychological growth and positive

consequences. Because psychological needs "concern the deep structure of the human psyche" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 230), the process of establishing these fundamentals relates significantly to achieving mental well-being and to success. Contrastively, if BPNs are neglected or frustrated, negative consequences will result. Therefore, exploring how L2 international students perceive their challenges and successes through the lens that their BPNs are being met elucidated if these students were acculturating well and achieving academic success.

Recognizing behaviors and attitudes can indicate if BPNs are being fulfilled (Ryan & Deci, 2019). Deci & Ryan (2000) state that "SDT suggests that it is part of the adaptive design of the human organism to engage [in] interesting activities, to exercise capacities, to pursue connectedness in social groups, and to integrate intrapsychic and interpersonal experiences into a relative unity" (p. 229). In other words, to fulfill these fundamental needs, people interact with their environment. Experiences with others in the external environment can influence BPN fulfillment and goal attainment. When BPNs are not met, individuals try to meet their requirements by finding or constructing their needs with their own internal resources. The extent of unfavorable conditions might include feeling rejected, overwhelmed or highly controlled, and not feeling supported. Compensatory outcomes can range from being defensive, self-protective, self-focused, and withdrawing empathy for others, and engaging in antisocial behavior. (Deci & Ryan, 2000) These behaviors and attitudes may distract from students achieving their goals.

Meeting BPNs involves deep psychological adaptation that influences behaviors and attitudes while people interact in cultural learning. By this logic, BPN satisfaction influences both enculturative and acculturative processes and affects goal achievement (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Connecting theory to this study, when L2 international students attend U.S. HEIs and encounter various challenges, I posit that they are likely to achieve academic success during the acculturative process when they perceive their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are being met. I will illustrate this in the findings. In the following section, I describe how each BPN relates to the focus of this study.

Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness

As with three types of acculturative adaptations – psychological, sociocultural, and cultural identity are unique but interrelated so are the three BPNs. Each BPN must be fulfilled so that it may support the other two BPNs and that an individual's goals may be achieved.

Competence

Ryan and Deci (2000) equate *competence* to "self-efficacy" (p. 69). "Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior, and social environment" (American Psychological Association, 2023). This definition reflects competence as a means of demonstrating skills and tasks and connects the idea of competence with the need for autonomy over self and in one's environment.

In this study, students need to feel competent about their academic and language skills, their abilities to take care of their own physical and mental needs and to interact within their environment safely. Competence to the point of mastery takes time and requires practice. As L2 international students learn to navigate their host culture in the classroom and in their social settings, the principle of negative feedback is implemented to direct the student toward improved social competence. Academic and language competencies work in the same fashion; interaction

and corrective feedback guide the student in learning language skills and course content. The

key to gaining competencies is found in maintaining a level of autonomy.

Autonomy

Per Ryan et al. (2021, p. 135), "The need for autonomy refers to the experience of

behavior as volitional and reflectively self-endorsed". *Autonomy* refers to the extent of control a

person perceives they have in their environment. A less autonomous perspective contributes to

feelings of powerlessness and incompetence and stimulates the desire to disengage with any

scenario or person perpetuating the control. Sensitive to variations in autonomy, people respond

differently.

Acculturative stressors and the sense of autonomy related to addressing them will affect

acculturative adaptations.   In Berry's (1997, 2005) Acculturative Strategies Model, he proposed

the questions of cultural maintenance (*To what extent will I maintain my own culture?)* and

contact of participation (*To what extent should I engage in the receiving culture?).* The level of

autonomy students perceived in being able to answer these questions their own way aligned with

the extent of cultural learning and sociocultural adaptation required from the student.

Adaptations to the university culture regarding educational styles and language proficiency

including classroom discussions, study habits, and interactions between the student and their

teachers and classmates will probably be influenced by the students' perception of autonomy.

Students who experience more autonomy are more likely to feel empowered to learn and express

themselves more readily. Because they perceive themselves as having more agency in their

academic setting, students will listen more effectively and interject ideas and pose questions

more comfortably. Conversely, students are likely to feel limits in their autonomy based on their

host culture's racial and ethnic acceptance (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Thus, levels of autonomy

during encounters with these acculturative stressors will shape students' cultural adaptation and their academic success depending on how they perceive the extent of control they have and how they respond accordingly.

Relatedness

Relatedness, also commonly called a *sense of belonging*, refers to the reciprocal relationship of feeling connected with others and plays a significant role in how comfortable international students will build relationships and interact within their host culture. This sense of belonging lowers anxiety and supports the student in autonomous and competent learning. For example, identified by Niemiec and Ryan (2009), teacher and parent support are connected to fulfilling students' basic psychological needs. Peer support increase student confidence and support social learning (Tullis & Goldstone, 2020). Understandably support systems are high stakes, normally resulting in the idea of having or not having support as causing acculturative stress.

Language proficiency is also identified in numerous students as causing acculturative stress. Because communicating in a second language sufficiently and confidently affects experiences, such as making friends with native speakers or speaking during class, second language proficiency has a significant impact on students' support systems and their feelings of belonging within the host environment (CITE).

Regardless of L2 language proficiency, making friends with students who share the same first language as the international student also impacts developing support systems and impacts feeling a part of the surrounding environment. Social activities where students can engage in their first or second language open culture and language learning opportunities building a students' sense of connection with their host environment.

Feeling related to other people in the new atmosphere also mitigates the stress of racial discrimination. Students who feel accepted in their environment are less likely to encounter the mental effects caused by the isolation of discrimination. Per Sun et al. (2021), American students in U.S. HEIs who help to create an atmosphere of acceptance for their Chinese peers help to buffer the negative mental effects that discrimination may have inflicted.

Relatedness as a key element of students' basic psychological needs must be fulfilled during the acculturative process for students to experience academic success.

Summary

Classroom interaction and building rapport with peers and teachers establishes a sense of belonging. The connection with others in their academic settings affects L2 international students' academic and social identity by encouraging self-esteem and assisting with sociocultural adaptation. Ideally, relating to peers and instructors will improve academic competence and contribute to a greater sense of autonomy, demonstrating the interconnectedness of the BPNs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Altogether, these examples of BPN's affect cultural adaptation and academic and social success of L2 international students at U.S. HEIs, illustrate the usefulness of this theory for this current study.

Next, I briefly explain the more uniqueness of this study in relation to the overall body of scholarship focusing on L2 international students at HEIs.

<div align="center">

Gap in Literature

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Usually, studies about academic acculturative stressors impacting L2 and international students are quantitative or mixed studies and begin with a survey containing a predetermined list of potential acculturative stressors. The positivistic structure of quantitative studies restricts the research to inquire only about what the researcher posits and does not allow more anomalous

student explorative responses. Mixed studies often constrain students' responses to minimal quotations probably because of lack of publishing space.

Although qualitative research should explore the participants' lived experiences, in the literature when studies are qualitative, researchers typically limit the students' words and voices, including mostly the researchers' interpretative words. Additionally, these studies do not report more anomalous findings, instead focusing on major stressors only. More often the literature concentrates on students from Latino/a and East Asian cultures whereas studies exploring L2 international students from Middle Eastern cultures are incredibly sparce. These studies mostly report acculturative stressors having a negative impact and rarely concentrate on students' resilience exhibited during the complexity of the acculturative process.

Instead of predisposing students to a ready-made survey consisting of listed acculturative stressors, in this research, students answered open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview that permitted them to share the story they wanted to tell. Mostly unique to this qualitative study, extended students' quotes supported my interpretations of these students' stories, describing specific stressor categories tucked into overarching themes. Students' descriptions include some of their accomplishments and the support that made them successful during their first college semester.

Qualitative stories from L2 international students about their adjustment experiences in a university bridge program are also rare. In fact, research into the literature revealed none in this bounded system.

Students in this study are predominantly Middle Eastern (Omani and Saudia Arabian) male. Very few studies record Middle Eastern men's responses to their university experience beyond racial discrimination and language learning. This research helps to humanize Middle

Eastern males, viewing them as college students who face a myriad of challenges and who also persevere to accomplish their goals.

As multiple studies exist studying East Asian students and their adjustments to university, language learning, and some racial discriminatory encounters, the one East student from China included in this project provided yet another set of cultural adjustment perspectives perceiving himself as the most ethnically and linguistically underrepresented person in the bridge program that semester. As an individual, he expressed many obstacles but also achievements, a rarer find in the literature about acculturative stress.

Remembering the pandemic provoked stressful times (Gallagher, 2021), this study revealed sojourners' challenges and accomplishments particular to those unusual times. Because the world is continuing to see COVID-19 variants, safety protocols have continued to be practiced and encouraged (Diep, 2021), prompting a need for research centered around students' perspectives of *pandemic-acculturative stressors*. Examining what challenges and successes L2 international students encounter academically and socially in a university bridge program provided a deeper exploration into these students' experiences in a setting not saturated in the literature.

To describe the pandemic context more adequately, Chapter 3 will elucidate some situations faced by L2 international students during the pandemic and then explain this research study's methods to investigate L2 international students' lived experiences in a university context during the pandemic.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Contextualizing the Study

Quarantine. Self-isolation. Face Mask. Hand Sanitizer. Disinfectant. Social Distancing. Outbreak. Flattening the curve. WHO. CDC. COVID-19. Coronavirus. The Pandemic. New Normal. Zoom Meeting.

These were among some of the most commonly used words in 2020 (*What's the Top Word of 2020?*, 2020), with *pandemic* being the Word of the Year (Italie, 2020). Toward the end of 2019, COVID-19*,* a virulent respiratory illness, spread quickly worldwide. This new strain of the coronavirus, not previously seen in humans, was named after the crown-like spikes on the virus' surface. COVID-19 manifests itself with mild to severe symptoms, such as "fever and chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, the new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, and diarrhea" (CDC, 2020b). Symptoms usually appear two to fourteen days after exposure. Individuals with any pre-existing illness, including lung and heart diseases, are at a higher risk of severe symptoms (CDC, 2020a, 2020b; Intermountain Healthcare, 2020). Since the original strain of COVID-19, other mutated strains, such as Alpha, Beta, Delta, and Omicron, have spread (Katella, 2022). Since the virus first appeared on the world stage in 2019 (Worldometer, 2021), the U.S. has reported one of the highest infection and death rates worldwide. The pandemic also had far reaching effects on the general population.

Pandemic Effects on the General Population

Beginning in the early part of 2020, from the first detections of this virus in the U.S., people sheltered in their homes for months because of government mandates attempting to confine the spread of COVID-19 (Fernandez, 2020; J. Wu et al., 2020). Following CDC

guidelines, people wore protective masks and sometimes disposable gloves when venturing out of their homes for necessities and mandatory work (CDC, 2020a). Once in public areas, individuals were encouraged to remain six feet (two meters) apart to reduce airborne transmission of the virus. Numerous people opted to order necessities electronically, delivering them directly to their doorsteps or vehicles to avoid entering stores (Sumagaysay, 2020). People worked remotely from home, while only essential personnel reported working in person (Lancet, 2020). Several businesses and institutions such as churches, HEIs, and K-12 schools also had to provisionally shut down or find new ways to cope with the times. In the case of HEIs and K-12 schools, classes were held online either synchronously through sites such as Zoom or asynchronously through sites such as Canvas. In either case, students were isolated from their peers and instructors. All of these behaviors were to limit the spreading of COVID-19.

In the fall of 2021, many universities and schools opened their doors for in-person classes for the first time in nearly a year and a half, requiring masks, advocating social distancing, and sanitizing hands. Most departments implemented new attendance policies for COVID cases. The scene for 2020 and 2021 changed the university's socio-culture with a significantly reduced in-person presence on campuses, sparce in-person social gatherings, canceled in-person student-organizational activities, required indoor masking, highly recommended social distancing, and new teaching and learning platforms. While the general student population felt these effects, international students experienced additional challenges initiated by the pandemic.

Pandemic Effects on International Student Populations

While the routines of U.S. HEIs were practicing safety protocols, international students studying in those institutions were in "particularly vulnerable positions" (Daiya, 2020) as these new requirements potentially contributed to acculturative stressors.

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In spring 2020, universities were forced to complete the spring semester in online formats in response to the declared national emergency. International students had to make the hurried choice of either being uprooted from their university studies and possibly losing their opportunity to continue their education if they went home or staying in the U.S., unsure when they would be able to return home again. Per a survey of U.S. HEIs in May 2020, nearly 92 percent of internationals chose or had to remain in the U.S. during this calamitous spring semester (Durrani, 2020a).

Because of this, on March 13, 2020, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), overseen by the U.S. State Department, issued a formal "exemption" for those holding an F-1 visa, which requires that students attend classes in person, acknowledging that appearing in-person for classes was probably impossible. At the time of this announcement, ICE clarified that this unprecedented exemption would be in place "for the duration of the emergency" (*SEVP March 13, 2020, COVID-19 Follow-Up Guidance*, 2020).

However, during the summer of 2020, the U.S. government declared that international students remaining or planning to arrive in the U.S. holding an F-1 visa must attend at least one course in person weekly to remain in the country legally (*NAFSA Resource on Fall 2020 COVID-19 Guidance for F-1 Schools*, 2020b). Although the nationally declared emergency still existed, ICE was reversing its March 2020 exemption policy, creating an uncertain atmosphere for its nonimmigrant students. At its essence, international students were faced with being compliant with U.S. law and risking their health to attend in-person classes or breaking the law and facing unclear consequences, such as visa revocation and deportation (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2020a). This mandate also meant that for some students to attend in-person classes, they would need to transfer to a different university offering in-person courses

because most universities were considering a predominantly or total online delivery in the fall of 2020.

Returning home while attending online classes presented its own set of issues. First, on April 28, 2020, per the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2020), 100 percent of global destinations enforced travel restrictions because of the fear of the spread of COVID-19, including banned travel to one's own countries. Even though 40 percent of countries had begun to ease these travel restrictions by the end of July (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2020), the entry restrictions usually meant quarantining at one's own expense in hotels or other government-designated areas for at least two weeks before returning home (Daiya, 2020; Rufo, 2020). This travel interruption added a layer of upheaval in students' HEI routines and acculturative processes.

Second, internet connections were not always reliable in some areas, making attending online classes challenging. Third, international students living in other time zones had to adapt to late-night schedules to accommodate their U.S. courses. Additionally, by returning to their home countries, a few students might lose their once-granted annual scholarships from their countries to attend U.S. universities because their visas might not be renewed in time to re-enter the U.S. (Daiya, 2020; Rufo, 2020). Finally, students were required to re-apply for visas which involved paying more money and making and keeping visa appointment(s) at U.S. embassies, which had either been closed or were working with a skeleton staff since March 2020 (U.S. Department of State - Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2020). This meant delayed college education and job prospects (Chandler, 2020).

Universities, acknowledging the cultural value and perspectives that international students bring to their U.S. campuses, publicly condemned the reversed policy through written

public declarations against the federal ICE policy (Madhusoodanan, 2020). After Harvard and MIT filed a lawsuit to ban the implementation of this newest ICE regulation (*NAFSA Resource on Fall 2020 COVID-19 Guidance for F-1 Schools*, 2020b), other universities enthusiastically joined the effort by petitioning the courts for a rationale for this policy reversal (Chandler, 2020). Per *MIT News*, "Unless the decision is reversed, the filing says, international students 'face the imminent, concrete, and irreparable risk of harm to themselves, their families, their education, their short-term and long-term health, and their future education and employment prospects.' " (Chandler, 2020). Nearly a week later, on July 14, 2020, the U.S. government withdrew its policy, admitting flaws, but with reservations. ICE would "continue to monitor the situation and may update its guidance if school closures and alternative learning procedures [remained] necessary this fall" (*NAFSA Resource on Fall 2020 COVID-19 Guidance for F-1 Schools*, 2020a). This translated that the matter was not necessarily closed, and as guests in the U.S., international students' status could be changed suddenly.

The depth of the political scenario involving international students extends beyond the scope of this study. However, its acknowledgment in this study is necessary to understand the setting of L2 international students in U.S. universities during the pandemic. In addition to the everyday acculturating situations, L2 sojourners were also coping with a layer of conditions spread atop their academic adjustment. For example, in addition to leaving behind family and friend support systems under normal international sojourner circumstances, attending completely virtual courses cut these students off from potential social outlets (Rufo, 2020). Also, per federal law, international students as F-1 visa holders cannot work off-campus. If they lost their on-campus jobs as a result of HEI mandates for emergency-work personnel only, paying for food and other necessities became another broad-reaching pandemic-induced obstacle (Daiya, 2020;

Quinton, 2020). Without work, some students could not afford food, negatively impacting their physical and psychological well-being (Eicher-Miller & Landry, 2020). Thus, in the COVID pandemic, L2 international students faced extra factors that could have negatively contributed to their academic acculturation process. It is in this context that the participants of this study began their bridge program and first year at their U.S. HEI.

<p align="center">Participants and Their Physical Setting</p>

Five Middle Eastern and East Asian L2 international students in a South-Central Plains U.S. bridge program participated in this study. Each student held an F-1 visa and was 18 to 20 years old. Invitations following Institutional Review Board (IRB) specifications were emailed to L2 international students through the university system. All students were currently enrolled in the university bridge program and in their first university semester at a U.S. HEI. Students voluntarily responded to the email. To protect students' anonymity, pseudonyms have been assigned; not even students know their new identifications. Except for me as the researcher, no one else is aware of these students' participation in the study.

In this particular bridge program, L2 sojourners took four credit-bearing core courses as part of their mainstream university coursework. Smaller class sizes and courses conducted by content professors aware of students' language backgrounds made this full-time course load more conducive for learning.

The previous academic year these L2 sojourners completed their official English language studies in an IEP. They accomplished their minimum college entrance score on their required English language test, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and Duolingo. It is worth noting that students in this research study had to finish their language requirements from their home

countries or attend a hybrid of online and in-person IEP courses because of pandemic conditions. This perseverance speaks to these students' commitment to strive toward their collegiate goals.

These L2 international sojourners were invited to participate in this study because although having attended an IEP, they did not have any previous college experience in their home country or the U.S. They were only taking core courses as opposed to a mixture of core and discipline courses, which would expose students to a different acculturative experience specific to their chosen fields of study (Durrani, 2020a). Furthermore, by attending the same university bridge program, the participants in this project were in a comparable environment, taking the same four-core courses, following the same schedule with the same instructors, and being involved in an environment intended for international student support.

Study Design: Case Study

Exploring L2 international students' acculturating experiences in their first university semester in a bridge program fits into a single case study approach. Yin (2014) gives a twofold definition of a case study. First, he states, "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be evident" (p. 16). In this study, students' acculturative adaptations began because of students' necessary interaction within their new environment. Because of this effect-and-response relationship, separating students from the changes initiated by being in a new environment and the context of the new environment itself is not feasible.

Second, Yin describes a case study as an "inquiry with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as [a] result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion"

(p.17). For this research study, interviews and weekly journals directed by prompts served as data points, as well as course syllabi and field notes. Varying re-occurring student experiences over eight weeks provided a triangulation method for these numerous data points to examine students' interpretations of their acculturative process in their new academic context.

This study was not suited for phenomenology, ethnography, or narrative inquiry paradigms because of this study's focus, research population, data collection, and analysis. Phenomenology research studies several individuals' conscious experiences, mainly through interviews, to describe those lived experience in detail and potentially create a composite experience (Brown, 2020). Ethnography is centralized around the sociocultural experiences of the participants. Ethnography focuses on observing people's lives, describing those cultural systems, and comparing that data with other societies (Suryani, 2013). It requires most of the researcher's observations to be made while immersed in a shared cultural group's lived experiences and followed up with interviews to understand the observed behavior.   Finally, narrative inquiry explores the stories of only one or two participants in spoken or written format and reports those experiences in chronological order of events (Creswell, 2013). These research methods generally use descriptive and explanatory approaches.

This research study involved investigating the phenomenon, or case, through in-depth interviewing of L2 international students, receiving students' weekly journals, and considering field notes and other documents related to the university context using more than one method compared to phenomenology. These data collection methods were triangulated to present themes focusing on the case and were supported by a large number of quotes from those living the academic acculturative experience and not consolidated into one experience as in phenomenology (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014).

This study was also exploratory compared to the explanatory focus of ethnography and narrative inquiry. I conducted an initial semi-structured interview around academic acculturation. I followed up with two semi-structured interviews based on weekly journal categories, which differs from ethnography because interviews usually feature questions about observations. However, pandemic safety protocols prevented me from observing students in their academic environments.

Instead of interviewing one or two people, as in phenomenology and narrative inquiry, I interviewed five people. Findings were reported according to themes instead of chronological events as in narrative inquiry. Even though students may not have been entirely cognizant of how their experiences impacted their acculturation process, I depended on students' self-described experiences to interpret their ideas about their academic acculturative process and their academic success. Therefore, the focus of the study, number of participants, methods of inquiry, and analysis procedures guided my choice to design this research as a case study rather than another qualitative research methodology.

