THE PERCEPTION AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL

STUDENTS DURING THEIR STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES COLLEGES AND

UNIVERSITIES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Ebere Chukwuezi

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

Sharon Michael-Chadwell, EdD, Committee Chair

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience and perceptions adapting to the process of college-level education for African international students at a four-year college in the southeastern United States. The theory that guided this study was Berry's acculturation theory, which categorizes individual adaptation strategies into two dimensions. This study was guided by acculturation theory aligned with the central research question and sub-questions. Participants who completed their studies or were current students at the university were selected through purposeful and snowball sampling. Data was collected through individual interviews, online surveys, and focus groups and analyzed using Moustakas's phenomenological seven-step approach of bracketing, horizontalization, clustering into themes, textural descriptions, structural descriptions, and textural-structural synthesis. Data collected illuminated themes and sub-themes across participants' lived experiences. Five themes emerged from the individual interviews and focus group data: (a) cultural differences, (b) course teaching, (c) lack of university assistance, (d) lack of diversity, and (e) individualized orientation process. The findings may guide international agencies, instructors, and higher education institutions to serve African international students better studying in the U.S. and those aspiring to study in the U.S.

*Keywords*: International students, African International students, acculturation

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Ebere V. Chukwuezi

## Dedication

I dedicate this manuscript to my children, Chibinyerem, Dabirichi, Chigekwu, and Chiemezu. I hope this study has inspired you to believe in yourself and strive for greatness. And to my parents, Maazi Emmanuel Orji and Mrs. Martha Orji, who encouraged, motivated, and inspired me to reach for excellence.

**Acknowledgments**

First, I thank God for His blessings upon me, for being present in times of doubt, for having good health, and for being strong throughout my doctoral journey.

I thank my study participants who willingly volunteered to share their experiences. This study was possible because of their help. I hope this study achieves your goals.

My profound gratitude goes to my dissertation chair, Dr. Sharon Michael-Chadwell. Thank you for your guidance and patience and for walking me through my doctoral journey. To my dissertation committee members, Dr. Milhalik Gregory, Dr. Deck, and Janet Sue, thank you for volunteering to serve on my committee and helping me review, direct, and shape my work. I thank Dr. Chris Reese for his support and guidance throughout this journey.

To my parents, Maazi Emmanuel, and Mrs. Martha Orji, thank you for your prayers and numerous calls and for encouraging me to keep pushing. I thank my children, Chibinyerem, Dabirichi, Chigekwu, and Chiemezu, for their understanding and supporting me with technology issues. I am thankful to my siblings, Kenneth, Charlie, Edith, Chijioke, and Nnenna, for their encouragement throughout the process. My sincere gratitude goes to my second brother, Dr. Charles Orji, who encouraged me to embark on this journey. To my numerous friends, I am grateful for standing by me throughout this journey.

Finally, I would like to thank my beloved husband and friend. We started this journey simultaneously, with full-time jobs and four school-aged children with different needs. You inspired me to become a better version of myself. Thank you for standing with me at every step of this process. Even when I felt discouraged, you encouraged me to keep pushing to get to the finish line. I am grateful for your love, support, encouragement, prayers, and dedication throughout this journey.

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## List of Abbreviations

African International Students (AIS)

Higher Education Institution (HEI)

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)

Institute of International Education (IIE)

International Student Office (ISO)

National Association of Foreign Students Advisors (NAFSA)

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## Overview

The enrollment of international students has significantly increased in colleges and universities across the U.S. These students, as transient migrants, find themselves in new social and academic environments, often far from their familiar support systems (Forbes-Mewett, 2019). In 2017, more than five million students were studying outside their home countries (Neghina, 2017), contributing substantial amounts to the economies of various countries: £14 billion in the UK, AU$20 billion in Australia, and US$30.5 billion in the US annually (Dodd, 2016; UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2014, 2015). Despite the absence of a unified national strategy for recruiting international students, the U.S. remains the primary destination for those pursuing education abroad (Chow, 2015). A critical examination of research on international students' experiences is necessary, as existing studies have predominantly focused on students in Western Anglophone universities or institutions in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the U.S. (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017; Vasilopoulos, 2016). International students play a vital role in the US economy, highlighting that their impact extends beyond numerical growth and financial contributions to institutions. The broader societal advantages of student mobility include preparing individuals for skilled migration, addressing skills shortages, and fostering closer international ties (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013). Many international students face academic and social obstacles in adapting to their new surroundings, such as language barriers, stereotypes, culture shock, racism, adjusting to different academic norms, immigration challenges, and financial pressures (Chege, 2016). Chapter One provides an overview of African and African international students (AIS) and issues related to challenges and strategies for adjustment, acculturation, and integration into their

new environment to foster their academic success. It also has a background highlighting relevant literature, including historical, social, and theoretical contexts for the research problem. Likewise, the problem and purpose statements, the significance of the study, the research questions, and terms related to the study are stated.

## Background

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS, 2015) defined an international student as, "Anyone who is enrolled at an institution of higher education in the U.S. who is not a U.S. citizen, an immigrant (permanent resident) or a refugee" (para 2).

Once international students complete their studies, they return to their home country or start working overseas on a different visa status, as their temporary identity as international students goes away (Bista & Foster, 2016a). The U.S. has the world's largest international student population (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019). Different countries, such as African nations, value degrees from the U.S. higher institutions. As such, the number of international students from Africa continues to grow. According to the Open Doors Report published by the IIE (2016), the 2014-2015 school year in the U.S. saw a seven percent increase in African international students. However, their challenges make it difficult for the students to integrate into the American academic and social environment.

The study utilized Berry's (1980) acculturation model as a framework for understanding international students' social and academic experiences in U.S. institutions of higher learning. The study includes an examination of the challenges African international students face and how higher education institutions can best support them in navigating the prevailing obstacles. Fostering a meaningful engagement of international students with the rest of the university community, integrating intercultural perspectives into classrooms, and encouraging domestic

students to operate in multicultural groups and teams could enhance the student experience and complement institutional recruitment and retention strategies (Palmer & Urban, 2014).

**Historical Context**

Many international students come from developing countries to the U.S. Although rising incomes in emerging economies imply increasing demands for higher education, the insufficient supply and poor quality of education tend to push their citizens to seek education overseas (Chevalier, 2014). The need to learn a popular language, such as English, for example, which is the global language for communication of scientific knowledge, is one key driving force pushing international students to study in English-speaking countries (Chevalier, 2014). According to a survey by the IIE (2016), most African international students come from sub-Saharan regions, including Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Cameroon, and South Africa. The quality of education, tuition and living costs, and the job market are key determinants in shaping the choices of international students on where to engage in overseas studies (Beine et al., 2014). Hence, there is a high influx of international students in the U.S. United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia.

In addition, scholarship programs might influence international students' mobility (Benson, 2015). For instance, a scholarship program in Saudi Arabia that encourages Saudi citizens to study overseas has led to the rise of the Saudi student population pursuing studies in the U.S. (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). Additionally, Africans have been seeking educational opportunities in the U.S. due to the view that America is a land of opportunities. Some elite African parents send their children to the U.S. to earn degrees. Nevertheless, limited resources among some African households do not deter young people from seeking education in the U.S. As such, some families that cannot afford the fees have been pushed to sell their land properties to send their children abroad for higher education because of better job opportunities. The

African governments and other employers highly value education from an American institution;

the graduates are viewed with pride by family members and communities alike. When they

return to their countries of origin, they believe that an international qualification provides a

competitive edge in the job market by positively impacting their careers and employability

(Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). However, with the increase of international students in U.S.

colleges and universities, their striving to keep their academic dreams alive has never been easy.

**Social Context**

International students are an asset to the colleges and universities where they enroll

because they add different perspectives and promote cultural awareness in the classroom.

Furthermore, the individual resources of international students promote the internationalization

of higher education and enrich diverse campus climates (Ward et al., 2015). Research by Bista

and  Foster (2016a) revealed that in adjusting to the academic culture, they also try to get used to

the social and cultural norms. International students experience stress adapting to a new culture

and language and cannot connect with family and friends in their home country (Bista & Foster,

2016b). They must adjust to a new academic culture, program requirements, and participation

styles and get accustomed to alternative social and cultural norms, such as communication styles,

eating options, living arrangements, and making new friends (Ammigan & Jones, 2018).

The experiences of international students might add to the challenges of transitioning to a

new country. Adapting to a different environment might impact their ability to communicate

within a new culture and language or deal with missing family and friends, which could add to

the challenges of residing on campus (Bista & Foster, 2016a; Jones, 2017). These challenges

range from emotional, physical, social, psychological, and mental. Consequently, it is essential to

provide transitional support to assist current African international students to set the path for

improved future recruitment. In countries with well-established international recruitment, there is a recognition that providing adequate support services and resources for international students could contribute to a positive experience and serve as a key factor in attracting and retaining other international students (Ammigan & Jones, 2018).

**Theoretical Context**

The theoretical context focuses on understanding how international students adjust to diverse cultures, particularly those studying abroad. Research has extensively explored these students' experiences and adaptation, emphasizing key concepts such as ethnic identity, acculturative stress, group and individual adaptation, and psychological adjustment (Berry, 1980). The aim is to highlight the factors that facilitate African international students' challenges and adaptation strategies. Practitioners can better understand the students' challenges by examining academic and sociocultural adaptation factors. Therefore, this study explores the experiences of African international students in U.S. colleges and universities, with findings intended to guide instructors and institutions in better serving current and prospective African international students.

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**Problem Statement**

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The problem being studied was the challenges African international students faced in adapting to college-level education in a four-year college in the southeastern U.S. due to unrealistic expectations set by recruiters and the challenges of transitioning into a new cultural and academic environment (Bimpong, 2023). Numerous students studying abroad depend on institutions and recruiters for information to facilitate their transition (James, 2022). African international students have expectations when they seek to attain their education in U.S. colleges and universities; they perceive America as their last hope for achieving good quality education

and financial stability because school recruiters do not give them realistic information about what to expect (Qadeer et al., 2021). According to Hulme et al. (2014), there are occasions where agents promise some students things that could not be delivered, such as specific modules or work placements with certain organizations; The students struggle with finding schools, taking assessments for college admissions, obtaining visas, and transitioning into the dominant culture.

More so, the ethical practices of these agents are questionable due to corruption, forgery, misrepresentation, and making false promises. The scholars added that "one international officer described most agents as being one level from being outright crooks" (Hulme et al., 2014, p. 682). Despite contributing to the U.S. economy, including a beneficial financial impact for their host HEIs, international students and African students continue to experience obstacles that challenge their continued enrollment and, therefore, the revenue they bring to the institutions in which they are registered (Sevanthinathan, 2017). Dos Santos (2019) suggested that more research should be done to examine the challenges international students face in U.S. universities and colleges, other than Chinese students. This research study seeks to bridge the knowledge gap and provide new insights into the existing literature on the experiences of African international students enrolled in a four-year college in Georgia.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience and perceptions adapting to the process of college-level education for African international students at a four-year college in the southeastern United States. At this stage of the research, the central phenomenon of the study was the perceptions and lived experiences adapting to the process of college-level education which is defined as those acculturations and

strategies used to alleviate the difficulties adjusting to a new culture. The theory guiding this study was Berry's (1980) acculturation theory.

## Significance of the Study

The National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA, 2019) reported that international students contribute to the U.S. in diverse ways, such as growing the economy and helping the U.S. lead innovation. According to the IIE (2017), the number of international students enrolled in U.S. higher education in 2016 increased by 7.1% from the previous year to over a million, representing an increase of 85% over just a decade ago. However, the foreign student population has been steadily declining. In the 2018 academic year, the percentage of international students in the U.S. dropped more than 6% from the previous year (Svrluga & Anderson, 2018). The reduction could result from immigration policy changes enacted by President Trump's administration (McKivigan, 2020). President Trump significantly limited the number of U.S. visas issued yearly, including those issued to international students (Usher, 2019). As such, the U.S. HEIs might not achieve international student access and completion goals without identifying and addressing the "challenges that minority and international students face" (Atebe, 2011, p. 9).

### Theoretical

There has been extensive investigation of international students' social interactions and their relationship to acculturation processes and outcomes (Beech, 2015). The increase in migration over the past three decades led researchers to explore the process immigrants undergo when settling in a foreign land. Hence the development of acculturation models. The theory guiding this study is Berry's (1980) acculturation theory and its relationship with international students' social and academic integration in U.S. colleges and universities. Insufficient work has

been done on African international students' challenges and strategies for adjustment, acculturation, and integration into their new environment to promote academic success.

**Empirical**

Although there has been some research on the transition experiences of international students in U.S. universities, much of this scholarship aggregates all international students as a singular group (Mwangi et al., 2019). Yet, most of this research overlooked the cultural adaptation and academic experiences of African migrant students, as they are typically conflated with those of Black or African Americans (Kim, 2014). This supports the existing literature on African migrant adjustments. Nevertheless, the findings provide a result that would help practitioners attend to the needs of African international students. Mandishona's (2018) study indicated that it could inform international agencies, instructors, and institutions of higher education institutions on how to better serve the international student population" (p. 4). However, extensive research mainly focused on international students from China, South Korea, and India (Hyun, 2019; Moon et al., 2020; Zhang-Wu, 2018). Theoretically, the current study contributes to the literature on the experiences and adjustment of African international students in universities and colleges. More specifically, the study findings have significant implications for the practitioners. According to Atteraya (2021), negative experiences by international students negatively affect their academic performance and well-being. Understanding the challenges this population of African international students faces could inform international agencies, instructors, and higher education institutions on how to serve better the African international students studying or aspiring to study in the U.S.

**Practical**

International students will likely encounter acculturation stress while transitioning into a new culture. While internationalization is often measured by the recruitment and enrollment of international students, several institutions fail to fully integrate and engage the students with the larger university community after they have been admitted and registered on campus (Spencer-Oatey, 2018). There is insufficient research that addresses the experiences of international students from Africa, who face additional challenges beyond those collectively experienced by most college students (Yan & Sendall, 2016). The findings from this study might help produce new insights for the host colleges or campuses to consider programs that could enhance and promote students' adaptation to their new environment and subsequently help them achieve their academic goals.

## Research Questions

To comprehend African international students' viewpoints and real-life encounters at a four-year college in the southeastern U.S., a set of questions was formulated to direct the research. These questions were designed to delve into the unique perspectives and experiences of these students within the academic and social environment of the institution. By utilizing these guiding questions, the study aimed to gain a deeper insight into the specific challenges and successes faced by African international students in this particular educational setting.

**Central Research Question**

How do African international students perceive their adaptation and acculturation experiences at a four-year college in a southeastern part of the U.S.?

**Sub-Question One**

What are the cultural challenges experienced by African international students that affect their abilities to acculturate?

**Sub-Question Two**

What are the perceived barriers to adaption, acculturation, and integration of African international students as they navigate their way through their studies at the university?

**Sub-Question Three**

How do African international students perceive their university's support services would address their challenges when attending a four-year college in a southeastern part of the U.S.?

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**Definitions**

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1. *Acculturation* - According to Berry (2001), acculturation is "social interaction and communication response styles that individuals adapt when interacting with individuals and groups from other cultures" (p. 139).

2. *Acculturation Stress* - A particular type of stress resulting from the process of acculturation (Berry et al., 1989).

3. *Berry's Model of Acculturation* - A model that proposes two dimensions through which immigrants are oriented towards a new society: the wish to interact with people from the majority group and the desire to preserve their ethnic culture (Berry, 1980, 2001).

4. *Culture* - The set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for everyone, communicated from one generation to the next (Matsumoto et al., 1996).

5. *Culture Shock* - The anxiety felt by individuals living in a new culture (Oberg, 1960).

6.  *F*-1 *Visa* - A type of non-immigrant student visa that permits foreigners to study (academic or a language training program) in the U.S. (McKivigan, 2020)

7.  *Immigrant* - Any individual who is not a citizen or national of the U.S. (Department of Homeland Security, 2015).

8.  *Integrations* - The ability for college students to assimilate both academically and socially (Tinto, 1987).

9.  *International Student* - A student who moves to another country (the host country) to pursue tertiary or higher education e.g., college or university (Shapiro et al., 2019).

10. *Sub-Saharan Region* - The sub-Saharan region of the African continent, includes Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Cameroon, and South Africa. (Okusolubo, 2018).

11. *Xenophobia* - The fear or hatred of foreigners or people from different countries. It involves prejudice, discrimination, or hostility towards individuals who are perceived as being outsiders or foreigners.

**Summary**

The problem being studied was the challenges African international students faced in adapting to college-level education in a four-year college in the southeastern U.S. due to unrealistic expectations set by recruiters and the challenges of transitioning into a new cultural and academic environment (Bimpong, 2023). Therefore, the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience and perceptions adapting to the process of college-level education for African international students at a four-year college in the southeastern United States. Berry's (1980) acculturation theory is the underpinning theoretical framework for this study. Understanding the adaptation and acculturation experiences of African international students would be valuable to U.S. educational stakeholders, institutions of higher

learning, and students alike in formulating strategies to address potential challenges that affect the students while adjusting to the U.S. academic environment. Chapter Two provides a review of the literature and covers a discussion of the theory of acculturation. The chapter ends with a summary restating the problem and identifying gaps in the literature, which warrant a further study of the experiences of African international students in the U.S.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## Overview

The review of the literature was conducted to determine the acculturation experiences of African international students during their study in U.S. colleges and universities. Some global scholars such as Rose-Redwood (2017) and Vasilopoulos (2016) argued for more subtle and broader research on international students' experiences, particularly since extensive research is focused on students who attend Western Anglophone universities or institutions located in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the U.S. This chapter reviews the literature about international students in general and, specifically, African international students. The search for the literature review was conducted using Liberty University's online research database. The first section discusses Berry's (1980) acculturation theory, followed by the synthesis of recent literature regarding support systems, financial challenges, and social and academic integration experiences of international students during their studies in U.S. colleges and universities. Finally, a summary of the chapter restates the problem and identifies gaps in the literature, which justifies the need for further research.

## Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is the foundation or blueprint from which all knowledge is constructed for a research study. Eisenhart (1991) defined a theoretical framework as "a structure that guides research by relying on a formal theory…constructed by using an established, coherent explanation of certain phenomena and relationships" (p. 205). The design of this study was developed under the theoretical understanding of Berry's (1980) acculturation theory to understand the experiences of African international students' cultural, social, and academic integration in U.S. institutions of higher learning. The concept of acculturation, conceived in

anthropology and sociology early in the 20th century, has been used to explain the dynamics involved when people from diverse cultural backgrounds come into continuous contact with one another (Park & Burgess, 1921).

Acculturation parallels various features of the process of socialization. The person or group accepts specific values and practices that were initially not their own to a greater or lesser extent (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020). Acculturation is not a negative experience; however, acculturative stress is experienced when greater levels of conflict are experienced, and the experiences are judged to be problematic, controllable, and surmountable (Berry, 1997). Numerous international students experience acculturation stress while adjusting to a different academic environment and culture.

Once international students come into contact with the host country's culture, they experience cultural changes, seeking to adapt to the new culture. Subsequently, acculturation stress arises, triggering the need to appraise potential threats. Lack of social and emotional support could lead to an inability to cope with the threat posed by the new culture, culminating in mental health concerns. However, if the students receive proper social and emotional support, the outcome is positive since their mental well-being improves, allowing them to adjust accordingly to the new culture. Figure 1 shows the acculturation framework for international students.

