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DISTANCE MAY VARY: A PORTRAITURE STUDY ON INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI REFLECTIONS

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International students play a significant role in U.S. higher education; however, these students' perspectives are rarely explored following graduation. Much of the literature centers issues related to persistence and retention with an emphasis on first year undergraduate students, missing the breadth of international student experience. This qualitative portraiture study presents the authentic reflections of alumni (n = 4) on their tenure as international undergraduate students in U.S. higher education. Participants' reported experiences indicated marginalization and disempowerment affirming the value of further including international alumni perspectives in discussions on student services and support.

Introduction

The process of becoming an international student in the United States is complicated, but it is only the first stage in an international student's academic and cocurricular journey (Madden-Dent et al., 2019). Throughout their academic careers, international students may navigate unfamiliar academic practices, acculturative stress, communicative misalignments, unpredictable visa processes, financial concerns, and health-related issues, often with limited family and social support (Heng, 2017; Horne et al., 2018; Jean-Francois, 2019; Kim et al., 2019; Ohorodnik, 2019; Thomas, 2017). However, it is rare to find deep explorations of international students' perceived experiences, outcomes, and benefits gained (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Krsmanovic, 2021; Page & Chahboun, 2019).

Conversations about international students in U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) often emphasize the benefits derived from and challenges faced by international students (Jones, 2017; Lee et al., 2019). However, discussions that include international students' reflections uncover a student and learning community. Situating student experiences within the framework of separation, transition, and connectedness can uncover contextual factors allowing for a deeper understanding of the individual's higher education journey (Guiffrida, 2006; Tinto, 1993).

As part of the third wave of student development theory, the RMMDI is intended for use in better understanding the individual through the lens of the self as an alternative to impinging a defined identity upon individuals (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & Stewart, 2016). Using the RMMDI, researchers can explore how individuals develop, express, and perceive their social identities in various contexts (Abes et al., 2007). The model is nonlinear, meaning there is no normative progression for individuals to follow in defining their identities; it is possible for an individual to engage with one, some, or every social identity to varying degrees in an interlinked or intersectional manner (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & Stewart, 2016). These theories support this study by reifying the agency of the individual in presenting their reflections, centering their unique lived experiences and their multiple self-defined, authentic, fluid identities at various stages of their undergraduate careers (Abes et al., 2007; Guiffrida, 2006; Tinto, 1993).

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Literature Review

International students face unique challenges in U.S. higher education relating to acculturative stress, campus engagement, and being perceived as agents in their academic careers. This section explores how these issues impact international students while framing opportunities present in the literature.

Acculturative Stress
Acculturative stress, or culture shock, is a state often experienced by individuals living in a foreign country or community with unfamiliar cultural norms or habits, a state which can cause acute stress and other mental health issues (Kim et al., 2019; McLachlan & Justice, 2009). For international students, studying at U.S. HEIs may be their first immersive interaction with a culture and way of life differing from their home community (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017; He & Hutson, 2018).

Campus Experience
Many undergraduate students experience true independence for the first time on their HEI campus; however, international students may experience this independence differently (Heng, 2017; Horne et al., 2018; Oh & Butler, 2019; Tsevi, 2018). Students from other countries may experience more acute isolation due to cultural, linguistic, and other differences (Kim et al., 2019). Having access to mentors who share a similar cultural background with international student mentees can mitigate issues faced by students navigating an unfamiliar system and environment (Georges & Chen, 2018; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Oh & Butler, 2019; Rabia & Karkouti, 2017). Such mentors, whether peers or faculty members, can assist international students in avoiding academic and cocurricular pitfalls which could otherwise negatively impact student persistence (Fass-Holmes, 2016; Glass et al., 2017; McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

Student Agency: Professional Perspectives and Impact
Higher education professionals often perceive international students through a lens of deficits, emphasizing students' lack of academic preparedness or capacity for integration into the U.S. campus community (Anandavalli, 2021; Jones, 2017; Page & Chahboun, 2019). This deficit perspective frames international students as ill-suited to the U.S. higher education context and passive victims of issues, such as racism, cultural discrimination, and academic misalignment, which they are helpless to overcome (Lee, 2006; Shaheen, 2019). Through the deficit perspective, international students may also be viewed as reactive subjects who have not met an arbitrary and unknowable set of standards prior to arrival (Page & Chahboun, 2019, p. 880). Instead of envisioning international students as wholly unprepared outsiders, it is reasonable to consider international students as active participants variably aware of the challenges they will face with a measured desire to learn and grow (Heng, 2017; Jones, 2017; Lee et al., 2019). By incorporating the voices of international students in discussions about challenges, opportunities, and supports, it is possible for HEIs to become more inclusive, equitable, and effective, and for international

students to achieve greater agency in their education and development (Heng, 2017; Jean-Francois, 2019; Madden-Dent et al., 2019; Martirosyan et al., 2019; Page & Chahboun, 2019; Shaheen, 2019).