Data Collection

The following describes how data was gathered in monthly interviews and weekly audio, video, and written journals, as well as thorough documents.

Interviews

"At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006). Without predisposing students to potential acculturative challenges or accomplishments, I facilitated semi-structured and discussion-style interviews with individual students. My goal was to listen to

verbal communication and note non-verbal communication, such as gestures and facial expressions, while observing students during their online Zoom interviews.

Interacting with students individually in person is the most powerful method for exploring students' own lived experiences. While I offered each student the option for in-person interviewing at a campus locale of the students' choosing, all students chose online interviewing. Each student participated in online interviewing through the university's Zoom internet video-conferencing tool with activated security features, including registration and login. This mode of interviewing gave L2 international students agency in communicating their ideas. In this interview manner, students opted to show or not show their faces, controlled their time investment, felt safer quarantining while participating, and felt less pressure to share in their controlled environment.

As students volunteered to participate via Institutional Review Board (IRB) specifications, interview appointments were confirmed through school email addresses. Before the first online interview, I emailed a set of open-ended questions to students via the university system for them to ponder their responses and gather English words and phrases necessary for expression if needed. Questions remained as open-ended as possible to allow students to share their perspectives.

During all three interviews, I referenced potential open-ended questions to prompt responses. I gave each student the choice of selecting their first question. As a question was selected, I pointed to each question for easier understanding. The second and third interview questions were focused on follow-up and clarification inquiries based on students' journal entries and previous interviews. Other discussion questions were also introduced. As done previously, questions were indicated on the screen. Some questions were spontaneous. I also had a list of

categorized questions centered around potential topics to refer to during the interview as needed (See Appendix A).

Interviews lasted about 45 to 60 minutes each. Three interviews were conducted during the semester for Week 7 or 8, Week 10 or 11, and Week 15 or 16, depending on each student's schedule. The initial interviews were scheduled soon after th IRB approved this research study. Data from the previous interview(s) and journals were clarified at the following interview.

All interviews were recorded via Zoom and automatically stored in the university's secure media venue for transcript purposes. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed by a transcriptionist service, who had provided a non-disclosure form in adherence with IRB regulations. Typed field notes and information attained through and about each student's interview were uploaded through university protection measures and IRB/university-mandated password protected software.

Subsequently, student interview recordings were erased after the research was transcribed and verified.

Weekly Journal Entries

Students were asked to recount their weekly challenges and successes, accompanied by how they dealt with any obstacles and how their experiences may have affected their academic experiences. They reported weekly using their preferred media form, such as written or audio. Specifically, students answered the weekly prompts: "1. A. What was a challenge this week, and what did I do about it? B. How did this situation affect my thoughts and actions about university? 2. A. What was a success I had this week? B. How did this situation affect my thoughts and actions about university?"

To encourage proper time management, at the first interview, students were asked to decide on a tentative day of the week to accomplish this task. I then sent a reminder email weekly, the day before each student's chosen day containing the prompts and a list of various forms of media that they could use for answering these questions. Students were instructed to choose the same media or use a different media weekly. The purpose of various media would allow students to communicate their ideas in a format that promoted the most autonomy and their most robust expression. The following is a description of the media students were invited to use.

Option of Written Expression

A more familiar style of written expression could assist students in communicating their thoughts and emotions (van der Vaart et al., 2018). By initially expressing themselves in a familiar medium, such as written which they use in their course work, students are more apt to have time to process what they wish to say. Nevertheless, for L2 speakers, self-expressive language may require less common vocabulary and obscure verb tenses rendering students more hesitant to share. However, two participants chose to submit journal responses completely in written format. A third student also primarily chose written journals. Nonetheless, to allow more agency, I offered other media of expression as I explain below.

Option of Nonconventional Media Expression

Creative arts, and other nonconventional types of expression can help students find unique ways of expressing ideas that are communicatively comfortable and foster agency (Coemans & Hannes, 2017; Knowles & Cole, 2008). Taking photographs, writing poems and stories, drawing pictures, and using hypermedia exemplify communication bridges between the student and the listener. In recognition of preferable expression styles, students were presented with the idea of communicating their thoughts through artistic means, such as drawing, painting,

and music, and thereafter discussing those ideas that were represented. No student chose this communication style.

Option of Audio and Video Recordings

As opposed to written records or nonconventional media, spoken journals are sometimes an easier way to capture thoughts about a particular topic, offering the advantage of speaking openly to a machine, not directly to a person. This type of journaling can feel safer. No scripts are required. Journaling orally allows students time to think aloud about an issue and offers a free flow of ideas, unencumbered by grammar rules. Audio journal entries are convenient and user-friendly because students can easily select a button on their phones or computers to record their thoughts at any time (Journaling Habit, 2017; Parikh et al., 2012; Sawhney et al., 2018) before uploading the recording to their secure university email to submit. Most students who used audio recording chose this journaling option. Students who chose audio journaling were also invited to report their audio-recorded responses on researcher-provided recorders to be swapped out before each interview, but they preferred the upload option instead.

As an additional option, students were invited to use *Flipgrid* or *VoiceThread*, secure online easy-to-use video and audio services designed for educational purposes (*Flipgrid. Ignite Classroom Discussion.*, 2020; VoiceThread LLC, 2021a). These cloud programs allow users to easily create video or audio files through any preferred electronic device. These video and audio files are instantly available after the student agrees to save the file. This saves the student time uploading and sending a video or audio file via email. As the "discussion owner" of these accounts, I was the only person with immediate access to the recordings. *Flipgrid*, a Microsoft subsidiary, only collects personal information to improve its product. User privacy settings were set at the highest private setting for this research (*Flipgrid. Ignite Classroom Discussion.*, 2020).

VoiceThread claims that privacy settings default into the program, but Amazon Web Services (AWS) Identity and Access Management (IAM) also provides added security for privacy protection (VoiceThread LLC, 2021a, 2021b). Only one student chose VoiceThread, and no one selected Flipgrid.

Students were asked to audio and video record in approximately three-minute segments, but it was emphasized that they could speak for long as they wished. The time goal was suggested to help the students plan for the task without adding too much to their weekly routine or causing them to feel overwhelmed.

Journaling Data Collected

Three of the five students participated in the weekly journal entries, where responses were typed or recorded, then emailed. Only one student utilized the audio recording option found on *VoiceThread* as an intermittent alternative to his weekly written journals. This student chose to record on *VoiceThread* because he had used this service previously for some IEP assignments. Altogether, one student emailed weekly journal entries six times during the nine-week opportunity, another sent five journal entries, while a third sent three.

The two other participants opted not to participate in the weekly journal portion of the research; however, at the end of the second and third interviews, these weekly prompts were asked of each student, resulting in all students responding at some point in some way. Although neither of the two students specifically declined the opportunity to participate in weekly journaling, only one volunteered why he had not participated. Intending to send emails answering the journal questions, he explained that each week was riddled with so much responsibility, leaving him feeling too overwhelmed to write. The other participant never commented on the journal entries, even when I mentioned them in our three interviews.

Document Data Sources

Syllabi

For contextual purposes, course syllabi were gathered from faculty members to further understand the participants' academic contexts and for cross-referencing purposes during data analysis. The course syllabi were used to clarify course information shared during interviews and to gain a sense of the content students were learning in their coursework.

Field Notes

Field notes were taken during and after student interviews and upon initially reviewing transcripts and while coding. Some notes were taken via voice recording, while others were typed in a field journal on a password-protected laptop. Field notes included observations of students' nonverbal cues and gestures during interviews and helped me to remember any significant details or particularly strong insights related to the phenomenon of interest that emerged while engaging with the participants during the interviews or while reading transcripts and coding.

Observations

Observations, such as student-teacher interaction in the classroom or at a library where students gather to study, would generally be an ideal method to study international academic acculturation processes on university campuses. However, because of COVID-19 related safety regulations, group study was discouraged in libraries (noted by the marked-off seating with yellow tape), and most in-person classes were moved to online scenarios. In-person classes were also restricted to a certain number of people for safety conditions, and there was no place for an observer to attend. As a result, observations for this study were not possible given the pandemic context restrictions.

Triangulation between the interviews, journal entries, and documents yielded a rich data set about the phenomena of interest with several significant findings emerging the process of data analysis.

Data Analysis

Coding

One way to extract meaning is through the process of coding. Per Charmaz (2001), coding is a crucial link between the raw data and the comprehension of ideas within the data. Saldaña (2016) describes the transitional coding process as distinctly separating fused meaning into the two sublevel concepts of coding: decoding and encoding. He explains clearly, "[W]hen we reflect on a passage of data to decipher its core meaning, we are *de*coding, [and] when we determine its appropriate code and label it, we are *en*coding (Saldaña, 2016, p. 5, emphasis in original)." Thus, the term *coding* is used in this research to refer to both ideas.

The heuristic nature of coding allows the researcher to explore the meaning behind the text from multiple angles. Coding unfolds the meaning within texts from various perspectives based on coding techniques and the researcher's ontological and epistemological standings. The coding process should be cyclical for analysis and dependability to "make meaning" from raw data (Saldaña, 2016, p. 8).

"A code in qualitative inquiry is often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 3) in order to describe the meaning in the respondents' text as it relates to the focus of a study.

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Qualitative coding seeks to identify patterns in collected data; in other words, "repetitive, regular, or consistent occurrences of action/data that appear more than twice" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 5). These patterns reflect what Saldaña (2016) describes as "people's 'five Rs': routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships" (5). Patterns help construct an understanding of human actions, making what might initially appear chaotic or related as "more comprehensible, predictable and tractable" (Stenner, 2014, p. 143)". To conduct this research's coding, I looked for ideas and phrases that were repeated throughout the data and across participants. For example, a concept that appeared in the transcripts multiple times was the idea of language proficiency. In the pre-coding stage of examining the transcripts, I read students mentioning phrases, such as "English speakers", "Americans", "second language", and "English". I also noticed that generally these phrases were embedded in stories about students' perceived language deficiency. Keeping in mind that my research was to identify challenges students faced, during the pre-coding stage, I coded these situations generally as "Challenge: Language Proficiency". However, after pre-coding some interview transcripts, I realized that students were specific about when and where they faced their language challenges. Recognizing the students' settings influenced the interpretation of these research findings, I re-examined the situations students described in the transcript and identified the setting more specifically in my codes. For example, if the described situations were in a social setting, I specifically coded "Challenge: Language Proficiency: Social". When the situation occurred in an academic setting, I distinguished the struggle with language ability as affecting the academic setting and, therefore, added "Academic" to the code in addition to the specific space where the language challenge happened. For example, when the student reported an incident of struggling with their "second language" or "English" in class, I coded it as "Challenge: Language Proficiency: Academic: Class". Likewise, when the situation

occurred while the student was studying alone, I coded it as "Challenge: Language Proficiency: Academic: Studies". Other codes and sub-codes were used to interpret meaning from students' explanations and phrases. Saldaña (2021) reports that "a datum is …, when needed, secondarily coded to discern and label its content and meaning according to the needs of the inquiry" (p. 19). Applying secondary coding labels for this research established the patterns of Saldaña's five Rs.

As I coded the transcripts looking for common and uncommon acculturative stressors as well as students' acculturative strategies, I was influenced by the recent literature surrounding acculturation and academic success. Additionally, in keeping with the theoretical framework, I was also attentive to references of choice, which relates to autonomy; the inability to academically perform, which relates to their ideas of competence; and family, friends, teachers, classmates, which relates to their ideas of relatedness and sense of belonging.

For the purposes of this research, I coded data frequently, including between interviews and journal entries to reveal insightful perspectives. Filtering students' ideas through my coding process positively affected follow-up interviews allowing me to inquire about specific topics to clarify ideas. I attempted to allow coding to reveal students' perceptions about their lived experiences instead of declaring any pre-determined inclination.

As codes emerged, they were categorized according to related themes to provide a sense of order. Codifying codes helps to synthesize data, not in a reduction of information, but as "*consolidated meaning*. That meaning may take the symbolic form of a category, theme, concept, or assertion, or set in motion a new line of … interpretive thought" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 10). The information illuminated in the themes were reported in the findings and are discussed in the final chapters of this dissertation. For a list of codes and related themes, see Appendix B.

To represent the emergent themes, I took note of relevant examples that illustrate these themes through students' own voices. Extended student quotes were included in the findings to preserve students' perspectives and allow them to tell their stories in their own words. Important outlying information was also reported to illuminate the diversity of students' experiences, both those ideas exemplified in the literature and more unique findings. Each experience, common or rare, could lead to practical implications, such as necessary services that apply to most or all students including campus student orientation information; international and second-language student organization and event information; additional faculty, staff, and administrator professional development; specialized support staff training and services; and expanded cafeteria and food court options. Implications, such as mental or physical health recommendations, may only apply to a few students rather than large groups but are still equally important.

Trustworthiness of the Research

"To what extent can the researcher trust the findings of a qualitative study?" (Merriam, 1988, p. 166). Before posing this question, Merriam explained that qualitative researchers had retheorized positivistic research terms such as *internal validity, external validity,* and *generalizability* to validate that, even without replicating an exact study, exploring individuals' lived experiences can be achieved with rigor and trustworthiness. For this reasons, Lincoln & Guba (1985) offer the words *credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability* to better describe the concept of trustworthiness of qualitative research.

Specific processes were applied throughout this research study's data collection methods, analytical procedures, and interpretation of information to establish *dependability* and *credibility* so that outcomes could potentially be transferrable and relevant to other HEI settings with similar students. I describe these processes in the following section.

Credibility and Dependability

Merriam (2009) provides five processes to support credibility and four to support

dependability. There is an overlap in these practices, as seen in the table on the next page.

Table 2:

Credibility and Dependability

Credibility	Dependability
Triangulation	Triangulation
Member Checks	
Adequate Engagement	
Reflexivity/Positionality	Reflexivity/Positionality
Peer Examination	Peer Examination
	Audit Trail

Note. Merriam's (2009) procedures support credibility and dependability in qualitative

research.

Each of these explained below was used in this research study as checks and balances to provide

as much accurate evidence as possible.

Triangulation. Using triangulation, researchers can clarify they have gathered accurate

information (Fine et al., 2000; Stake, 2000). "Methodological triangulation involves a complex

process of playing each method off against the other to maximize the validity of field efforts"

(Denzin, 1978). Merriam (2009) recommends substantiating data throughout the research study,

such as cross-checking various people's interviews about similar events with differing

viewpoints.   Sources triangulated in this research included interviews, weekly journals, field

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notes, and syllabi. Cross-checking occurred between the different participants' data and within each student's own data.

Member Checks. Known as *member checks* or *respondent validation*, this task ensures more accuracy in reporting researcher's interpretation (Merriam, 2009, p. 217). For the students to "check" my interpretation, I reflected on my field notes and a student's previous interview responses prior to the upcoming interview. Then, I incorporated clarification questions and re-asked, when necessary, some of the same previous interview questions in the second and third interviews. Because this study was completed during finals week and students returned to their home countries, they did not respond to follow-up emails in the intersession between semesters nor the following semester. Without this contact, I could not verify my interpretations from the third interview. However, much information gathered during the third interview crosschecked with information from the first and second interview, for example, discussions about academic success, course challenges, social opportunities and many times the lack thereof, and various people in their support systems.

Adequate Engagement. Adequate or prolonged engagement during research indicates that enough time has been spent in the setting to understand the phenomenon of interest (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Merriam, 2009). To dedicate adequate time to this study, I conducted three one-hour interviews during nine weeks with each of five students, collected and read weekly journals, and communicated with participants about interviews and weekly journals as well as answered various other correspondences from the students. Additionally, I took observation and reflective field notes during and after interactions with participants and pre-coded notes to identify significant quotes and salient information (Saldaña, 2016), both to prepare for the next interviews and begin the recursive process of analysis. I also scoured through different data

sources initially to draw meaning from the texts. Overall, I spent at least 20 hours weekly for 12 weeks dedicated to collection and pre-analysis.

Reflexivity, or Positionality. Positionality requires that researchers "explain their bias**,** dispositions, and assumptions regarding their research to be undertaken". Explanations of positionality affords the reader understanding of the values and attitudes influencing the researcher's interpretations of the data (Merriam, 2009, p. 219).

Having taught in Intensive English Programs for more than 20 years, preparing L2 students, usually internationals, with academic English-language skills to attend a U.S. HEIs, I have seen hundreds of students anxiously anticipate the goal of being accepted in these institutions. However, not being one of those students, I was unsure of the challenges that they face after their freshmen year begins, such as adjusting yet again to another new learning environment after the Intensive English Program. Before this research, I actually had little knowledge of the acculturative and academic challenges individual students encounter once they enter their chosen HEI. What small amount I have gathered through my years of teaching has been in conversations with former students after they were enrolled in mainstream university. Now, because of pandemic conditions, I especially wondered what added hurdles students encountered.

I did, however, have some sense of acculturative challenges outside of academic settings. Living overseas for nearly three years with few support systems, I struggled to assimilate in my new setting. At the very least, I differed in language and religious beliefs from people in my host culture. This experience makes me acutely sympathetic to acculturating individuals. Because of my personal acculturative experience, I had to protect against my response to over-sympathize with students, exacerbate their circumstances, or unduly predispose students to ideas or

misrepresent their voices in the data analysis process by reflecting in my field notes about my tendency toward bias and utilizing my interview protocol to refrain from asking biased questions.

Additionally, each student in this research had previously been in some of my IEP courses. At times, I was at risk of slipping back into my *instructor role* instead of the researcher. Being their past academic English language teacher and recalling the "You are doing well. Keep trying" role, caused me to remember my strong desire for each student to succeed. Knowing the students' personalities well and their language progress affected my biases in assuming why students encounter struggles and conflicts. Thus, preparing interview protocols and meeting IRB standards prior equipped me with the tools to prioritize the researcher role.

To mitigate my biases and to better sustain my position, as a researcher, I recognized that my role was to listen to and report students' lived experiences as accurately as possible. I asked many questions to clarify and verify written interpretations of their accounts when I could and reported the data using extended quotes. I practiced member-checking procedures as best as I could through the interview clarification process to protect against projecting my ideas into the students' perceptions of their experiences.

To draw real implications from the student information, it was pertinent that only accurate information be reported. My belief that each L2 student should be valued and provided with equal grounding to earn a higher education degree, the same as domestic students, drove my desire to uphold my research with integrity as I encouraged them to share their voices and promoted their agency to express their own perspectives.

As an outsider to these students' acculturating phenomenon, I cannot completely understand these students' own lived experiences, no matter how much data is gathered. However, the more research about students' acculturation and the more students are heard and

able to share their own perspectives and their own voices, the better equipped receiving universities and their campus climates will be at establishing preventative and encouraging practices to foster L2 sojourner academic success. Universities that benefit so well from these students owe it to them to try to understand how these students are or are not adapting to their learning environment (H. Wu et al., 2015) and if they are meeting their academic success goals.

Peer Examination. A practiced research method within academia, asking peers to read and offer feedback about research offers a fuller and more accurate account of shared information (Merriam, 2009). For this study, my advisor provided me with extensive feedback and discussion as she read this research study. As someone whose background is a third culture, my advisor shared her robust perspectives about cultures as we scoured through this research study. By definition "third culture kids" reside for a limited time in a place other than their family's citizenship or their own passport country. Because third-culture persons are exposed to pluralistic cultures, they are aware of an array of cultural mores, enhancing their intercultural competence (Bose, 2020). In living and going to school in other countries, my advisor has also experienced her own acculturative process. Additionally, one of her research specializations is cross-cultural engagement and understanding, which includes issues surrounding direct and extended cultural contact, and intercultural competence. She has also worked with second language speaking students from various cultural backgrounds in the past seven years in the education field.

My committee members who also have a wealth of intercultural experiences and research expertise also provided important feedback and insights as they examined drafts of this dissertation.

Audit Trail. Merriam (2009) states that an audit trail provides three descriptive purposes: how the data was collected, how decisions were made throughout the research process, and how categories and themes were decided. I kept an audit trail as part of my field notes to trace research steps credibly and dependably (Dey, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) through reflections, questions, some visual descriptions of students during interviews, and some impressions about data while coding, some of which has served as analytic memos (Saldaña, 2021) of decisions I was making. I also retained dated email communications between me and students about participant reminder's notices and interview questions. In all of these procedural choices, the goal was to make the outcomes of this study not only trustworthy but potentially transferable to other HEIs hosting L2 international students.

Transferability

The concept of generalizability, or external validity, in quantitative research, indicates that research is conducted following a set of rules and is, therefore, replicable exactly in other studies. Because of the nature of qualitative research, this concept does not apply; however, *transferability* is more suited. Each qualitative study is based on heavily detailed accounts of the in situ context, causing these exact details to be specific to that study and impossible to reproduce. Thus, in the concept of transferability, the goal is to represent the study design, context, participants, data and outcomes in enough detail and description that others can see how the research can be applied to other contexts and studies.