**Figure 1.**

*Diagram of a General Acculturation Framework*
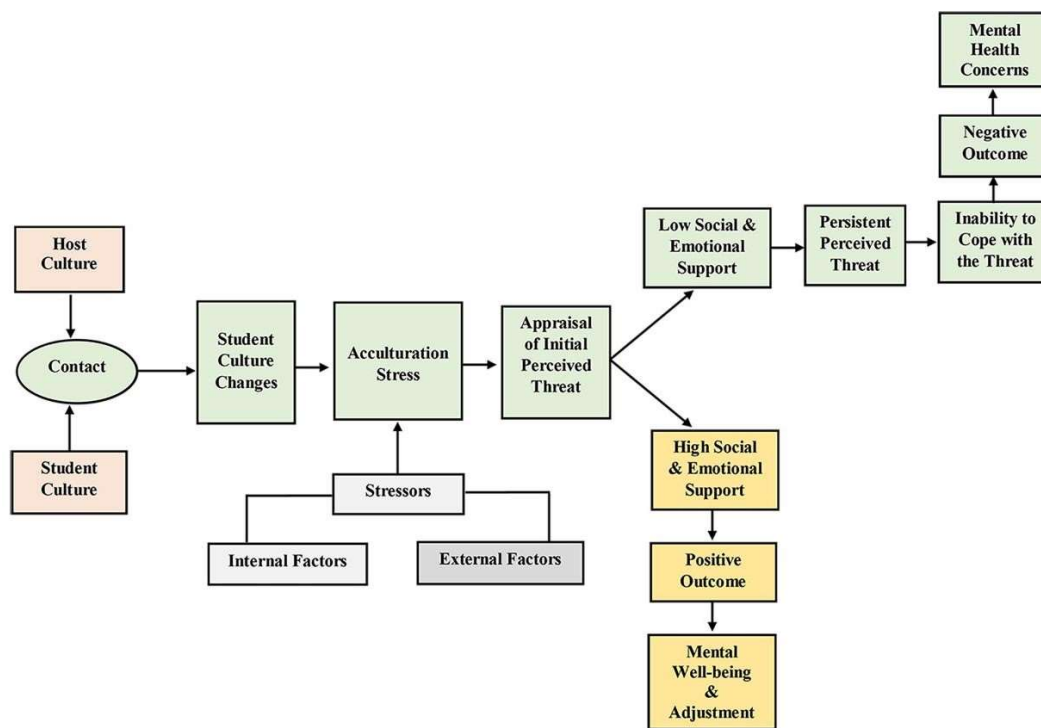


The framework shows the process of cultural change, potential acculturation stressors, cognitive appraisals of stressful situations, the role of social support, and predicted mental health outcomes, both positive and negative (Ma et al., 2020). Direct contact between international students and host students results in cultural changes, which could lead to acculturation stress. These changes are multidimensional, pervasive, and involve psychological, behavioral, and cultural aspects. Although the linear layout of this conceptual map does not adequately illustrate it, the changes are bi-directional (Berry, 1992), affecting both host and student cultures simultaneously. Acculturation at the group level involves changes in cultural practices, institutions, and social structures, and at the individual level, it involves psychological changes. Acculturation refers to cultural change; therefore, it would be necessary to specify how culture is defined.

## Related Literature

Experiences of African international students in U.S. universities have received limited attention in the extant literature. As the researcher in this study, I conducted an extensive literature search using online search engines (Google and Liberty University Library). Most of the articles from this study were downloaded from the *Journal of International Students*. The articles were dominated by major host countries and sending countries like the U.S., United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, China, and Japan, among others. A review of related literature helped to identify issues and areas of need and considerable solutions related to problems facing African international students in U.S. colleges and universities. The literature review presents social, cultural, psychological, academic, and economic experiences affecting African international students when attempting to adapt, acculturate, and integrate into their new environments.

Social and academic integration with the complexity of international students' lives overseas and their challenges, I considered social and academic integration. According to Tinto (1975, 1982, 1987), students are more likely to persist in college and graduate if they are academically and socially integrated into the institution. Tinto (2003, 2017) argued that students' perceptions of their social integration into the institution are essential to their persistence. Students who feel connected to their peers and satisfied with their educational experience tend to persist (Tinto, 2017). According to Tinto (1975, 1997), academic integration is defined by students' academic performance, level of intellectual development, and perception of having a positive experience in academic settings, while social integration is defined by involvement in extracurricular activities and the presence of positive relationships with peers.

The current study regarded social integration as an acculturation process where students adapt to the life of the host country and the institution. Tinto (1975, 1997) defined six successive sequences that underlie a student's decision-making process for persisting in or dropping out from academic courses and programs: pre-entry attributes, objectives, initial commitments, experience with the university system, integration, objectives, and emerging commitments and results. However, background and contextual obstacles might impede students' ability to connect with their institution's academic and social culture, thus impacting their sociocultural adjustment and academic performance (Kim, 2014). This is not an easy process for international students. More specifically, Black students are thought to maintain their heritage and local culture while simultaneously socializing between the two cultures (Kim, 2014; Valentine, 1971). Therefore, the challenges they face regarding their social adjustment impact their cultural adaptation to universities.

**Meaning of Culture**

Morris et al. (2015) defined culture as "a loosely integrated system of ideas, practices, and social institutions that enable coordination of behavior in a population" (p. 632). It has transformed over the past two centuries. There have been different interpretations of culture. However, by this definition, every member of a society has a definitive culture. It is made up of the ideas, institutions, and interactions that guide and reflect individuals' thoughts, feelings, and actions (Hamedani & Markus, 2019). Immigrants often are situated in two worlds and cultures as they come into new locations with different approaches and values. These habits, values, beliefs, and attitudes are not static.

Culture guides one in adjusting to different ideas and notions about acculturation (Ardila, 2021; Lennon et al., 2017). People are forced into habits and traditions, which eventually become

their culture. Culture helps people to connect with and learn about others' interests and concerns. There are three levels of culture (Ardila, 2021; Lennon et al., 2017). The first is the cultural tradition that sets one apart from one's specific society (Lennon et al., 2017). For example, African, Chinese, and Japanese cultures entail their shared language, beliefs, values, and traditions, which distinguish them from other people. Logically, people with a shared cultural aspect acquired their culture from their parents or household members with the same culture.

The second layer of culture is the subculture, which refers to individuals who are part of a group that is different from the dominant culture or dominant people in a particular part of society (Ardila, 2021). In such a diverse society, some people might decide to retain their original cultural traditions. Thus, they might be seen as sharing a subculture within their newly adopted society. Subcultures exist because the dominant one does not meet the needs or interests of members of the subculture. Therefore, these groups form to engage in lifestyles or activities that meet the needs of their interests or shared experiences related to a particular identity (Lennon et al., 2017, p. 292). Examples of these subgroups could be found in the United States, such as African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans. When the cultural difference between the subculture and the dominant culture begins to fade, and individuals adopt their dominant culture more, the subculture becomes obsolete except for those who have a common ancestry. This situation is the case with Irish or German Americans who identify first as Americans. Also, numerous Asian Americans think of themselves as Americans first.

The third level of culture is the cultural universal, which entails elements, patterns, characteristics, or institutions that are found in all human cultures worldwide (Ardila, 2021). These are learned behaviors shared by all people anywhere in the world. Examples include arts, verbal language communication, leadership roles implemented by community decisions, raising

children through family settings, playing games, making rules guiding sexual orientation, use of

kingship terms to refer to family members, classifying people through age and gender, and

different roles they play in the society. Culture helps people adapt to their environment (Lennon

et al., 2017). For African international students studying in the United States, they would need to

be able to read and write to be able to adapt to the American culture. In all, culture changes due

to injection, acculturation, innovation,

Most immigrants should undergo "a process of adaptation—known as acculturation

following their arrival in the United States" (Girmay, 2017, p. 2). Acculturation is a major part of

the adjustment process of migrant students. It is important to understand how adjustments impact

students' overall experiences. Acculturation is "the dual process of cultural and psychological

change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their

individual members" (Berry, 2005, p. 698). It requires interactions of at least two autonomous

culture groups, in which a change results in at least one of the cultural groups as part of the

interaction (Berry, 1980). One culture dominates the other group, thereby consciously and

unconsciously resulting in cultural changes in the weaker group. Acculturation could also occur

if the individual wishes to associate with the host culture. The early conceptualization led to the

development of unidimensional and bi-dimensional models to examine the acculturation of

immigrants.

The primary purpose of Berry's (1980) acculturation model was to investigate what

happens to individuals who have developed in one cultural context as they attempt to re-establish

their lives in another one. Berry (2001) conceptualized acculturation as "social interaction and

communication response styles that individuals adapt when interacting with individuals and

groups from other cultures" (p. 139). Furthermore, Berry (2003) considered two basic

dimensions for the adaptation of immigrants: (a) the preference for maintenance of their own ethnic culture (cultural maintenance), and (b) the preference for involvement or contact with the host society (cultural contact)—maintaining positive relationships with the larger society and other ethnic groups. The bi-directional model of acculturation specifies four acculturation dispositions or strategies of how people conceptualize home and host identities: – integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization (Berry, 1980; Rudmin, 2003). Assimilation (low maintenance and high contact), separation (high maintenance and low contact), marginalization (low maintenance and low contact), and integration (maintaining one's ethnic culture while also adopting elements of the host culture), are related to a range of positive psychological and social outcomes for immigrant youth (Berry, 2006).

Berry (1980) stated that different factors influence immigrants' inclination to either of the four dimensions of the acculturation model: integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization. Eventually, the four strategies became either voluntary, when members of a weaker group/immigrants felt that their acculturation strategies were developed by choice, and involuntary when the weaker group perceived that their acculturation strategies were the choice of the dominant group. Nonetheless, there are four categories of people under the whims of the acculturation framework: voluntary immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and sojourners. As Berry (1980) explained, voluntary immigrants are the immigrants who migrated to other countries in search of a better life and employment. Asylum seekers go to other countries to avoid torture due to political violence. Refugee seekers are displaced by war, violence, and natural disasters and are settled in counties willing to accommodate them. On the other hand, sojourners move to foreign nations temporarily intending to move back to their countries of origin; this includes international students seeking to acquire education in the host countries.

Acculturation theories have been criticized for adopting a "one size fits all" approach as they characterize immigrants equally, regardless of their countries of origin and ethnic group (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020). It is important to distinguish between Black, African, and other African students because not everyone from the continent of Africa is Black African. Additionally, there are cultural and linguistic differences between the same people who identify as Black -Africans. Hence, acculturation experiences might differ based on countries of origin and cultural heritage. Not much work has been done on African international students regarding challenges and strategies for adjustment, acculturation, and integration into their new environment to promote their academic success in the United States. Using Berry's (1980) model of acculturation allowed the researcher to contextualize sociocultural adjustment, align the central question, and identify and describe the changes African international students experienced with the members of the dominant group, which included the school community and the local community.

**Challenges Facing International Students**

The U.S. remains the top host country for international students globally, topping 1.09 million students in 2018, a 1.5% increase from the previous year (IIE, 2019). According to the IIE (2016), during the 2014/2015 academic year, there were 974,926 international students in US colleges and universities, and about 64% of international students were funded by themselves or their families. Transitioning into college or university could be challenging for any student. It could be even more challenging for international students who might have to additionally deal with discriminatory treatment (Almurideef, 2016). However, scholars suggested that the adjustment of Black African international students might differ from White international students' experiences (Mwangi et al., 2019). This is in part because, in the U.S., African

international students are considered racial/ethnic minorities who are exposed to racism, nativism, and other discrimination (Fries-Britt et al., 2014).

International students have been found to encounter a wide range of challenges during their studies. These students' encounters include living adaptation, language, and adjusting to the new cultural system (Yassin et al., 2020). While internationalization is often measured by the recruitment and enrollment of international students, several institutions fail to fully integrate and engage these students with the larger university community after they have been admitted and registered on campus (Spencer-Oatey, 2018). A student's integration is a multi-dimensional concept involving social, economic, political, and cultural considerations, and it is difficult to measure and evaluate (Ward et al., 2015). These challenges negatively influence the learning process for international students (Atteraya, 2021; Yassin et al., 2020).

A phenomenological study by Dos Santos (2019) involving Chinese students studying in historically Black colleges in the US revealed that there exists discrimination based on nationality, color, and race in these institutions. Moreover, there is significant social unfairness in internship opportunities and gaps in academic expectations. Moon et al. (2020) revealed that South Korean and Chinese graduate students studying in the U.S. had different challenges and experiences. The researchers associated the differences with the groups' diverse cultures. Additionally, Zhang-Wu's (2018) study showed that Chinese students in the U.S. faced discrimination.

As one student in Hyams-Ssekasi et al.'s (2014) study explained, "If you are not careful you can lose your confidence and self-esteem in this country. The values we have in Africa are looked down on. Talk about our traditions, they are still considered backward, only good enough for research." (p. 8). Okusolubo (2018) added that African international students face social

challenges and barriers as soon as they arrive due to the unfavorable misconceptions, prejudices, and misperceptions held by Americans regarding Africans. This situation might be due to information from the media and news channels. Wild animal poaching, wars, disease, and starving people with AIDS are some of the media images shaping American students' understanding and conception of African international students.

Furthermore, Evivie (2009) noted that the media (e.g., televised charities such as *Save the Children and Christian Children's Fund* as well as *the Discovery Channel and National Geographic*), the curriculum in school, and the home environment of their fellow students perpetuate myths, stereotypes, and misperceptions against African international students. These typecasts even cause some African international students to hide their African identity due to the fear of being mocked for their accents (Coleman, 2018; Osikomaiya, 2014). This experience could be stressful, with the impact being exacerbated by settling into a new educational context. Despite their differences relating to language, religion, previous mobility experiences, gender, and race, international students tend to be considered by their host institution as a homogenous group without considering their specific needs (Ballo et al., 2019). The most cursory examinations reveal that international (i.e., non-domiciled) students are far from homogenous (Mwangi et al., 2019).

Furthermore, it should be noted that African international students come from different countries and backgrounds. Combining all African international students makes it even more challenging for specific groups. For instance, they might lack 'natural' opportunities to interact with the local community when much of their time is spent with international student peers in 'bubble-like learning environments' (Cuzzocrea et al., 2021), resulting in what has been termed a form of unintentional segregation (Fincher & Shaw, 2009). Subsequently, they differ from the

individualistic culture in which people are viewed as independent and possessing a unique pattern of traits that distinguish them from others; people in collectivistic cultures view the self as inherently interdependent with the group to which they belong (Jiang et al., 2022).

Berry (1997) identified two fundamental dimensions of acculturation: maintaining original cultural identity and maintaining relations with other groups. For international students, this aspect is challenging to navigate because it means holding on to their home culture and, at the same time, adapting to the new culture. Four scenarios might happen during acculturation: integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization (Berry, 1997). Some international students follow the integration approach whereby they maintain their culture and embrace the dominant group's culture. Such students look for opportunities to highlight their culture and seek opportunities at cultural events and other similar events at school where they could interact and engage in cross-cultural activities. However, other international students might follow the separatist approach by maintaining their culture. This group prefers to stay engaged in their classroom, isolated, and not interact with other students in their institutions. The separation group values neither intergroup relations nor cultural maintenance and is likely to be marginalized (Berry, 1997).

**Racial Experiences**

Numerous international students were born in non-White countries (IIE, 2020). When arriving in the U.S., foreigners must adapt to the racial structure and change how they perceive different cultures (Viggiano & Yao, 2019). Nonetheless, those from West African regions are born in homogenous countries; therefore, race is not a part of how they identify with individuals. Bardhan and Zhang (2017) conducted a study that focused on twenty-two students from a global south at a midwestern university. As the study revealed, the U.S. makes the incorrect assumption

that Black international students who identify as either African or Caribbean could be classified as Black American. Furthermore, the findings indicated that race is often not a facet of identity for numerous international students of color when they enter the U.S.; race is sometimes seen as a Western phenomenon.

Bardhan and Zhang's (2017) study provide valuable insights into how international students of color perceive racial identity through the lens of U.S. citizens upon their arrival in the country. The authors highlighted that the experience of racialization is particularly intense for students from sub-Saharan Africa or predominantly Black countries, who faced the challenge of 'becoming' Black in the U.S. (p. 294). This notion resonates with Lee's (2017) findings, which reveal the existence of racial discrimination in the U.S. Lee explains that students from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East experience discrimination, while White students from Europe, Canada, or Australia report significantly fewer instances of such treatment. This discussion highlights the racial challenges faced by international students of color, emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of their unique experiences and the development of more inclusive and supportive educational environments.

International students experience racial or ethnic discrimination and recognize this discriminatory act based on how they become increasingly aware of their racial and ethnic background (Kim, 2014; Ma et al., 2020). Berry et al. (1989) posited that race, discrimination, and prejudice might negatively impact individual acculturative strategies. Accordingly, when immigrants experience racial discrimination or bias in their interactions with members of the host culture, they tend to associate acculturation with rejection, making it more difficult for them to acculturate to their new environment. These students have not been subjected to discrimination in their home country; therefore, it is difficult for them to understand how the

American higher educational system perceives race and ethnicity (Ma et al., 2020). Reports indicated that foreigners faced multiple incidents of racism and racial discrimination committed against international students due to their specific race/ethnicity (Horton, 2020; Oppel & Tavernise, 2020).

**Impact of COVID-19 on International Higher Education**

The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic is remarkable in international higher education, particularly student mobility (Altbach & De Wit, 2022). For instance, from the IIE survey, approximately 90% of US colleges and universities anticipated a decrease in international student enrolment, and 30% of HEIs indicated a substantial decline in the academic year 2020–2021 (Martel, 2020). In the 2020/2021 school year, international students declined by 15% from the previous year (IIE, 2021). This reduction might be because of the COVID-19 pandemic. While most college students encountered familiar challenges such as navigating online courses, fear of the virus and health concerns, and social isolation, international students faced unique challenges during COVID-19.

The prevalence of depression among international students, which ranged from 22.6% to 45.3%, was higher than among local students and even the general population during COVID-19 (Saravanan & Subhashini, 2021). While domestic students were quarantined at home, international students either stayed in the dormitory, off-campus housing on temporary accommodation or flew back home, risking contracting the virus while in transit. Therefore, international students had to navigate additional challenges because of COVID-19 (Koo et al., 2021). The pandemic led to changes in college admission, college completion, and access to learning, among others. The changes due to COVID-19 increased worries and concerns about marginalized students, including international students in the U.S. There were concerns

regarding issuing visas, college admission, racism, and scholarship/assistantship opportunities (Horton, 2020).

Despite intense debate on whether the COVID-19 pandemic could mean the end of the internationalization of higher education, the pandemic profoundly influenced the global higher education landscape, specifically student mobility (Marginson, 2020). Parents' and students' rethinking about studying abroad and making decisions on the country of study became apparent. Previous studies emphasized the perceived lack of support and guidance from International Students' Office (ISO) regarding tax and immigration matters, clarity of administrative information, and pre-pandemic planning for international students dedicated social activities (Chen & Yang, 2014; Heng, 2017). The coronavirus forced the sector to re-think and redesign higher education to sustain it in the future, especially as it relies heavily on fees generated by international student bodies.

**Academic Challenges**

Challenges with academic adjustment often result from the difference between international students' experiences of classroom life in their home countries and their encounters in the U.S. (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Baker and Siryk (1999) state that academic integration entails students' positive experiences and intellectual development. Academic integration has a significant influence on students' performance. Baker and Siryk distinguished four concepts in academic integration: academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal and emotional adjustment, and attachment. Academic adjustment is not just being academically successful but instead comprises the overall adjustment process and student satisfaction,

The learning experience of international students has been shown to have a more significant impact on satisfaction than the arrival, living, or support services experiences

(Ammigan & Jones, 2018). International students might be unaccustomed to instructors asking questions in class and be particularly troubled if called upon without having raised their hands (Tang et al., 2018). African students might likely feel embarrassed and intimidated when asked to answer class questions. This does not mean they do not know the answers to the questions. It is part of the African culture to raise one's hand if one wants to speak.

Classrooms in the U.S. might differ from what international students are accustomed to in their home countries. The interactive nature of U.S. classrooms runs in stark contrast to the more formal atmosphere present in the African educational system, in which professors serve as the sole connoisseurs of knowledge (Girmay, 2017). For example, the various teaching styles in the U.S. education system include class discussions, group projects, and class presentations, among others, which might be unfamiliar to international students. In Africa, it is considered disrespectful to challenge a professor's opinion, while in the U.S., those who challenge instructors are appreciated and rewarded with points.

In Africa and some other countries, a grade is weighted towards final exams, while in the U.S., there is more emphasis on class participation and presentations. The testing and grading formats might also differ, which could be extremely frustrating. Students could easily approach their professors to seek help on their work, while in some cultures like Africa, faculty is highly respected, and the office is forbidden. Students are rarely seen approaching their professors in a formal context. Thus, differences in the academic culture between African and Western countries might lead to conflicting expectations in the academic environment, thereby creating barriers to academic adjustment (Girmay, 2017).