Methodology

Research Design

This study used portraiture methodology as formalized by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis (1997). Portraiture was best suited to this study as it offers the potential for deep exploration of underexplored populations, centralizing the participants and their perspectives, while encouraging the generation of research accessible to an inclusive audience (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). As a qualitative methodological approach portraiture incorporates aspects of phenomenology and narrative inquiry but with certain distinguishing properties (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). The portraiture process, as exegesis in hermeneutics, works from an exterior viewing of the participant being researched – a classifying

or defining process reliant on the participant's context, social positioning, and other extrinsic features – toward a point of interpretation and deeper meaning-making connected to the research participant's position in and impact upon reality. Within the context of this study, portraiture offers a deeper exploration of each participant and their experiences framed in the shared context of U.S. higher education. This qualitative study also expands how portraiture has been historically applied in academic research.

The broader central question of this study is this: What are the shared lived experiences of international alumni who completed an undergraduate degree at higher education institutions in the United States? Two supporting subquestions were also addressed in this analysis:

Q1: How do international alumni describe their social identities in relation to their undergraduate experiences in the United States?

Q2: What are the connecting cocurricular experiences of international alumni in relation to their undergraduate experiences in the United States?

Participants

Sampling strategies for this study included snowball and purposive sampling. The researchers shared recruitment information via email, social media posts, and professional networks to engage independent prospective participants. Due to snowball sampling's potential to draw ineligible individuals, the study incorporated purposive sampling to confirm prospective participants' eligibility (Andrade, 2021; Geddes et al., 2018). Following submission of signed informed consent, prospective participants were asked to share a brief autobiographical statement. To confirm participant eligibility, the first author reviewed each autobiographical statement to confirm all eligibility criteria, and no exclusionary criteria, were met.

This study was comprised of international student alumni ($n = 4$) with diverse social identities and backgrounds (see Table 1). All participants successfully completed at least one undergraduate program at a U.S. HEI resulting in conferment of a four-year undergraduate degree. Participants were enrolled with international student status for a minimum of two academic years during their relevant program.

Predominantly white institutions (PWIs) are HEIs where more than 50% of the total student population identifies as white (John & Stage, 2014). Minority-serving institutions (MSIs) are HEIs that enroll a significant percentage of students with underrepresented or marginalized racial or ethnic backgrounds, often aimed at serving a specific student demographic, with white students making up less than 50% of the institution's total enrollment (Bourke, 2016; Flores & Park, 2015). Background relates to major national and cultural influences, such as participant's home country; no nationalities or cultural influences were inferred by the authors. All descriptors are self-descriptors using language employed by participants included in the data. Avi did not indicate his home country, nationality, or major national influences during data collection.

Table 1
Participant Information

Pseudonym	Background	Descriptors	HEI Type
Anne	Austria	cisgender white woman; global citizen; mother; passionate about social justice; wife	public; medium; PWI
Avi	N/A	hardworking; passionate and excited about data	public; large; MSI
Gabriel	Honduras Germany	adapts easily; Catholic; family person; hardworking; honest; organized	private; non-profit; religious-affiliated; large; PWI
Michael	Syria	Arab; creature of habit; emotionally unavailable; gay; interfaith advocate; Muslim family; quirky	private; non-profit; large; MSI

Data Collection
Data for this study included four autobiographical statements and eight deidentified transcripts from in-depth semi-structured individual interviews. Autobiographical statements included self-selected relevant information shared by participants prior to interviews to inform the interview process. The first author conducted two 45-minute interviews with each participant. Interviews were conducted over Zoom and recorded to support the transcription process. All identifying data were anonymized using self-selected pseudonyms.

Data Analysis
Following data collection, the researchers engaged in an iterative analytical process using MAXQDA version 22.2.1 for analysis and coding. Analyses of novel data in portraiture studies are formally begun through the Impressionistic Record, the daily documentation of potential insights, challenges, and reflections to support analysis and identify biases impacting analysis (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Throughout the analysis, the researchers systematically reviewed the autobiographical statements and interview transcripts to uncover shared themes and individually impactful experiences, using the Impressionistic Record to document avenues for further analyses and bring attention to indications of possible researcher biases. After the first complete review of the data, initial codes were inductively generated (Saldaña, 2013). The researchers iteratively reviewed all data creating relevant child codes and renegotiating parent codes when appropriate in line with portraiture's flexible approach to uncovering emergent themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Saldaña, 2013).