To interpret and apply the meaning of the data, a well-developed context from where data originates or from the people to whom the data originated needs to be described. Qualitative research has the strength of presenting such elaborative features about the context and people in each research study. It creates a complete picture of where the data was obtained and the

circumstances to which it can be applied (Huberman & Miles, 2002). Eisner (1991) writes that "[Detailed description] is an expansion of our kit of conceptual tools…Through this process, knowledge is accumulated, perception refined and meaning deepened" (p. 211). In this regard, the researcher must write highly detailed accounts describing the context of that study, particularly the findings, so that the details can help establish the setting (Merriam, 2009).

Transferability in this study was established through detailed descriptions of the study design, the context of the study and thick description of the data. More specifically, the following chapters were written applying a *thick description* to elucidate the findings and discussions of this research study thoroughly. Thick description as well as typical sampling were utilized in this research study to contribute to its transferability.

Thick Description.   Borrowed from the field of anthropology, the term *thick description* is used in qualitative research, to describe "the complete, literal description of the incident or entity being investigated" (Merriam, 2009, p. 43). Thick description depicts events, people, or themes of a study. Often, thick description is based on observations. However, in this study, observations were unsafe because of pandemic conditions. Consequently, the thick description in the results were based on several student interviews, weekly journals, and field notes.

In the role of a researcher and an 'outsider' to the L2 international student experience, I realized that only those students could understand their own experiences. Therefore, interpretations of their events and perceptions portrayed in this study were founded in the students' own descriptions about their lived experiences. Erickson (1986) writes, "[Thick description] is the combination of richness [of detail] and interpretative perspectives that make the account valid. Such a valid account is not simply a description; it is an analysis" (p. 150).

My analysis of the data gathered directly from the students afforded me reliable and credible materials with which I was able to create rich, detailed interpretative accounts of the experiences contributing to the studies' potential transferability.

Typical Sampling. Also, contributing to transferability, the L2 international sojourners in this study represent people typically enrolled in other bridge programs in U.S. HEIs. The information learned from them is likely applicable to other students fitting the bounded system described in this study (Merriam, 2009).

Summary

This case study was purposefully designed to answer the research question of exploring L2 internationals students' own perspectives about their acculturative and academic success during their first university year. To ensure rigorous and transferable research for other bridge programs, I implemented this methodology as explained. This rigor helped me to bracket my bias and report students' voices accurately as I understood them, solidifying the significance of the results from the findings.

The findings in Chapter 4 present themes revealed during coding and are explained using extended quotes to support students' perceptions about their acculturative and academic success.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the themes that emerged from the data. One theme contextualizes why students' viewed studying in the U.S. as so important, and another theme presents their perceptions of academic success. The other three themes address the challenges and accomplishments impacting participant-perceived acculturation and success. To situate these themes, this chapter begins with a contextual overview of university culture during the pandemic and then briefly describes the participants.

Contextual Overview: University Culture Consists of Three Dimensions

For this research, understanding the connection between the academic and social aspects of university culture coupled with the impact of the pandemic influences how students extended quotes are viewed.

In this study, students were entrenched in both academic and social dimensions affected by the repercussions of the pandemic which overlapped and interfered with most academic and social living experiences. In normative circumstances, university culture consists of two overlapping domains - the academic and the social. Separate but interconnected, these two cultures support each other directly and indirectly. Occurrences during academic interactions impact students' social interchanges. Conversely, what occurs during students' social interactions bears on their academic activities.

Comprehending the breadth and depth of academic and social domains clarifies how they intersect. For example, academics extend from the classroom to include students' study habits, incorporating how students implement language and study skills, where students plan to study (for example, publicly or privately), and with whom they plan to study (for example, L1 or L2

peers or alone). Social culture exceeds personal and entertaining situations to include peer connections established in university classrooms but further develops during peer study interactions in libraries, common rooms, and restaurants. These relationships may continue to expand to typical social settings involving leisure activities, reinforcing a sense of belonging outside the classroom and lowering affective filters in the classroom. In this way, studying with peers in public versus studying alone in a student's own secluded space exemplify how academic and social domains are intertwined and support one another.

The separation and interconnection between academic and social spheres became less clear than normal when the pandemic domain dominated these other two. As an example of the pandemic's influence on the other domains, social isolation was mandatory, forcing students to socially distance while studying publicly, through attending online classes, or when attending in-person classes. The social distancing between individuals constrained interactions between L2 students and their peers, instructors, and support staff, thus impacting perceptions of success. As a result, the academic and social challenges and accomplishments affecting academic success identified by the five students in these findings sometimes included elements influenced by the pandemic.

Understanding how the three domains - academic, social, and pandemic - interrelate within university culture and impacted students' lived experiences helped contextualize participants' responses during the study. Additional context and background information were gathered during the interview process. This information helps construct a picture of each participant's unique circumstances and identity. Next is a brief introduction of the five L2 international student participants that provides further information to help understand their responses and direct quotes.

L2 International Students in this Study

Five male L2 international students studying in a U.S. HEI. bridge program during their first university semester participated in this research. Each student had recently completed their university's Intensive English Program and their English-language exams to gain entrance into the university. Their first semester was in their university's bridge program.

Four of these students from Middle-Eastern countries (Oman and Saudi Arabia) spoke Arabic as their first language (L1). One student from East Asia (China) spoke Mandarin Chinese as his L1. All students were between the ages of 18 to 25 and had never attended university in any country previously. For anonymity, students' names have been changed to Ahmed, Basim, Hakim, Kareem, and Li.

During this research, Li planned to earn a degree in Business Management with a co-major or minor in Japanese. He also wanted to complete university in three years in order to graduate college more in time with his high school peers attending other universities in his home country.

Basim, majoring in Aviation Management, was attending college through a five-year government scholarship. He had already completed one year while studying English. Somewhat quiet-spoken, Basim had a sense of humor and smiled a lot during our interviews. He also enjoyed playing video games.

Ahmed and Hakim had a similar government scholarship to Basim. As a Geophysics major, Ahmed chose his current U.S. HEI based on online friends' recommendations. He was eager to attend his specific university recognizing its leadership in his major. This idea promoted his confidence and drive to complete his degree. He demonstrated much determination to study.

Hakim was a Geology major who was eager to learn to live independently so much so that his mother taught him to shop for the right ingredients and cook some of his favorite dishes. Hakim also had a sense of humor and seemed to use social interaction for learning. Highly intelligent but preferring to spend time with his friends, he often procrastinated completing his schoolwork.

Kareem, majoring in Chemical Engineering, shared an apartment with his brother who was two years ahead of him in college. He had an optimistic disposition. He was focused on accomplishing his academic and social goals and spent much of his social time in-person or online with his university friends, chatting on social media with friends out of state, or talking with others through online video games.

Each student in this study demonstrated determination to complete their bachelor's degree from a U.S. university successfully. The following is a description of the reasons these students chose to study in a U.S. HEI and how these L2 international students defined academic success in working toward their goal of degree completion.

Reasons for Earning a Degree from a U.S. HEI

To understand why students wanted to study in a U.S. HEI during a global pandemic, students were asked to reflect on what brought them to the U.S. to seek a degree. While individual responses differed, underlying all of them was the idea that each student chose to study in the U.S. because the quality of education in a U.S. HEI held promise for establishing future careers. It is worth mentioning that no student shared a story linking their overall reason for studying in the U.S. to COVID-related situations. It was a coincidence that the pandemic occurred after they had decided to earn their degree from a U.S. HEI. After investing at least a

year learning English in the university IEP, students simply chose to continue pursuing their degrees amidst the pandemic.

Hakim's choice to study here meant a more solid education in his career field and a chance to become independent. This latter thought excited him as much as earning a degree in the U.S.

First of all, I came to the United States actually before the pandemic started. …[At] the end of March [2020] and we actually [left] the United States and I went back home. In August, we decided to come back to the United States so that we [could] resume our studies. … I think the education is better and just the experience…. I want to live the experience, to be responsible for myself. …When I come here, I have to live alone and I have to manage my money and I do whatever I want to do. I make appointments and go shopping, all of this by myself. If I were in [my home country], all of this will be done by my family, my father and my mother. ...Before I went to high school … I wanted to get a scholarship to study in the United States and live this life and this experience away from my family and my country. …Actually, I wanted to come here … four or five years ago.

For students like Hakim, the dream of studying in the U.S. was their own choice.

For Basim, his choice meant going against his parents to study in the U.S. during the pandemic. He explained the circumstances that led up to his decision to come but never overtly declared reasons for choosing the U.S. As Basim explained in one interview, he could have declined his scholarship, forfeiting his dream of studying in the U.S. Instead, after being forced by his government to return to his home country in March 2020, Basim chose to return during the pandemic when the government permitted it. "Basically I'm on a scholarship before the pandemic, and we are excited to study our major….So, [the government] tells us it is important

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to come back and to study in person". Basim chose to return and seemed relieved he could return to continue his studies. He explained that not returning would mean losing his scholarship and he was serious about completing his education in a U.S. HEI. In another conversation, Basim linked his U.S. degree to earning a job. Therefore, although his exact reasons for choosing to study at a U.S. HEI were not explicit, he provided information (determination to come despite the risks and his parents' initial disapproval and earning a degree to seek a job) that indicated this strategic choice was to his benefit.

For Kareem, studying was originally his father's idea, but Kareem felt that the decision was logical and therefore he embraced it. Kareem explained his choice.

> In 2019, when I was in [my home country], my grade in high school was very good…. I can join 80% from any college in [my home country], or any university, but my father told me, 'You will go with your brother to the United States'…I don't have any sponsor, like the company. I don't have any. I suppose my father … paid the money for college…I want Chemical Engineering because it has a good future in [my home country]. Because [my country's leader] talks about the Chemical Engineering will have a good future in [my home country]. So, because of that, I took Chemical Engineering …. [I came here] because [the United States] has a good degree… [not like] any country, like in [my home country], or any country.... Because if I get my degree after four years from the United States...[and] I return to my country and I apply [to] any company or [my] government, they will accept me. Because [this is true if anyone] has a … second language and they have a good degree.

Thus, pursuing a competitive degree in the U.S. afforded Kareem an edge in his home country's job market.

Conversations with Ahmed also revealed that the degree was valuable in his field for securing a job. As mentioned in his introduction in an earlier section in this chapter, family and online friends who studied this degree previously recommended studying at his current U.S. HEI. Ahmed explained, "When I finished studying in the grade 12 and I have the scholarship from my government, and I choose my major. My major is Geophysics, and [my] government talk with me and send to me five universit[ies]; we can choose one of them. After I see these five universit[ies], I don't have enough information about all of the universit[ies]."

So, he contacted his cousin studying a similar major in the U.S. and his cousin recommended this current university based on Ahmed's major and the university's strength in that major. "The Geophysics is more connected with Petroleum Engineering. And, I think [this university] is known for Petrol Engineering." After this, he pursued information about the major from the online community for students currently attending that university. "[One online friend] told me, the professors [are] helpful and [they] can teach you very well… I decid[ed] to choose [this university] and I told the government."

Like Basim, Ahmed went back to his home country at the start of the pandemic. He explained the challenges after returning home. The major obstacle for him was overcoming the time differences for attending IEP classes between his home country and the United States, an identified problem for some international students as discussed in Chapter 2. That situation explained why he chose to be in the U.S. amidst the pandemic. In short, the inconvenient time difference was impacting his grades and this challenge to his academic success enticed him to continue his degree in the U.S. in person instead of online. As he explained,

I already came to the United States earlier in 2020, specifically on the 19th of January 2020. … When I hear about this pandemic, this is in a separate [part] in the world. After

that, the president of the [university] sends an email to complete the semesters online. When I see this email, I... book a ticket to go to my home country because in my home country, I already feel comfortable and [I am] with my family. ... All classes are online. However, I see some difficulties and problems when I study online. First of all, the time is different, maybe a 10-hour difference between the United States and my home country. That makes me angry, makes me sad. I don't [know] what I can do because in the United States, you have 9:00 a.m. to start the class, but [in] my home country, it's 2:00 a.m. ... However, before that, I go to sleep at 10:00 p.m., so that affects me. After that, I decide to come back to the United States to complete my studies. …After that, I book the ticket and I came to the United States.

Thus, Ahmed was eager to pursue a degree from a U.S. HEI and just as eager to study on an in-country schedule.

Li's story of attending university was less about schedule and more about language learning and degree pursual. At first, Li came to the U.S. to learn English because of his love of languages but his parents wanted him to complete his language studies and begin a major. "I [am] really interested to learn another language. I have a plan to learn Japanese, to know Korean, to know... Russian. …. I already [started] learning Japanese. That's my plan…When [my parents] heard I [kept] studying language, … they say, "What are you doing? You're supposed to graduate [a] long time ago, but you keep studying language. No, that [is] not allowed." They say, "How about this? You go [to the] Chinese army. You go join [the] army for two years. After that, we support you [with] everything.'"

Li's parents forced him to stay home for a year with the idea that he join the army to learn more responsibility. Li explained that because his father was formerly in the military, so he

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thought that Li would benefit. "They think … I go to the army, because my [father] was army… He say, 'Join the army. [It] can change everything. You can … control yourself... you can know what's the [importance] of study." However, not wanting to join the army, but needing to prove himself responsible, Li studied English in China until he passed the U.S. college entrance exam with a high score. Soon after that, he meticulously studied and passed the strenuous exams to earn a Chinese driver's license. After these accomplishments, his parents relented at the idea of Li joining the military and vowed to support his studies in the U.S. Li explained his parents' reaction. "So they say, 'Okay, since you do those, you can go to America.' So, I go to re-apply [for the U.S. university] and then I go packing all my luggage …." Li arrived a couple of months before the Coronavirus came to the U.S. and refused to return home so that he could fulfill his goals.

Although Li described his goals to learn English and to complete his university degree in the United States, he did not explain explicitly why he chose a U.S. HEI over other global universities, including his home country. However, most of the other students in this study expressed their reasons for earning a U.S. college degree based on the overall positive reputation of U.S. HEIs and the promise of professionally competitive degrees. The desire for a competitive degree often rose during the discussion about students' own academic expectations and their definition of academic success, a topic discussed next.

Defining Academic Success

To understand if students were academically successful by their standards, it is important to know how they defined academic success. All five students associated grades with their concept of academic success, but, interestingly, some students included the concepts of socializing and learning in their definitions of academic success.

Kareem linked academic success to high grades. "It's so difficult, but our grades [are] okay right now. All of them. [They're] above 90%," he responded when he was asked directly if he felt he was being academically successful. With only a few days toward the end of the semester and the week before final exams, Kareem continued to connect his idea of academic success with his grades. "I cannot say [if I am academically successful until] after I see my GPA," Kareem declared.

Hakim's thoughts during his first interview described a well-rounded person with broad academic and social goals. His third interview focused more on scholarly results. Initially, Hakim's definition of academic success was more introspective although he had also connected his idea of academic success with grades. Initially, he explained, "To participate in things, join groups or organizations and be a better person and graduate from [the university] with high grades, high GPA." By being a better person, Hakim clarifies, "I want to achieve more things and participate in a lot of things. So, to be, a social person." However, toward the end of the semester, Hakim spoke specifically about his success through the lens of grades, saying, "If I get a good grade, I will be very successful with school this semester. …I don't want to get B or lower, actually. I want to get A, because this is the first semester and it's the easiest in the university."

Ahmed also linked success to good grades. Faced with the scenario of potentially earning a lower grade, Ahmed expressed his reasoning for remaining diligent during the semester while being adamant about his intellectual pursuits hoping for a 4.0 that semester. "That could be a problem. …[If] I get B in the first semester, that makes me … nervous …You must start…[with] the grade 4, and continue for three semesters, four semesters. After that, when you go to study

your specific … major, maybe you can get B or C, that's fine, but in the first, we must get A. ...I continue [to] work hard."

Confident in his response about defining academic success in a U.S. HEI, Basim linked his thoughts to his grade point average. "Maybe get a grade, like a four, 4.0, 3.0." Truthful but with a smile, he added, "[Getting a D or C] can't happen to me. …I [would] have to study more and get the A pluses." For him, academic success equaled earning high grades and was non-negotiable. If his grades did not meet his satisfaction, he was determined to study more diligently. For Basim, academic success was in his control. Basim also connected his definition of academic success with the concept of "finishing my degree and I want to get a job." For Basim, each semester's investment of earning high grades should lead to earning a college degree and finding employment. According to him, his first job would be fine working in his home country or the U.S.

In sum, only one of the four Middle Eastern students broadened their definition of academic success to include socialization even though all students focused on the result York et al. (2015) had discussed in Chapter 2 - to earn grades and a degree. For these L2 international university students, grades were the primary association with academic success.

However, the East Asian student expressed a slightly different perspective. Connecting grades and degree achievement to his definition of academic success, Li also linked learning his course material and another language through self-disciplined application to his concept of academic success. Additionally, Li included the power that he would have after earning his degree.

> I would be sad [if I made Bs] but [it's] still okay. … My goal is to do my best. Try my
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> best. …If I got all As, I would definitely be happy. Even [if] it's two Cs, as long as I work

hard, I won't regret it. Because that's the limit. … I work hard…. For me, academic success is my understanding. I think it's kind of like I got what I want to get and finish the degree, to have the power to do what I want to do. For the short term, my academic success is to get all As. That's the first thing, and the second thing is during the time I get all As, I study Japanese. … That's my goal. Basically, generally, the whole college life, the college success, academic success, is I can speak four languages, and I finish all the stuff [with], not As, but Bs.

As a measure of comparison, learning English coincided with Ahmed's goal, but he saw it as a goal already attained. Ahmed did not include the idea of learning a language as part of his current definition of academic success, but rather as a past success because of his accomplishments in arriving this far in his academic career. "I already completed the IEP, one year in the IEP! And, I [was] successful and I already [started] the university." In this description, Ahmed took into account the language hurdles that he had already overcome, implicitly suggesting this is part of his current academic success.

Overall, for these L2 international sojourners, definitions of academic success ranged from language learning to the current semester grades to the future goal of completing their university degrees. In their goal to be academically successful and acculturate to the university context that would make that possible, students experienced several challenges and accomplishments that impacted their goals. Following are the key findings in relation to the challenges and accomplishments.

Challenges to Acculturation and Academic Success

This section identifies challenges that students faced while navigating their acculturative processes within the domains as part of the university culture – social, academic, and pandemic.

These students shared difficulties categorized in the five sections below – pandemic-specific, study habits, language proficiency, religious practice, and racism. The first through fourth sections contain sub-sections to more specifically describe the challenges students faced. While the first section focuses on pandemic-specific challenges, the others explain issues that these sojourners would most likely have encountered in their academic and social settings more broadly regardless of the pandemic. It is important to note, however, that some of the more specific incidences in these sections are intertwined with the pandemic. For example, the adjustments in religious practices were provoked by the pandemic, and one student's racially charged situation seemed to be initiated and exacerbated by the pandemic.

Pandemic-Specific Challenges

Parental Reactions to Students Studying in a U.S. HEI

This first challenge recognizes some students' reality of coping with their parents' objections to these students studying in the U.S. during the pandemic. These students found themselves assuring their parents that they were indeed adhering to their parents' continual warnings about following safety protocols.

Ahmed described how his mother begged him to stay in his home country, trying to convince him of how she made life better for him at home than he would experience in the U.S.

> My family … already feels sad. [My mother said,] 'You can stay with [me, your mother]. You can stay with me [and] with your father. That's fine for you. I will cook your food. No need to order [in].' But, I convinced my family [that I needed] to come to the United States to complete my studies. ... I promised my family to adhere [to] all the laws for the pandemic. To avoid the pandemic, I wear the mask, I use the hand sanitizer, and I wash my hands [after touching] anything."

Basim described a similar experience. While Basim was preparing to return to the U.S. after he received his government's permission, he reported that his entire family asked him, "'Why [must] you go back?'" During the interview, Basim confessed, "It's kinda of hard to leave them and go…." Basim also revealed that even living in the States had not deterred his family from trying to convince him to return home. "They call me every day... on [the] phone...all the time. …They say they miss me, but I tell them I won't come back home like I'm joking." He confirmed that they put pressure on him to return home because they were worried about him studying in the U.S. "All the time. All the time."

Li's parents also expressed great concern for him, begging him continuously to return home when Li decided to stay in the States after the pandemic began.

> "I [came] to America, but my parents always worry about me…. When the coronavirus officially, generally spreading everywhere in America… My parents called me every day and say, 'Hey, …[come] back. Hey, we don't care about how much money you spend. Get back.… You need to get back to keep your safety.' But, for me, I [stood by] my decision. Yeah, that's the hardest decision I make. I say no…So I stay. I decided to stay. … Sometimes. When they say, 'You have to go back' like really seriously, in those times I'm really like, 'Ah, no. How can I explain to them?' At this time, I [am a] little bit affected."