The contributing factors of academic adaptive stress for international students are culturally and linguistically different, including teaching styles, curriculum structure, minimum

credit hour requirements, heavy course load, academic competence, and high expectations (Xu et al., 2018). To maximize the international student's chances of overall success in the university, special attention should be paid to academic success in the classroom (Tinto, 2017). Furthermore, the language barrier cannot be over-emphasized. English language proficiency and writing styles are the major academic challenges for international students in the U.S. Another challenge that international students should navigate is the pressure to utilize English in all aspects of daily life, which could increase stress (Lee, 2017). Swathi et al. (2017) believed that international students in the U.S. experienced writing difficulties related to grammar and vocabulary, organization and flow of ideas, critical thinking, and plagiarism. One of the most widely used tools to measure the language proficiency level of students is the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Most universities in the U.S. mandate that international students take the TOEFL exam before admission (IIE, 2017). However, because of the complexity of proficiency in a second language, significant numbers of studies suggest a lack of a relationship between the TOEFL and academic success (Özturgut, 2001; Stover, 1982). This perspective means that a passing score for TOEFL admission does not determine language proficiency and success at U.S. colleges and universities. Smiljanic (2017) investigated how lower scores created psychological problems. The author found that the lower scores in speaking sections in the TOEFL exam were related to more acculturative stress, which has been linked to anxiety and avoidance. Safipour et al. (2017) and Perry (2016) argued that such understanding would enable postsecondary institutions to provide adequate support for international students to address negative experiences and stereotypical views.

However, after reviewing 58 journal articles on international graduate student development, learning, and experiences, including those related to English-language learning, Renn et al. (2014) stated that little new knowledge emerged about students' adjustment to the host country. This is in line with Tinto's (1997, p. 103) suggestion that,

> "Persistence in college is… not simply the outcome of individual characteristics, prior experiences, or prior commitments… [but also] the outcome of a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the institution (peers, faculty, administration, etc.) in which he is registered."

Previous research argued that it is through domestic and international students' interactions, where students from different cultures and backgrounds discuss and debate, that an understanding of what it means to live in a globalizing world is supported (Beelen & Jones, 2015).

## Culture Shock

Culture shock cannot be overlooked when exploring international students' experiences in their host country. It could be challenging to transition from a collectivist to an individualistic culture like the U.S. While an encounter with a new culture could be a positive experience that builds confidence and empathy and strengthens one's sense of being, it could also be challenging, leading to anxiety and feelings of uncertainty, disorientation, and confusion, commonly referenced as culture shock (Slonim-Nevo & Regev, 2016). An anthropologist, Kalervo Oberg, first coined culture shock in 1954 to describe the anxiety felt by individuals living in a new culture. According to Oberg (1960), some symptoms might also include boredom, feeling isolated, withdrawal, avoiding contact with the host nationals, irritation,

frustration, and homesickness. The degree to which culture shock affects people differs; however, it somehow affects everybody.

Oberg (1960) identified four stages of cultural adjustment that describe the steps people go through when adapting to a new environment. The first stage is the honeymoon stage, which is an exciting time for the individual. Students are curious about the new culture. They seem adjusted and do not anticipate difficulties. Then, the individual gets to the irritation and hostile stage. At this stage, students start feeling irritated and confused about the host and home cultures. The individual moves to the gradual adjustment stage, where they begin to learn more about the new culture. As people gain a deeper understanding of the new culture, they also better appreciate the host culture. The final stage is the adaptation stage. By then, the students feel a sense of belonging and sensitivity to the new experiences. This process takes a longer time, and it comes with various challenges. However, this could be achieved if the individual spends a considerable amount of time in the host culture. Likewise, a person's personality traits might also play a role in how they react to new experiences.

Shu et al. (2016) explored how personality traits affect cross-cultural adjustment among international students in the U.S. Their research supported the idea that individuals with personality traits such as extroversion and conscientiousness are likely to adjust more quickly to new cultures. Therefore, international students who interact socially with natives of the host country would experience a better adaptation in the host country. However, this experience might not be easy for African international students. Okusolubo (2018) noted that socially, African international students have trouble adapting to their new environment and culture due to cultural differences.

International students might not feel comfortable with openness about topics such as sexuality, alcohol drinking in social and community events, co-ed dormitories, dressing styles, and sexual orientation. In addition to being required to learn in the medium of a foreign language, international students are sometimes challenged at the level of deeply ingrained cultural and religious taboos, such as lifestyles, social rules, and social behaviors, such as the consumption of alcohol, gender relations, and sexual mores. Adjusting to Western food might be challenging for them. Nonetheless, learning to recognize the stages of culture shock would help advisors assist students with adapting to their new environment (Yale, 2017). Markedly, advisors should strive to create opportunities that allow international students to interact socially with the natives to enhance their social experiences, leading to better adaptation.

African international students also face communication barriers. All immigrants are acculturated into the new culture through communication. Speaking with an accent is a significant factor that affects international students' academic and social integration. Chege (2016) noted that African international students struggled with their peers and instructors due to their heavy English accents. African international students had to take more classes to improve their language skills. At the same time, English is the official language in the home countries of some of these African international students, and it is rarely used outside of the classrooms. It has resulted in the inability to express themselves in English and the unwillingness of the students to communicate with native speakers. The unwillingness is a major barrier for international students, including those from refugee backgrounds, because it limits their opportunity to produce English output in an authentic context. Subsequently, such a barrier impedes their English acquisition (Ahn et al., 2017).

Studies have shown that language and culture are the two main barriers affecting international students' adaptation to new cultures (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016). Specifically, the language challenge comprises (a) obstacles in understanding people's speaking and being understood, (b) failure to understand the slang and jokes, and (c) a lack of confidence to use English (Jackson, 2016). Thus, language deficiency hinders classroom participation. In general, Africans are accustomed to being quiet during conversations with their elders and avoid direct eye contact with their superiors unless they receive permission to speak (Girmay, 2017). Reasonably, talking overly to an older adult or a person in high authority and making direct eye contact would be seen as a sign of disrespect. As such, it limits their opportunities to approach instructors to discuss their issues.

Findings from Mwangi et al. (2019) showed that some international students want more involvement from their colleges. Some researchers did not agree; Chavoshi et al. (2017) had an entirely different perspective on adjustment. They proposed that international students need to "keep an open mind" about their host country instead of positing that they find support groups. Accordingly, the onus was on international students to overcome their adjustment hurdles independently. As temporary residents with permanent social support in the host culture, international students are more vulnerable to the negative influence of acculturation challenges (Berry et al., 1989).

As Mesidor and Sly (2016) found in their study, international students benefit from having groups of people supporting them in their new host country. Specifically, African international students (AIS) should get support to adjust better to the host country. Additionally, understanding how their cultural identities and acculturation process are interrelated might help the students facilitate their acculturation process meaningfully and successfully. Indeed, colleges

and universities should strive to enhance their communication techniques because language barriers can be complex, and the challenges that come with them could hurt the overall integration of international students.

**Financial and Economic Challenges**

African international students are bound to face challenges as they study abroad. These challenges and pressure points are extensive and impact their subsequent ability to adjust to life in their host institution (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016). The visa processing process might be complex and frustrating because it varies from country to country, yet far more stringent in Africa. According to Kang et al. (2019), because of the recent revisions in immigration policy, international students must confront increased organizational barriers that are either currently in effect or projected. The impediments include increased application fees and threats of deportation to students who violate visa requirements.

Although tuition costs have increased for both domestic and international students, the general cost is significantly higher for international students because they should typically pay hidden fees, such as "international student fees" and Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) fees (Study International Staff, 2019). In addition, international students do not qualify for federal student aid because they are not citizens of the U.S. Their immigration status does not allow them to get such packages; therefore, they are an infusion of revenue into the national economy, but not the liability that they have been portrayed as in national political rhetoric (McKivigan, 2020),

In addition to these new fees and requirements, the increase in xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S. has significantly affected international students seeking to pursue courses of study at American universities (Ritter & Roth, 2021). They need to be

protected; however, the government policies after September 2011 or 9/11 raise questions about the future relationship between American higher institutions and international students. Post-9/11 immigration policies created a physically and administratively restrictive and politically and socially inhospitable effect in the U.S.A. (Witt, 2008). This paradigm shift affected international students' mobility, creating hurdles on how to tackle immigration challenges.

During President Obama's administration, the Department of Homeland Security (2015) proposed expanding and extending the STEM Optional Practice Training (OPT) program. Bound et al. (2021) state that the OPT program provides temporary work permits to international students for 12 to 29 months after graduation. During its implementation in the Obama administration, the U.S.A. saw new foreign enrollment grow yearly. However, according to the NAFSA (2019), the 2018–2019 academic year revealed a nearly 10% reduction in the number of recently enrolled international students in the US. This occurrence might be because of the immigration policy changes enacted by President Trump when he took office in 2017.

Furthermore, the Trump administration introduced new, enhanced visa questionnaires for certain applicants. It enforced a controversial new policy, making it easier for international students to accrue what's known as "unlawful presence" in the U.S. This determination could subject them to a future three or 10-year ban on re-entry (Redden, 2019). Recent U.S. policies, such as the Trump administration's travel injunctions, excluded travelers from primarily Muslim and non-White countries to the U.S., simultaneously positioning international students as commodities for U.S. higher education (Viggiano & Yao, 2019). The travel ban made it more difficult for universities to recruit international graduate students and faculty. However, graduate students who could still apply for a visa are likely to face challenges. These changes mounted pressure on international students and allowed countries such as Canada and Australia to reap the

benefits of Trump's "America first" policies, with international students choosing to go there for higher education (Fischer, 2011). This might be the reason for a reduction in the previous increase in international student enrollment.

There was a slowdown in the growth of international students in the last decade. Enrollment has decreased since the 2016/2017 school year (IIE, 2017). According to a 2021 survey by the Council of Graduate Schools, which looked specifically at master's and doctoral programs, the sharp drop-off in international enrollment from fall 2019 to fall 2020 was fueled more by health and travel issues than a drop in interest (IIE, 2021). In the 2019/2020 school year, 268,000 new international students were enrolled in the U.S. institutions (IIE, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, visa restrictions, and the political environment might have contributed to the enrollment decline (Kang et al., 2019; Redden, 2019; Saravanan & Subhashini, 2021).

The political and social environment might have been uncomfortable for the students. According to McKivigan (2020), there are four categories of visas issued to international students and exchange visitors by U.S. immigration. The F-1 student visa is a nonimmigrant visa that implies almost no guarantees from, or the good graces of, the U.S. and provides little or no protection to students who encounter legal trouble; an F-1 visa is a type of non-immigrant student visa that permits foreigners to study (academic or language training program) in the U.S. F-3 or M-3 visas are for nationals of Canada and Mexico who commute to the U.S. for full- or part-time study at an academic (F-3) or vocational (M-3) institution (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE], 2020). A J-1 visa is for participants in an educational or cultural exchange program. This visa category includes college and university students, physicians, summer work-travel visitors, visiting professors, research and short-term scholars, teachers, and au pairs (ICE, 2020).

As the Department of Homeland Security (2015) reported, F-1 visa holders are allowed to change their program of study, receive employment permission for the duration of their studies, and work for limited hours a week. F-1 students are allowed to stay in the country for their studies, and they can travel internationally yearly. Once they finish their studies or have employment permission, they can be approved to stay for 60 more days before they depart. On the other hand, M-1 visa holders are international students who enroll only in vocational programs and are not allowed to change their program. They could be employed after their studies. They are not allowed to travel internationally yearly. They should depart within 30 days after their graduation or employment permission ends. International students are worried about these issues and do not want their future jeopardized. They also fear that their visas might be revoked without cause during their educational programs; such instances have occurred in which students commence a bachelor's, master's, Ph. D., or other professional degree programs but are later forced to disenroll and return home before completing their studies (Kang et al., 2019).

Various American universities and colleges have reported a significant decrease in the number of applications submitted by international students (Redden, 2019). It has been reported that the social and political environment (60%) and the lack of feeling welcome in the U.S. (48.9%) are factors contributing to the declining number of new international students (McKivigan, 2020). This noteworthy decrease in international students might affect U.S. higher education as international students are the source of revenue for higher institutions. The state cut funding for higher institutions might have resulted in aggressive marketing programs to international students. Transnational students are charged a higher tuition rate and do not receive federal aid because of their immigration status (McKivigan, 2020). They are justifiably charged a

significantly higher tuition rate than domestic students. Nonetheless, international students can often pay these fees without requesting financial aid or scholarship packages (McKivigan, 2020).

Higher educational institutions have been aggressively marketing their programs to international students to compensate for the revenue losses that resulted from the elimination of funding for public universities (McKivigan, 2020). These challenges might lead to a continuous decline in international student enrollment. Losing international students could reduce the cultural exposure and opportunities domestic students get from interacting with students from other cultures. Thus, if universities continue to struggle to attract international students to foster interactions and friendships with domestic students, their ability to promise a global education could be questioned.

**Social Support System**

International students' adjustment in U.S. colleges depends on how well they can establish social networks with various campus groups, including peers, and engagement in clubs, recreational sports, and other activities that facilitate social involvement on campus (Hwang et al., 2016). This perspective aligns with Berry's (2003) integration hypothesis, which states that individuals feel and do well if engaged in their culture and that of the larger society. On the other hand, international students with little interest in social interaction might isolate themselves, causing a higher probability of suffering from low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Darwish, 2015).

International students also face obstacles ranging from language to cultural barriers in their social interactions with American students and professors (Zizzi & Li, 2018). As such, they need support systems to mitigate their challenges during acculturation and integration into their new campus life (Cho & Yu, 2015). The support services act as valuable coping resources for

individuals against stress; therefore, they could psychologically reduce stress and facilitate the ease of adapting to the host environment (Madden-Dent et al., 2018; Montgomery, 2010). However, social support varies as it could be like having a friend who participates in students' lives or having a spouse or loved ones at home or in the host country.

Social isolation and lack of integration are perennial issues for international students and remain among the major challenges in universities abroad (Gomes & Tran, 2017). Social isolation is categorized by whether an individual belongs to a social network. There is agreement that loneliness is the subjective perception that intimate and social needs are not being met (Wister et al., 2021). The language of instruction and academic structures in most African academic institutions are usually the language of the former colonizers, which is often not English (Okusolubo, 2018). For example, Guinea, Togo, and Senegal students come from French-speaking countries. They would have to learn English to communicate with people in the U.S. This leads to isolation, loneliness, and a lack of confidence among international students because they do not want to make mistakes or feel embarrassed. However, more frequent interactions and perceived confidence in one's English skills could lead to positive feelings of adjustment and reduced loneliness (Poulakis et al., 2017). Additionally, research has found that perceived English proficiency facilitates more successful interpersonal relationships with English-speaking students (Li et al., 2016; Mukminin, 2019).

According to past research, African-born immigrant youth experienced the stress of coping with a new language and a new culture, unwelcoming reception, discrimination, isolation, and emotional problems (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020). Nonetheless, studies on domestic and international students emphasize the opportunities for enhancing interaction between students via group work activities (Arkoudis et al., 2019). However, even though much research has

highlighted student diversity as a valuable resource for learning (Beelen & Jones, 2015), interaction with domestic students continues to be a challenge, with several international students noting they often socialize with other international students during class time. International students lack social connectedness, which could be developed during cultural activities or programs. They also face academic issues and higher dropout rates, which could be addressed through tailored academic support (Koo et al., 2021). This aspect demonstrates that social connectedness is essential for the successful acculturation of international students, especially African international students. A lack of culturally sensitive treatment on university campuses worsens the situation.

Constantine et al.'s (2005) study was consistent with the findings on the cultural adjustment experiences of Black African international students. In their research, they discovered that Black-African students experienced feelings of confusion, alienation, and discrimination from American students and international students from other continents. Subsequently, most international students experience frustration, annoyance, and feelings of alienation, especially if they lack social support in their new environments. Illustratively, international students deal with psychological and emotional issues away from their families and communities. However, there are more issues they should deal with during their transition to the host country.

One study utilizing data from the International Student Barometer (ISB) measured 45,000 international undergraduate students' satisfaction at more than 100 U.S., European, and Australian institutions (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). The findings showed that students were least satisfied with institutional support services, which suggests that institutions should enhance integration support services to improve the overall learning experience and, thus, student satisfaction. Unfortunately, most U.S. colleges and universities provide international students

with integration training only immediately after they arrive in the U.S. and only in an orientation format (Madden-Dent et al., 2018; Martirosyan et al., 2019). Additionally, academic institutions' services are often underdeveloped, inconsistent, or optional (Hser, 2005).

Most students studying abroad rely on institutions for information to facilitate their transition. However, they feel disappointed because they receive limited information about their transition through agencies outsourced by the school. The agents act as the initial point of contact for HEIs, advising on courses and offering support with applications, English proficiency requirements, and visas (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016). As the study by Hulme et al. (2014) revealed, although the staff serving in the agencies should be a "one-stop-shop" and "a face to talk" for prospective international students, some of them are unreliable. For instance, one international officer described most agents as "one level from being outright crooks" (Hulme et al., 2014, p .682).

Some students might have the impression that they would make money while studying. This is a particular issue for several self-funded Black African students who often borrow money from family and friends to pay for their studies (Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014). While there are opportunities for students to work under their visa requirements, the jobs are unskilled and have low pay, making them work longer hours to survive. One student hardship fund manager commented in a report by the National Union of Students (NUS, 2014, p. 24) that,

> "I battled with my marketing team as I wanted to put that any part-time work, they found would probably be minimum wage and low grade and marketing said it was too negative. However, this is because this is a reality, and we were seeing teachers and engineers, etc. coming to the UK and thinking they would find jobs in those areas to support their studies and of course, this is rare to find that level of part-time work whilst studying."

Some international students live in appalling conditions, with some sleeping in a room with little privacy and no lease. Students without leases are exposed to hidden fees and rent increases and often cannot complain due to the fear of revoking their visas (Ryan et al., 2016). As such, they are left to go through housing agencies, which puts them at greater risk of paying substantial agency fees or losing their money. As Nada and Araújo (2019) stated, improper institutional policies regarding diversity put the development of a fulfilling educational experience in danger.

Despite their challenges, international students do not experience social integration or isolation evenly. Therefore, universities need to promote a broad and diverse range of initiatives for them to boost their social integration and foster their learning outcomes while considering their academic preparedness and access to resources (Moskal & Wang, 2019). Baklashova and Kazakov (2016) argued that such an understanding would enable postsecondary institutions to provide enough and proficient support for international students. In a study exploring international students' views regarding campus support services, Martirosyan et al. (2019) reiterated that communication aids immigrants' acculturation into the new society. As international populations have grown, universities should look more closely at questions of inclusion and how international students acclimate to the social, cultural, and academic norms in their host countries and communities (Metro-Roland, 2018).

**Summary**

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of adapting to the process of college-level education among African international students at a four-year college in the Southeastern U.S. A review of the literature indicated that international students struggle with academic, economic, racial, cultural, and social challenges

while they adjust to their new study environment (Ammigan & Jones, 2018; Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016; Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016; Girmay, 2017; Horton, 2020; Jackson, 2016; Kang et al., 2019; Kim, 2014; Koo et al., 2021; Lee, 2017; Ma et al., 2020; Marginson, 2020; Okusolubo, 2018; Oppel & Tavernise, 2020; Redden, 2019; Ritter & Roth, 2021; Saravanan & Subhashini, 2021; Shu et al., 2016; Slonim-Nevo & Regev, 2016; Smiljanic, 2017; Swathi et al., 2017; Viggiano & Yao, 2019; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Acculturation entails the cultural and psychological adjustment related to social interaction that individuals or groups experience when encountering people from other cultural backgrounds (Oberg, 1960).

I used Berry's (1980) acculturation theory as its theoretical foundation, categorizing individual adaptation strategies along two dimensions (Berry, 1992). Sociocultural adaptation factors entail responses to external demands that influence acculturation. Examining the academic and sociocultural adaptation factors would help practitioners determine the phenomenological meaning of students' challenges. Poor acculturation could impact students' mental and physical well-being. Several studies pointed out that entering an unfamiliar or adjusting to a new environment needs changes that might lead to being worried, confused, depressed, and subsequently faced with mental health issues (Khosravi et al., 2018)

Colleges and universities should strive to meet the needs of international students at their campuses, building bridges between international students and domestic students during their stay at the host universities. A better understanding of these students' different social and academic challenges would guide instructors and institutions of higher education to serve African international students better studying in the U.S. or aspiring to join U.S. institutions of higher learning.

**CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

**Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience and perceptions adapting to the process of college-level education for African international students at a four-year college in the southeastern United States. Chapter 3 provides information about the research design, research questions, the recruitment process, the setting and participants, and my positionality. The data collection and analysis process are also presented in this chapter, followed by a section on trustworthiness, ethical considerations for the research, and a summary of the chapter's content.