Positionality

Internalizing and expressing how one's background and perceptions may influence one as a researcher is vital (Holmes, 2020). Due to the influential position and potential of the authorial voice in portraiture, a limited exploration of the authors' biases and backgrounds is necessary and appropriate (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The first author recognizes as a cisgender white-passing heterosexual male his social identities confer unmerited privilege. The second author is a mixed-heritage cisgender heterosexual Latino male. They collectively believe that privilege must be leveraged toward dismantling systemically inequitable social structures particularly in relation to structures oppressing individuals based on race, gender, sex, sexuality, disability, socioeconomic status (SES), and other characteristics. The first author exists as a partial insider among the research population; after more than a decade living, working, and studying outside the United States, he has developed a transcultural perspective on U.S. higher education (Franzenburg, 2020). Regardless, the researchers aim to convey participants' authentic reflections to further the various causes of social justice relating to equity and inclusion, and to amplify voices which have been historically deemphasized.

Findings

Data collected for this study were organized into individual micro-portraits. The depth and breadth of available data allowed for a thorough explication of participant reflections. Each micro-portrait incorporates a given participant's authentic reflections interwoven with that participant's corresponding quoted statements.

Anne

Prior to her undergraduate studies, Anne had travelled extensively across the United States and spent a year of high school as an exchange student in the Midwest. These experiences motivated Anne to pursue an undergraduate degree in the United States hoping for an American university experience akin to her domestic counterparts. Anne regularly discussed herself through a lens of relative privilege with her reflections touching on social justice issues, the importance of inclusivity, and the occasionally bittersweet reality of achieving one's dreams.

"The International Student"

Coming into orientation, Anne, "didn't want to be grouped in with other international students." Even before classes began, Anne chafed against her perceived status as, "the international student," when first meeting other students and staff. Having completed a year of high school in the Midwest, Anne felt confident she, "would fit in with a lot of the domestic students," better than with Cypress University's international students. However, there being, "four of us who were international students at that school that year… we were always kind of grouped together. And I- to be honest, like, I hated it."

International student orientation was brief, lasting one and a half days. Anne felt it, "didn't set us [international students] up in the same way to build community," being focused primarily on paperwork and regulations. "It didn't really allow us to do any of the bonding that the other undergraduate students did in their orientation." Following orientation, Anne, "quickly… met a group of friends," within her residence hall. Through these early social connections, Anne was able to establish relationships and feel involved in campus life almost immediately.

Socializing on campus was mostly positive, but Anne faced challenges regarding her international identity daily. One domestic student asserted Austria, the country of Anne's birth, was merely a region of Germany; the student refused to listen to Anne's rebuttal. Others voiced surprise when Anne stated how, "[Austria] is not that different," from the United States. She explained, "I don't want to have to tell people everything about my home country… Even if they were nice questions or good questions, it just got tiring to always have to talk about that part of your identity." This sense of constant pressure led Anne to avoid such conversations, even denying her international identity. When her accent belied her international status, she would reply, "Well, I've lived all over."

Enrolled in a writing-related major, Anne came to Cypress eager to improve as a writer. She planned to enroll in a general first-year English course hoping to better understand the program's expectations before her major courses started the following year. Anne's academic advisor, an advisor with an international student focus, decided Anne's international status was reason enough to enroll her in a remedial English course. Anne protested, but her advisor held firm. After only a few classes, the instructor noted the quality, accuracy, and fluency present in Anne's compositions. The instructor asked Anne why she chose that class; Anne explained there was no choice. Unsolicited, the instructor wrote a note giving Anne permission to enroll in a general education English course. Though grateful, Anne posited, "Why do they keep treating me differently? Because I'm an international student; I just kinda wanna do the thing everyone else is doing." After a mixed academic year, Anne chose to spend her first undergraduate summer in Austria.

"Why We Fit Together"
Starting her second year, Anne became deeply involved with campus activities and student leadership as editor of the university's student newspaper and as an RA. Prior to taking on these roles, Anne said, "There was always a little bit that sense of I don't 100% fit in." However, through working with the other RAs and professional staff at Cypress, Anne found a community she connected with deeply. "We were a super diverse staff in many ways, and so there was that sense of like none of us fit in, and that's why we fit together."

Besides her RA duties, editing Cypress's student newspaper was enriching for Anne, though exhausting. Instructors took note of this but were generally sympathetic. Most instructors would gently wake Anne if she started to doze in class, knowing she would come to them after to apologize. Still, one professor voiced disapproval of the newspaper feeling it did not meet a high enough journalistic standard. This professor interrupted lessons to admonish Anne and others involved with the newspaper when they seemed sleepy or inattentive. Despite this, Anne remained drawn to her extracurricular roles.

Anne felt a sense of pride in her university but found few opportunities to express this feeling on campus. Instead, school spirit was displayed at multi-institutional academic and leadership conferences. Preparing for these gatherings, Anne worked with other student leaders creating signs and posters to bring to these events. Sometimes these activities became an outlet for expressing unabashed enthusiasm for their shared institutional identity. On one occasion, Anne, "even dyed [her] hair… [Cypress's] school colors."