Ahmed, Basim, and Li expressed how difficult it was for them to go against their parents' wishes, but with their academic goals in mind, they decided to persevere. Feeling empowered to pursue their own goals despite their parents' objections, these students practiced their autonomy when deciding to study in the U.S.

Safety Protocols

Assuring parents that they would be safe, students adhered to safety protocols whether in class or daily activities. Masking was required in public places and other safety protocols were highly encouraged. Such protocols were also mandatory on most university campuses and students had no choice of obeying safety rules if they wished to participate in their in-person classes. These preventions sometimes affected their academic and social lives.

Wearing a Mask. Wearing a mask was one of the main discussion points when discussing the pandemic safety protocols because of the issues it presented in the academic and social settings.

Kareem shared, "I think [the pandemic] is more difficult because we have requirements to do if we go to the campus, like wear a mask and have social distance. So, it's not the normal life we know before the pandemic. That's sad. And in the class actually, we should wear a mask, and we [cannot] take it off, so it's hard." Kareem claims not to be complaining about these protocols because he has gotten "accustomed to this, wear[ing] a mask and social distanc[ing]." However, he agreed that it was difficult to interact in the classroom while wearing a mask. It impeded his ability to clarify information about the lecture with his peers.

Hakim did complain that he disliked wearing a mask because it interferes with communication and breathing in social and academic situations. "[I] hate it, because," he pauses to laugh a little, "You breathe in it, and you cannot see others' emotion-[or] their faces. … I'm actually a little bit upset about the mask…. Just it's annoying me. …You just want to be normal without mask. Breath normally and see people's faces and their expression." He sounded frustrated. "Also, sometimes you don't hear the words correctly [in any language]." Hakim explains that the professor had trouble "not always, but sometimes" understanding people in the

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class because of the masks. When this happened, the teachers would have to break the social distancing rule by saying, "Just come closer."

Ahmed confirmed this idea, explaining how two ways the professor dealt with trying to understand what the students were saying.

Sometimes the professor can't understand what the students are saying because [of] the mask, and the professor says, 'You can take off the mask for [the] moment and complete', and you can lower the mask...That's fine for [the professor]. [When he] can't understand the [students] very well, he can come near ... you, and [he can] hear what you [are] saying.

Ahmed also shared how wearing a mask affected studying with new classmates.

I... met [a] student from [an]other country.… We finished this class, [and] he told me, 'I need your number …. I need to talk with you. We have [an] exam [in] the history, and we can come together [in] my apartment, or [your] apartment and we can study together.' However, [at] first, I feel I can't go close [to] him. Maybe he's got COVID-19. I ask[ed] him, '[Are] you feeling anything bad, like fever, cough, anything?' …. He told me, 'I don't feel anything.' But, I told him, 'When I speak with you, please [do] not take off the mask. Because if you do, we go. That is the safety for me and for you.... When we come close, please don't take the mask off. ... We can explain and discuss with the mask on.'"

Ahmed confirmed that the other student agreed to keep his mask on and that they managed to communicate well enough to set a tentative study time. Although sometimes a deterrent to communication, the students expressed an understanding of the necessity for them to wear masks. However, these examples demonstrate how wearing a mask while communicating

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with professors and classmates was an academic stressor. Mask-wearing interrupted conversations and contributed to students' sense of belonging within their academic settings.

For some of these students, wearing a mask caused problems in participating in leisure activities, such as playing sports, further affecting their social acculturation, but it did not deter their participation. For something fun to do, several classmates and friends of Basim and Hakim organized an intramural soccer team. This created some excitement, with Basim declaring, "Maybe our friends want to start a soccer team. … I think they will try to…. [The university] tell us that they are still preparing. …It's a good time to spend with a friend and enjoy it."

However, to their disappointment, all teams were required to wear masks while playing soccer because it was a university rule – wear a mask while on school property and participating in school events. Having to choose between playing soccer or not, students chose to play the sport and wear the mask rather than not enjoying themselves. Nevertheless, some of the students shared their animosity about the policy. Hakim complained with strong disgust, "We…we were shocked yesterday when we know that. I don't know what…this is stupid." He claimed adamantly that if given the choice to wear or not wear a mask, "I will play without a mask." However, choosing between playing the sport or not, Hakim preferred to play wearing a mask rather than not playing at all.

Wearing a mask was one of the most prevalent pandemic challenges for students while another challenge was being in proximity to friends, including social distancing and quarantining. Because social distancing and quarantining involved how much students could interact with one another and in various aspects of their lives, students mentioned these two pandemic safety protocols a lot regarding the classroom, socializing, and attending mosque.

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Social Distancing. Ahmed was one of the first to discuss how social distancing impacted being in the classroom. He compared peer and professor proximity during normative classroom circumstances to the pandemic safety protocol of social distancing. Before the pandemic, Ahmed could clarify lecture and discussion content, but during the pandemic being six feet apart made communication difficult.

> "Before the pandemic, I sit with the other students near me…and I can discuss with [them], with him, anything that I'm saying. Maybe I don't understand the question. I ask him, and that's [it]. Now, we …[are] six feet [apart]. I can't go ask him. [Also], I can't hear from him. … The professor stands [there] and other students [are] far away. ...Other students can't hear the professor very well because it's pandemic, we [are] six feet [apart].

Confirming Ahmed's thoughts, Basim commented in his interview how social distancing impacted his ability to discuss class topics with his friends, "Discussing with the other student, it's hard to discuss with them, and kind of hard to talk with the class." For students, social distancing was impacting participatory learning.

The classroom was not the only place where social distancing affected their routine. Kareem's parents warned against him attending his place of worship for fear that he would contract COVID. There, social distancing was nearly impossible. "We don't go to mosque because of the pandemic…. Still people go to the mosque, but I cannot go because my parents said, 'Don't go to [there].'…We pray…everyone...together". Because social distancing was not an option in his style of worship, Kareem followed his parents' advice to skip praying and socializing in his public place of worship. This meant that he was spending more time alone. Thus, social distancing, many times, came in the form of quarantining because social distancing in many contexts, such as the mosque simply was not an option.

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Quarantining. Quarantining provided protection such as in Kareem's situation above, and it was an option for the university because isolating was the most assured means of eradicating the spread of COVID. Therefore, when appropriate, the university and individual teachers moved classes, tests, and assignments from in-person classes to an online format.

Hosting courses online, when someone had come in contact with COVID, was one of the several ways teachers utilized quarantining to protect themselves and students. Another way was to allow students to post assignments, such as presentations via a video. Kareem recalled having two exams online the same week, including recording a video. "I will do [my English exam] online, but not on Zoom. I may do it [by] recording a video and send[ing] it to [my teacher]." This 5- to 7- minute video recording was his choice instead of presenting in person to his teacher only.

Sometimes when hosting class was not an option, teachers chose asynchronous lectures, a different and less likable experience described by students. Basim explains details about his history course. "Our teacher doesn't have online class. It's sometimes like a voice to listen to…In person, [our teacher] teach[es] us, but then online class, he give[s] us [a] lecture, audio lecture…. It was boring." Basim laughed while sharing this and then explained that he "miss[ed] interact[ing] with the teacher."

Other Social Impacts of Social Distancing and Quarantining. When it came to being social, the elements of social distancing and quarantining had a direct impact on students, limiting what they could do, whom they could go with, and if they had opportunities to meet new friends. For those students who enjoyed much interaction with friends, boredom was sometimes a new reality. Friends might gather but only in someone's apartment. Eating out publicly was not a safe option. Kareem explained,

"We cannot go outside like what we [did] last year, or last two years ago, it's … so difficult, like from learning from the college… [or] if you want to go to the mall or want to go to the supermarket to get … the groceries, it's so difficult right now…. because I always [went] outside. Like every weekend I [had] fun with my friends. But now, most of the weekends, I spend it in my home because it's the COVID-19…. Now, we order Front Door, Dash, or Uber Eats.… if I want to go out, I just visit my friends… I just sit with them [in their apartments]."

Overall, students described how social distancing and quarantining affected their social times with friends, their freedom to attend prayer gatherings, and their ability to interact with peers and participate in their classes. As stressors, social distancing and quarantining influenced how much students interacted with others and, therefore, their social acculturative process and experiences. The isolation and separation impacted students' sense of belonging.

Vaccines. When vaccines became available, students eased some on their precautions but not much, having less of an effect on acculturation though not significantly. According to Li, "I still bring masks and wash my hands." Hakim reported, "I wash with soap frequently. I always wear my mask." However, he did not practice as much social distancing anymore. "I think it's safer with the vaccine." Ahmed still took many of the same precautions as he did before vaccines were available. "[Even with a vaccine, I still] adhere to the laws and everywhere wear the mask and use hand sanitizer and avoid sitting with a group of people and we should… social distance."

Pandemic-Specific Challenges' Connection to Academic Acculturation Process and Success

Overall, these students had to cope with the academic and social challenges that the safety protocols prompted. International sojourners were also forced to cope with their parents' reactions to studying overseas during the pandemic, a stressor that tested students' autonomy.

The challenge of the pandemic caused trials that would not have occurred during normal study-abroad experiences and that affected acculturation and academic success. It also exacerbated other circumstances explained in the subsequent challenges. While students would likely encounter some of these issues regardless of the pandemic, COVID-19-related protocols added new manifestations and heightened difficulties in areas such as study habits and language proficiency.

Study Habits

Learning how to study and apply study habits at a higher and more rigorous educational level challenged these L2 international students. Having little to no background in the course topics, such as U.S. political science and history, intensified these freshman sojourners' challenges to acculturate.   Similar to what other studies such as Taylor & Ali, (2017) have shown, cultural differences in educational styles manifested through difficult issues such as satisfying course expectations, writing essays, preparing for and taking tests, and managing their study time.

Study Habits Affects Satisfying Course Expectations

Adjusting to the course requirements and the study time necessary to accomplish the workload were what students discussed mostly when describing their academic experience. During these discussions, they detailed what they thought was most difficult and sometimes how that contrasted with what they had expected. As Kareem explained,

> I thought this will be like, this will be easy. But no, it's so difficult sometimes, because I don't like history. I don't like it. ... All of the history is like years and names, and they do this, [and] they do this. So, it's so hard to understand it. And the hardest thing is to understand the new vocabulary….Sometimes, I [write] … the new vocab to learn what is

the meaning of them… There [are] some classes, tough to me.... There's the History and Political Science, American Government. So, it's new information for me and … new vocabulary for me.

Hakim also discussed the task of applying himself to learning a new history and preparing for the history tests.

"In my history class, we have [written] tests and this test is from his lecture. …We have a study guide, [it] has... I don't remember [the] exact number of questions….I think it's 10...essay questions. So, we have these 10 and he will include three of them in our tests and we have to choose one of these three and write about it... It's all about the United States history starting from Columbus and the Spanish and all these things…. [It's] a little bit difficult. …[and] that's a lot!"

These examples of U.S. educational content illustrate stressors on L2 international sojourner's academic success. Several students detailed their struggle to also prepare for their quizzes, not only tests, especially in history. According to Li,

Two classes [are] very difficult…[and] very hard. It's government and history. These two classes, I need to spend a lot of time on them, but [I] get less than [the] other classes. For example, history class, if I want to take a small quiz, just a small quiz each week, I need to spend a whole day to read a 30-page … chapter, and I … do not [make a] bad grade on the quiz, but not [a] perfect grade.

For these students to be academically successful, they had to overcome the stressor of educational style differences for learning course content that they had never been exposed to. Basim described his difficulties in not only preparing for, but also taking the history quizzes.

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Through this preparation, he realized the importance of constantly studying the material, not simply cramming for a one-time quiz.

> This week, we will have a quiz in history. At the quiz, we [have] to answer questions and … everyone [will] finish his own quiz. We have to describe and discuss the answer to the teacher. The teacher wants us to understand and give a reason for choosing any answer, which is challenging because we have to study the chapter and we have to take a quiz on it. This weekly quiz makes me have the idea that we have to take care of what we have studied, and keep studying, and don't forget to study and remind yourself about what we have studied before.

Quizzes were not the only struggle, Basim shared. Locating and applying sources while research writing for his Political Science and English writing assignments was not a skill Basim had much confidence in.

> We have 2 writings… one for political [science] and the other for English. They are too difficult and [we] need more than… five to six sources, which is hard and kind of difficult because the subject of research [is] about economic changes…[in] political [science] and the other for the English is …about obesity [being] a disease or not."

Writing was an uphill challenge as students learned to navigate language expression and avoid plagiarism. Controlling plagiarism while writing his final exam was an ever-present concern for Ahmed. "This week I have the finals…. It is a lot of hard work with the history exams; [those are] very, very long exams... And the professor says, 'You must [keep] plagiarism under 10 percent.'" Ahmed emphasized ten percent several times in his explanation, remembering that an infraction of this rule would result in losing significant points. He planned to be extremely conscientious to include citations and avoid copying during his exam writing.

The stress of studying and meeting teachers' expectations was a serious concern for L2 international students as poor performance here would affect their idea of academic success: good grades. They wanted to meet their own grade expectations and knew that learning the material and following directions were keys. Another key was managing time to study.

Time Management Influences Study Habits

Studying course material and preparing for quizzes and exams were challenges while planning time to study efficiently was another issue. The desire to socialize also confused the issue of time management. When asked directly about managing time spent with friends versus studying, Basim replied honestly, " I think I have…trouble with time management. ... I have no time to sleep, no time to do homework, no time to meet friends, so I do it randomly. ... I do my homework at 3:00 a.m. Sometimes, [I start at] 1:00 a.m. or 12:00 a.m.…. Mostly, I play video games [during the day]."

Hakim managed his time similarly. "I'm studying more [now than the beginning of the semester], but I'm still going through my homework the night before the submission." To clarify, he adds, "I'm doing it [not reviewing it]. Later, in the conversation, he admits how much he studies. "Some weeks I study five, four hours or more. Sometimes nothing." Hakim described procrastinating. He confessed for one test, "I started studying…too late as usual. I haven't time to go over all of the materials." When pressed about this, he confirmed that these are the same habits he had in high school.

Kareem's time management skills seemed to be more on target with the expectations for a college student. He confirmed that he studied much more in the middle and at end of the semester than he did at the beginning of the semester. Kareem increased the number of study hours required for him to complete his study load and accomplish the grades he wanted. His

description included a vivid metaphor. "We're out in the deep…. There's homework…. There's an exam. It's so difficult…. [How much I study] depends on what we have…Sometimes three to five hours…sometimes the whole day…between six to eight hours." His time differed from Hakim's, but both Hakim and Kareem reported achieving satisfactory grades.

Ahmed described habits for balancing his study and personal time. He confirmed that sometimes he was successful and sometimes not, but he tried.

> Sometimes I want to play soccer with my friend, and sometimes I want to play video games.… I think maybe I can make a good plan for how [I] can study and play [at] the same time. But sometimes, I have some difficulties, [and I do] not have enough time to prepare for class. Maybe [at] night, I will go with my friend to hang out, and maybe play a game. I don't have enough time. But when I have the exam, I …have … all the time. I turn off my phone, and I [tell] all my friends, 'I cannot hang out with you.' … [Before I spent] four hours a day [studying at the beginning of the semester]. [Now,] at the midterm, [it] could be between six and seven hours.

Li described managing his time successfully. The amount of time he dedicated to studying corresponded with what and when the assignment was due.

> It depends on a different situation. If that's homework, I need to do it. If it's due tomorrow, I'm probably going to start today. If the homework is not [a] big project, I mean...a little homework…maybe start it the day before. But if [it's] a big project, I maybe … [make] a schedule, like separating [responsibilities] for each day. Maybe I can do this on Monday and schedule an outline or something on Tuesday. Then that would be easier when they're due and I have a lot of time to check on this. Maybe grammar or something? I have time to check on this.

Overall, students described that they were aware of the importance of time management. For some, time management was purposeful while for others it was a hit and a miss. Some of these students also described a main contender for their time – the ALEKS, a required math test that predetermined how many math courses students took before entering their engineering or geology major. The pressure was on to perform well on this exam and, therefore, time and responsibilities had to be balanced to accommodate studying for this pertinent additional exam. Kareem confessed how studying for the ALEKS interfered with his studies for his other courses. "I [have to] spend more time [on] ALEKS and take [a break from] all the classes I have, so sometimes I forget to do the quizzes. Yesterday, I forgot to do a quiz because of the ALEKS."

Hakim had a similar attitude to Kareem stating that he would "just ignore all that" referring to his quizzes for his Political Science and History courses so he could dedicate his time to preparing for the ALEKS. Apparently, the stakes for the ALEKS test were high enough to garner their highest attention and temporarily jeopardize some small grades. Time management was a constant struggle as students described how much there was to accomplish in a day and all their responsibilities. Crunching time and learning quickly was usually the goal. The practice of studying together, when possible, met these criteria. However, for one student that was not likely as described below.

Study Habits Influence Studying Together

To be more successful with teacher and grade expectations, studying together might be worth the time. All the students described how studying together was crucial, but it was not always feasible or productive. Li described a study session he had arranged with his classmates. "Okay, say the test is next Thursday. So, we can maybe meet on Wednesday because we don't have class the whole morning and afternoon. We only have class [at] 4:00. So, we could meet at

maybe 2:00 PM. But only two of them come and three of them … [are] late. [Everything] we discussed is useless. We just watch a video. I recall the whole class. We're just watching videos and we didn't do anything. [I didn't learn anything] and just [felt] helpless. It doesn't help a lot. So, I don't think that's a good idea [or] way to work with them."

Study Habit Challenges' Connection to Academic Acculturation Process and Success

Learning how to prepare for exams and quizzes and meet coursework requirements in a second language university environment mandated that students manage their time differently than their previous study experiences and learn to study together. Taking the personal responsibility to manage their time, these students met a criterion described by the L2 international students in Cachia et al.'s (2015) definition of academic success. Failure to embrace this personal responsibility and adapt to these educational style challenges jeopardized these international sojourner's academic acculturation process and success. Another challenge that related not only to studying but also to social acculturation was English language proficiency as discussed in the next section.

Language Proficiency

Another major challenge for these L2 international students was the ability to communicate in English. Because language impacted almost all aspects of life – both academic and social, students explained how language inadequacies affected studying and meeting English-speaking friends.

Language Proficiency Influences Meeting Course Expectations

Studying in another language means dedication to learning that language as well as the course material, making the study process daunting. Difficulties arose for students when they tried to understand what they were hearing and reading. Because of the intimidation of

communicating wrongly, students would wait to ask written questions, composing them with absolute precision, before asking questions aloud in class to verify what they had heard. Hakim confessed, "In class, I am little bit afraid to talk a lots...because I make a lot of mistakes. It's okay, actually, but when you will be in the class and like that, it's embarrassing…. It's just embarrassing."

Students also often found themselves looking up new vocabulary to understand the course reading materials. This translated into hours of reading, writing, and searching for words in the online dictionary or the back of the book as Basim explained below:

> I think I use everything that I studied in [the IEP] to make my writings better and read
> quicker. … I learn a lot of vocabulary and use my old vocabulary from [the IEP]. [Still,]
> we have to spend a lot of time reading and studying and asking questions [to the teacher].
> ...Sometimes it takes longer time [to read] than I think because of homework and study
> and other things to do. ... [There are] so many new vocabulary [words].... We need to
> understand the book meaning. ...Sometimes it takes a long time. Sometimes it's okay.
> ...It's mostly hard in history because they have long words.

In addition to learning unfamiliar vocabulary from audio lectures and reading materials, students also had to learn vocabulary pertaining to their math skills in English to prepare for their required ALEKS exam.   For example, Ahmed confirmed that the long hours spent studying for the ALEKS, six to seven hours daily, was not because of the math itself but learning necessary English to understand the math problems.

> "I know I have some difficulties. You know, I already study [math] some, not all, but
> most of [it] in my home country when I [was] in the high school, but in the Arabic
> language, not in the English language…I try the practice test…I read the test. When I see

[a] question I didn't understand very well, [I asked myself,] 'What [do] they need?' But, when I translate this question, [I say,] 'Oh, I see. This [is] easy. I understand this. But, the problem is I don't understand this; What [did] the question [mean]?"

Studying alone in English was time-consuming, eating away at their time management skills. Additionally, studying with other people in this second language compounded the difficulties of time management and communicating in a second language.

Language Proficiency Influences Studying Together

Students sharing the same language had more success studying together. When the same first language was involved, students could communicate with fewer problems about content in their L2. They could explain in their L1 about the L2 content and new vocabulary. This was the case with the Arabic-speaking students. Although they were from different countries, they spoke a common language.