**Research Design**

This study used qualitative methodology anchored on transcendental phenomenology design. Qualitative research is the interpretation of experiences based on the investigative process of a researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By its very nature, the qualitative approach deals with "non-numeric" data, such as a participant's thoughts, feelings, and attitudes, which are primarily subjective (Hennink et al., 2020). It is used for exploratory questions like how and why, allowing participants to explain what they were thinking or experiencing at a particular time or event (Strijker et al., 2020). I observe, interview, and record the participants in a natural setting (Liu, 2022). Qualitative research helps me understand the 'lived experiences' of the participants to make sense of these experiences (Alase, 2017). To describe the experiences of African international students as they make sense of the research phenomenon, it was, therefore, essential to use a qualitative methodological approach to illuminate their encounters and perceptions through rich, evocative descriptions.

Quantitative research was unsuitable for this study due to its emphasis on positivism and objectivity; data is analyzed numerically (Zyphur & Pierides, 2020). It involves using and analyzing numerical data with specific statistical techniques to address questions like who, how much, what, where, when, how many, and how (Strijker et al., 2020). Hence, it is challenging to capture phenomena such as behavior, thoughts, and experiences. A phenomenological research design was chosen to tackle the research questions in this study. This approach was selected because it's flexible enough to explore the participants' lived experiences compared to other qualitative designs (Alase, 2017). Phenomenology is utilized to grasp a phenomenon and the experiences that a specific group of individuals have undergone in such encounters (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). To construct an understanding of a phenomenon, I seek to find the essence of experiences by interviewing subjects and finding common themes (Moustakas, 1994).

There are two main approaches to phenomenology: transcendental descriptive phenomenology and hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology (TPh), largely developed by Husserl, is a philosophical approach to qualitative research methodology seeking to understand human experience (Moustakas, 1994). It focuses more on describing the experiences of the participants and less on my interpretations (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, I set aside their judgment, beliefs, and ideas about the phenomenon. The setting aside of one's prejudgment is called epoché (Moustakas, 1994). The second type of phenomenology is hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology, which originated with Martin Heidegger. Hermeneutic phenomenology studies the meanings of an individual's being in the world, as their experience is interpreted through their lifeworld, and how these meanings and interpretations influence the individual's choices (Neubauer et al.,

2019). Heidegger expanded Husserl's views on phenomenology and focused on my interpretative process (Staiti, 2012). This approach is based on the principle that reduction is impossible and, therefore, rejects the idea of bracketing one's opinion and embracing interpretations of experiences.

This study was grounded on a transcendental phenomenological approach because I wanted to understand the phenomenon's essence by exploring African international students' perceptions and lived experiences. Through transcendental phenomenology, meaning is created as an object appears in people's consciousness or as individuals mingle with the object in nature. That is, "what appears in consciousness is an absolute reality while what appears to the world is a product of learning" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). As such, researchers do not conclude a thing through perception, as multiple layers of meaning might unfold as one continues to search for meaning. To get to the essence of a phenomenon, one should merge the noema (external perception) and the noesis (internal perception). Understanding and unifying the intentionality, noema, and noesis allows me to arrive at the essences or the structural and textural meanings of a given experience (Moustakas, 1994).

A qualitative phenomenological transcendental research design was appropriate for collecting comprehensive and quality information to get to the specific issue from a small number of participants who have experienced the problem. It was a valid research design because it made it possible to understand the perceptions and lived experiences of the targeted group (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019). More specifically, the design helped me to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African international students studying in the U.S. Examining the experiences as they are subjectively lived, new appreciations and meanings could be developed to re-orient or inform how the experiences could be understood (Laverty,

2003). As such, the study allowed for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon from those who have experienced it (Padilla-Díaz, 2015).

Since I was interested in understanding the participants' perceptions and lived experiences and not interpretation of the experiences, transcendental phenomenology was used. This research design captured the true meaning by setting aside preconceived beliefs and ideas about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I was expected to suspend their assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes and focus on the respondent's experiences of the phenomena to pinpoint the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In transcendental phenomenology, my primary subjectivity was bracketed during data collection and analysis. I should bring no hypotheses, assumptions, or expectations to the research. Instead, they should assume the position of a blank slate, utilizing the participants' experiences to understand the phenomenon (Husserl, 1970). Thus, in examining the issues faced by African international students in U.S. higher institutions, I set aside my beliefs and assumptions about the phenomenon under investigation and focused on the descriptions of the lived experiences presented by the research participants.

## Research Questions

To comprehend African international students' viewpoints and real-life encounters at a four-year college in the southeastern U.S., a set of questions was formulated to direct the research. These questions were designed to delve into the unique perspectives and experiences of these students within the academic and social environment of the institution. By utilizing these guiding questions, the study aimed to gain a deeper insight into the specific challenges and successes faced by African international students in this educational setting.

**Central Research Question**

How do African international students perceive their adaptation and acculturation experiences at a four-year college in a southeastern part of the U.S.?

**Sub-Question One**

What are the cultural challenges experienced by African international students that affect their abilities to acculturate?

**Sub-Question Two**

What are the perceived barriers to adaption, acculturation, and integration of African international students as they navigate their way through their studies at the university?

**Sub-Question Three**

How do African international students perceive their university's support services would address their challenges when attending a four-year college in a southeastern part of the U.S.?

## Setting and Participants

An integral part of a qualitative study is examining the context by which a phenomenon is located, structured, and experienced. The setting is an essential component of the research design. A description of the setting creates a base for conceptualizing the data analysis. I ensured the sample had experienced the phenomenon through a direct selection of the site and by selecting participants who could add value and focus on understanding the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The approval of the study was received from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix A) and the president of the African International Students' Organization (see Appendix B). Detailed descriptions of the setting and the participants are outlined below.

**Setting**

A crucial step in the process of research is to find people or places to study, gain access, and establish rapport with participants so that they will provide good data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study site was in a Southeastern region of the U.S. The university (pseudonym) offers 67 undergraduate degrees, concentrated on 55 majors. It also offers graduate studies and specialist degrees in education and psychology. Based on university records, the school has a total enrollment of 11,000 students. With a population of 6,371 enrolled students, 1,757 are males, while 4,614 are females. A total of 6,001 students enrolled in undergraduate programs, and 370 were in graduate programs. The setting was appropriate for this study because the college serves international students. The school is home to foreigners from 50 countries. International students make up 5% of the university. Thus, conducting the study at the university was appropriate to understand the participant's acculturation experiences, challenges, and integration into the campus.

Based on U.S. Census Bureau (2021) data, the city where the university is situated has a population of 16,376 people, marking an 18.68% decrease since the last census. The average household income is $ 63,199, with a poverty rate of 27.6%. The median rental costs in recent years come to $716 per month, and the median house value is $110,500. The county's racial makeup is White 87.35%, Black, or African American 7.62%, and Hispanic (of any race) 13. 9%, Asian, 2.19 %, two or more races 2.0%, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 0.08%, Others 0.36%. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

The university has benefitted from the community in terms of support in employment, housing, scholarships, and hospitality. The school is part of the university system, which includes all state-operated universities, four-year colleges, and two-year colleges. The Board of

Regents is the state's governing and management authority for public higher education. The faculty and staff of the university celebrate values and honor diversity. Numerous faculty and staff members are from other countries or have international travel experiences.

**Participants**

In a phenomenological study, I needed to select the participants carefully and ensure that all the participants had experienced the phenomena of the research questions (Creswell, 2009). All the participants were born and raised in Africa. They were over 18 years of age and lived in the U.S. I sent each participant forms to share important information related to their demographic. These included names, age, gender, nationality, visa status, major, background, family size, and ethnicity. Demographic data presentation provided insights about the participants. Respondents in this study were African international students from the sub-Saharan regions of Africa: Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, and Benin. It was essential to recognize that the population is a minority among the overall population of international students at the school being studied and the city. The participants were African students who came to the U.S. on nonimmigrant student visas F-I or J-1 visa, specifically to pursue their degrees and go back to their countries after their education completion or have graduated and have become permanent residents in the U.S. within six years. Participants had to be able to communicate in English.

Two permanent residents were added to get more perspectives on their experiences and those of the other nonimmigrant F-1 student visas. Participants were between 18 and 45 years old, undergraduate, or graduate students. The participants included both male and female students. Participants had family ties from their home countries. I used pseudonyms for the interviewees to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

**Recruitment Plan**

The requirements and subsequent criteria for participant selection, as outlined by Moustakas (1994), are that (a) the participants had experience of the phenomenon, (b) were interested in understanding it, and (c) were willing to participate and findings published. Phenomenological study size varies from five to 25 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Other scholars suggest different-sized samples for phenomenological research, but a sample of between 6 and 20 individuals is sufficient (Ellis, 2020). For this study, a minimum of 10 participants, as required by Liberty University, were recruited; however, the size could increase until saturation is met. The saturation is determined when the data collection no longer produces new insights into the phenomenon explored (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The purpose of selecting a small sample size was to explore students' perceptions of their university experiences deeply. Rather than merely reflecting opinions, the focus was on generating detailed and informative data. The goal was to describe the meaning of the phenomenon for a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. A purposive sampling strategy was used to collect data from African international students. Purposeful sampling ensures that only individuals who can provide the best information regarding the phenomenon are selected for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In addition to purposeful sampling, snowball sampling was used to reach potential participants who might not be easily identified or located. It is suitable for research on underrepresented or hard-to-reach populations (TenHouten, 2017). Snowball sampling helped identify participants with similar experiences. For example, there were similarities in their ages, jobs, cultures, and life experiences. Most interviewees came from West Africa, including Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon. These West African countries, especially Nigeria and Ghana,

have the highest representation of international students and the highest number of immigrants in the U.S. Hence, it was appropriate to sample this population of students to understand the struggles international students encounter during their studies and ways to improve acculturation challenges and promote their overall success.

Recruitment for the participants was completed with the support of the African Student Union president, who posted the recruitment flyer on the organization's social media website (see Appendix C). Flyers were also distributed at social events, international clubs, and the international student center. The flyer included an overview of the study and my name, phone number, and email. Identified candidates completed consent forms via Google Forms (see Appendix D ). I used demographic questionnaires to determine individual eligibility to participate (see Appendix E). Once eligibility was determined, participants were asked to complete a survey via Google Forms. Each candidate was sent a link via Doodle, an online scheduling tool, to choose their preferred interview date and time. As Moustakas (1994) suggested, I decided on an appropriate and quiet interview setting where the participants would feel comfortable sharing their answers without distraction.

The survey was used to support the interview process and furnish answers that might not be included in the interview. Saturation was determined when the data collection no longer produced new insights into the phenomenon explored (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The move allowed an in-depth description of African international students' perceptions and experiences in U.S. colleges and universities.

## Researcher Positionality

The data collected in this study was the lived experiences of African international students. My personal experience was bracketed to allow for a sustained, in-depth reflection that

enhances a more varied analysis and results. Moustakas (1994) described bracketing as standing before an experience with an attitude of unknowing, even if and especially if one has lived the experience personally, to allow multiple different possibilities to emerge. Personal experience is the material from which one begins to work; therefore, the investigator's personal experience, beliefs, and knowledge are to be suspended or bracketed to the study of the natural world (Moustakas, 1994).

## Interpretive Framework

This approach believes that to understand and explain situations, attention should be focused on the individuals' feelings, viewpoints, interpretations, and experiences in situations (Prasad, 2002). They might be paradigms or beliefs that I bring to the process of research or theories or theoretical orientations that guide the practice of research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I attributed the personal interpretations of the participants' experiences during the data collection and analysis. International students are bound to face challenges while studying in the U.S. (Almurideef, 2016; Mwangi et al., 2019). The interview responses were read as presented by the study respondents. Vital information was extracted and formulated into meaning, which formed themes and later became a narrative description.

## Philosophical Assumptions

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "Whether we are aware of it or not, we always bring certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to our research" (p. 15). Philosophical assumptions are derived from a paradigm that guides the design. These presuppositions drive the decisions I made in conducting qualitative research, including ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. The concepts are not separated. They are parts of the whole. Ontology is the core, and everything emanates from there.

**Ontological Assumption**

Ontology is the study of being and is concerned with what constitutes reality, the real world, and what could be known about it (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Ontology is a belief system that shows how an individual interprets what represents a fact. In other words, it describes my view of the nature of reality as a researcher. It should be identified at the beginning of the research process as it determines the choice of the research design, which affects the research approach to be selected, the design, strategies, data collection, and data analysis. Ontological assumptions led to the choice of this research process. In my view, when I conduct such an inquiry, it lets the participants and I delve into specific experiences and perceptions to interpret the situational boundaries that shape the study. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). These challenges range from emotional, physical, social, psychological, and mental. Acculturation could be positive or negative. The negative part could be because of the adaptation to the new culture.

**Epistemological Assumption**

Epistemology is the philosophy of knowledge or how one comes to know reality. Epistemological assumptions relate to how knowledge could be created, developed, and communicated, in other words, what it means to know. It involves asking the nature of the relationship between the would-be knower and what could be known (Bradshaw et al., 2017). An epistemological perspective provides a framework for predicting, describing, empowering, and deconstructing population-specific worldviews, increasing the base of knowledge that leads to an enhanced understanding of the purpose behind qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). According to Creswell (2007), qualitative researchers believe that "truth is both complex and dynamic and can be found only by studying persons as they interact with and within their sociohistorical settings" (p. 89). I believe that I should actively engage as a part of the study.

(Business Bliss Consultants FZE, 2018). As such, in this study, I interacted with the participants to explore perceptions, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, expectations, and behavior to obtain knowledge about the phenomena of interest. The study exemplified an epistemological perspective, as its primary goal was to gather information from the participant's perspectives.

**Axiological Assumption**

Axiology refers to the ethical issues that I should consider as a researcher when planning research since biases impact not only the behaviors and actions of those being researched but also my observations and understanding (Kulinska, 2016). This assumption aspect involves understanding concepts of right and wrong in behavior concerning the research. In a qualitative study, the inquirers admit the value-laden nature of the study and actively report their values and biases as well as the structure of the information gathered from the field. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a researcher in this study, I have dual nationality; therefore, my African values might interfere with research objectivity. However, subjective experiences were bracketed.

**Researcher's Role**

As a researcher, my role in qualitative studies is dynamic and complex simultaneously (Chenail, 2011; Patton, 2002; Raheim et al., 2016). I am the human instrument in qualitative studies (Chenail, 2011). Moustakas (1994) used the term 'co-researcher' for participants because respondents are included in the meaning of the phenomenon's essence along with me as a researcher. At the beginning of the study, I informed participants about their role in the research and encouraged them to be open and share rich data about their experiences. I asked the interviewees about their perceptions and encounters to seek answers to the research questions.

Given my importance in qualitative research, the credibility of the inquirer is inextricably related to the inquiry's credibility, as stressed by Creswell and Poth (2018).

For this study, I explored the lived experiences of African international students and how they perceived the challenges they faced while enrolled at a university. As the sole interviewer, I listened to the participants, collected data, transcribed, and analyzed. Creswell (2009) suggested that qualitative researchers should identify their own biases, values, and personal background as a strategy to address potential bias in the research process.

I was born and raised in Africa and am a former international student in France. My affiliation with the category of participants for this study, background, and experiences of being once an international student would make it possible for my biases or assumptions in this study. I understand that subjectivity is inevitable. However, I am responsible for maintaining ethical integrity and confidentiality. I laid out my objectives before data was collected and analyzed by using a bracketing strategy to address assumptions and biases that I might have. I maintained a reflective journal and a memo to lead and maintain productivity in the research and ensure that my personal views did not interfere with the findings. I also did memoing, which helped me to map research activities, draw meaning from the data, stay engaged, and maintain momentum (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Procedures

The IRB application was obtained from Liberty University for approval to start collecting data from the study participants noted earlier in Appendix A. A review of research plans by my college or university is a critical component of the process (Creswell, 2012). Once the IRB application was approved, a meeting with the president of the African International Students' Organization was scheduled to organize a recruitment exercise. A purposive sampling technique

was also used to recruit viable participants, following the president's recommendation.

Purposeful sampling is an intentional selection of participants who have lived experiences being

studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The rationale for choosing purposeful sampling was to identify

and select participants who experienced the phenomenon of interest and met all the criteria for

participating in the study. This includes international students who have graduated from college.

I emailed the African International Student Organization's president at the proposed site with an

explanation of the study and a link to a screening survey for students to complete. Participants

who met the parameters of the population, including former African international students who

had completed their studies, were contacted to participate in the study.

Once the participants were contacted and agreed to participate in the study, I used

different techniques to collect data, including individual one-on-one interviews via Zoom and

focus groups. A individual protocol allows me as a researcher to collect open-ended data, dive

deeper into sensitive matters, and explore the participant's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a

particular topic (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The interview lasted between 40 to 60

minutes. I developed an interview guide based on the research questions. To achieve optimum

use of interview time, interview guides serve the useful purpose of exploring various respondents

more systematically and comprehensively and keeping the interview focused on the desired line

of action (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). There was an online survey that included survey

questions like country of origin, choice of the U.S., choice of school, age, gender, marital status,

program of study, length of stay, and academic level. Responses were recorded, and written

accounts were verbatim.

**Data Collection Plan**

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), data collection is a set of interdependent activities that lead to gathering adequate information to answer research questions. Data was collected from individuals who had experienced the phenomenon. Participants were contacted via email to provide them with surveys and to schedule interviews. The data collection process incorporated surveys, interviews, and focus groups that were designed to capture the experiences of the participants in the study. As a researcher, I furnished each participant with a consent form that described the scope of the study and the flexibility of terminating their participation at any time for any reason as noted earlier in Appendix D. Survey questions were then provided to individuals identified as study participants online. The survey took the participants approximately 30 minutes to complete. Respondents were then scheduled for an individual interview or a focus group, where they were asked to describe their experiences at their institution and pinpoint any aspect of the events that impacted their experiences. The length of the interviews was between 40-60 minutes; the length of the focus group was 72 minutes. The participants were assured confidentiality throughout the research process.

**Individual Interviews**

Individual interviews were conducted with selected participants. In the individual approach, researchers ask a standard set of questions to collect data while being allowed to ask probing questions if an interesting or new line of inquiry develops during the interview process (Young et al., 2018). This approach explored participants' feelings and thoughts and probed them about their unique experiences. Interviews were conducted in English. Each participant had one interview session to explore these experiences over time intentionally. The interview was conducted via Zoom, which lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. This supported the emergence of

detailed descriptions of the respondents' integration and acculturation processes related to their social and academic challenges. Each participant chose a pseudonym to assure the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected. Furthermore, each participant received a $30 gift card as a small thank-you for their time and effort (Creswell, 2012). An interview protocol was created as a guide for the interview, for my introduction as a researcher, and for the topic of the interview (see Appendix G).

**Table 1**

*Individual Interview Questions*

1. What is your perception of your school? SRQ

2. What challenges do you face as a student here and how have you overcome the challenges? CRQ

3. Could you describe some of the cultural differences you have observed since you came to the United States? CRQ

4. Could you share some of the cultural experiences you have encountered as an international student? CRQ

5. Do you feel welcome at this university? SRQ

6. Do you know of any student who has given up on his or her studies because of these challenges? SQ1

7. How do you view your instructors including your course load? SR1

8. What is your perception of Americans? SQ1

9. What do you do on a typical day? Could you please describe it? SQ1

10. How are your social interactions here? SQ1

11. Could you describe the steps you took to integrate into your school? SQ1

12. Do you have any advice for an African international student who intends to come to this school or African students who intend to study in America? SQ1

13. Think about the first time you came to your school, what was your greatest challenge? CRQ

14. If you could go back to your first year in the university, what would you do differently? Could you please explain? SQ1

15. Would you choose this university again if you had the opportunity to choose a school for your studies? SQ

16. What do you intend to do at the end of your study? SQ1

17. Are there other things you want to tell me for a better understanding of your thoughts? CRQ

It is important to point out that the individual interviews were designed in such a way to encourage discursive answers rather than affirmative or negative answers (as discussed in Høffding & Martiny, 2016). Questions one through four addressed the central question regarding the students' understanding of their experiences and adaptation to the university. The experiences of international students with the academic environment of the host country, sociocultural situation, discrimination (Wekullo, 2019), accommodations, safety and security (Arambewela & Hall, 2013), and support services (Ammigan & Jones, 2018) play an important role in the institutional and destination choices of international students. Questions five through 11 addressed sub-questions one and two in exploring cultural, academic, and social challenges during their studies to understand the experiences. This was vital because social support was pivotal to international students' welfare and contentment in the U.S. (Lian et al., 2020). It also explored barriers that participants encountered during their studies and how they affected their

overall acculturation and persistence. Life outside the classroom could be a critical aspect of the experience of any international student on campus (Ammigan, 2019).

Questions 12 through 16 addressed central research questions and sub-questions relating to students' satisfaction with their overall experiences and the impact on the institution. Satisfaction has a positive and significant link with the likelihood of an institutional recommendation or an intention to revisit (Chelliah et al., 2019; Mavondo et al., 2004). The last question was about any additional information I may have missed. This was important because it allowed the participants to give any relevant information the interview question may not have addressed. Engaging in interviews can seek new views and perspectives about the phenomenon being investigated, not simply to confirm or disconfirm what is already known about that phenomenon (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). These questions delved deep into how participants felt about their acculturation experiences.

International students are a high-risk population, vulnerable to stress due to adapting to a new country (Amado et al., 2020). Sociocultural experience entails the perceptions of international students of how they are treated while studying abroad and the cultural and psychological problems they encounter (Zhang et al., 2022). The quality of the students' experiences influences their favorable future behavioral intentions (Qadeer et al., 2021).

**Focus Groups**

Focus group discussion is a technique where a researcher assembles a group of individuals to discuss a specific topic, aiming to draw from the complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of the participants through a moderated interaction (Ochieng et al., 2018). I used focus groups because they help facilitate more in-depth interaction between the moderator and the participants. Four participants were selected based on their willingness to

participate. In this study, the students were asked concise questions. The aim was to find commonalities among the participants about conceptualizing their experiences as AIS. I emphasized the objective of the study at the beginning of the session and assured participants of the security measures in place, which would include using pseudonyms during the discussions. I provided aliases to avoid using their given name on the recordings. The meeting was conducted through Zoom and lasted 72 minutes. The group shared their personal experiences and the struggles they faced as they pursued their studies at the university. Responses were recorded, and written accounts were verbatim.

**Table 2**

*Focus Group Questions*

1. How would you describe your experiences at your school? CRQ

2. What is your perception of the university? SQ1

3. If you could change anything about this college, what would it be? SQ2

4. What services are available to you? SQ3

The first research question focused on the cultural, academic, and social challenges experienced by African international students that affected their abilities to acculturate. The first focus group question asked the stakeholders to describe their experiences at school. The second focus group question addressed the barriers African international students encountered as they navigated their way through their studies at the university. The third focus group question addressed available resources that could best support international students through the challenges in the U.S. higher education system. Focus group question four highlighted the resources available to the students, and question three provided insights for recommendations on

meeting students 'needs. Discussions on focus group questions one and two were more detailed to understand their lived experiences better.

**Survey**

Surveys are ideal for documenting perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, or knowledge within a predetermined sample of individuals (Paradis et al., 2016). The survey was used to collect descriptive data leading to information on understanding the experience of adjustment or struggles of African international students in their school. Survey questions were given to individuals identified as study participants online. The survey took less than 30 minutes on average to complete. The survey questions were designed to address the research questions about the experiences of African international students during their studies at the university. It also gained information regarding social adjustment issues. The survey questions were a combination of short answers and multiple choices in a table form (see Appendix H).

A piloting phase was conducted before the primary data collection to ensure the validity and reliability of the survey instrument. During this phase, three African international students who were similar to the target population were invited to complete the survey. The pilot study aimed to identify any potential issues with the survey questions and assess the clarity and comprehensibility of the survey instructions and response options. It is important to note that none of the pilot study participants identified any issues with the survey questions.

## Data Analysis

Extracted data from each participant was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics aggregate data that are grouped into variables to examine typical values and the spread of values for each variable in a data set (Guetterman, 2019). I studied the general

characteristics of the population, which included the school community. The data helped to determine whether the participants were accurate representative samples of the target population.

The data analysis spiral includes managing and organizing data, reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into themes, developing and accessing interpretations, and representing and visualizing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data collected from the interviews was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) data analysis technique of phenomenological reduction. (Moustakas (1994) recommended that phenomenological researchers engage in the process of Epoch**é** as the first step in data collection "as a way of creating an atmosphere and rapport for conducting the interview" (p. 181).

Before the interview, I took time to engage in epoché by thinking about their perceptions of African international students and acculturation experiences. As such, I intentionally cleared the mind of any presuppositions to allow the start of each interview with an "unbiased, receptive presence" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 180) as much as possible. Notably, the five steps proposed by Moustakas (1994) were adopted for the data analysis. To limit confirmation and other biases in qualitative research, especially but not exclusively in the transcendental, non-interpretive narrative, and phenomenology methods, epoché and bracketing should be achieved (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I used the experiences of the participants to build an understanding of the essence of the phenomenon. This aspect was achieved through a series of reductions. The first step of reduction is called bracketing, also known as epoché (Thomas & Sohn, 2023)

**Bracketing.** The process of bracketing is used to disassociate the researcher's personal experience from the lived experiences of the research participants (Moustakas, 1994). It is achieved through stages of reduction. The first step was introduced by Husserl as epoché, also

known as bracketing. Bracketing means refraining from judgment or staying away from the everyday, commonplace way of seeing things (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, bracketing is a way that I separated my personal experiences from what was being studied.

Through the bracketing process, I recalled my personal and professional experiences. I reflected on past and present events that happened to shape my life, allowing prejudices and preconceptions to enter and freely leave the mind. I come from West Africa, but I moved to the U.S. in 1999. As a high school teacher, I am often called to the front office to talk to parents of new students from Africa, especially those who speak French. Additionally, I held peer debriefing sessions to discuss my findings and interpretations with my Chair and committee members, ensuring that personal biases did not influence the study's outcomes (Moustakas, 1994).

Bracketing helped ensure the study was rooted in the research questions and the participant's experiences. These practices include entering a place of internal consciousness with the readiness to embrace and understand the self, being aware and present in the experience of life, and the state of being the self (Moustakas, 1994). As the main instrument of the research, I should be constantly conscious of and understand their internal ideas, perceptions, values, prejudgments, and connections of the topic under study to one's past (Creswell, 2012). As the researcher, I followed Moustakas' (1994) data analysis guidelines, which include several steps.

*Horizonalization.* This is one of the processes of phenomenological reduction. Significant themes and commonalities are identified by analyzing and reducing expressions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This aspect involves reducing the number of words in the statements and placing equal value on each statement (Moustakas, 1994). I read and reread the transcribed interviews directly after each interview from Zoom video conferencing to ensure that no

information was omitted. After multiple readings, memoing was used to dig deep into the data collected. Memoing is the process of a researcher reading the full transcript of an interview and writing short descriptions of the phenomenon and potential themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I classified and categorized repeatedly, allowing for deeper immersion. The interviews were coded by focusing on significant statements gleaned from the transcripts and provided in a table so that a reader could identify the range of perspectives about the phenomenon, as Moustakas (1994) recommended.

*Cluster into Themes.* I used significant statements to identify the themes (Moustakas, 1994). This step guides the identification of the core themes across the participants' experiences. Examples were positive and negative experiences, challenges, and difficulties, among others. I started with broader themes and narrowed them down to more specific ones using the color-coding technique. Then, a table consisting of the categories and common codes was created. This move helped identify the core themes among the participants and enabled me to make a detailed description of the phenomena.

*Describing.* Textural descriptions of the phenomenon describe what the participants experienced (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). A comprehensive description of the phenomenon was written from the verbatim transcripts. Notably, "In the textural description of an experience nothing is omitted; every dimension or phrase is granted equal attention and is included" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 78). Specific texts quoted from the participants were included in the descriptions to fully describe the phenomenon.

The structural descriptions focused on the underlying subtleties of the experience of African international students in U.S. higher institutions. In transcendental phenomenology, structural descriptions focus on uncovering the underlying essences or essences of lived

experience (Moustakas, 1994). Unlike textural descriptions that capture the surface-level details and what participants directly experienced, structural descriptions delve deeper into the fundamental meanings, relationships, and structures inherent in the phenomenon; they aim to elucidate the underlying patterns, contexts, and essential components that contribute to the essence of the experience being studied (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, while textural descriptions provide a comprehensive account of what participants experienced, structural descriptions aim to uncover the deeper, often implicit aspects and meanings that shape those experiences within transcendental phenomenology. In the current research study, the participants discussed their personal or structural experiences as African international college students. Some participants discuss their perceptions of the behaviors of American students in terms of cultural differences in clothing, food, and what they expected to receive as students versus having to pay for items. These and other experiences were shared during individual interviews and the focus group.

*Textural-Structural Synthesis.* Textural-Structural synthesis was the last step of the analysis process. It is an intuitive-reflective integration of the composite structural and textual descriptions used to synthesize the essences and meanings of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). I constructed textural and structural descriptions of everyone, then synthesized the themes and meaning, providing descriptions of their experiences concerning the phenomenon. I sent a copy of the textural-structural description to each participant to verify the validity and accuracy of the description and whether it reflected the description of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The respondents were asked to respond with any corrections or additional information. I used the individual textural-structural description to construct a composite meaning and essence of the

experiences of African international students during their studies in U.S. colleges and universities. This description "represented the group as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

The data analysis was the same as the one used in the interview, which is in line with Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological reduction. The focus group discussion was video and audiotaped. The recorded tape was played to expand the note. In doing so, I followed the "note-expansion" approach in which "the reporter (note taker) listens to the tape to clarify certain issues or to confirm that all the main points are included in the notes" (Bertrand et al., 1992). Focus group interview statements were given equal value through horizonalization to develop meaning units (Moustakas, 1994).

Then, notes were examined inductively for themes and coded. The textural descriptions were combined to create a universal textual description of the participant's experience with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Then, each structural description was combined to develop a composite structural description of the participant's experience with the phenomenon. The textural and structural descriptions were used to establish the meaning of the phenomenon. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data collected from the surveys. Descriptive statistics are specific methods used to calculate, describe, and summarize collected research data in a logical, meaningful, and efficient way (Vetter, 2017). The collected data was examined, and relevant themes were identified and converted into numerical data for comparison.

Data synthesis starts with the process of epoché, which was discussed earlier in this chapter. Using bracketing helped me to reduce presumptions and explore emerging themes. The transcripts, journals, and field notes were uploaded and analyzed through a qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 10. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2006), NVivo 10 is helpful for researchers in moving data easily from one code to another as

they are analyzed. It identifies major and minor common Themes that represent the data and addresses the research question. The textual and structural descriptions of the experiences are the final step of the data synthesis as they are synthesized into a composite description of the phenomenon through the research process referred to as "intuitive integration" Moustakas (1994, p. 100). I wrote composite narratives in the third person for the group to represent the essence and meaning of the overall phenomenon as suggested by (Moustakas, 1994).

## Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is ensured by establishing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A synthesis of the participants' data and a draft of the analysis and interpretations were returned to them. The interviewees were asked to check for accuracy to ascertain the proper accounts of their experiences. This was important because it reduced human biases and increased confidence in the result. I used an audit trail to assess the trustworthiness of the study. This aspect is important because it examines the process and product of the inquiry by reviewing the data, analyzing, and interpreting it to determine whether the findings represent the data.

### Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings are reliable and accurately interpret participants' meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Credibility was achieved by rechecking and cross-checking data from the different sources for verification and corrections. It included techniques like debriefing by collaborating with noninvolved professional peers to discuss the experiences, challenges, findings, and decisions.

**Transferability**

Transferability describes how well the findings apply to other settings (Amankwaa, 2016). While the study primarily focused on African international students at a specific university, certain aspects of the findings may be transferable to other organizations or schools hosting African international students. For instance, insights into social adjustment issues, academic experiences, and support mechanisms identified in the study could resonate with similar populations in different settings. Understanding the challenges and experiences of African international students, as explored in this study, could provide valuable comparative insights for institutions facing similar student demographics.

However, it is important to note that the extent of transferability may vary depending on contextual factors such as institutional policies, cultural norms, and support structures available at different universities or organizations. While findings related to the experiences of African international students may offer some transferable insights, the applicability to other demographics of international students would require further research. Different demographic groups of international students may have distinct experiences and needs that would necessitate specific studies to determine the transferability of findings. Therefore, while the conclusions drawn from this study may not be universally generalizable, they can contribute to broader discussions and inform practices that support the diverse needs of international student populations in various educational settings.

**Dependability**

Dependability involves the consistency and reliability of the research findings and how the research procedures are documented (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I kept a journal, recorded events, interview transcriptions, and maintained data storage. This study required an external

person to review the research process and data analysis. The intention was to ensure the consistency of the findings and that the study could be repeated.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability assumes that I brought a unique perspective to the study and refers to the degree to which others can collaborate or confirm results (Anderson, 2021). Ultimately, this element of trustworthiness is established when the research findings demonstrate that results could be replicated and are based on the participants' words and narratives of their experiences of the phenomenon versus findings based on researcher bias and perception (Nassaji, 2020). To ensure that I obtained the result and the interpretations of the data, I used direct quotes (verbatim) from the participants' responses to support the themes. Data techniques were used to achieve triangulation. In this study, my interpretation of the research was neutral, as Amankwaa (2016) recommended. The process was achieved through the epoché.

## Ethical Considerations

Given that participants in this study were immigrants and international students, there was the tendency that they might not feel comfortable talking about their experiences. A couple of considerations were put in place to address this challenge. Participation was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any time. The respondents' information was confidential since the African student population at the school was small. Revealing the names would lead to easy identification; however, pseudonyms were used for the participants and the setting. The interviewees were fully informed about the nature of the study, the questions, and how the data would be used.

The cornerstone of ethical research is 'informed consent' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The participants were provided with written, signed consent letters to participate. This included

comprehension of information, freedom of choice to participate, and the right to withdraw at any point. This could serve as a contract between me and the participants. Consent forms, transcriptions, and data were kept on a password-protected computer (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Any identifying information about the setting or the participants was removed.

## Permissions

I got site approval before seeking Institution Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix A). The study followed the proper procedure from the IRB before contacting the participants and collecting data. I contacted the president of the African graduate student forum through the organization's social media site, seeking authorization from her to recruit participants (see Appendix B). She approved recruiting participants through their organization via email (see Appendix B). The president provided a list of potential participants, who were contacted via email and invited them to participate in the research study. Participants received informed consent forms to agree to participate in the study before I collected data. Likewise, I invoked the Belmont report recommendations governing ethical research studies. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1979), the Belmont report provides the legal guidelines for human protection and other related ethical requirements. The three aspects of the report entail respect, beneficence, and justice.

## Other Participant Protections

The respect dimension deals with fidelity and holding the study participants in high regard (Pieper & Thomson, 2013; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). In this study, the respondents volunteered their efforts and time to participate. As such, they were treated as autonomous and were allowed into the study at their own will. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of the participants. All the study materials, including the transcripts

and any other data, were stored on my laptop's hard drive, which was password-protected. All the materials will be destroyed after three years.

The beneficence principle seeks to ensure that the research study would provide the participants with positive benefits (Lavrakas, 2008; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). In this case, it upholds that the research should do no harm but maximize the benefits while reducing any possible harm to the respondents. I ensured the participants were comfortable during the individual and focus group interviews. The study allowed for the understanding of the student's challenges and barriers while trying to integrate, adapt, and acculturate to their new campus life in the U.S. colleges and universities. The study findings would benefit the participants as it would lead to the formulation of appropriate policies and tailored support programs to assist the international students in the new culture.

The final principle is the justice dimension. According to Pieper and Thomson (2013), justice considers the integrity of the study processes. All the participants in this study were fairly treated. They had equal opportunities to contribute their perceptions and experiences per the suggestions of the Belmont report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). The respondents were not exploited in any way, and care was taken to interview them to avoid exposing them to potential dangers such as COVID-19. All the participants were given equal time and asked the same questions. I did not manipulate the data but relied solely on the information shared by the participants.

Finally, participants were assured of protection by hiding their actual identities when reporting this research. I stored data on my laptop hard drive, which was password-protected. A backup copy was stored in an external file for recording purposes. Transcripts were stored in a file cabinet and would be destroyed after the study.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience and perceptions adapting to the process of college-level education for African international students at a four-year college in the southeastern United States. This chapter outlined how the study was conducted to support the study's research design. Data collection relied on a survey, individual interviews, and a focus group as data sources. Data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) data analysis approach. Data analysis included using NVivo software for the coding process. Through the research process, I engaged in activities that promoted trustworthiness between me and the participants, practiced bracketing to eliminate biases, and employed research strategies that correlated with Guba and Lincoln (1989) and Moustakas (1994). Trustworthiness was maintained through credibility, dependability, and confirmability. I used pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the study participants while conducting the research within the recommendations of the Belmont report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979).

**CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

**Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience and perceptions adapting to the process of college-level education for African international students at a four-year college in the southeastern United States. This chapter will provide an overview of the study's findings. The chapter will begin by outlining the demographic characteristics of the participants and highlighting the results. Following the discussion of the findings, I will conclude this chapter by addressing the research questions that guided the study.

**Participants**

This research was conducted at a university in the southeastern region of the U.S. The university offered 67 undergraduate degrees, focusing on 55 majors, and provided graduate studies and specialist degrees in education and psychology. The selection of this setting for the study was based on its suitability for international students, demonstrated by a diverse population from 50 countries. International students constituted 5% of the university's overall student body. Because the university's name in this study was a pseudonym, the demographic data was collected from the university's website.

This study's participants were African international students from the sub-Saharan regions of Africa, specifically Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, and Benin. This demographic constituted a minority within the institution's international student body and the broader city population under investigation. These individuals were students from Africa, who had entered the U.S. on nonimmigrant student visas, more precisely, F-1 or J-1 visas. Their primary objective was to pursue academic degrees and return to their home countries after completing their education. The participant pool also encompassed African students who had already completed

their degrees and, within a six-year timeframe, transitioned to permanent residency in the United States. An essential inclusion criterion for the study was the participants' proficiency in effectively communicating in English. A total of 10 participants participated in this study, answering an online survey, and completing an individual interview. Four of these participants completed a focus group. The decision to include only one focus group with 4 out of 10 participants was made to ensure methodological rigor and practical feasibility within the study's scope. This approach allowed for comprehensive insights from individual interviews and the initial focus group, which provided diverse perspectives on the experiences of African international students at the university. Constraints such as time and participant availability influenced the choice not to conduct a second focus group despite the smaller number in the first group. Table 3 highlights the demographic characteristics of the participants.

**Table 1.**

*Participant Demographic Characteristics*

|  | Age | Gender | Education Level | Country of Origin | Years in the United States |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ayo | 18-30 | Male | Graduate | Nigeria | 2 |
| Anthony | 18-30 | Male | Graduate | Kenya | 2 |
| Adazee | 18-30 | Male | Graduate | Nigeria | 1 |
| Abdul | 19-30 | Male | Graduate | Nigeria | 1 |
| Nkechi | 30-40 | Female | Undergraduate | Nigeria | 9 |
| Martha | 30-40 | Female | Graduate | Cameroon | 8 |
| Ngozi | 18-30 | Female | Graduate | Nigeria | 2 |
| Esther | 18-30 | Female | Undergraduate | Cameroon | 6 |
| Ben | 18-30 | Male | Undergraduate | Ghana | 3 |
| Kwame | 18-30 | Male | Undergraduate | Ghana | 2 |
| Anthony FGP1 | 18-30 | Male | Graduate | Nigeria | 2 |
| Nkechi FGP2 | 18-30 | Male | Graduate | Kenya | 9 |
| Esther FGP3 | 18-30 | Male | Graduate | Nigeria | 6 |
| Kwame FGP4 | 19-30 | Male | Graduate | Ghana | 2 |

As highlighted in Table 3, the study encompassed diverse participants, each with unique characteristics. This diverse group enriched the study with various perspectives and backgrounds. The study included diverse participants, each bringing unique backgrounds and perspectives.

**Ayo**

Having been in the United States for two years, Ayo is in the 18–30-year-old age range and male. Ayo was born and raised in Nigeria.  He obtained his bachelor's and master's degrees in engineering in Nigeria. He is currently working towards his PhD in Engineering.  He speaks English and Yoruba his native language. He spends most of his time in the laboratory on his research project. He had minimal knowledge about Americans. He spends his free time with his friends playing soccer

**Anthony**

Anthony is in the 18–30-year-old age range and identifies as a male. He has been in the United States for two years. He currently holds an F-1 visa.  He obtained his undergraduate program in Engineering. He is a graduate student in the same field of Engineering. Anthony comes from Kenya, East Africa. He speaks English and Swahili.  He likes to keep fit and eat healthy by going to the gym during his spare time.

**Adazee**

Adazee is a male who is in the 18 to 30-year-old age range. He is a graduate student in Engineering. Adazee comes from Southern Nigeria and he speaks English and Yoruba languages. He has been in the United States for one year. He is currently on an F-1 visa. He likes to sing in church. He engages socially with his close friends.