Kareem explained how he and his Arabic-speaking friends organized their study sessions. Advantaged in explaining new vocabulary and course material in English and their native language, all four students in the group could listen, analyze, ask questions, and take notes together. This dual language instruction and learning scenario permitted students to help each other consider the new information from various angles. "We study as a group, five people, four people. One of us [has recorded] this lecture, and we'll listen to it together. …We listen to the lecture, and we understand it. Then, if there is something we cannot understand in English, we can …talk in Arabic so we can understand it more." Their sense of belonging with other Arabic-speakers allowed these students opportunities to increase their language proficiency and their course content competency.

However, one student in this research group of five did not share an L1 in common with anyone in his class. For Li, being the only one speaking Chinese in his cohort presented study challenges with his classmates. He longed for someone to study with who spoke his first language because he strongly felt that this would improve his grades, moving him closer to achieving part of his definition of academic success.

"Actually… last semester we have two students [who spoke the same language as me], so we can maybe talk with each other, like discuss or something, but now we only have students [who speak a different first language than mine]. They are grouped together. But, I can't …. It's hard to tell them what I'm thinking, and they can... tell their friends, 'Hey we're meeting', but it's hard for me to ask them to meet with me... [This is] kind of [because of speaking different languages], but maybe because of the culture. For me, myself, I would like to ask somebody to work with me. I would like to ask my Chinese friends, not American friends…. I don't want to invite them maybe just because I don't want to speak English.… I want [studying] to be easy…. I don't want to force [myself] to speak English with them and communicate. That's kind of embarrassing….Here, [now] there's only one student [from my home country]. That's me! I have no one to talk [with], and even there's people in university, they don't know me... It's hard to communicate with others."

Li's frustration was evident. He struggled to communicate with other L2 international students because it was a tedious process that did not always yield the desired communicative result. He wanted to understand the content and be understood when talking about the content. Li wanted to ask questions and learn without the complication of the language barrier. Communicating in English with Americans also presented a problem because Li did not feel

confident, claiming he would be embarrassed and adding to his stress level. Li shared his desire

to study and communicate comfortably in his first language so studying and communicating was

not such a constant challenge. However, Li also had a desire to meet Americans. The desires to

communicate in English and to meet American friends seemed to be a double-edged sword.

Language Proficiency Influences Meeting English-Speaking Friends

L2 international students wanted, even expected to meet Americans, but the students felt

inadequate about communicating in English. Li explained that he "would like to" meet American

friends. However, he also confessed, "I don't have many American friends, maybe just a few but

they are not [here]. We [don't] talk much because we are not close…. For me, I really don't want

to talk any Americans...because of the language. " He reported several times that speaking

English with native speakers was "embarrassing".

Basim also expressed less confidence in his language competency and shared that he was

shy when it came to meeting others. He had the vocabulary words, but he was not sure how to

initiate a conversation or what to discuss. "Actually, [I wish I knew] how to speak English.

Because I used to have a lot of words. I understand and I have much of words to speak, but that I

can't speak with people. When I meet people, what I'm going to talk about that I can tell them?

I'm afraid." Because of his fear, Basim had not yet met any English-speaking friends.

Kareem spoke about why he wanted to make American friends. "Because I want to learn

the slang words, if you know it... It's great to understand that…. Because most of the Americans

here use it, because I have friends, not friends actually.…in the video games because we meet

Americans a lot. All of them, they use slang words, all of them." He expressed a great desire to

learn slang, nothing bad, just the "fun" slang.

Hakim's response began differently about meeting others and speaking English with them. At first, Hakim quickly and confidently explained that he had succeeded in meeting English-speaking friends this semester. When asked, he replied, "Yes" (not yeah) "I played soccer and [met] …American people and talked with them". Then, he more sheepishly clarified, "Yeah, but not a lot of talk." Hakim expected to meet Americans. "I have never been with the American students studying [or been] in groups with American students. I['d] like to make some friends actually." He indicated a determination to know Americans when he was in classes with them.

Language Proficiency Challenges' Connection to Acculturative and Academic Success

To conclude, language proficiency exemplifies how the occurrences in the academic setting extend to the social. Study habits and whom to study with are affected by how well L2 students understand and communicate in English. Equally, language proficiency crosses the social setting to affect academics. In this study, each student wanted to meet Americans to practice their English but claimed they lacked confidence. Practicing English would likely have improved their ability to understand and communicate in their academic settings. Therefore, their friends remained to be the ones speaking their same L1.

Lower language proficiency reduces feelings of autonomy and control over developing relationships in social and academic situations, causing students to feel stressed in learning course content and in communicating with teachers and peers during academic situations and with host nationals in social situations. Because students' L2 impacts most communication in their host environment, language competence has a high impact on their academic acculturation process and success. Another challenge to students' ability to build relationships and grow their

support systems in their academic and social settings is the autonomy to practice their heritage religion, which is discussed next.

Religious Practices

For the four Muslim students, adjusting their schedules to accommodate both their religious practice of fasting during the month of Ramadan and their university's required course schedule challenged behaviors in their academic and social domains. Kareem journaled about the difficulty. "It's about fasting and go[ing] to the class. It's so hard because we [fast] from 5:00 a.m. till 8:00 p.m. so it's so hard to go to the class, and listen to the lecture, and focus, it's so hard." Kareem only commented about the demands in the change of schedule, not how well he accomplished them. Basim shared similar thoughts in his weekly journal.

> The challenge is to wake up [in] the morning…. It's so hard because we spent all the night [awake]. First, we have time to [eat] before 8:00 AM. So, we have to make our food. Then, after, I think 10:00 PM, or almost 1:00 AM, we have to prepare for [the meal], which is breakfast for the next day. It's hard to manage our time and [we] prepare ourselves, or write [something], or finish the homework.

Ahmed also described how preparing for the fast required students to manage their time. He vividly described missing family and the experience of fasting in a different culture.

> We [are] fasting from the morning... from 5:00 AM until 8:00 PM. We don't eat anything, we don't drink, we don't eat the bad things…. But, you know, this is different between here in United States and [my country] for the [fasting]. The food is the problem here. In my hometown, my sisters, my mother's [cook] delicious food, and I sit with my family... And here, we have the exams, we have the quizzes, we don't have any time to [cook]…. Just in the weekend, we can [cook] some things very quickly, and other days... Monday,

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Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, I think all of my friends... All the people is…very busy, because [it's] the last [of the] semester now. We have the project, we have the speech, we have the final exam.

Instead of discussing how fasting interfered with his academic life, Hakim explained how fasting interfered with his social activities. "The bad news is, we will have some matches [while fasting]. So, we gonna play and we are fasting." They cannot drink water at all until after the daily fast. "We hope we get [the soccer match] at seven o'clock." The later time meant that they could eat and drink right after.

For these students, fasting was not the issue but rather it was the adjustments that had to be made within their host culture to accommodate the fasting. The intercultural conflict between practicing fasting during the month of Ramadan and keeping with their host culture's university course schedule exemplified how students could not integrate these two cultural behaviors but had to learn to accommodate their belief practices to their acculturating environment. Finding this balance required students to take personal responsibility in managing their time. Perceiving control over their circumstances, each student had to choose when they prepared for classes and participated in social events. The amount of autonomy each student perceived determined his course competence and the competence of navigating host academic expectations during the month of Ramadan. Although these students did not mention how successful they were with this challenge, they explained some support during the time of the fast which will be discussed in the theme describing their support.

Racism and Violence

The final challenge experienced by one of the participants related to xenophobia and threats of bodily harm. In some literature studies, international students report fear of racial

discrimination and encounters with racial bias. Sometimes incidents are subtle or potentially unintended. Other times, like the one below, these incidents are direct and potentially violent. Li was the only student who shared having a racially-driven and dangerous experience. After this drastic instance, he became concerned about how to remain safe during his university career.

> [Before this semester], my car is broken [into] and I took the [car service]. The driver didn't wear [a] mask. When I asked him friendly to wear a mask, I say 'Hey sir, if you don't mind …. [Can you] can wear a mask?' But, he just waved his hand, yelling at me, and [said] some bad words to me and 'Get out. We don't need masks', saying 'Asians are the bastards.' ...He just said, 'Get out of my car' and he canceled my whole…. trip or something in the app and said, 'Get out, get out of my car or I will beat you.' ... Later, he even report[ed] me saying it was my [fault]. And …. I tried to call somebody or report and there's no way to report him. I tried just to report him not wearing masks but…. I can't. That's really bad for me. I really feel danger. Like literally, I can't imagine what if he pull[ed] out his gun, what if he really beat me. I wasn't strong, like a tough guy. So, I'm really scared like that.

Li continued about how this incident will affect him attending classes in person with Americans in the near future. For him to voluntarily share this during his bridge program suggested that he was still processing the event. In one interview he proposes to take online classes only.

> First thing is I will, [he begins emphasizing the word *will*], "take the summer and the fall classes, and I probably, I would like to took them online… I want to take them online if I can. …. Because [the] first thing is the safety thing. Not only because of the pandemic, but also because the racist hate. So, I, yeah, I want to take the online.

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In the next interview, he amends his idea slightly but still to indicate that he was concerned about attending classes in person.

I don't think I'm going to worry about it when I [go] to class because I'm going to cover my head, cover everything... sunglasses, cover mask, maybe sometimes wear [something on my] head… After class, I just drive home. The only time I spend, with people probably is in class. So I don't worry about hate or beat me…If someone beat me in class. I maybe just drive there and to class and then just leave. I think [I have] only [one] class. I can't say I['m] not afraid at all. It's better…. [I'll] probably cover my head. Probably, I haven't decided yet. I'm just saying.

Although Li was the only student to share this act of racial discrimination, it does not eliminate the other students experiencing some type of overt or subtle discrimination they chose not to share. Also, Li's choice to share this overtly discriminatory act does not remove the possibility that he experienced other subtle or open acts of discrimination. Regardless of the potential for more undocumented discriminatory acts, one is too many, evidenced by Li's response indicating its lasting effects for him to want to hide his identity for fear of some type of retaliation because of his ethnicity. As discussed in Chapter 2, acts of discrimination against Asians were on the rise during the pandemic and this one, not reported to the police, is only documented in this study which asked students to recount their challenges in the U.S. during the pandemic. Otherwise, it may have also gone undocumented. In terms of his acculturation process and academic success, the fear of violent racism caused him to limit his social and academic interactions and disguise his ethnic identity hindering his positive acculturative progress and endangering his academic success.

Nevertheless, Li illustrates autonomy through his perseverance to achieve his goal of graduating from a U.S. HEI. For many of the participants, all of whom had the same goal, they turned some of their challenges into accomplishments, something they were keen to relate. Achievements are discussed below.

Turning Challenges to Accomplishments

In this finding, students share how they chose to turn some of their challenges into achievements. Many of the weekly successes reported were students' grades but also included the desire to learn and negotiation of safety protocols.

Quarantining Leads to Online Classes

Even though participating in online classes for lectures was new to these students, online classes worked to several students' advantage including Li who commented about making the adjustment to online learning.

"Academically…. [the pandemic] influenced me a lot because the first thing is all the courses [moved on]line and that changed a lot. Now [this is] not how I used to learn. [It is] not like I learned before, so I try to…get used to it….and…. sometimes I'm glad I'm [in] the online classes so I have more …opportunity to figure out the homework."

Kareem had similar thoughts. "I think for history I'd prefer to be online…just history...because you can search the Google about the years… If you take quizzes online, you feel like you are alone and there's no sound on you. There's no people look[ing at] you, and you take your time to do the quiz." In this way, the challenge of quarantining and the move to online classes enhanced feelings of autonomy allowing students time and solitude to learn and complete assessments without distractions. This likely improved course subject competence. As a result, the stressors of quarantining and online classes were perceived positively more than negatively. Students were

able to achieve and grow as individuals as described by the L2 international students' definition

of academic success in Chapter 2 (Cachia et al., 2018). Other challenges were viewed positively.

Enjoyable Challenges

As mentioned in Chapter 2, some stressors are not negatively stressful but instead

positive catalysts and even enjoyable prompting the students toward success by encouraging

autonomy and strengthening competence. These positive perspectives turned challenges into

accomplishments as described in this section.

For example, Li revealed how although U.S. history, a truly foreign subject to him, was

challenging to learn and not a subject he would have chosen, he discovered how much he

enjoyed studying it.

> This semester, … the four courses are chosen…automatically. It's not courses I like. So,
>
> basically, I'm studying hard, but I really don't like some courses, but I like all professors,
>
> really. … I really like history. I like everything [about] it, even the homework. … I like
>
> stories. I like history. When [the professor] talks about it, even religion, [tells] the story
>
> [that] happened [to] all the class, I follow … him, and I listen [to] him and I can respond.
>
> I can answer all the questions. I'm happy with it. [This is] the first time I realize I like
>
> studying. ... When he said we have homework or something, I will like to do it. When I
>
> do something I …How do you say it? Just feel something. [I] feel I really like this
>
> subject."

Balancing the amount of work for some of these students was a new experience as

discussed in the section about time management challenges, but for some the initial difficulty

became a challenge they appreciated which supported their growth in competence and autonomy.

In the first half of this research, Basim writes in his weekly journal, "This week we have one

quiz, one exam, and one long writing. It is very challenging because we have to focus on each of them and it makes us [feel] out of control and rushed." Three-fourths through the semester, he records in his journal, "This makes [it] kind of difficult to manage the time between focusing on the paper of history or the writing in English or the presentation. It's okay. I like to know there are a lot of challenges." These separate reports show the growth mindset Basim developed throughout his first university semester. Although he admits to the challenges, he seems to appreciate them.

Li and Basim perceived managing time to learn course material as a desirable challenge, relating autonomous learning to course competence. This sense of competence and autonomy in turning challenges into accomplishments contributed to their academic success to earn passing grades as they explain below.

Making the Grades

Although students reportedly trudged through the course material, many times their grades were satisfactory or sometimes even excellent. During interviews and weekly journals, students often reported their grades voluntarily and excitedly. They seemed proud that their diligence in their studies was rewarded. For example, Li reported in his journal, "This week, I have completed all my homework perfectly and read [the] history book really carefully. Because of that, I got a good grade on [the] history quiz. And, I also raised my government class grade." Kareem volunteered in his journal, "[This week in] political science, I got a [low A], but he changed it to [a higher A], because he [made a] mistake on the exam, so he fixed it and I got [this really high A], … which was a good thing. "

When students accomplished high grades and learned the material well, they were especially eager to share their achievements and show the proof. For example, after one history exam, Li spent some time talking about his success on an essay portion:

> History is the best. [The] exam, it's worth a lot of points. And when I studied it, I have to study one essay question and prepare 5 questions, [explaining] what [the term] means. I spent the whole time to study one essay, oh, because [there are] 7 topics. I just chose one and studied really hard…. Because that one, he talked about literally two classes about that question. I said, "It must be on it. It must be on it." I studied really hard about one, just one, and I got full points. I got whole credit! But, about term[s], I only studied four…. The whole grade is … not bad. I'm good with it...That's good for me. B or C for me.... I'm glad I get full points on [the essay question] ...full points that no one did. No one did; I got [the] points. I literally wrote a whole page, maybe five pages on the blue book. Give me a second. I'll go grab my essay.

Li returned to the screen with his blue book in clear view. Proudly waving it, he flipped through each page displaying his writing, repeatedly saying, "Five pages, whole pages". Li seemed incredibly encouraged by the demonstration of his language and course material competence.

In addition to grades on homework, quizzes, and essays, students bragged about their accomplishments on the ALEKS, the mandatory math exam that would determine if they entered their engineering or geology major without taking the math prerequisites. Kareem wrote in his journal toward the end of the semester, "I got 78 out of 100, so I will enter my major". When Basim took the ALEKS twice to attain a higher score, he excitedly shared in an interview about receiving the grade he wanted. "Yeah, I think [it was] because we have studied a lot, we have a lot of information, I studied everything well, and I have great grade!" After having shared his

tedious study experiences in preparation for the ALEKS, Ahmed quickly shared about the extremely high score he earned. "Yesterday I did the exam. Before I did the exam, I have some worry…Maybe I cannot get this score that I need, but I [studied] very hard." Then, he revealed his high score and iterated, "Now that was the real test, … not a practice test. …Now when I see [my high score], I'm really glad!"

To earn high grades, students had to overcome barriers such as language proficiency.

Language Proficiency: Listening in Class

Ahmed reported difficulties in class understanding what the teacher was saying. As a few weeks passed, his understanding began to open. He acknowledged that his English grew as he continued in his courses.

"The teachers talk with me… [and] with other students [to help] students. Speak slowly…talk slowly. When I come [to] the university the first time, … the professor [speaks] very quickly and I don't understand any of what he is saying. Just I understand a few sentences, but he is speaking very quickly. He is not stopping for me. Explain, explain, explain. One week or two weeks [pass]; it's difficult for me. After that, I ended up doing good. I'm trying to understand, and, after two weeks, I understand very well what he's saying. Now, I'm very glad to understand this all professors. What he says is very quick, [but] that helps me talk with other professors."

This classroom success translated to daily academic and social success for Ahmed. "Now I can meet anyone who talk with me. I can meet anyone. Any professor, any student, anyone. That's fine for me because now I learn a lot of things, grammar, vocabulary, and now I have [the] ability to speak with anyone," Ahmed shared.

Overcoming Social Distancing in Classes and in Socialization

Social Distancing was a challenge in the classroom because, as Ahmed had explained

earlier, he was not in proximity to his classmates to ask them questions about what he did not

understand during the professor's lectures. For Ahmed, he found two other ways of resolving

this problem – receiving the professor's permission to ask a classmate or jotting down his

question to ask his friends later.

> [When] I can't ask [my friend and] I need more time, … I [ask] my professor, "Can I talk
>
> with my friend for one moment?" [They] say, "Yes, you can," and I will go there, I will
>
> talk. Otherwise, I write what I don't understand on the paper. After the class, I go to
>
> [an]other student and what I don't understand, I ask him, and they explain to me."

Coupled with his increasing language proficiency, Ahmed's workaround to overcome challenges

related to safety protocols allowed him to achieve greater classroom success toward achieving

his ultimate goal for academic success: good grades.

In addition to success with studying, learning, and language development, students

managed to overcome challenges associated with out-of-class socializing because of social

distancing. For one student, his way of meeting friends, especially English-speaking ones was

fulfilled virtually. Chatting through various social media forums allowed Kareem to stay in

touch with friends he had met while in the IEP, including Arabic-speaking friends and one

Spanish-speaking South American, who he enjoys speaking English with. The online world of

video gaming also introduced Kareem to new *friends*. Sitting in his room, he chatted online with

friends in other apartments. "Yeah, we just sit.... [and have] conversation with others on social

media…I play all social media more and more, but with the pandemic, it's been more and

more.... I sit and just play video games with my friends and have a conversation with the

application with the new people." For close friends at the same university, students considered themselves part of informal "quarantine pods", who gathered in person without wearing masks, sometimes even meeting outside. Kareem commented about not wearing a mask with close friends, "So when I go through to my friend's apartment, I don't wear a mask … because we know where each one go[es]."

Kareem explained how this concept carried into the evenings when it was time to break the Ramadan fast.

[A]ctually we are in the end of Ramadan. We just have six days now. … We have a group on [an app], so ...someone sends a message. They [say], 'Do we have iftar [the meal breaking the fast] today?'… So yeah, we just maybe meet on the weekend sometimes. Yesterday I meet with my friend to eat iftar. Yeah, because we cook sometimes. We have some fun.

Basim also told a time when some of his friends from the university met for iftar at a park. He explained, "Last week we had one meeting in the park. So, we bring our [meal] to the park and enjoyed time eating and having fun with other students. Which, [we] consider a success because it takes us away from studying and concentrating on homework and project. So, it's like a space to enjoy and …to have fun."

In this way, these students chose to take some mitigated risks to overcome the challenges of isolation and fulfill their social needs, find spaces of belonging, and practice their encultured custom of breaking the Ramadan fast together.

The Role of How Challenges Became Accomplishments

Whether students were etching out places to belong despite socialization challenges or creating opportunities to learn unfamiliar course knowledge with limited language proficiency,

these L2 international students were persistent in turning their challenges to their favor. From quarantining to social distancing to improving their second language, these L2 international students did not let challenges deter them from their goals of being academically and socially successful. Instead, these students used their autonomy to be proactive in growing their language and content competencies, studying to make satisfactory grades, and taking the time to nurture friendships. Each choice to overcome challenges pointed these students to positive academic acculturation. Students chose to be competent, taking responsibility for their own learning, using their skills, and dealing with challenges. They chose to academically succeed. They also chose to nurture relationships that supported their sense of belonging and assisted their acculturation. Beyond their choices, students also perceived different support systems that prompted them to succeed. These systems were not ones that they could control but ones that inspired them. These systems will be discussed next.