**Abdul**

Abdul is in the 18 to 30-year-old age range and identifies as a male. He is a graduate student in engineering. He comes from Northern Nigeria, and he speaks English and his native language Hausa. He has been in the school for one year. He is currently on an F-1 visa. He likes to play soccer.

**Nkechi**

Nkechi is in the 30-40-year-old age range and identifies as a female. Nkechi was a former student of the school. She obtained a bachelor's degree in management information systems. She has been in the United States for nine years. She is married with children. She is no longer on an F-1 visa. She is currently a United States resident. She works as a sales business analyst for a Japanese automobile company. She speaks English and her native language, Igbo. She enjoys reading during her spare time.

**Martha**

Martha is in the 30–40-year-old age range and identifies as a female. Martha was a former student at the school. For four years She is from Cameroon, West Africa. She obtained her bachelor's degree in education. She has been in the US for eight years. She is married with children. She is no longer on an F-1 visa. She is currently a United States resident. She works for a school district as a World language Teacher. She speaks French and English where French is her primary language. She spent more time at the library during her days at the school getting language support because French was her first language. She spent her spare time staying by herself.

**Ngozi**

Ngozi is in the 18–30-year-old age range and identifies as a female. She is from Eastern Nigeria She obtained her bachelor's degree in Nigeria with a chemistry major. She is currently working on her master's degree in chemistry with a PhD track.  Ngozi has been in the United States for 2 years. She is on an F-1 visa. She speaks English and Igbo language. She spends most of her time in the laboratory researching her project. She likes to read books.

**Esther**

Esther is in the 18–30-year-old age range and identifies as a female. She is from Cameroon, West Africa. She speaks English and French languages. Esther is an undergraduate student in Education. She has been in the United States for six years. She is on an F-1 visa. She likes to dance and listen to nice music during her spare time.

**Ben**

Ben is in the 18–30-year-old age range and identifies as a male. He is from Ghana, West Africa. Ben is an undergraduate student in Biochemistry. He has been in the US for three years. He is currently on an F-1 visa.  He speaks English language and Ghanaian language, Ewe. He likes to play video games during his spare time.

**Kwame**

Kwame is in the 18–30-year-old age range and identifies as a male. He is from Ghana, West Africa.  Kwame is an undergraduate student in engineering.  He has been in the United States for two years, He speaks the English language and the Ghana language, Akan.  He is currently on an F-1 visa. He likes to keep fit and eat healthy. He goes to the gym during his spare time.

**Results**

This section begins with a discussion of the qualitative findings from the individual interviews and focus groups. Then, there is a discussion of the results from the survey that all 10 participants completed, When discussing the qualitative findings, I will discuss the coding process, highlighting the themes that emerged from the dataset. Chapter 3 has been updated to reflect how the Moustakas' data analysis process was applied to the current research study. A detailed data discussion related to the data analysis results for interviews, focus groups, and survey data analysis results is detailed in upcoming sections.

**Individual Interviews and Focus Group Results**

This section contains the findings from the qualitative individual interviews and the focus group. I collected data from 10 participants via individual interviews and four participants for the focus group. The data collected from the individual interviews and the focus group was analyzed using Moustakas' phenomenological data analysis technique, encompassing key steps such as epoché. Epoché, or bracketing, involves setting aside biases and preconceived notions to approach the data with an unbiased perspective (Moustakas, 1994). I engaged in data immersion, reading, and rereading interview transcripts to gain a profound understanding of participants' experiences. This process ensured a focused analysis that prioritized participants' lived experiences, free from undue influence from researchers' pre-existing beliefs (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas' approach facilitated a comprehensive data exploration, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Within this section, five themes emerged from the individual and focus group data: (a) cultural differences, (b) course teaching, (c) lack of university assistance, (d) lack of diversity, and (e) individualized orientation process. Table 4 highlights the themes that represented the research questions for the individual interviews and the focus group.

**Table 2**

*Results of Analysis for Interviews and Focus Groups*

| Individual Interviews | |
| --- | --- |
| Sub-Research Question 1: What are the cultural, and social challenges experienced by African international students that affect their abilities to acculturate? | Themes: <br> Cultural Differences <br> Clothing <br> Food |
| Sub-Research Question 2: What are the perceived barriers to adaption, acculturation, | Themes: |

and integration of African international students as they navigate their way through their studies at the university?

Communication
Course Teaching

Sub-Research Question 3: How will support services benefit African international students through their challenges at a four-year college in a southeastern part of the United States?

Themes:

Individualized Orientation Process

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Focus Group

Sub-Research Question 1: What are the cultural, and social challenges experienced by African international students that affect their abilities to acculturate?

Themes:

Cultural Differences
Food

Sub-Research Question 2: What are the perceived barriers to adaption, acculturation, and integration of African international students as they navigate their way through their studies at the university?

Themes:

Lack of University Assistance
Lack of Diversity

Sub-Research Question 3: How will support services benefit African international students through their challenges at a four-year college in a southeastern part of the United States?

Themes:

Individualized Orientation Process

---

To determine the dominant themes between the two data sources, Table 5 highlights the themes and the frequency of the participants' contribution.

**Table 3**

*Participants and Frequency of Dominant Themes*

| Theme | Frequency |
|---|---|
| Theme 1: Cultural Differences | 10 |
| | (e.g., P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, FGP2, FGP3) |
| Theme 2: Course Teaching | 4 |
| | (e.g., P1, P4, FGP2, FGP4) |
| Theme 3: Lack of University Assistance | 5 |
| | (e.g., P6, P8, P9, FGP3, FGP4) |
| Theme 4: Lack of Diversity | 4 |
| | (e.g., P5, P6, FGP3, FGP4) |
| Theme 5: Individualized Orientation Process | 4 |
| | (e.g., P2, P5, P8, FGP1) |

**Survey Results**

Regarding food, survey questions centered around cafeteria services, the variety of food selections, dietary habits, and the accessibility of resources on campus. Additionally, the survey explored aspects related to family relationships, friends, events, and community

, covering communication with family, support received friendships on campus, and participation in campus-wide events. The comprehensive nature of the survey was designed to gather insights into the academic, social, and cultural dimensions of international students' lives at the institution (see Table 6).

**Table 4**

*Survey Results*

| Survey Category | Findings |
| --- | --- |
| International Support Office | Most participants (8 out of 10) consider the international support office at their institution to be welcoming. |
| Teacher-Friendliness and Student Orientation | • Teachers are generally perceived as friendly by all participants. <br><br> • Almost all respondents (9 out of 10) report that their educational institution hosts student orientation programs. <br><br> • The majority (9 out of 10) were able to attend these student orientation programs. <br><br> • Participants overwhelmingly found the orientation programs beneficial (8 out of 10). |
| Quality Ratings | • Most participants (7 out of 10) rate the overall quality of their educational institution as either Excellent or Good. <br><br> • Similarly, residential accommodations are mostly rated as Excellent or Good by the majority (6 out of 10). |
| International Office Support | Ratings for the quality of service from the international office in addressing residential accommodation concerns vary but generally lean towards positive responses. |
| Campus Environment | Most participants (8 out of 10) rate the overall quality of the campus environment as Good or Excellent. |
| Classroom Experience | • The quality of education within the classroom is consistently rated as |

| Survey Category | Findings |
| --- | --- |
| | Excellent or Good by the majority (9 out of 10). |
| | • Most participants (8 out of 10) rate the professor's instruction in working with international students as Good or Excellent. |
| | • Engagement methods and collaboration in the classroom are positively acknowledged by the majority (9 out of 10). |
| Language Usage and Interaction | • Participants predominantly speak English (7 out of 10) and sometimes speak their native language (2 out of 10). |
| | • Interaction with domestic students in group activities varies. |
| Library Resources | • Most participants (6 out of 10) use library resources, and the majority (4 out of 10) find it easy to access all resources on campus. |
| Food and Cafeteria Services | • Ratings for cafeteria services are generally positive, with the majority (4 out of 10) indicating Excellent or Good. |
| | • Most participants (8 out of 10) feel that the cafeteria offers a variety of food selections. |
| Dietary Habits | Participants have diverse eating habits, including food from their country of origin and American food. |
| Family Relationships and Support | Participants vary in how often they communicate with family and the level of support received. |

| Survey Category | Findings |
| --- | --- |
| Friendships and Networks | • Friendships on campus are common (8 out of 10). <br><br> • Participants utilize various networks, including professors, advisors, roommates, and friends, to access resources on campus. |
| Campus Events | Ratings for the quality of campus-wide events are generally positive (5 out of 10). |
| Event Participation and Connections | Participants often attend events and report making connections through their participation (6 out of 10). |

The survey encompassed 30 questions distributed across different categories, seeking to comprehensively explore the experiences of international students at the educational institution. In the section addressing the educational institution, participants were asked about their perception of the friendliness of the international support office, teacher-friendliness, attendance and benefit from student orientation programs, and their overall rating of the institution and residential accommodations. The survey also delved into the support services provided by the international office and the general campus environment. The instruction category focused on classroom experiences, professor-student interactions, language usage, engagement methods, and utilization of campus resources like the library..

The survey results revealed generally positive sentiments among participants regarding their experiences as international students at the institution. Eighty percent of the participants consider the international support office welcoming, reflecting a positive reception to support services. In addition, all the participants reported teachers to be widely perceived as friendly,

while 80% reported that the presence and benefits of student orientation programs are overwhelmingly acknowledged. Ratings for the overall quality of the educational institution and residential accommodations are predominantly positive, 70% highlight satisfaction with the campus environment. Moreover, 90% of the participants report classroom experiences, including the quality of education, professor-student interactions, and engagement methods, are well-received.

Language usage varies, with 60% of participants reporting use of English, and library resources frequently. Positive evaluations extend to cafeteria services, campus-wide events, and event participation, suggesting a robust social and cultural experience; 80% of participants reported a variety of foods served in the cafeteria. Friendships on campus are common, and 80% of the participants report utilizing diverse networks for accessing resources. While overall satisfaction is high, some areas, such as variations in dietary habits and support from family abroad, present opportunities for further exploration and potential improvements.

**Themes**

Within this study, five themes emerged from the individual interviews and focus group data: (a) cultural differences, (b) course teaching, (c) lack of university assistance, (d) lack of diversity, and (e) individualized orientation process. This section provides an overview of each theme, with participant quotations being provided that substantiate each of the findings.

**Cultural Differences**

This theme found many cultural distinctions. These cultural differences were highlighted in different areas that included social experiences, food, clothing, and how communication is encountered. For example, when it came to social differences, one participant discussed how living in the United States promoted a more relaxed way of life than what they were used to. Ayo

stated that they found it difficult for some American students to be so relaxed over issues that they would otherwise feel needed to be taken more seriously. Ayo stated: "I was shocked that why will you be this relaxed over certain things I take so seriously, like, you should be so uptight. The US is a bit more relaxed, are so intense, so intense here. On social, their social life is the one thing I also noticed, yeah, they do not take this too seriously."

In addition, Ngozi was able to talk about differences in the way that Americans lived by discussing how they perceived that they were rude: "I think, most of the Americans, they are rude. But I'm gonna say like, from Africa, like we try to be respectful to everyone. But some of them just like, say things without putting the other person's feelings into consideration."

Nkechi agreed with Ngozi's thought, as they reported that many Americans do not speak to others unless it is absolutely warranted: "One cultural difference is people don't speak to you. I noticed that right away. You know, in Nigeria, you can just be walking down the streets. When a young person sees you, they speak good morning, good afternoon."

Furthermore, Ayo highlighted an encounter with an American friend. He was surprised to know that when someone invites you on an outing, you are responsible for your bills, unlike the culture in Africa where the invitee absorbs the cost incurred. Ayo stated: "I was also shocked at the fact that when someone invites you to somewhere, you will have to pay for yourself. The first time I was invited to a game night downtown, I assumed the person was going to pay for the food and every other thing, I was shocked when the store asked for my card. Thankfully, I was with my card."

In addition, Ben discussed how they perceived American culture to be more individualistic than what they experienced in their country of origin: "When I came to the US,

instead of studying I found this individualistic culture where everybody does their thing. It was kind of strange and threw me off balance like you're trying to depend on."

Participants in the focus group also agreed with the individual interview participants. For example, FGP2 Nkechi stated: "Here, it's so different because everyone minds their business, which is kind of a big change. You have to like call your friends, make sure they're home and they are willing to receive you before you visit. So, it's kind of a big change as opposed to where we're coming from."

Finally, FGP3 Esther also discussed how they perceived Americans to be less friendly, which made integration difficult: "We come from a place where everyone is I will use the word friendliness to the point that where we come from. Just walking down, the street, you speak to a stranger and a stranger will speak to you, even if it's good morning, good afternoon. And is a shock."

Clothing was another area where the participants noted differences. For example, P6 Martha reported that they found American students' clothing quite different. P6 reported:

> The way people even dress to go some places, personally, in general, I can think that
> people are too…I mean, I don't know if they have a barrier between where they are to do
> things, for instance, in a school, I saw people going to school dress in pajamas in all these
> things flip flop, you know, coming from Africa, in higher education, you always see
> people dress well, like they were going to, to a job.

Esther appeared to agree with Martha and provided an example of what they experienced when it came to witnessing different ways in which other students dressed: "This girl she came to class, her stomach, her whole stomach is open. She had literally like she's wearing like a bra. And her stomach is open. And then she's wearing like, a pant that is like, under all her abdomen

is outside. And when I saw it, what I wanted to do is like, Oh my God, how could somebody wear something like this to class?"

Finally, Ben discussed how they are used to a more conservative style of dress: "We seem to dress back home in the way we present ourselves and our classrooms seem to be a little bit on the conservative side if you understand what I mean as compared to here where we like no free gear school doesn't really matter."

Food was another cultural difference that emerged from the dataset when it came to cultural differences. Some participants found it difficult to integrate due to their food choices. For example, Anthony discussed their experiences when it came to eating choices: "The food that you know, back home, like what we eat, but you know, it's kind of different from like, you know, coming here to like, a whole different set. So, it took me a while and living on campus, the menu options to kind of limited."

Abdul discussed how they found it difficult to only eat American meals, such as burgers: "The first thing that I will say is like, the food you know, what we have back home is different from what we have here. So, I find it's kind of difficult for me to eat a typical American food, you know, it's burgers, so for me, as a mostly so it's kind of difficult for me."

Finally, communication was highlighted as another cultural difference. The participants reported communication issues when it came to integrating into society and culture. For example, Ayo stated that it was difficult when: "Communicating with people, understanding how to communicate with them in the right manner without crossing the line."

In addition, Anthony reported that they had to continuously repeat themselves so that they could be understood:

When I speak, initially, it was like a problem for them understanding what I'm trying to

see, I have to repeat myself, that was one, two trying to pick because the pace at which,

you know, the professors were going, it was a little bit too fast. So, I had to, like, you

know, spend extra time trying to, like know, read and stay up late just to like, catch up.

Nkechi also agreed, stating that when it came to communication issues, accents were a

main barrier: "The very first challenge I faced was language. And by language, I mean, accents.

You know, I came from an English-speaking country, obviously. But I had a challenge of the

way Americans speak English. And that was a continuous challenge."

Martha discussed how they knew more than one language and reported that when living

in America it was difficult to understand American students with different American accents:

The language was also a big barrier for me. Coming to Africa, I am not an English

learner. So, I speak English as well. Like, you know, I understood, but here the language

as my first language is French. So, it was a little difficult even to speak, because even in

the south here I was, I had the impression that the way people spoke wasn't clear English.

The focus group participants also contributed to this theme, as they were able to discuss

communication issues. For example, Nkechi discussed the issues they experienced with accents:

"Trying to understand for me, trying to understand that accent because coming from Africa, we

speak British English and here it's kind of a little different. For example, metric system, they use

the pound system here while we use the kilogram system, like the SI unit back home."

In addition, Esther reported that it was difficult to understand the professors' accents:

"Understanding what the professors are saying. Not the language itself, just the accent. And

Americans use different words that we come from a place where we speak British, English,

Americans, they use slang words that sometimes we are not familiar with, I've never heard before."

**Course Teaching**

This theme highlighted how the participants experienced barriers due to the way the courses were taught or presented. For example, Ayo discussed how the course load made it difficult for them to adapt and integrate into society. He stated, "Yeah, it was too much. Even actually, I was shocked when I heard about the course load because normally when students come in, I think they take two or three classes. I was taking six. So, I was struggling." Abdul also agreed and reported: "The course load is kind of difficult and challenging. You know, doing two courses here in United States is just like doing like 10 courses back home. I mean, in Nigeria, so it's kind of difficult. So, I feel like every time I used to be engaged from one course or the other or doing assignments from one course, writing reports, doing all those stuff. So, it's very tough."

Esther reported that not only was the course load high, but the material was presented very quickly: "Regarding the course load the instructors have, they give us a lot of assignments and they give you like a deadline that this assignment is due at this time, and sometimes you realize that the assignments are different assignments and are due at the same time. So, it's a lot of challenge like trying to catch up to assignments."

Some of the focus group participants also agreed with the difficulties experienced when being taught materials. For example, Nkechi stated: "On the downside is the course load. One, it's a bit on the tedious side. Trying to juggle all these classes in life can be overwhelming. Also, the expectations from the professors, every one of them demanding 100% of your time and with the limited time that you have, it's sometimes overwhelming."

In addition, Tony reported how the material is also different, making it difficult to adapt, acculturate, and integrate into their new lives:

In Africa, the focus might just be on theoretical knowledge and some practical knowledge. That way the course hours will not be as huge or enormous as it is here. But the US system emphasizes on hands on and practical application of knowledge, which is good to some extent, but the pace is quite fast, and the intensity of the coursework is way, way higher than what I was previously accustomed to.

**Lack of Assistance at the University**

This theme highlighted how the participants perceived a lack of assistance from their universities. For example, Esther discussed how they were not prepared properly to find their way around the campus, which resulted in missing important classes:

One of the challenges is like being able to know what to do, where to go to, where the right source to get what you're looking for. And so, it's kind of really hard. Sometimes you're confused, like all over the place wondering, and things that you could have known where it is, you could have gone to get it, you couldn't because you don't know what to do.

Ben reported similar thoughts as they stated: "Finding things in the school like first of all, finding my dorm, I'm finding my classes, and you know, walking from one department to another department. Those were really challenging for me."

Martha also agreed by stating that the campus was too large, and had limited assistance when it came to knowing where to go: "The greatest challenge was the size. It was too big. It was difficult to find things, places. It was like going in from I mean living in a city where you

don't know where to start. And I didn't have a guide, you know, a guide in the campus that will take me to place and show it to me."

The focus group participants also agreed with this theme, as they reported similar experiences. For example, Esther stated: "By the time I discovered my class, some of my class, I missed almost half of the class. So, looking for how to get there and all that, not getting as much information as I need to keep me going."

In addition, Tony reported that international students are not provided with nearly enough information: "They do not provide enough information because I think most of the orientation are geared towards the understanding. You've been through this system already, so you should know where and how to approach different resources. But us coming here from afar, it is so different."

**Lack of Diversity**

This theme highlighted how the participants perceived the campus having a lack of diversity, most of which agreed that the universities were not providing this to the campus' culture. For example, Nkechi stated they would like to see more culture and diversity on the campus: "I would like to see activities like maybe they can have their own maybe the school will create like a cultural day, where different cultures have different students that represent different cultures can showcase their culture."

In addition, Martha reported that they felt like just another number and did not feel it was an individualized experience:

I felt like I was another number. Because I wish there were people that were available to show me around, maybe things that are needed. But I didn't feel like you know, I was I

was just another number loss in the midst of 1000s of 1000s of students. And I didn't really feel myself connected to that place.

The focus group participants also agreed with the individual interview participants. For example, Tony stated:

More efforts could be made to create a more welcoming atmosphere for students from diverse backgrounds. If the society or the society where the school is not a welcoming environment for internationals, it says a lot and that will affect the perception of the students. I feel my institution could do better in terms of how they create an inclusive environment for international students.

Finally, Esther stated that their university should offer a culture week to help increase diversity on the campus: "Cultural week is something I believe my school can actually do, where we have people from other internationals actually showcase their culture, and that's a way of fostering inclusiveness for other internationals. I still believe some Americans feel Africa is a country and Africa is a continent."

**Individualize the Orientation Process**

This theme highlighted how participants believed that their universities should individualize the orientation process. Participants reported the need to advocate for personalized orientation processes at their universities to help address their diverse needs, backgrounds, and aspirations. Recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach may not effectively address their varied demographics, learning styles, and challenges, their perceptions aim to enhance student engagement and success by tailoring the orientation experience. For example, Anthony stated, "I think they should like, kind of individualize the orientation process. Because it's just like, general orientation they are giving you, throwing all this stuff at you."