Support Contributes to Success

This final theme recognizes the support systems that aided students in their accomplishments. This relates to students' perception of academic success regarding family and peer support as well as university responsibilities discussed in Chapter 2. This theme differs from the above theme in which students chose to turn their obstacles into achievements. Instead, this theme reflects the perceived support that students gathered from other entities in their lives and how these support systems contributed to their academic and social success. These were not support systems that they could completely control. Sometimes advice was given, and it was the students' choice to accept the advice; however, students credited their success to the support. These support systems included their family, friends, religious community, teachers, advisors,

and the university which contributed to the students' autonomy, competence, and sense of belonging needed to ensure their academic and acculturative success.

Family and Personal Support

Although the beginning of this chapter began with a picture of concerned parents not wishing their children to attend an HEI in the U.S. for fear of contracting the virus, some students also perceived their parents' support. For example, Hakim felt nothing but support to make his own decision about coming, saying, "My family, they didn't say anything actually [about me attending a U.S. HEI]. They say, 'This is your choice, and you have to be careful there' because it's the same situation of Coronavirus at home and in the United States. There is a lot of number of COVID…. I didn't face any situation of someone who discouraged me." Basim's parents, even though highly concerned, were excited for him to have the opportunity to study in the U.S. and according to him, "They want me to finish [the semester] and get a nice grade and [come] back home to [my country]." He responded, "It's encouraging me to study more."

Thus, despite initial concerns, after Li declared his choice to stay, his parents openly supported their academic choices and cheered their success. "No matter what I [do], they still concerned [for] me, that's parents." He confirmed that his parents still call "lots" to check on him. Li's parents also encouraged him to complete his work with diligence and speed. "They gave me a plan, they say, "Yeah, just work hard. If you can graduate in [three] years, …graduate in three years." Ahmed shared similar advice his father gave him before leaving his home. "Every[time] I face difficulties, I remember what my father told me before coming [to the] United States, 'Work harder. Work harder. If you work harder, after that, you'll feel better. You'll feel better. Work harder.'

Not only were their families supportive, but a couple of students identified their personal friends as being equally helpful. Kareem shared in his last interview that he felt supported by his friends and his family this semester. "All of them encourage me too". Hakim made a similar statement sharing, "I have an amazing friend who always support me, and my family always support me and encourage me."

Academic Peer Support

All the students described times when academic peers were academically and socially supportive. Li connected with another L1 peer during that semester who provided social support. "[My friend from another university's] whole classes [are] on Zoom so he said he can live in my house. So, he's next door [in the same house]".

The Arabic-speaking students connected with L1 support from peers who had previously attended the bridge program. Students' support came in the form of encouragement and course guidance. Basim shared how his peers had helped him. "[University is] kind of hard but it's okay. …because we have our roommates. They studied before us. ... [They told us about] the class, about everything and how hard this is." He explained the advice given by his peers, "To study history every day and take notes and record the audio... [which I do] mostly in history because it's too long". Kareem also explained the advice given by peers. "Actually, before I joined [this bridge program] the students who studied there, they said it will be easy…and everything will be fine. … It's super easy, but when we entered [this program], we see that there [are] classes too easy, but the History and the Political Science [are] so difficult for us because we didn't study [the history of America] before [or].... the government for America." However, he added "I asked the people who [were in the bridge program] one semester ago or three

freshmen last year or something like that and they taught us like, do this, do this, … take notes, and ... [do these] steps…Thanks for them, I got [an acceptably passing grade on my test]."

Religious Community Support

The four Muslim students shared about the challenge of aligning their religious practices with their academic schedules. One difficulty was not having enough time during the day to prepare iftar [their nightly meals to break the fast] during Ramadan. However, Ahmed and Hakim told how their mosque helped the students in a way that these students did not have to worry about preparing meals. Ahmed explained in detail the relief received from his religious community. "Every day [Islamic Society of North America] sends a link … If anyone needs to get the foods, that is fine. But, [they] told other students, you need to sponsor, donate for this, and other students… donated for $100, $200, any amount…That is …very, very helpful to me. Every day [at] seven and a half [7:30 p.m.], I go to Islamic Society [in this town] at the corner and pick up the food. The food could be chicken and rice, watermelon, some grapes, dates." Hakim in turn expressed his gratitude for the necessity of this food. "Because the masjid...mosque, they offer us iftar boxes…. If they didn't offer that, we will not have any time for anything. … We have to iftar [meal that breaks the fast] and we have to pray."

Although other Muslim students did not mention these boxes, specifically they did say they participated in the meal that broke the fast, indicating some sort of community support. As stated, this meal was helpful so that students had more time in their day to dedicate to their studies.

Advisor Support

Several students talked about an upcoming appointment with their advisor, but Li described how helpful his advisor was. "[The advisor] helped me a lot. [She went] over my

grade sheet and say, 'Hey, these classes, you need to maybe [take] next semester or semester next... After next semester... [She] explain to me some basic things... So, I think it's pretty good. She think normally people [who] want to graduate fast will pick those classes." Even though Li wanted to take 19 or more hours so that he could graduate early, he listened to her advice. "She even tell me more people ask for over 19 hours…. [But] I did 18 hours. She say, 'Hey, it's enough. It's hard to do that being [a] freshman. It's enough.' And I say, 'Well, I know. I know.'"

Teacher Support

Teacher support was manifested through teaching approaches that promoted autonomy and competence. Ahmed felt that "all teachers, all the professors" had been helpful to him at the university. He gave me an example where for the final speech, the teacher gave students an option to record themselves or do the speech in person. "Because [of] the COVID-19, we cannot do the speech in front of the students, [but]… I could send the link. No need to meet with the professor…. It's up to the student. If they need to... It's online, or via Zoom, or send the link. We have three options."

Kareem explained that his instructors allowed students to record the lectures and how this action contributed to his learning. "We record the lectures on our phones, … go back and listen to these lectures….Because if you forget something, or forget to write something about the lecture, you can listen to it again. And this thing is okay with the professors. They said, 'You can, you can because [this is] my voice.' If I forget to write something in my notes like if we have the quizzes, if we have a quiz about the history. We can listen to it again and prepare for the quiz."

Hakim confessed how teachers gave grace when he was forgetful. "During] Ramadan, [if I] forget to do these quizzes. So, I miss it, but there's no problem. Most of our teacher... they open anything for us." Hakim also shared how his English teacher advised him on his first essay.

So, in my English class for first essay, I choose a topic and I have to turn in ...turn in my

first draft. So that topic I couldn't write a lot of words and it's a little bit difficult to me.

So, I sent to the professor, and she responds to me and gives me a lot of suggestions and

help me. My first draft was just 300 [words] and I have to write 1400 words. So, I said to

her, 'I want to change my topic' and [told her] my topic. So, I write the first paragraph

and she gives me a little suggestion for three paragraphs or four and said to me write

about this and how you feel about this....and I got a good grade."

Sometimes when students were sad because they did not earn the grade that they wanted,

they approached the teacher for advice. Li explained the advice given to him by his instructor.

When I took [the] test, ...I... How do you say? I think 'I know it.' I think, 'Oh, 100% I

know it.' But after that, D. No, I don't know. I don't know why. .... So, I ask professor. I

say...'Why? I listen every class. I really participated in every class. Why [do] I still get [a]

bad grade?' He said, 'Maybe you miss some information. You think you know something,

but you miss some part of it. So that means you [don't] read carefully. You [didn't] study

carefully. I know you studying hard, but you [didn't] study carefully. You have to study

step by step. Now remember who did something, or remember each [of] them... their

name, and [don't] mess up. ... So this week, I go study really hard to remember each of

name, and who does some events. I go focus on them. ...Every class, I record and then I

go play them maybe when I review [for] the test.

Li not only pursued advice from his professor but followed the advice. This advice seemed to

boost Li's confidence as well as provide him with tools to improve his content competence.

University Support

When it came to the university's physical environment, students mostly felt safe in their space during the pandemic because of university mandated safety protocols. Referencing back to these protocols during class, I asked Basim about feeling safe. Even though he had referenced previously how cleaning his desk reminded him of the possibility of virus infection, he commented, "I think class is good, yeah. I think that's good because they…clean the class after the class. Everyone is seated at a safe distance, too".

Ahmed commented about how the university providing vaccines was beneficial in feeling safe at the university. "All the students come [with] awareness about this pandemic and now the [university] gives the vaccine to anyone who needs it, and that's made me comfortable and not worry about this pandemic." Basim commented a couple of different times about how vaccine availability eased his uncertainty about potential infection. "Because a lot of people have the vaccine, I feel very safe. It makes us less afraid about meeting people [and] go[ing] outside or shopping." According to these students, the university maintained its responsibility during the pandemic to provide the safest possible learning environment.

The Role of Support Systems in Relation to Acculturation and Academic Success

This theme described various support systems relating to students' perception of academic success as described in Chapter 2 by Cachia et al (2018). Students perceived support from their family members, religious community, personal friends, academic peers, and U.S. HEI teachers and advisors as well as the university itself. Each student reported nurturing support throughout most of their academic and social acculturative endeavors, encouraging autonomy and building competencies while fostering a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging could have helped to mitigate the effects of negative cultural feedback and promote

these students' positive cultural identity. These support systems coupled with students' choices to turn challenges to accomplishments yielded a successful semester for these five students.

Successful Semester

Despite ups and downs intermixed during these L2 international sojourners' first university semester in a bridge program, all five students reported being successful. Everyone completed the semester and planned to complete their degrees at this U.S. HEI.

In the last week of the semester, Basim expressed his assurance of his academic success by saying he was "finishing [the bridge program]" and that he had "[stayed] in the United States for almost one year." Describing his overall academic and social experience, Hakim simply stated, "I [have] become more confident to talk with [every]body". Thus, while students encountered many obstacles during their semester in a bridge program, collectively these findings indicate the students completed their semester with the perception that they were successful.

In the following chapter, I will discuss students' challenges and achievements in relation to the research question and the connections of the results to Self-Determination Theory and other relevant literature described in Chapter 2. I will also address limitations and implications for this research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This case study aimed to explore L2 international students' perspectives regarding what challenges and accomplishments impacted their academic acculturation process and success while attending a U.S. HEI bridge program during their first semester during the pandemic. Three themes that emerged from the data analysis were the academic and social challenges they encountered, the challenges they converted to accomplishments, and the perceived support that contributed to students' success. To recognize more about how these L2 international sojourners achieved their success, this chapter will review student-identified challenges and successes through the lens of the basic psychological needs (BPN) of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, identified by Ryan and Deci (2000) in their Self-Determination Theory (SDT). After interpreting my findings through BPN fulfillment, I will present implications, discuss limitations, and offer suggestions for future research. This chapter concludes with a chapter summary and dissertation conclusion.

To begin, these findings reveal that students faced certain stressful circumstances but often chose to adjust their behaviors to ensure they met their BPNs. As a result, students persevered and attained academic acculturative success in most areas. As a reminder, academic success was defined in Chapter 2 by researchers denotatively as a list of goals to be achieved (York et al., 2015) and by international students as a sense of personal growth with responsibilities and of HEI responsibility (Cachia et al., 2018). One exception to meeting academic success was in making L2 friends. Students reported not feeling confident in their L2 language competence and did not want to engage with native speakers and other L1 peers in the lingua franca. Recognizing that the pandemic safety practices decreased social engagements and

academic interactions, opportunities for students in this study to interact in English also declined. Therefore, it is difficult to say if students would have engaged in more L2 conversations if more opportunities had been possible. These international students could have improved their L2 competence and confidence if these interactions had occurred. Students reported that they did not want to seek these opportunities until their language improved and did not think they would not have these opportunities until they studied in classes with native speakers. Nevertheless, while students did not experience success in this area, they did in many others.

In the following section, I will present some of the challenges that students encountered and the adaptations they made to ensure their BPNs were met to accomplish their success. I will also describe support networks and the student-perceived support these systems provided to facilitate academic achievement. This interpretation section is divided into acculturative stressors sub-sections, which interpret the findings through the lens of the BPNs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. My reasoning for organizing this section according to stressors is two-fold.

First, acculturative research has traditionally been organized by the stressors students face, making the findings' order potentially more familiar and accessible to the researcher (R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Xing & Bolden, 2019a). Second, in support of the implications for students, educators, and universities, which are explained more thoroughly later in this chapter, individuals and groups can reference the section of their interest. For example, a teacher can review how to help L2 students with their study habits. A student can read how other students struggled and coped with their lower language proficiency. Universities can examine how just one racist incident can cause trauma for a student, even when it occurs off-campus.

These findings about student acculturative stressors interpreted through Ryan and Deci's (2000) BPNs are discussed next.

Interpretations of the Findings

Psychological needs "concern the deep structure of the human psyche" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 230), causing the process of establishing these fundamentals to relate significantly to achieving mental well-being and to success. Without BPN fulfillment, individuals' mental well-being will suffer, risking successful goal achievement. Therefore, for students to succeed academically, it is imperative that they perceive their BPNs as being met. In this research, students sought to fulfill their need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness in most acculturative challenging situations as described in this section.

Pandemic Safety Protocols

The university required safety protocols to decrease the spread of the coronavirus to keep students safe. However, these protocols, for example, wearing masks, social distancing, and quarantining, interfered with students' need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Specifically, the safety protocol of wearing a mask and social distancing interfered with students' need for course competence and autonomous learning because students had difficulty communicating with each other during class lectures. For example, Kareem and Ahmed reported that because of these protocols, they could not clarify information with their peers. To ensure that their course competence was achieved, Ahmed responded in two ways. First, he jotted down questions to ask after class. Second, he asked the professor permission to confer with his peers during class. Ahmed's response represents his autonomous learning style, ensuring he met his need for his course competence. This example indicates that autonomous learning supports course competence.

However, social distancing and mask wearing also interfered with students' academic competence because their autonomy was hindered. For example, Hakim and Ahmed explained that wearing masks impeded the instructor from understanding the students, challenging students' competence because the instructor could misunderstand their questions and comments. In these situations, instructors permitted students to take down their mask momentarily or the teacher came closer. Because social distancing and mask wearing requirements mandated against these solutions, wearing masks and social distancing negatively impacted students' autonomy.

Another protocol, quarantining, also challenged students' competence and autonomy by removing students from in-person lectures, discussion, quizzes, and teacher-student feedback when students were forced in asynchronous lectures and assessments. For example, Kareem, Basim, and Li explained that online lectures impacted their course competence. They could not ask questions or hear teacher-student feedback for other students during one-on-one presentations with the teacher. However, to meet their need for course and language competence and autonomous learning, Li and Karim described researching unfamiliar dates and vocabulary during online lectures and quizzes. Li and Karim explained how they regained their sense of autonomy by choosing to make their learning circumstances work for them. Having more time to review and compile information, they described feeling more at ease to search for answers and increase their own opportunities to grow in their course and language competencies. These autonomous experiences sustained students' competence despite limited opportunities to ask questions and engage with their teachers in person.

Safety protocols also restricted students' experiences for growth in cultural and linguistic competence. Quarantining reduced the opportunities to interact with the host culture. Students in this study did not engage much in their L2 settings so they experienced limited cultural and

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language competence growth. Without much host cultural interactions, students could not learn from host cultural experiences and feedback or practice their L2 and social skills. For example, Karim reported staying inside his apartment a lot or visiting with his L1-speaking friends only in his quarantine pod. In these situations, Kareem was either alone restricted to conversing over social media with friends, or he was isolated in his friends' apartments instead of spending time at social events and mingling in his host environment. The restricted social interaction within their L2 environment because of quarantining, limited opportunities for cultural and linguistic exchanges substantially hindering students' cultural and language competence.

When students engaged in some social activities within their L2 environment, such as playing soccer, students had to wear masks reducing the number of conversational possibilities and encumbering communication, and, thus, hindering students' opportunities for language and cultural competence growth. For example, Hakim reported greeting others in English but not participating in full conversations. Wearing masks in these situations deterred language use and, as a result, it also deterred growth in language competence. Wearing masks also interfered with students' feelings of autonomy in their social settings. For example, Hakim reported that he did not want to wear a mask and given the choice would not have. Mandatory mask wearing impeded Hakim's autonomy within his social environment.

In addition to autonomy and competence, the same reduced social opportunities because of quarantining decreased students' sense of relatedness within their host culture, potentially affecting their acculturative process. Isolated from individuals within their host culture, students missed opportunities to build relationships that would ground them socially and establish a sense of belonging, which is often associated with Ryan and Deci's (2000) concept of relatedness. Because relational activities are essential to reducing anxiety and providing a place of belonging

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for L2 international students, establishing relationships within the host culture is crucial to achieving acculturative adaptation. Therefore, quarantining as a safety protocol challenged students' sense of relatedness within their host culture.

Similar to quarantining reduced social opportunities inhibiting a sense of relatedness, social distancing decreased opportunities to connect with individuals within, negatively impacted students' sense of competence and relatedness within their host culture. For example, Kareem explained that the reason he chose not to attend mosque was because he could not participate in prayer services without being in close proximity to other prayer participants. The idea of social distancing as a safety protocol challenged Kareem's ability to make a local community connection, which would have nurtured his sense of relatedness within the host culture.

In academic and social settings, wearing masks, social distancing and quarantining interfered with students' linguistic, cultural, and course competence growth, but students maintained their autonomy to control their opportunities to increase their competence. However, students' autonomy was limited by the degree that was required them by their host environment to maintain their safety. Also, even when practicing safety protocols, students took more control over their academic environment to increase their competence than they reported taking in their social settings. Also, because of their inability to interact within that environment in keeping with safety mandates, students' sense of relatedness within their host culture was challenged. However, students managed to maintain connections within their own quarantine pods but were unsuccessful in establishing connections with host individuals because of quarantining, social distancing, and mask wearing. For these reasons, safety protocols interfered significantly with students' competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Study Habits

Study habits identified in this study included personal time management, studying independently to learn unfamiliar content, navigating new assessment styles, and studying in groups.

Study habits directly impacted student's course competence and autonomy. Students had to manage their personal time so that they could study independently. Time management required making the personal decision to study instead of spending time with friends. For example, Ahmed described telling his friends that he could not participate in social activities and turned off his phone so that he could concentrate on his studies. He reported increased course competence and high grades. Likewise, Basim realized that he had to study daily rather than cram for a quiz. As a result, he spaced out his study time so that he could enjoy time to relax as well as accomplish his studies. He fulfilled his need for competence through autonomous learning. In contrast, Hakim described himself as a procrastinator risking his grades at times to be social instead of studying. In this Hakim risked his course competence, choosing to spend less of his time studying. However, Hakim also admitted that he did make time to study in order to overall meet his need for competence. Even though time management challenged students' course competence, overall, they chose to adjust their personal time to study to meet their need for competence. Therefore, their autonomous actions affected their course competence.

Achieving course competence also required dedicating much time for independent studying to absorb unfamiliar content. Students in this study were from East Asia and the Middle East and had to discipline themselves to learn unfamiliar western history and political science, subjects for which they reported having no previous background. For example, Kareem mentioned the difficulty of learning Columbian and post-Columbian history, and Li shared that

he spent an entire day understanding a 30-page history chapter to prepare for one quiz. Learning the unfamiliar material was necessary to meet their need for competence so that students could meet their overall academic goals. However, this took much time. As a result, students dedicated much energy and time to understanding the courses' material to meet their need for competence.

In addition to mastering the content, students had to dedicate themselves to learning how to take tests, quizzes, and write papers in unfamiliar assessment formats, which are examples of academic skills competence. These new formats challenged students' academic success. Therefore, students had to dedicate time learning to prepare for these new formats. For example, Kareem explained how challenging it was to prepare ten essay questions when only three would appear on the test and then having to choose only one of these questions to write. Similarly, Basim described how new he was to research and to incorporating sources in his writing. Not adjusting to these unfamiliar testing styles would negatively affect students' course competence. Therefore, students had to persevere to meet their need for competence employing various methods. For example, after Li failed a test, he met with his teacher to learn how he could improve his study habits and increase his exam performance. After this consultation, Li reported his grades improving because his study approach had changed, exemplifying how competence increases when students understand how to approach learning. Overall, students reported successfully adjusting to new assessment styles.

To also meet their need for competence, some students chose to study together, positively impacting their academic competence because each person benefited from the group's knowledge. For example, Kareem described how he learned material more competently when he met with his peers in study sessions because he could ask questions about the lecture and fill in gaps in his notes. Studying together also met students' need for relatedness because they could

build relationships through a common need, which was to achieve academic course goals. Their mutual interactions fed students' need to belong to a group and connect with others. Not only were they increasing their course competence, but these students were developing relationships that nurtured their need for relatedness. As discussed in Chapter 2, experiencing a sense of relatedness reduces anxiety and increases competence.

To achieve overall academic success, students had to meet the study habit challenges, including managing personal time management, learning how to excel in various assessment styles, and studying independently and in groups. Without autonomous learning, students would have not been successful. Therefore, meet academic success goals, students had to practice their autonomy by controlling their study habits to have an opportunity to increase their competence. In these situations, enacting their autonomy to practice self-discipline to spend less time with friends and more time learning, students' need for autonomy supported their need for competence. Without embracing their autonomy to meet their need for competence, students would not have been academically successful. Practicing their autonomy to also include study groups met students need for relatedness.

With competence as their main goal, students also met their needs for autonomy and relatedness by enacting several study habits, including managing personal time, navigating new assessment styles, studying independently, and studying together.

Language Proficiency

Because students' L1 and L2 language proficiency affected every aspect of their academic and social lives, language proficiency impacted students' need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Because students were conducting their studies in their L2, how proficiently they read, wrote, listened, and spoke in their L2 affected their need for competence in and out of the classroom. For example, Hakin explained that he was too embarrassed to speak in class, so he limited his questions and discussion participation. His failure to interact in class may have harmed his course and language competence, negatively impacting his academic success. If he had spoken in class, he would have gained more course knowledge and practiced his language skills. Thus, Hakim's lack of confidence in his language proficiency limited his need for competence risked Hakim's academic success.

In contrast, to meet his need for course and language competence, Basim exercised his L2 language competence skills to develop his course competence. Basim explained that while completing his writing homework, he used a lot of his vocabulary knowledge. He also described taking much time to read for understanding so that he could discuss and ask questions in class. The hours he spent preparing for his courses in his L2 likely improved his language competence in addition to his course competence, meeting his need for competence and positively influencing his academic success.

Students also met their need for competence through the L2 language component of listening. Understanding what was said in class impacted what information students could glean from class discussion. For example, Ahmed reported not understanding the instructors during lectures the first few weeks negatively affecting his need to fulfill his course and language competences and impacting his academic acculturative process and success. However, as the semester continued and Ahmed perceived that his instructors were speaking slower than average, Ahmed explained that his listening improved, fulfilling his need for course and language competence and leading to academic success. Therefore, this example indicates how language

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proficiency impacted the need for academic autonomy. Additionally, after he increased his listening language proficiency in the classroom, Ahmed described feeling that he could speak with anyone giving him control over his academic and social environments. Thus, Ahmed's increased academic language competence translated into more autonomy to communicate within in L2 host environment.

Students' L2 language proficiency also impacted their need for other skills' competence as they studied for the ALEKS, a mandatory math entrance exam for their majors. Students, including Ahmed, reported that their L2 language competence as well their mathematic competence impacted how well they performed on this test. Ahmed shared how concerned he was before taking the test because of his language competence, but then he explained being excited when he achieved a high score. Therefore, his L2 language proficiency impacted his need to show himself competent in math and contributing to his confidence in his language and math competences. Per Xing & Bolden (2019b) and Zimmermann (1995), the mutual relationship between confidence and competence will contribute to academic acculturative success. Thus, based on Ahmed's admission of confidence and competence, the experience of passing the ALEKS enhanced his academic acculturative success.

Also, when students demonstrated higher language competence on the ALEKS, students felt more autonomous over their academic careers influencing their overall academic success. For example, Kareem shared how his score ensured that he can directly enter his major. Therefore, students met their need for autonomy by fulfilling their needs for competence.

Students' L1 proficiency also impacted their need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Because students could study together in their first language, students increased their course competence and their L2 language competence. In an L1 language group, students

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asked each other questions about the course material and about words they did not understand in English. As a result, this autonomous learning environment contributed to their course competence. For example, Kareem explained how he could talk freely with his friends to analyze information and take notes. One student would record the lecture and they would gather to listen to it and discuss the points in their L1. One of the reasons the mutual relationship among these students was present was because they shared the same language, which increased their opportunities to communicate as a group and learn from each other, building a sense of connection with each other. Therefore, their autonomous group study sessions increased their language and course competence and met their need for relatedness.

With the lack of an L1 community, Li described feeling isolated from his L1 peers. This impacted his sense of relatedness with L1 peers and negatively affected his competence and autonomous learning environment. Li described missing this L1 setting, especially to study. Lacking an L1 autonomous study environment inhibited his course competence because Li could have shared his thoughts more easily in his L1. Li contrasted the desire for an autonomous study group with L1 peers to his L2 classmates. Because Li felt his language proficiency was not advanced enough to communicate clearly with his L2 peers, he could not study successfully with them to meet his course competence needs, risking his academic success. Likewise, not sharing the same L1 and feeling incompetent in his L2, Li's sense of relatedness was also challenged, potentially impairing his academic acculturative process and success. Therefore, Li's lower language proficiency contributed to his inability to meet his need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness and risked his overall academic success.

Students' perceived lower L2 language competence challenged all students' relatedness within their host culture. Because students felt insecure and embarrassed about their L2 language

proficiency, they did not engage in meeting L2 speakers or making connections with individuals in their host culture. The inability to relate to others in their host environment caused students to feel less autonomous in their environment, threatening their acculturative adaptation and risking their academic acculturative process and success. For example, Li described having a desire to meet and talk with Americans later when his language competence had improved. However, currently he was too embarrassed to communicate with Americans, so he did not create opportunities to meet them. Basim also confessed to not knowing what to say. Hakim also expressed an interest in meeting Americans but reported in never engaging in lengthy L2 conversation. This lack of confidence or refusal to communicate impacted their L2 language and host cultural competence because students did not create opportunities for language growth or learning more about their L2 environment. If they had, they would have increased confidence and in turn created more L2 language and cultural opportunities with host nationals developing a sense of relatedness with the host culture. However, because students did not build their L2 language and cultural competence, their need for relatedness suffered. Likewise, because they did not meet their need for relatedness because of fear of using their L2, their overall language and cultural competence suffered. The mutual relationship between L2 language and cultural competence and relatedness impaired their growth in meeting these needs simultaneously.

These lower language capacities also inhibited their autonomy because these students had a reduced sense of moving around in the host culture. Because students did not engage with their host culture to develop their L2 language and cultural competence, they also reduced their opportunities to connect with host individuals, affecting their need for relatedness. Not meeting their needs for language and cultural competence and relatedness affected their lack of creating

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autonomous social opportunities, negatively impacting students' academic acculturative process and success.

In sum, current language proficiency was so connected to growing in L2 language and cultural competence and engaging with the host culture to establish a sense of connection with host individuals. Failure to meet their need for competence affected students' need for relatedness. In reverse, by not meeting their need for relatedness in the L2 host environment, students did not achieve their need for language and cultural competence. The lack of meeting the needs for competence and relatedness inhibited students' need for autonomy in their L2 environment. Ultimately because of their fear of embarrassment to communicate in their L2 language, students failed to meet their BPNs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy within their host culture, negatively affecting their academic acculturative progress. However, using their L1, students were successful in fulfilling their BPNs to achieve academic success.

Another challenge to students' need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness was some students' religious practices.

Religious Practices

For four students, aspects of their religious practices challenged their BPNs. Fasting during the day and lack of sleep in the evenings challenged students' competence. For example, Kareem and Basim journaled how difficult it was to attend class and focus during the lecture because they had not slept much nor eaten since an early hour.

The intercultural conflict during Ramadan between students' enculturated customs and their U.S. course schedule and expectations challenged students' autonomy. Because it is customary during Ramadan to eat special food and socialize with family and friends between sunset and sunrise, shopping for ingredients and cooking must be done during the day. However,

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as Ahmed explained, students spent their time attending classes, studying, taking online quizzes, completing homework with little to no time to shop for ingredients and cook except on the weekend. Realizing that their U.S. responsibilities did not allow them time to participate in some of their religious customs challenged their autonomy because they were torn between their U.S. academic responsibilities and their desire to participate in their enculturated religious customs. One way that students felt more autonomous during Ramadan was taking advantage of the local mosque's offering of food boxes. Students had the choice to register and pick up food boxes daily from the mosque. Through this supportive option, students perceived that they had more autonomy in their ability to meet their physical needs. Knowing that they had a ready-available choice for food, students could concentrate on their academic responsibilities contributing to their academic success.

Being in the U.S. during Ramadan also challenged their sense of relatedness. Because this holiday brought to mind images of spending time with family and friends, students expressed missing their families and friends. Therefore, to meet this need for connection, some of the students planned to celebrate together. For example, Basim described missing his family, so he and his friends prepared a picnic to enjoy *iftar* at sunset together in the park on a couple of weekends. Missing family could have interfered with acculturative success. However, students sharing the same religious practices enjoyed spending time together.

Also, by fulfilling their need for relatedness, students nurtured their need for competence. For example, as Basim stated, the relaxation he felt when he spent time with friends during Ramadan energized him to study more. Thus, students fueled their competence when they met their need for relatedness.

Despite limitations to their schedules and some conflicts with their religious practices and course responsibilities, students met their needs for competence and relatedness. Students also found autonomous ways to celebrate their religion encouraging them to support their acculturative adaptation and academically succeed.

The final challenge, racism, risked one student's academic acculturation and success.

Racism

In this study, only one student reported a racially-driven incident. However, Li's response to this challenge and chosen limitations to meet his BPNs are highly applicable to this research to understand how even one racially biased incident can jeopardize a student's academic acculturative process and success.

During this discriminatory episode, Li described losing his sense of autonomy. He felt out of control of his environment during the verbal interchange with the driver, when Li could not report the driver's behavior, when Li was blamed for the incident, and when he felt that no other driver would come because of the incident. Li felt that his autonomy was limited because he could not freely move around his current environment safely. He was not sure how others around him would act so he limited leaving his apartment.

Li's loss of autonomy damaged his sense of relatedness to his host culture. For example, because Li had experienced what he described as a *dangerous* event, the aspects of the actual situation and the fear of the "what ifs" during the situation reverberated through Li's perception of others and projected onto individuals in the host culture. In other words, because one person in the host culture acted so verbally abusive toward Li and Li thought the driver might become physically violent, Li's fear affected how he perceived other host nationalists, damaging Li's sense of relatedness with individuals in the host culture. Because he became fearful for others to

recognize his Eastern Asian identity, Li also became fearful to relate with other individuals in his host culture, hindering his autonomy to leave his apartment to engage with others. For example, Li talked of taking future classes online so that he did not have to engage with host nationals. He also spoke of driving to future in-person classes, instead of walking, and leaving immediately after class so that he would not have to interact with others.

Also, Li's sense of relatedness would negatively be affected if that were the case because Li would be limiting his opportunities to build relationships with others in his academic setting, including classmates and instructors. Not making connections in his host environment would risk Li's acculturative process by not exposing him to situations of cultural feedback, jeopardizing his need for cultural competence. He would also not interact with L2 speakers, limiting his language competence. If Li chose not to meet his need for relatedness by engaging with his peers and instructors, then Li was also risking his course competence. Also, if Li neglected his need for relatedness with on-campus individuals, Li would not have opportunities to exchange cultural ideas or network for future needs. Therefore, Li's lack of relatedness would negatively impact his need for competence.

In sum, this racially biased incident tainted Li's perception of host nationals damaging his need for relatedness by inhibiting his desire to interrelate with host individuals in academic and social setting. Because Li did not wish to meet his need for relatedness, he felt he had lost his autonomy beyond where he could safely maintain his ethnic identity, which was his living space and his car. With a diminished sense of autonomy within his host environment, Li would ultimately struggle to meet his need for course, cultural, and language competence. Therefore, this one discriminatory event challenged Li's need for relatedness, autonomy, and competence, risking his academic acculturative process and success.

Challenge Conclusion

Throughout this study, students encountered challenges in the form of mandatory pandemic safety protocols, study habits, language proficiency, religious practices, and racial discrimination. These stressors threatened aspects of students' acculturative adaptation and academic success. However, to persist through these challenges, students met their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, except in the area of meeting L2 friends in the host culture. Because of the interrelatedness among these BPNs, achieving one of them usually resulted in students meeting the other two BPNs. Therefore, students attained success in most of their academic acculturative process and in their academic goals because students chose to meet their BPNs. Thus, for L2 international students to acculturate in their U.S. HEI environments and achieve academic success, they must meet their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

A prominent part of how students meet their BPNs despite their challenges is the support systems they encounter. Students perceived people and tools as systems of support that nurtured their academic and social environments. Students practiced their autonomy to implement these perceived support networks to meet their needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy for academic acculturative success. These support systems and how students used them are discussed in the following section.

Support Systems

As discussed in Chapter 2, support systems are vital for positive psychological well-being and for feeling successful. They are "coping mechanisms for stress" and identified in three categories: support networks, received support, and perceived support. In the case of students, the underlying idea of support is that students receive something helpful from an entity and

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perceive the entity as a source of support (Lopez et al., 2002). In the findings of this research study, students identified several support networks that they perceived as receiving support, including peers, instructors, advisors, the university, religious communities, close friends, and family members. Students perceived these networks as supportive because they fostered environments where students could meet their BPNs.

I will begin by discussing how the support systems of peers, instructors, and advisors met students' need for competence to meet their academic goals. Some peers who had previously taken bridge program courses advised these students on what to expect and how to prepare for their classes. Some in-class peers spent time in study groups outside of class to learn course content, clarify new vocabulary, and discuss how to approach unfamiliar course assessments styles. Also, instructors guided students in their study approaches, such as prompting them in writing their essays, studying for tests, and giving them additional opportunities to complete work. Students also perceived academic assistance from advisors as they counseled students about future courses and scheduling. Each of these networks directly encouraged students to meet their academic goals by expanding their academic competencies and navigating university expectations. In directly addressing areas of academic competencies, these same networks empowered students to feel more in control of their learning environment, impacting the autonomy aspect of their BPNs. In situations where students feel more autonomous, they are more likely to achieve goals, as discussed in Chapter 2.

There were other support networks that further encouraged autonomy. For example, the university itself provided sanitary conditions and vaccines to encourage a safer academic and social environment. This dedication to safety mentioned by Basim and Ahmed in the findings encouraged students to move about their surroundings with more peace of mind. Another

example of support for autonomy was felt by a few of the Muslim students in this study whose religious community offered support by providing ready-made and easily-available food options during their religious observance. With this nutritional provision, students could observe their religious beliefs and participate in their academic activities with less worry about their physical needs. Meeting this physical need gave them a sense of more control over their learning environment and, in addition, supported students' competence because learning is more manageable when nutritional needs are met. The mosque's food provision also encouraged community among these students by fostering a sense of belonging, a feature of relatedness. Having the established connection with Islam in their home culture, students experienced being a part of the global Islamic community when they accepted food provisions from a local mosque. As a result, this physical act also nurtured a sense of relatedness with the students and their religious community.

In addition to the religious community, the BPN of relatedness was met through friends and family. Students perceived mutual friend connections when they relaxed with their friends, playing soccer and video games, and participating in iftar in the park. As often as they spoke about their friends, these students spoke much more about their families, especially their parents.

Hakim and Kareem reported their families demonstrating encouraging behaviors, promoting a positive environment for these students to meet their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. For example, Hakim's family bought him food ingredients, and his mother taught him to cook his favorite meals, fulfilling his need to be autonomous and independent. Improving his cooking skills, his mother increased his competence in an area that promoted his ability to control his environment. Like the mosque meeting the physical need for food provision, Hakim's mother teaching him to be competent in food shopping and cooking

resulted in Hakim not having to worry as much about how he would feed himself. The autonomy derived from the competence meant having more perceived control over his physical needs, which would likely distract less from his learning opportunities. The support Hakim's mother showed also exemplified the relationship that she shared with him. This one example of promoting independence nurtured Hakim's need for competence, autonomy, and a sense of familial belonging and fostered a resilient academic and social environment.

Kareem also received encouragement from a parent. It was Kareem's father' who encouraged him to study in the U.S. Kareem understood his father's logic to the point that Kareem internalized this decision, making him feel autonomous. His father's financial and emotional support helped Kareem focus on his studies. Thus, his father's support contributed to Kareem's acculturative competence.

However, it is important to note that for some students their family networks appeared more challenging than supporting. For example, Ahmed's mother pled with him while he was preparing to come to the U.S. to stay in his country with his family, trying to convince him that she and his father would take care of all his needs and that there was no reason to leave. To assuage his mother's concerns, Ahmed had to promise her frequently that he would adhere to the safety protocols, but he also convinced her that he had to come to the U.S. to accomplish his academic goals. Ahmed reported his father as being more accepting of his decision, advising Ahmed to work hard in everything he did. In comparison to Ahmed, Basim's parents did not stop pleading with him to stay home, even months after he began studying in the U.S. He confessed his difficulty of leaving his family and how he joked with them that he would never return home. Despite his bouts with homesickness, Basim chose to study in a U.S. HEI. Li's parents were like Basim's. Already in the U.S. at the time the pandemic began and refusing to return home until he

completed his degree, Li struggled with his parents' many pleas to return home. However, he remained steadfast in his decision to stay in the U.S. despite how this difficult decision affected him emotionally. So, while the challenge of leaving family and these pleas may have affected them emotionally, maintaining their decision to study in the U.S. demonstrated students' autonomy to pursue their academic goals during the pandemic.

For these three students, coping with their families' reluctance for them to attend U.S. HEIs during the pandemic initially appeared to risk the positive support perceived by these family members. However, students indicated they understood that their parents' concerns arose out of care for them, and therefore, while it was a difficult decision, it did not seem to overall affect their academic success because the recognition of this deep affection most likely helped to anchor the students' overall psychological well-being even though students explained intermittent struggles with sadness and homesickness. Overall, students experienced a sense of autonomy and competence in their right to decide to study in the U.S. They also viewed their choice as having a positive effect on them and their loved ones. Even though they encountered conflict with their families in their decision to attend a U.S. HEI during the pandemic, the students continued to maintain their relationships with their parents, contributing to their academic success.

Thus, despite the outliers related to family supports for some of the participants, overall students perceived support from their identified support networks because of what they received from these helpful systems. Their perceived support encouraged students' psychological well-being by promoting autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The relationships that students had developed and depended on nurtured environments for students to feel connected with those around them, mitigating feelings of anxiety and isolation and increasing confidence and social

learning (Niemiec and Ryan, 2009; Tullis and Goldston, 2020). Students sensed that they

belonged in their environment, feeling autonomy and competence that led to feeling more

empowered to control their circumstances and, as a result, were more inclined to be successful in

their learning endeavors, be that course content, language proficiency, or social interactions.

Overall, support systems helped students fulfill BPNs that led to their academic acculturation and

success.

Academic Success

The previous sections in this chapter have discussed the research findings through the

lens of the BPNs. In Chapter 2, I posited that the L2 international students in this study were

likely to achieve academic success during the acculturative process as they perceived fulfilling

their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. In this section, I explain how the

findings linked to BPN satisfaction support the definition of academic success described in

Chapter 2. As a reminder, for this research, I defined academic success in one collective concept

by combining the denotation of academic success from other researchers found in York et al.'s

(2015) study and the connotation of academic success from international students' perspectives

given in Cachia et al.'s (2018) study. Therefore, this research's definition of academic success is

"academic achievement, attainment of learning objectives, acquisition of desired skills and

competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and post-college performance" (York et al., 2015, p. 5)

and "[international students feel they] are achieving and growing as an individual" and "knowing

who [they] are…and how [they] impact…other people," which also includes taking personal

responsibility for learning through self-management habits and perceiving that the HEI is

fulfilling their responsibilities to the students (Cachia et al., 2018, p. 436). The discussion of how

students met the definition of academic success is connected to students fulfilling their BPNs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness and supported by examples from the findings.

Most of the ideas within York et al.'s (2015) definition, *academic achievement, attainment of learning objectives, acquisition of desired skills and competencies,* and *satisfaction* and the first portion of Cachia et al.'s (2018) definition stating that *[international students feel they] are achieving* align with Ryan and Deci's (2000) idea of competence, or self-efficacy. Reported in the findings, all students included the idea of making good grades in their definition of academic success. Additionally, in the findings, students gave numerous examples of demonstrating course and language competence, such as preparing for quizzes and tests, writing essays, and making satisfactory grades while improving their English proficiency. For example, Li reported feeling satisfied after earning full points on an essay topic that the instructor had focused on for a few lectures. Although Li received an average grade on the rest of the test, he was delighted with his *acquisition of desired skills* to learn the course material and write five pages in English in his blue book. Similarly, Kareem explained his satisfaction in earning a high A on a history exam and increasing his overall government course grade. Both Kareem and Ahmed bragged about earning the necessary score on the ALEKS to bypass the first mathematics class for their major. These academic achievement examples depict self-efficacy coupled with perseverance to meet course and language competence goals to accomplish overall academic success.