Nkechi discussed the importance of individualizing the orientation process for international students:

You're coming from a whole different country, a whole different world, there is no program or project set up to engage international students, you know, you have this block of students from different parts of the world who are not familiar with the country, first of all, and there are no family, they may not be familiar with the language, they may understand the language but not so much.

Esther discussed how they could individualize the orientation process by assigning an individual person to help them: "Maybe they should like kind of like maybe to assign, like the new students, like kind of have somebody who guide them. Like, which was not effective at all. Because I think what happened, the lady that was supposed to help us, she had a lot of people that she's supposed to help, and they have different programs."

One focus group member, Ayo, also agreed with the individual interview participants, as they were able to discuss how having an individual assigned to international students who know different cultures: "If I would recommend anything to be changed is maybe assigning someone who understands international relations and has knowledge of the difference in culture to help guide students, even current and prospective students, on how to navigate resources that the institution has to offer."

### Research Question Responses

This section contains answers to the central research question and the sub-research questions that guided this study. Within this section, I will answer the questions as depicted by the themes that emerged from the survey, interview, and focus group dataset. The themes will be

explored concerning the varied perspectives and experiences of the diverse participant group described earlier.

**Central Research Question**

How do African international students perceive their adaptation and acculturation experiences at a four-year college in a southeastern part of the United States? African international students participating in the study provided nuanced insights into their experiences adapting to life at a four-year college in the southeastern United States. One notable observation centered around the perceived contrast in lifestyle between their home countries and the U.S. In particular, four participants highlighted the prevalence of a more relaxed American lifestyle (Nikolaev et al., 2021). For example, Ayo reported instances where U.S. students exhibited nonchalance towards certain matters considered significant or serious in the participants' home countries. Ayo stated: "I was shocked that why will you be this relaxed over certain things I take so seriously, like, you should be so uptight. The US is a bit more relaxed, are so intense, so intense here. On social, their social life is the one thing I also noticed, yeah, they do not take this too seriously. This allowed Ayo to express surprise at the casual approach to social interactions among American students. This particular participant articulated a sense of cultural dissonance, describing how they found it difficult to reconcile the American tendency to be more laid-back and less formal in social settings. The participant remarked that issues they considered necessary were met with what they perceived as a lack of intensity or seriousness among their American peers.

Nine participants also pointed out the perceived informality in American communication styles. Ben, for example, was taken aback by what they perceived as a lack of formality in American verbal interactions (Pho & Schartner, 2021). Ben highlighted instances where

Americans did not seem to adhere to the same social etiquettes they were accustomed to in their home country. This included observations of Americans speaking without apparent consideration for the feelings of others, leading to a perceived cultural difference in communication norms. Ben said: "When I came to the US, instead of studying I found this individualistic culture where everybody does their thing. It was kind of strange and threw me off balance like you're trying to depend on." The participants' reflections on the more relaxed American lifestyle underscored the cultural adjustments they were navigating. The contrast in social attitudes and communication styles became central to their acculturation experiences, highlighting the importance of understanding and adapting to cultural nuances for effective integration into the American college environment (Bittencourt et al., 2021).

**Sub-Question One**

What are the cultural, and social challenges experienced by African international students that affect their abilities to acculturate? African international students participating in the study shared insights into the cultural and social challenges they encountered during their acculturation process. Participants identified significant disparities between their home cultures and the social dynamics they encountered in the southeastern United States (Wu & Tarc, 2021). These challenges encompassed various aspects, including clothing norms, social interactions, and perceptions of rudeness. One prevalent theme revolved around differences in clothing norms. Four participants noted that American students' attire, such as pajamas to class, was perceived as unconventional and markedly different from the more formal and conservative dress codes in their home countries (Thompson, 2022). This cultural incongruence posed a challenge as

students sought to reconcile their accustomed dressing standards with the more casual approach prevalent in American academic settings.

Social interactions presented challenges as participants navigated new communication norms. Instances were recounted where the participants struggled to interpret American social cues and etiquette, leading to feelings of isolation (Lin & Nguyen, 2021). For example, four participants expressed surprise at Americans' limited inclination to greet strangers in passing, a practice deeply ingrained in their home cultures. The perceived lack of social engagement created a sense of distance and added to the complexities of forming connections in the new cultural context.

Furthermore, participants Ayo, Anthony, Adazee, and Nkechi discussed their observations of what they perceived as rudeness in American communication styles (Astia, 2020). For example, Ayo stated that it was difficult when: "Communicating with people, understanding how to communicate with them in the right manner without crossing the line." Navigating these differences in social norms proved challenging and impacted participants' abilities to integrate seamlessly into the social fabric of their academic environment. The cultural and social challenges highlighted by participants underscored the intricate acculturation process, where adapting to new norms in clothing, social interactions, and communication styles posed significant hurdles. Understanding and addressing these challenges are crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and facilitating a smoother acculturation experience for African international students in the southeastern United States.

**Sub-Question Two**

What are the perceived barriers to adaption, acculturation, and integration of African international students as they navigate their way through their studies at the university? African

international students participating in the study articulated various perceived barriers that impeded their adaptation, acculturation, and integration into the academic and social milieu of the southeastern United States. These barriers encompassed challenges related to the academic environment, communication, navigating campus life, and the absence of cultural diversity (Ayala, 2021). One substantial barrier revolved around the demanding nature of the academic workload. Four participants shared their struggles with adapting to a high volume of coursework, stringent deadlines, and a fast-paced educational system.

Ayo discussed how the course load made it difficult for them to adapt and integrate into society. He stated, "Yeah, it was too much. Even actually, I was shocked when I heard about the course load because normally when students come in, I think they take two or three classes. I was taking six. So, I was struggling." Abdul also agreed and reported: "The course load is kind of difficult and challenging. You know, doing two courses here in United States is just like doing like 10 courses back home. I mean, in Nigeria, so it's kind of difficult. So, I feel like every time I used to be engaged from one course or the other or doing assignments from one course, writing reports, doing all those stuff. So, it's very tough."

Communication issues emerged as a significant barrier, with participants highlighting challenges related to language, accents, and the pace of communication. Navigating American slang, fast-paced speech, and understanding various American accents presented difficulties for the participants (LaScotte & Peters, 2021). These challenges extended beyond the classroom, impacting social interactions, and creating a sense of isolation as students grappled with linguistic nuances different from their home environments. Navigating the university environment posed additional challenges, as participants reported a lack of sufficient assistance and guidance. Finding classrooms, resources and understanding university procedures were cited

as obstacles. The vastness of the campus, coupled with a perceived lack of support services, contributed to participants feeling disoriented and struggling to integrate into the academic community.

Three participants also highlighted a lack of cultural diversity on campus as a barrier to integration (Singh et al., 2022). The absence of representation from diverse cultural backgrounds contributed to a sense of alienation. Ayo, Nkechi, and Martha all expressed a desire for more inclusive initiatives, such as cultural events or festivals, to promote understanding and appreciation for the diverse backgrounds of international students. Esther stated that their university should offer a culture week to help increase diversity on the campus: "Cultural week is something I believe my school can actually do, where we have people from other internationals actually showcase their culture, and that's a way of fostering inclusiveness for other internationals. I still believe some Americans feel Africa is a country and Africa is a continent."

**Sub-Question Three**

How will support services benefit African international students through their challenges at a four-year college in a southeastern part of the United States? Participants in the study identified ways tailored support services could significantly benefit African international students as they navigate the challenges of adapting to a four-year college in the southeastern United States. They suggested support services spanned language assistance, campus orientation, cultural inclusivity, and academic guidance (Tavares, 2021). One crucial area where support services could be instrumental is in addressing communication challenges. Language support services were highlighted as essential, including language proficiency programs and accent reduction workshops. These services could assist students in improving their English language

skills, enhancing their ability to understand, and be understood in academic and social contexts, thereby fostering more effective communication.

Another vital aspect pertained to orientation programs designed specifically for international students. Anthony, Nkechi, and Esther emphasized the importance of comprehensive and individualized orientation processes that go beyond generic information (Shu et al., 2020). Assigning mentors or guides who understand international students' unique needs and cultural backgrounds was proposed. This could include assistance in navigating campus resources, understanding academic expectations, and adapting to the American educational system. Cultural inclusivity initiatives were deemed essential to fostering a more supportive environment. Nkechi expressed a desire for cultural events or festivals that celebrate the diverse backgrounds of international students. These events could serve as platforms for cultural exchange, breaking down stereotypes, and promoting a sense of belonging within the broader campus community.

Academic guidance services were also considered critical support mechanisms (Van de Velde et al., 2021). Four participants (e.g., Nkechi, Martha, Esther, and Ben) suggested providing academic resources, tutoring services, and guidance on navigating the demanding course load. Offering workshops on effective study strategies and time management could contribute to the academic success of international students. Martha also agreed by stating that the campus was too large, and had limited assistance when it came to knowing where to go: "The greatest challenge was the size. It was too big. It was difficult to find things, places. It was like going in from I mean living in a city where you don't know where to start. And I didn't have a guide, you know, a guide in the campus that will take me to place and show it to me."

The focus group participants also agreed with this theme, as they reported similar experiences. For example, Esther stated: "By the time I discovered my class, some of my class, I missed almost half of the class. So, looking for how to get there and all that, not getting as much information as I need to keep me going." Furthermore, Ayo, Nkechi, and Martha recommended that universities actively address the lack of diversity on campus. Support services could include establishing multicultural centers, recruiting diverse faculty and staff, and implementing policies that promote an inclusive and welcoming environment for students from various cultural backgrounds. Nkechi stated they would like to see more culture and diversity on the campus: "I would like to see activities like maybe they can have their own maybe the school will create like a cultural day, where different cultures have different students that represent different cultures can showcase their culture."

## Summary

This qualitative research study addressed a gap in the literature related to the adaptation experiences of African international students to college-level education within a four-year college in the southeastern United States. The primary purpose was to explore African international students' experiences and perceptions of the challenges encountered during their university enrollment. This chapter provided an overview of the study's findings. I collected data from 10 participants via a survey, individual interviews, and four participants for the focus group. The data collected from the individual interviews and the focus group was analyzed using Moustakas' phenomenological data analysis technique, encompassing key steps such as epoché. Epoché, or bracketing, involves setting aside biases and preconceived notions to approach the data with an unbiased perspective (Moustakas, 1994).

Five themes emerged from the individual and focus group data: (a) cultural differences (b) course teaching, (c) lack of university assistance, (d) lack of diversity, and (e) individualized orientation process. The next chapter is Chapter Five, which will conclude this dissertation by discussing previous literature findings, identifying implications, and discussing limitations and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience and perceptions adapting to the process of college-level education for African international students at a four-year college in the southeastern United States. This chapter concludes with a discussion and interpretation of the study's findings in relation to the existing research literature. The implications for policy and practice, as well as theoretical and empirical implications are also emphasized. This chapter ends with discussions on the limitations, delimitations, and opportunities for future research.

### Discussion

Cultural differences emerged as a significant hurdle, encompassing diverse aspects like norms, values, and social customs distinct from their home countries. Additionally, clothing norms were pivotal in shaping students' identities and sense of belonging on campus, navigating cultural preferences and Western attire expectations. Food preferences highlighted the importance of access to familiar cuisine, with students grappling with adapting to new culinary experiences. Communication challenges, including language barriers and cultural nuances, posed significant obstacles in academic and social interactions. Issues with course teaching methods underscored the need for tailored support to meet the educational expectations of U.S. institutions. Concerns about the perceived lack of university assistance revealed gaps in support services for African international students.

Feelings of isolation due to a perceived lack of campus diversity emphasized the importance of fostering inclusive environments. Finally, deficiencies in the orientation process underscored the necessity for improved strategies to address the specific needs of African

international students during their transition to college life. Together, these themes provided a comprehensive understanding of African international students' nuanced experiences and adaptation processes in the southeastern United States. The findings aligned with literature on the topics: cultural adaptation of African international students (e.g., Bell et al., 2020; Bethel et al, 2020; Gong et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2018), cultural implications of clothing for international students (e.g. Dairo, 2023; Huisman et al., 2021; Safdar et al., 2020), dietary challenges and cultural adaptation (e.g. Boch et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2021 ), cross-cultural communication challenges (e.g. Bhatti & Alzahrani, 2023; King & Bailey, 2021), educational challenges and pedagogical adaptation (e.g. Cho et al., 2020; Whilby, 2022), challenges in accessing university support services (e.g. Ammigan & Bentahar, 2024; Yılmaz & Temizkan, 2022), fostering diversity and inclusion on university campuses (e.g. Daddow et al., 2019; Hale, 2023), and enhancing orientation programs (e.g. Aithal & Shubhrajyotsna., 2023; Bakay, 2023).

**Cultural Adaptation of African International Students**

The finding regarding cultural differences among African international students adapting to college life in the southeastern United States aligns with existing literature on cross-cultural transitions in higher education. Prior research emphasized the impact of cultural differences on students' academic experiences (Bethel et al., 2020). Like participants in this study, scholars noted challenges for non-Western international students adjusting to Western social norms (e.g., Wang et al., 2018). For example, the observation that American students might appear less severe or considerate in social interactions compared to the cultural norms of African countries resonates with findings indicating cultural variations in communication styles and interpersonal relationships (Gong et al., 2020).

Moreover, the experiences shared by participants, such as the surprise at having to cover their expenses during social outings, echo previous research on the cultural differences in expectations regarding hospitality and social reciprocity (Bell et al., 2020). Additionally, Americans' perception of being less friendly or inclined to engage in spontaneous social interactions reflects the broader literature on cultural differences in social behavior and the challenges of building interpersonal connections in unfamiliar cultural contexts (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). Therefore, this finding highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing cultural differences in supporting African international students' academic and social integration in U.S. higher education institutions, as highlighted by Wang et al.'s (2015) research on intercultural competence and cross-cultural adjustment strategies.

**Cultural Implications of Clothing for International Students**

Participants' reflections on the conservative dress style in their home countries highlight the role of cultural upbringing and societal norms in shaping individuals' clothing preferences and behaviors. As stated in previous research, clothing is a cultural marker affecting students' social identity and belonging (Safdar et al., 2020). Scholars noted challenges for international students in adapting to attire norms between home countries and host institutions (Huisman et al., 2021). For example, the observation that American students might adopt more casual attire for academic settings contrasts with the formal dress expectations prevalent in various African educational systems, reflecting broader cultural variations in clothing norms (Dairo, 2023). Moreover, the discomfort expressed by participants at witnessing peers wearing revealing clothing in academic settings reflects broader discussions on cultural differences in perceptions of modesty and appropriateness (Huisman et al., 2021; Misra & Castillo, 2004). This finding highlights the complexity of cultural adaptation and the need for support services and resources

that address international students' diverse needs and experiences navigating clothing norms and cultural differences in their host country's educational environment.

**Dietary Challenges and Cultural Adaptation**

Food highlights African international students' challenges with dietary preferences and available options in their new environment. Difficulty adjusting to unfamiliar cuisine on campus reveals a disparity from their accustomed foods back home, aligning with existing literature on food's cultural significance for international students (Lordly et al., 2021). The accounts provided by participants, such as P2 's struggle with limited menu options on campus and resorting to snacks from stores, resonates with Yan (2020) findings on the impact of food choices on students' sense of belonging and well-being in a new cultural context.

Moreover, P4's difficulty adjusting to typical American meals like burgers highlights the challenge of reconciling cultural food preferences with the predominant cuisine in the host country as previously highlighted by Boch et al. (2020). This also coincides with prior research by Wright et al. (2021) who emphasized food's role in cultural identity and the necessity of familiar foods for international students' adjustment. Overall, the significance of food highlights the need for enhanced dietary diversity and cultural sensitivity in university dining services to adequately meet the nutritional and cultural requirements of African international students throughout their academic journey.

**Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges**

The theme of communication aligns with previous literature on cross-cultural communication challenges within higher education contexts. Participants' experiences underscore the multifaceted nature of communication hurdles, reflecting previous research on the complexities of intercultural interactions as noted in King and Bailey's (2021) study. The

participants' concerns about navigating social norms and avoiding miscommunication align with prior research by Tsang et al. (2020), highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity and understanding in fostering effective cross-cultural communication. Moreover, the participants' accounts of struggling to articulate themselves in academic settings align with existing literature from Tavares' (2021) research on language barriers and academic discourse in international student populations. The recurring challenge of understanding diverse accents and colloquialisms parallels findings from Sawir et al.'s (2012) study, emphasizing the impact of linguistic differences on communication comprehension and social integration

Additionally, despite fluency in multiple languages, participants' experiences of struggling with unfamiliar linguistic conventions further highlight the nuanced nature of language adaptation in diverse cultural contexts, as highlighted by Bhatti and Alzahrani (2023). The findings from this theme contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics of cross-cultural communication within higher education settings, identifying unique challenges African international students face in navigating linguistic and cultural differences. Furthermore, these insights highlight the importance of tailored support services and cultural sensitivity training to facilitate effective communication and enhance international students' overall academic and social experiences.

**Educational Challenges and Pedagogical Adaptation**

The theme of course teaching provides insights into the challenges encountered in navigating the educational landscape of international students' host country, mainly concerning course structure and teaching methodologies. Previous literature on international student experiences extensively documented the difficulties associated with adapting to new educational systems characterized by differing pedagogical approaches, academic expectations, and course

loads (Bittencourt et al., 2019). Scholars highlighted the disparities between educational systems worldwide, emphasizing the need for international students to acclimate to the fast-paced nature of instruction and the rigorous coursework commonly found in Western higher education institutions (Whilby, 2022). Additionally, studies showed the importance of understanding cultural differences in teaching and learning styles and the need for targeted support services to assist international students in navigating these challenges (Cho et al., 2020). The findings from this theme appear consistent with prior research by Smith (2020) on teaching methodologies' influence on international student engagement and academic achievement, highlighting the need for faculty to adopt inclusive teaching strategies catering to diverse learning styles and cultural backgrounds. Overall, these insights deepen the understanding of how educational systems interact with cultural adaptation among African international students, emphasizing the significance of promoting inclusive learning environments and offering personalized support to enrich their academic journeys.

**Challenges in Accessing University Support Services**

The theme of lack of assistance at the university aligns with broader discussions in previous literature on the challenges faced by international students in accessing support services within higher education institutions. Research has consistently highlighted the critical role of university support systems in facilitating the successful adaptation and integration of international students into campus life (Yılmaz & Temizkan, 2022). However, studies have also documented various gaps and shortcomings in these support services, particularly concerning orientation programs, campus navigation, and access to essential resources (Ammigan & Bentahar, 2024). For instance, orientation programs often fail to adequately address international students' unique needs and challenges, assuming familiarity with university systems and

procedures that might differ significantly from those in their home countries as previously demonstrated in Bittencourt et al.'s (2019) study. Moreover, the international students expressed that they frequently encountered difficulties navigating their host institutions' complex administrative structures and bureaucratic processes, exacerbating feelings of isolation and disorientation.

The challenges highlighted by African international students regarding the lack of assistance in navigating campus facilities and accessing essential information align with previous literature from Glass et al.'s (2022) research, which explored the importance of inclusive campus environments and culturally responsive support services. Similar to Wang and Sun's (2022) findings, participants in this study emphasized the need for universities to implement tailored orientation programs and provide ongoing support mechanisms that consider the diverse cultural backgrounds and needs of international student populations. Likewise, as illustrated by Patel et al. (2024), this study revealed the importance of peer support networks and mentorship programs in facilitating international students' social integration and academic success.

**Fostering Diversity and Inclusion On University Campuses**

The theme of lack of diversity reflects broader discussions in previous literature such as Arthur (2017), Lau et al. (2018), Daddow et al. (2019), Hale (2023), and Smith (2015). According to the study findings, it is imperative to foster diverse and inclusive campus environments for international students within higher education institutions. Research consistently highlighted diversity's pivotal role in enhancing the overall academic and social experiences of students from diverse backgrounds (Hale, 2023). However, there are persistent challenges and shortcomings in creating genuinely inclusive campus cultures that celebrate diversity and promote intercultural understanding (Smith, 2015).

The experiences articulated by participants regarding the perceived lack of diversity on campus align with concerns raised in previous literature about the homogeneity of student populations in many higher education institutions. Participants' desires for greater cultural representation and opportunities to celebrate diversity through events and initiatives align with recommendations from previous research emphasizing the importance of creating spaces and programming that promote cross-cultural exchange and appreciation (Daddow et al., 2019). For example, participants' suggestions for cultural festivals or weeks dedicated to showcasing various cultures reflect strategies employed by some universities to foster a more inclusive campus environment.