To achieve competence, students had to realize their autonomous selves, linking their autonomy to most of the rest of Cachia et al.'s (2018) definition including *growing as individuals, knowing who they were and how they related with others,* and taking personal responsibility and to York et al.'s (2015) concept of *persistence*. These concepts from Cachia et

al.'s (2018) and York et al.'s (2015) definitions correspond to Ryan & Deci (2000) concept of autonomy, in this case, to take control of their learning environment. To succeed in their goals, students had to persist in taking personal responsibility, such as managing their time appropriately to study and requesting help when needed. For example, when Li realized that he had not made the satisfactory test grade he wanted after studying, he asked his instructor for advice. Hakim also turned to his English teacher for writing suggestions on an essay. Ahmed jotted down questions in class to ask his teacher and peers later. He also asked the teacher during class if he could confer with his peers to clarify his understanding about course content. Knowing who they were and growing as individuals meant practicing the disciplines of personal responsibility, such as time management to attain their academic goals. Some students reported setting aside much time to study. For example, Li spent an entire day reading one chapter to pass a quiz. Kareem reported six-to-eight-hour study days. Ahmed turned off his phone and told his friends that he had to study, taking personal responsibility for his actions that would contribute to his success. Contrasted to these students, Hakim confessed to procrastinating until the evening before due dates to begin his homework and once to prepare for an exam; thus, challenging his academic success.

How [students] impact others, the portion of Cachia et al.'s (2018) definition of academic success from international students' perspective coincides with Ryan and Deci's (2000) concept of relatedness. Relating with others is mutual, each person impacting the other. In an academic setting, each student needs to find a place where they belong to facilitate confidence and to support social learning (Tullis & Goldstone, 2020). To be confident and learn, students in this study needed to interact with L1 and L2 peers. Students mostly spent time with their L1 friends. For example, the Arabic-speakers held study groups together and during Ramadan participated in

iftar at the park together. Basim, Ahmed, and Hakim played soccer together. Kareem reported texting and visiting with his L1 friends in their apartments. Li also reported having an L1 friend from another part of the U.S. living with him so they could support each other. However, none of the students spent much time with English-speaking friends. Kareem reported chatting with Americans while playing online video games but not engaging in lengthy conversations. Hakim talked about speaking to Americans but also not at length. However, part of Hakim's definition of academic success included joining and socializing in organizations "to be a better person," but he did not report engaging in activities with many Americans or other L1 speakers in English, the lingua franca. Although Ahmed admitted he was willing to speak with anyone in English, he did not report having any L2 friends. In fact, Basim reported not knowing what to say and Li admitted being too embarrassed to speak to Americans. Regarding establishing a sense of belonging with L2 speakers, the students in this study did not achieve academic success in this one area. However, they seemed to achieve a sense of relatedness with people who shared their same language, which helped support academic success in a different way.

Also included Cachia et al.'s (2018) student-perceived definition of academic success was the idea that the university should fulfill its responsibilities toward these students. Because this study was conducted during the pandemic, students viewed the university as having a responsibility to keep them as safe as possible. Students in the findings mostly mentioned the university's responsibilities when discussing pandemic safety protocols. For example, Ahmed commented about how the university's offering of COVID-19 vaccinations to everyone made him feel safer. Basim was grateful the university cleaned his classroom often. All students discussed having to wear a mask and social distance during classes because of university policy. To these students, the university as an institution was meeting their safety responsibilities by

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providing services and enforcing rules that protected them in their learning environment. Because the students felt safe, they could concentrate on learning and participate in activities with diminished risk of contracting COVID-19. In this regard, the university was a support network that contributed to students' academic acculturative process and success.

This study's only unsubstantiated idea of academic success in York et al.'s (2015) definition of academic success was *post-college performance*. Because this study was limited to one semester, research could not know whether these students would be successful beyond their first semester or if their success would apply to their post-collegiate endeavors. However, despite this study not including a longitudinal span, students' comments indicated that they planned to be academically successful by completing their degrees for the purpose of pursuing careers. For example, Basim connected his definition of academic success with the concept of completing his degree to find a job. Kareem also stated that anyone who received a degree from a U.S. HEI, as he would do, would have their choice of jobs after graduating. Therefore, the portion of York et al.'s (2015) definition of academic success stating *post-college performance* appeared likely to apply in the future to the students in this study.

Overall, students in this study accomplished academic success according to this study's collective definition combined from York et al. (2015) and Cachia et al. (2018). Each unit of the definition corresponded to one of Ryan and Deci's (2000) basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The results of this research carry positive implications discussed in the next section.

Implications of This Research Study

In this section, positive implications of this research study are discussed, applying to L2 international students, educators, and the university.

L2 International Students

Exploring L2 international students' perceptions of their academic acculturative process and success in this study benefits other L2 international students in several ways. First, it can help them know how others managed the acculturative process, providing a vision of how they, too, can navigate and understand it. They can also be aware of and understand the acculturative stressors explained in this study. Second, with this study, other L2 international students could glean strategies through these exemplars of how to adjust their behavior during academic acculturative challenges, encouraging L2 international students to be successful. Finally, this study can be an encouragement to L2 international students. Knowing that other people similar to them were heard and respected, inspiring L2 international students to persevere with their educational goals.

Educators

As stakeholders in their students' learning, educators act as a point of contact between the student and the university. Educators, directly responsible to the student in assisting in the learning process, help students to achieve course competence. Hearing about instructors' actions and responses from students in this study, other educators can refer to this example when considering how to interact with L2 and international students during their university courses. This example is also applicable to instructors working with L2 and international in community colleges, college-preparedness language programs, and high-schools. Educators could use this study to recognize ways to guide students through the learning process of accomplishing course activities, as explained in this study, such as adjusting prompts for essay writing, providing specific study questions, and requiring weekly assignments and quizzes to help students attain course benchmarks. Other learning guidance described in this study included advising students

on their writing and study habits. The result of academic guidance, according to the students in this study, was academic achievement. In understanding the needs students identified to help them achieve academic success and which also supported their BPNs of autonomy and relatedness, educators can consider how to structure their courses, contributing to the international students' sense that they have control of and belong in their learning environment.

University

Implications for this research also apply to the universities as the institutions that invite international students to study on their campuses. Universities are responsible to students to provide the most plausible academic environment possible for students to have the opportunity to earn their degrees. Universities are also responsible to students to provide them with safe environment in normative and adverse times. Universities could examine this research to understand ways to create more appropriate and safer spaces for international students so that they feel comfortable to continue their studies at their chosen universities.

Students who feel safe in their environments to accomplish their goals means that students feel more in control of their environment. More autonomous international students will likely stay on university campuses. Their presence increases opportunities to contribute to international cultural learning and to build global relationships. Students who are comfortable contributors to academic and social settings will share their experiences with friends and acquaintances. This word-of-mouth advertising may entice more students to join U.S. HEI communities. For example, in this study's findings, when Ahmed knew that he wanted to study in the U.S. and his government gave him a list of several U.S. universities, he chose his current major based on family and online friends' recommendations as to which U.S. university would best meet his academic needs and how the professors valued the students.

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Universities that demonstrate responsibility to and for the students they invite to study on their campuses are likely to retain these students. Such demonstrations of responsibility can be indicated by maintaining safety protocols and employing professors and staff who engage with students to help them achieve their academic goals and create a sense of belonging on campus.

This study's research implications for L2 international students, educators, and universities suggest strategies and possibilities that can support students' academic acculturation and success by meetings students' BPNs.

Limitations

This study had two limitations related to the pandemic. First, because of social distancing with the need to maintain a certain number of people per square footage, I could not observe classroom behaviors or interactions. The observations would have helped me associate students' comments about their lived experiences and helped me to ask more clarifying questions related to those observations. Second, this study involved a small group of international students because of the limited number of international students attending the university in person for safety reasons. Most overseas' students preferred to take a gap year or attend online courses. Less overall international numbers reduced the number of students invited to participate in this study. This limitation impacted not only the number of student participants but also the places of origin and the languages represented by those students. More participants may have represented different languages and backgrounds, yielding more anomalous data.

Another limitation of this study was that it was conducted in only one university bridge program, confining the reported experiences and viewpoints described by the L2 international students. Conducting a study in different bridge programs may have revealed less similar

experiences with challenges, accomplishments, and support systems, or it may have confirmed more similar experiences and perspectives.

Conducting a longitudinal study would have been helpful in exploring how students perceive meeting their long-term academic goal of earning a U.S. HEI. Interviewing students at the end of their college career would have broadened the picture of how and if the students' accomplished their goals. Such data would benefit universities, educators, and incoming L2 international students. More data would contribute to the trustworthiness of understanding L2 international students' lived experiences about their own acculturative process and success. However, after intermittent attempts, I was unable to maintain contact with the participants in this study. Further attempted contact would feel like coercion. As a result, no longitudinal study could be conducted.

Future Research

In understanding more about L2 international students' lived experiences, future research that includes other challenging situations affecting university culture instead of the pandemic, such as politically or ethnically driven and hostile environments, would provide purposeful information in directing universities' formation of responses to such crises.

Other future impactful research would include more in-depth studies specifically focused on how students turn acculturative stressors into positive experiences. Resilient research paints a fuller image of what international students experience and would be helpful for universities to understand how the students they are inviting to participate on their campuses are also being successful. Likewise, with a more complete understanding of their challenges and accomplishments, international students can receive encouragement through other students' positively-reported lived experiences.

Another suggestion for future research regards conducting research with Middle Eastern students, especially males. The sparsity of research involving Middle Eastern male students attending university bridge programs and degree programs indicates a gap in the literature. As discussed in this dissertation, universities invite international students to participate in their degree programs on their campuses to strengthen cross-culture knowledge and interaction among educators and native students. For the positive development of relations with Middle Eastern students who make up a sizable portion or international students and to dispel discriminatory interactions on university campuses, conducting studies involving Middle Eastern students, especially male students, can educate stakeholders about more specific challenges these students face. Such positive inclusivity in research studies could also initiate and improve supportive programs for Middle Eastern students, their educators, and others involved in their academic acculturation and success.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter interpreted the findings about L2 international students' perspectives of their academic acculturative challenges and accomplishments through Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory's explanations of the basic psychological needs (BPNs) of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Included in this chapter's interpretation was how students met the criteria of academic success described in this study's definition. These interpretations indicate that students fulfilled their BPNs to overall accomplish academic acculturation and success with the exception of the previously discussed area. The importance of understanding the challenges and successes L2 internationals face will assist universities in fostering welcoming and supportive environments and retaining international students on their campuses.

Dissertation Conclusion

This study sought to explore L2 international students' perspectives about what challenges and accomplishments impact their academic acculturation process and success while studying in a bridge program during their first semester of university amidst the coronavirus pandemic. The findings showed that pandemic safety protocols, study habits, language proficiency, religious practices and racism were challenges. In many instances, students found workarounds to accomplish their academic goals. These findings were interpreted using Ryan and Deci's (2000) basic psychological needs (BPNs) of competence, autonomy, and relatedness as explained in their Self-Determination Theory. This study also combined denotative and connotative concepts of academic success (York et al., 2015; Cachia et al., 2018) for one collective understanding of academic success. Students' behaviors indicated that they fulfilled their BPNs to meet the definition of academic success. Support networks also contributed to successful academic and social learning environments.

Because this study revealed that these students were overall successful against their academic and social challenges, this research contributes to *resilience research* (Al Abiky, 2021; Pan, 2011), adding to the positive results about L2 international students during their academic acculturative process. Most acculturative studies involving East Asian students report the adverse effects, and there is nearly no literature exploring Middle Eastern males' many difficulties during their acculturation when studying in English-speaking countries. While revealing challenges during the pandemic and how L2 internationals faced those adverse circumstances, this study broadens the understanding of East Asian and Middle Eastern males' resilience in achieving their academic goals. With this knowledge, because universities invite international students to join their campuses for financial, academic, and cultural gain, universities can be more aware of L2

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international students' needs to foster resilient environments for these students' academic acculturation and success. Without facilitating a supportive environment, U.S. HEIs, financially dependent on international student tuition dollars, will suffer economically. Moreso, without international students' array of cultures, national students and educators on U.S. HEIs will decline in intercultural awareness. With such a lack of intercultural interactions, U.S.-educated individuals will fail to be equipped to engage in globalized settings. Additionally, the failure to nurture supportive environments for international students will cause international students to suffer psychologically. Not feeling their BPNs met, students will not academically succeed, translating to high turnover rates among international students on U.S. HEI campuses. This will impact international student retention (D. G. Smith, 2009), reverberating into economic struggles for U.S. HEIs. Therefore, it is in the best interest of U.S. HEIs to establish environments that support L2 international students' academic and social settings. Such environments can facilitate students' choices to succeed. Thus, the importance of this research is that it can assist universities in facilitating supportive environments to retain L2 international students for beneficial financial, academic, and cultural outcomes.

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Appendix A: Potential Interview Questions

Potential questions for the **first** interview:

1. Why did you come to the U.S. to study during the pandemic? How does your family feel about your coming here? Are there any situations that might discourage you from staying in the U.S. to study?
2. How is your experience so far?
3. What were your academic expectations before arriving? How is this experience meeting your expectations?
4. What obstacles have you experienced related to studying in the U.S. during the pandemic?
5. What do you think is helping you to adjust to university life and its expectations?
6. What would you like to change about your university experience?
7. What are some challenges you are having?
8. What are some achievements that you are making?
9. What is academic success to you? Do you feel that you are being successful?
10. What is motivation? Would you describe yourself as motivated? Can you provide any examples? What motivates you academically?
11. How has the need to participate in online or hybrid courses affected you?

In addition to individualized follow-up questions, potential questions for the **second** interview include the following:

1) What skills or knowledge do you wish you had before entering this university phase, especially during the pandemic? Which ones do you want to improve?
2) Do you prefer online or in-person classes, and why?
3) Describe a typical class meeting.
4) Describe when and where you study. Whom do you study with?

In addition to individualized follow-up questions, potential questions for the **third** interview include the following:

a. What experience do you remember most about this semester? Why do you remember this experience? Do you think that it interfered with your studies in any way?
b. How do you think you adjusted to university? Do you plan to finish your college career in the U.S.?
c. What is something you wish you could have improved this semester or hope to improve for next semester?
d. What did you already know helped you this semester?
e. Describe how you have been emotionally, mentally, and academically supported this semester.
f. What advice would you give your friends considering coming to a U.S. university?
g. Think of one word (or short phrase) to describe this semester.
h. Think of one word (or short phrase) to describe your feelings about next semester.

The following questions are divided by category and will be used as a reference to develop conversation as needed during any of the interviews:

Course Work

     a. How do you manage the academic workload?
     b. What do you hate/fear/like/love about any of your classes?
     c. What types of assignments have you had, *for example,* writing essays, short-answer tests, presentations, projects, etc.? Which ones do you enjoy and not enjoy? Do you avoid any of these? Why, or why not?
          a. Lectures
          b. Pair work and group work
          c. Presentations
          d. Essays/research writing
          e. Reading assignments
     d. Do you read your textbook or other class texts for your class assignments? Do you have a plan/strategy for reading? What do you read in the materials, for example, text, diagrams, and charts?
     e. Is there an academic task that you avoid, for example, taking notes, reading, writing papers, participating in extensive group discussion, or listening in class? Why?
     f. How do you feel about taking only core courses but no courses about your major? Did you know about this before you enrolled in this university program?
     g. What effect do hybrid and online courses have on your learning?

Language Proficiency

1. How do you think your English proficiency has helped or hurt you academically or socially?
2. Do you look for help from anyone to help with your assignments? If so, how do you receive this help, for example, by email, Google Docs, or on paper, and is it online or in person?
3. How much do you rely on a translator, i.e., electronic or personal, to help you in class and with your homework?
4. How has the pandemic affected your language learning?

Socio-Cultural Connections

1. How important is it to you to maintain/make friendships with people from your own country? In your language? From your own culture? Native English speakers? Friends/people from other languages/countries/cultures whose first language is not yours or English?

2. How much time do you spend with friends? How many English-speaking friends do you have? What do you and your friends do for fun? Do you study with your English-speaking friends and L1 friends?
3. How much time do you spend making new friends? How do you do this?
4. Are there any positive or negative experiences you wish to share that has occurred between you and the following people? Is there anything you want to discuss with these people but have not?
   a. Current teachers
   b. Classmates from your country
   c. Classmates from other countries
5. How has wearing masks and the need for social distance or fear of COVID-19 affected your opportunities to meet friends from other cultures and your own culture?

Technology

1) What role has technology played in the failure or achievement of your academic goals?
2) How has the pandemic changed your ability to use technology? How proficient were you in technology before the pandemic? If there is a change, give an example.
3) Compare how much you do the following study actions now with how much you did before the pandemic. How comfortable are you doing these actions now, and in your opinion, how much time do you need help doing these actions?
   a. Reading a textbook online
   b. Highlighting online
   c. Taking notes online
   d. Typing papers online
   e. Uploading assignments online
   f. Participating in audio or videoing online
4) Do you think that your instructors use technology well? What do they do or not do that affects how you study?

Appendix B: Codes, Categories, and Themes

59 Codes

Academic Success: Defined
Adjustment to university
American Safety
Attitude: Personal Idea of Working Hard
Challenge to Success: Lang. Prof.
Challenge to Success: Personal Experience
Challenge to Success: Ramadan
Challenge to Success: Social
Challenge to Success: Studies
Challenge to Success: Support: Advisor
Challenge to Success: Support: Familial
Challenge to Success: Support: Teacher
Challenge to Success: Time Management
Challenge: Class Dynamics
Challenge: Dedication to Complete Degree
Challenge: Educational Expectations
Challenge: Lang. Prof.: Social
Challenge: Language Proficiency: Academic
Challenge: Language Proficiency: Academic: ALEKS
Challenge: Language Proficiency: Academic: Class
Challenge: Language Proficiency: Academic: Studies
Challenge: Language Proficiency: Academic: Study Together
Challenge: Living Arrangements
Challenge: Meeting Friends: Academic
Challenge: Meeting Friends: Social
Challenge: Personal Experience: Academic
Challenge: Racism
Challenge: Ramadan
Challenge: Ramadan: Academic
Challenge: Safety Protocols
Challenge: Safety Protocols: Academic
Challenge: Safety Protocols: Academic: Quarantine
Challenge: Safety Protocols: Academic: Sanitizing
Challenge: Safety Protocols: Academic: Social Distancing
Challenge: Safety Protocols: Academic: Vaccine
Challenge: Safety Protocols: Academic: Wear a Mask
Challenge: Safety Protocols: Social: Quarantine
Challenge: Safety Protocols: Social: Social Distancing
Challenge: Safety Protocols: Social: Vaccine
Challenge: Safety Protocols: Social: Wear a Mask
Challenge: Studies
Challenge: Study Habits: Recording Lectures

Challenge: Study Habits: Study Together
Challenge: Study Habits: Time Management
Challenge: Time Management: Academic
Challenge: Visiting Home
Dedication to degree completion
Determination to study in the U.S.
Expectations From University Before Arriving
Future Goal
Personal Info
Success: Grades
Success: Social: Ramadan
Success: Support: Family: Academic
Success: Support: Family: General
Success: Support: Friends: Academic
Success: Support: Friends: Social
Success: Support: General
Success: Support: Teacher

26 Categories with Sub-Categories

Academic Success: Defined
Adjustment to University
Challenge to Success: Religious Practice
Challenge to Success: Lang. Proficiency
Challenge to Success: Personal Experience
Challenge to Success: Social
Challenge to Success: Studies
Challenge to Success: Support
Challenge to Success: Time Management
Challenge: Class Dynamics
Challenge: Dedication to Complete Degree
Challenge: Educational Expectations
Challenge: Language Proficiency
Challenge: Living Arrangements

Challenge: Meeting Friends
Challenge: Personal Experience: Academic
Challenge: Racism
Challenge: Religious Practice
Challenge: Safety Protocols
Challenge: Study Habits
Determination to Study in the U.S.
Expectation Before Arriving
Future Goal
Personal Idea of Working Hard
Success: Grades
Success: Support

Five Themes

Challenges
Challenges Turned to Successes
Successes

Academic Success: Defined
Determination to Study in the U.S.

Appendix C: IRB Approval Letters

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Approval of Study Modification – Expedited Review – AP0

Date: March 29, 2021   IRB#:   13089

Principal   Reference No: 714062
Investigator: Keely Robertson

Study Title: Academic Acculturation of L2 International Students in Their Freshman Year of University
During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Approval Date: 03/29/2021

Modification Description:
Adding REV.com agreement.

The review and approval of this submission is based on the determination that the study, as amended,
will continue to be conducted in a manner consistent with the requirements of 45 CFR 46.

To view the approved documents for this submission, open this study from the My Studies option, go to
Submission History, go to Completed Submissions tab and then click the Details icon.

If the consent form(s) were revised as a part of this modification, discontinue use of all previous versions
of the consent form.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the HRPP office at (405) 325-8110 or
irb@ou.edu. The HRPP Administrator assigned for this submission: Kat L Braswell.

Cordially,

Ioana Cionea, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Date: March 02, 2021   IRB#:   13089

Principal   Approval Date: 03/01/2021
Investigator: Keely Robertson

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: Academic Acculturation of L2 International Students in Their Freshman Year of University During the Coronavirus Pandemic

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:
- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Ioana A. O—

Ioana Cionea, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board