Moreover, participants' feelings of alienation and disconnection in the absence of a supportive and inclusive campus environment resonate with discussions in previous literature on the impact of campus climate on student engagement and sense of belonging. For instance, the study by Lau et al. (2018) showed similar findings. Finally, universities should actively address issues of diversity and inclusivity to ensure that all students feel valued and supported in their academic pursuits (Arthur, 2017).

**Enhancing Orientation Programs**

The theme of customizing the orientation process for African international students resonates with prior research emphasizing the significance of tailored support mechanisms to aid their transition and integration into higher education institutions. Orientation programs play a pivotal role in furnishing indispensable information and resources crucial for fostering students' academic and social adaptation to their new academic environment (Aithal & Shubhrajyotsna., 2023). Nevertheless, it is imperative for orientation procedures to be more personalized and attuned to international student cohorts' varied needs and backgrounds (Bakay, 2023).

The narratives shared by the participants highlight the inherent challenges of conventional, one-size-fits-all approaches to orientation and the necessity of personalized assistance for international students. This observation aligns with the recommendations outlined in previous literature, which advocate for implementing more individualized and culturally sensitive orientation initiatives tailored specifically for international student populations (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Conroy and McCarthy (2019) emphasized the advantages of assigning dedicated support personnel or mentors to guide international students throughout their transition. Additionally, it is important to integrate cultural competency training for orientation staff to better cater to the diverse needs of international student cohorts.

**Summary of Thematic Findings**

Eight dominant themes emerged from the survey, individual interviews, and focus group data: cultural adaptation of African international students, (b) cultural implications of clothing for international students, (c) dietary challenges and cultural adaptation, (d) cross-cultural communication challenges, (e) educational challenges and pedagogical adaptation, (f) challenges in accessing university support services, (g) fostering diversity and inclusion on university campuses, and (h) enhancing orientation program. The identified themes from the data offer insights into African international students' varied challenges while adjusting to college life in the southeastern United States. The emerging thematic findings supported existing literature on the study's topic and added knowledge to the body of research on African international students' college experiences. These themes are discussed in the following section.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

In this section, I explore the implications for policy. Moreover, the implications for practice are covered. Subsequently, considerations stemming from the theoretical and empirical contexts are discussed.

**Implications for Policy**

Implications for policy concerning African international students necessitate universities to prioritize inclusivity, cultural sensitivity, and tailored support services. This could involve enacting affirmative action policies to boost representation, funding cultural competency training for faculty and staff, and allocating resources to enhance support services such as orientation programs, academic advising, and mental health support (Salmi & D'Addio, 2020). Policymakers should collaborate with university administrations to develop strategies addressing communication barriers, promoting diversity through recruitment initiatives, and ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities for all students, regardless of their background. By implementing these policies, universities can create a more inclusive and supportive environment conducive to the success and well-being of African international students.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings highlighted by the African international students of this study emphasize several crucial implications for practice within higher education institutions. There is a need for comprehensive cultural sensitivity training across faculty, staff, and student support services to understand better and address the cultural differences experienced by international students. This training would enhance interactions and foster a more inclusive environment conducive to academic and personal growth. Additionally, universities should reevaluate their dress codes and policies to accommodate international students' diverse clothing preferences and cultural norms,

promoting a campus culture that respects and celebrates individual identities. Moreover, higher education institutions should prioritize expanding food options on campus to cater to the diverse dietary preferences of international students, fostering a sense of belonging and well-being among this population.

To assist international students in overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers, it is vital to offer communication support services such as language assistance programs, communication workshops, and cultural exchange initiatives (Rosenfield, 2020). Additionally, faculty members should embrace adaptable teaching approaches that accommodate diverse learning styles and backgrounds among international students, thereby fostering academic success and retention in the classroom (Dunn & Griggs, 2000). To meet the distinctive needs of international students, universities should strengthen support services, such as expanding orientation programs, assigning dedicated advisors or mentors, and offering resources for academic and administrative navigation. Creating a welcoming campus environment involves promoting diversity and inclusion through cultural events, student-led initiatives, and inclusive policies. Tailoring orientation programs to international students' specific needs and providing comprehensive support services can ensure a smoother transition into university life, fostering academic success and well-being.

**Empirical and Theoretical Implications**

Empirical and theoretical implications encompass diverse considerations drawn from existing research and theoretical frameworks. The empirical implications explore the objects, activities, and motives not directly observed in this study, but implied by the observations identified. Theoretical implications speculate how the study findings could impact research in the field of study.

**Empirical Implications**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience and perceptions adapting to the process of college-level education for African international students at a four-year college in the southeastern United States. As the study implied, international students face pertinent challenges while attempting to integrate into a new culture (Cao et al., 2018). More often, the students lack social and emotional support, an issue that threatens their successful acculturation. As such, there is a likelihood of developing mental health problems, as they seek to navigate the new culture (Can et al., 2021). This study underscored that while international students have been treated homogenously, there is need to focus on individual challenges since the students come from diverse cultural backgrounds. This aspect is imperative to understand their unique difficulties and potential tailored interventions to address them.

**Theoretical Implications**

The design of this study was developed under the theoretical understanding of Berry's (1980) acculturation theory to understand the experiences of African international students' cultural, social, and academic integration in U.S. institutions of higher learning. The concept of acculturation, conceived in anthropology and sociology early in the 20th century, has been used to explain the dynamics involved when people from diverse cultural backgrounds come into continuous contact with one another (Park & Burgess, 1921). Morris et al. (2015) defined culture as "a loosely integrated system of ideas, practices, and social institutions that enable coordination of behavior in a population" (p. 632).

It has transformed over the past two centuries. There have been different interpretations of culture. However, by this definition, every member of a society has a definitive culture. It is

made up of the ideas, institutions, and interactions that guide and reflect individuals' thoughts, feelings, and actions (Hamedani & Markus, 2019). Immigrants often are situated in two worlds and cultures as they come into new locations with different approaches and values. These habits, values, beliefs, and attitudes are not static.

Understanding students' cultural, social, and academic experiences contributes to refining theoretical models that explain factors influencing adaptation and success in higher education (Berry, 1980). This study's findings resonate with Berry's (1980) acculturation theory, which describes individuals' cultural adaptation process in new environments—themes emerged like cultural differences, communication challenges, and lack of university support mirror acculturation dimensions. Cultural differences highlight initial adjustment struggles, while communication challenges reflect acculturative stress. Additionally, the lack of university assistance underscores the institutional aspect of acculturation, emphasizing Berry's (1980) need for support structures.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

This study had various limitations and delimitations. Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018) defined limitations as the inherent difficulties in the techniques and methods used for a study that are beyond my control yet may have an impact on the study's outcomes. On the other hand, delimitations are the study aspects within my control and might affect the study results (Theofanidis & Fountouki (2018). Both limitations and delimitations limit the questions I can answer, especially in generalization. However, the difference between the two is the degree of control I have over them in the intentional choices made in the study design.

**Limitations**

One limitation of this study is its small sample size, potentially limiting the applicability of findings to broader populations of African international students. Additionally, there might be sampling bias due to recruitment methods or participant characteristics, affecting the representativeness of results. The qualitative data collection method could have also introduced subjectivity and interpretation bias based on participants' perspectives. In contrast, my biases may influence data analysis and interpretation, affecting validity and reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Contextual factors such as location, time frame, and cultural context may also have influenced findings.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations include focusing on a specific region of the United States, which restricts generalizability, and the study's time frame, potentially overlooking longitudinal changes. Language limitations might exclude non-English speakers, and cultural context could affect the applicability of findings across diverse backgrounds. A qualitative approach prioritizes in-depth exploration over statistical generalizability, limiting the breadth of findings.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Several recommendations could guide efforts to deepen understanding and enhance support mechanisms for future research on the experiences of African international students. Future research should strive for larger and more diverse samples to broaden the generalizability of findings and explore nuances within this population comprehensively (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In addition, longitudinal research designs could capture changes in students' experiences over time, providing insights into their adaptation processes across different stages of their academic journey. Moreover, comparative studies across various geographical regions or cultural

contexts could highlight variations in experiences and challenges, offering a more comprehensive understanding of international students' diverse needs.

## Conclusion

. Several significant themes emerged such as cultural differences, challenges with clothing, food, communication, course teaching, lack of university assistance, lack of diversity, and the need for an individualized orientation process. These findings also align closely with Berry's (1980) theory. However, this study has limitations, including a small sample size and potential biases in qualitative data collection. Despite these limitations, recommendations for future research point toward the need for larger, more diverse samples, longitudinal studies, and intersectional perspectives. By addressing these recommendations, future research can deepen our understanding of African international students' experiences and inform more effective support mechanisms in higher education institutions. Ultimately, by amplifying the voices of these students and incorporating their perspectives into research and practice, we can work towards creating more inclusive and supportive environments for African international students in academia.

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# Appendix A

# IRB approval

**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 6, 2023

Ebere Chukwuezi
Sharon Michael-Chadwell

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY23-24-139 The Perception and Lived Experiences of African International Students during Their Studies in United States Colleges and Universities

Dear Ebere Chukwuezi, Sharon Michael-Chadwell,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the following date: September 6, 2023. If you need to make changes to the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit a modification to the IRB. Modifications can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

**For a PDF of your approval letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study Details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.** Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP**
*Administrative Chair*
**Research Ethics Office**

**Appendix B**

**Site Permission Request Letter and Response Form**

**Site Permission Form**

February 02, 2023

████████████
██████████

Dear ████

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctoral degree. The title of my research project is the perception and lived experiences of African International students during their studies in United States Colleges and Universities. The purpose of my research is to explore the perception and lived experiences of African International students during their studies in United States Colleges and Universities. The findings would provide insights to instructors and institutions of higher education on the needs of these students, which the students may not willingly share with the school. It will also guide those aspiring to study in the United States on what to expect and strategies to overcome the challenges.

I request your permission to invite 15 eligible participants to my study. The participants must be African international students who came to the United States on an F1 student visa or African students who have graduated and have become permanent residents in the United States within six years.

Participants will be asked to complete an online survey questionnaire. The link will be provided through email. The chosen participants will be contacted to schedule an interview date and time of their convenience. Participants will be presented with informed consent information before

participating. Participating in this study is entirely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to

██████████████████

Sincerely,

Ebere Chukwuezi

Doctoral Student at Liberty University

Dear Ebere Chukwuezi,

## RE: Permission Granted to Interview AGSF Members

After careful review of your research proposal entitled the perception and lived experiences of African International students during their studies in the United States Colleges and Universities, we have decided to grant you permission to contact our students and invite them to participate in your study.

☒ [[I/We] will provide a list of potential participants to Ebere Chukwuezi, and Ebere Chukwuezi may use the list to contact our students to invite them to participate in her research study.

☐ [[I/We] will not provide potential participant information to Ebere Chukwuezi, but we agree to send her study information to African international students on her behalf.

Sincerely,

█████████

Official's Name: ██████████████

Official's Title: President,

████████████████  ██████████

Official's Company/Organization: African Graduate Student Forum - █████████████

**Appendix C**

**Recruitment Flyer**

# Research Participants Needed

The Perceptions and Lived Experiences of African International Students during Their Studies in the United States Colleges and Universities:  A Phenomenological Study.

- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Were you born and raised in Africa?
- Did you come to the United States on nonimmigrant student visas F-I or J-1 visa?
- Did you come to the United States specifically to pursue your degree with the intention of returning to your native country after your education is completed?
- Have you graduated and become a permanent resident of the United States within the last six years?

If you answered **yes** to each of the questions listed above, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of adapting to the process of college-level education among African international students at a four-year college in the southeastern region of the United States. Participants will be asked to complete an online survey which would take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete, meet the researcher via Zoom/Microsoft Teams/Google Meet for a one-on-one audio- and video-recorded interview lasting approximately 40-60 minutes, and if selected for further participation take part in a Zoom/Microsoft Teams/Google Meet, audio- and video-recorded focus group which will also last for approximately 30-40 minutes with selected participants who have also experienced the phenomenon. Participants will be asked to review the transcripts of their interview and focus group responses to ensure accuracy prior to the use of data for the study, which should take about 10 minutes.

Participants will receive an electronic $30 Amazon gift card upon completion of the study as a token for participating in this study.

If you would like to participate, please scan the QR code below to take a screening survey:

A consent document will be emailed to individuals that qualify.

Ebere Chukwuezi, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study. **Please contact Ebere Chukwuezi** ███████████ **or** ████████████████ **for more information.**

Liberty University IRB – 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA

## Appendix D

## Consent Form

**Title of the Project:** The Perception and Lived Experiences of African International Students During Their Studies in United States Colleges and Universities
**Principal Investigator:** Ebere Chukwuezi, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

| Invitation to be part of a Research Study |
|---|

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years or older and must be an African student who came to the United States on a nonimmigrant student visa F-I or J-1 visa, specifically to pursue their degrees with the intention of going back to their country after their education completion, or African students who have graduated and have become permanent residents in the United States within six years. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

| What is the study about and why is it being done? |
|---|

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of adapting to the process of college-level education among African international students during their studies at a four-year college in the southeastern region of the United States.

| if you take part in this study? |
|---|

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
- Complete an international student perception survey via Google Form (Consisting of multiple-choice questions). Survey completion time will vary between 20-30 minutes. This survey was designed to understand the experience of adjustment to your current school.
- A scheduled individual interview that will last 40-60 minutes will be audio- and video-recorded for data transcription accuracy via Zoom, a video conferencing software, or a similar platform like Team or Google Meet.
- If selected for further participation, take part in one audio- and video-recorded focus group, lasting an estimated 30-40 minutes with 4-6 selected participants through an online platform like the interview. The invitation will be sent after completing a one-on-one interview with the researcher and will be based on interview responses.
- Review the interview and focus group transcripts for the accuracy of the information you provided. (10 minutes)

It should take approximately 2 hours and 25 minutes to complete the procedures listed.

| How could you or others benefit from this study? |
|---|

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include providing international agencies, instructors, and higher education institutions on how to better serve African international students studying in the United States and those aspiring to study there.

### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

### How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

### How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Upon completing all the participation requirements listed above, a $30 Amazon gift card will be sent to you via email as a token for participating in this study.

### Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

### What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you apart from focus group data will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

### Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Ebere Chukwuezi. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ███████████████████████ You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Sharon Michael-Chadwell, at ███████████████████████

| **Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?** |
|---|

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. ██████████████
████████████████████████████████████████████████

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

| **Your Consent** |
|---|

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name


_____

Signature & Date

## Appendix E

## Demographic Questions

1. Age_18-30_30-40_40-50_50-60

2. Gender _ Male_ Female

3. Place of birth---------------------------------

**If you answered YES to question 3, please complete the rest of the survey**.

4. Phone Number ------------------------------------------------------

5. Email Address------------------------------------------------------

6. Academic Level     _Graduate _ Undergraduate

7. Academic Program-----------------------------------------------

8. Length of time in the United States----------------------------

9. Length of time on this campus----------------------------------------

10. Religion----------------------------------------------------------

11. Do you have family here? _Yes No

12.  Are you married? Yes_No

13.  Do you have children? _Yes_No

**Appendix F**

**Individual Interview**

**Participants' Background and Past Experiences Interview Guide**

**Self-introduction**

 Hi, my name is Ebere Chukwuezi. I am a doctoral candidate at Liberty University. The purpose

of the study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African international students

during their studies at your school.  Our conversation will be about your experiences as an

international student.

I want to reassure you that this is not a public conversation. You provided consent for this

interview, and I will not disclose your name publicly. If you have any concerns about the

questions, you do not have to answer any questions and you can withdraw from this interview at

any time. Thank you for participating in this interview.

1. What is your perception of your school? SRQ

2. What challenges do you face as a student here and how have you overcome the

   challenges? CRQ

3. Could you describe some of the cultural differences you have observed since you

   came to the United States? CRQ

4. Could you share some of the cultural experiences you have encountered as an

   international student? CRQ

5. Do you feel welcome at this university? SRQ

6. Do you know of any student who has given up on his or her studies because of these

   challenges? SQ1

7. How do you view your instructors including your course load? SR1

8. What is your perception of Americans? SQ1

9. What do you do on a typical day? Could you please describe it? SQ1

10. How are your social interactions here? SQ1

11. Could you describe the steps you took to integrate into your school? SQ1

12. Do you have any advice for an African international student who intends to come to this school or African students who intend to study in America? SQ1

13. Think about the first time you came to your school, what was your greatest challenge? CRQ

14. If you could go back to your first year in the university, what would you do differently? Could you please explain? SQ1

15. Would you choose this university again if you had the opportunity to choose a school for your studies? SQ

16. What do you intend to do at the end of your study? SQ1

17. Are there other things you want to tell me for a better understanding of your thoughts? CRQ

## Appendix G

## International Students Perception Survey

The following survey instrument will be used to understand the adjustment experience to your current school. Please choose an option and circle one answer in the multiple-choice questions,

|  | Question | Circle your answer |
|---|---|---|
|  | **EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION RQ3** |  |
| 1. | Would you consider the international support office at your institution welcoming? | Yes<br>No |
| 2. | Would you consider your teachers to be friendly? | Yes<br>No |
| 3. | Does your educational institution host a student orientation? | Yes<br>No |
| 4. | Were you able to attend the student orientation? | Yes<br>No |
| 5. | Were the student orientation programs beneficial to you? | Yes<br>No |
| 6. | How would you rate the quality of your educational institution? | Excellent<br>Good<br>Fair<br>Poor |
| 7. | How would you rate the quality of your residential accommodations on campus? | Excellent<br>Good<br>Fair<br>Poor |
| 8. | How would you rate the quality of service from the international office in supporting any complaints or concerns related to your residential accommodation? | Excellent<br>Good<br>Fair<br>Poor |
| 9. | How would you rate the overall quality of the campus environment? | Excellent<br>Good<br>Fair<br>Poor |
|  | **INSTRUCTION   CRQ** |  |
| 10. | How would you assess the quality of education within the classroom? | Excellent<br>Good<br>Fair<br>Poor |

| 11. | How would you rate the quality of the professor's instruction in working with international students? | Excellent<br>Good<br>Fair<br>Poor |
|---|---|---|
| 12. | Does the professor use methods to engage and promote collaboration in the classroom? | Yes<br>No |
| 13. | How often do you speak your native language? | Always<br>Sometimes<br>Rarely<br>Never |
| 14. | How often do you speak English? | Always<br>Sometimes<br>Rarely<br>Never |
| 15. | How often do you interact with domestic students in group activities? | Always<br>Sometimes<br>Rarely<br>Never |
| 16. | How often do you use the resources in the library? | Always<br>Sometimes<br>Rarely<br>Never |
| 17. | Do you find it easy to access all resources on campus? | Yes<br>No |
| . | FOOD  RQ2 | |
| 18. | How would you rate the quality of cafeteria services at the campus? | Excellent<br>Good<br>Fair<br>Poor |
| 19. | Does the menu at the cafeteria offer enough variety of food selections? | Yes<br>No |
| 20. | How frequently do you eat food from your country of origin? | Always<br>Sometimes<br>Rarely<br>Never |
| 21. | How frequently do you eat American food? | Not at all<br>Occasionally<br>Rarely<br>Regularly |
| . | FAMILY RELATIONSHIP RQ2 | |
| 22. | How often do you communicate with your family? | Always<br>Often<br>Sometimes<br>Rarely |

| 23. | How much support do you get from family abroad? | Quite a lot<br>Moderate<br>A little<br>Not at all |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | <mark>FRIENDS RQ1</mark> | |
| 24. | How would you classify the status of your friends? | American Students<br>International Students<br>People in the neighborhood |
| 25. | Do you have friends on campus? | Yes<br>No |
| 26. | In scenarios where you feel a sense of lonely, who would you contact from your network of friends? | American Students<br>International Students/non-African<br>International students from Africa<br>People in the neighborhood |
| | **EVENTS AND COMMUNITY RQ1** | |
| 27. | What networks would you utilize to access resources on campus? | Professor<br>Advisor<br>Coach<br>Roommate<br>Friend<br>Locals |
| 28. | How would you rate the quality of campus-wide events? | Excellent<br>Good<br>Fair<br>Poor |
| 29. | What specific events interest you at the campus?2 | Sports<br>Recreational<br>Social<br>Cultural |
| 30. | By attending these events, were you able to make connections through your participation? | Yes<br>No |