In her waning semesters, Anne looked into graduate programs centering education instead of writing. Discussing her experiences at Cypress, particularly working in student support roles, Anne says, "It definitely kind of changed my life trajectory." Working with the staff was her, "first introduction to really thinking about diversity and social justice," issues, which she, "became very passionate about." After completing her studies at Cypress, Anne was accepted into a graduate program focused on student support.

Avi

Prior to studying in the United States, Avi had never travelled to North America. However, he had studied as an international student in several countries throughout his youth. Avi seemed reticent to speak about himself, but he spoke enthusiastically about his shared experiences with peers and professionals at his undergraduate institution.

"What's Going on"

On his first day at Towers University, Avi was excited about meeting students from across the globe. With his limited knowledge of the campus, Avi was surprised at the diversity within the student body. Though he was already beginning to make friends, Avi knew little about Towers and spent, "the first few days… just trying to figure out what's going on."

During his first two years, Avi lived in a shared campus residence with three other international students. Though they all had different cultural and national backgrounds, having English as a bridge language allowed them to bond right away. After attending international student orientation together, Avi and two of his roommates were feeling overwhelmed and nervous about navigating their undergraduate experience; however, their transition was made easier through the support of their roommate Bart.

"A Friend to Help Me"
Bart had enrolled at Towers a year before Avi. Throughout Avi's first year, Bart was always there supporting Avi and their roommates. Discussing Bart, Avi states, "He was introducing me to his friends, and I was in the language school. He was even introducing me to the teachers that we had." For Avi, Bart was both a guide and, "a friend to help me," but also representative of Avi's reflections on Towers.

The positive interactions Avi experienced with students, staff, and faculty at Towers encouraged him to engage more deeply with the campus community. After participating in several organizations, Avi discovered a deep passion for working with Towers' international student organization. For one of the organization's biggest events, the international community festival, Avi reached out to the international student services (ISS) office seeking financial and logistical support. Speaking with the ISS team, Avi said, "We have a vision. We want to bring all the international students and the communities in town, in the city, together." The office regretted only being able to offer support in advertising the event as they lacked additional resources.

That year's festival broke attendance and revenue records with hundreds of attendees. Avi and the other international student organization leaders intentionally networked with business owners, community leaders, and others within and beyond campus to make the event more inclusive and community focused. Following that record year, the college took an official role managing and funding the international community festival, an outcome Avi was proud to have facilitated.

"Be Supportive"
During the latter half of Avi's undergraduate studies, the Covid pandemic spread across the United States. Though Towers was more home for Avi than nearly anywhere else, he felt, "campus is not safe anymore." Seeing the headlines, Avi wondered if the president of the United States wanted to, "just sacrifice all the international students in this country." Though able to stay, Avi felt the campus had become less secure.

One day while walking to class, Avi was handed a flyer by someone on campus. Avi read through the leaflet, shocked to find himself reading a racist message claiming, "you cannot replace us." Once campus officials were informed, the flyers were quickly removed from campus. Regardless, Avi felt unsettled recognizing himself as a possible target. After this incident, nothing similar occurred while Avi studied at Towers and, "everyone acted like it didn't happen." Even having experienced this, Avi maintains, "No matter who you are in this country [the United States] … if you're smart and a hard worker, everyone will appreciate you sooner or later."

Self-advocacy and continuous effort helped Avi get the support he required. The ISS office was, "the first destination," Avi went to with, "a problem or a question about the paperwork." Help was not always forthcoming, so Avi started, "pushing them to be supportive." Avi hoped by, "trying to be more active… I can show them the importance of my things that I need to complete." This paid off for Avi, but he recognized many of his friends in the international student community never received the support they needed.

Rex, another international student and friend of Avi's, afraid mental health counselors at Towers might share privileged information publicly, avoided seeking counseling services. At the time, Avi was concerned how cultural differences regarding patient confidentiality might be discouraging some students from pursuing counseling services at Towers. International students including Avi brought this concern before the international education committee at Towers. Staff members assured Avi directly that information received by counselors was treated with the utmost confidentiality yet did nothing more with his concern at the time. Then Rex died from a suspected suicide. Leadership at Towers then broadly promoted their policy on confidential information management related to mental health services. Avi grieved the loss of his friend, troubled that Towers had not addressed a valid cultural concern before this loss.

Through this series of challenges, victories, and heartbreaks, Avi remained optimistic, focusing on gaining recognition for his academic and professional efforts. When a major tragedy occurred in his home country, he received an email of support from an office at Towers. "Don't feel alone," he read. "If you need anything, let us know." Avi remained at Towers to pursue a graduate program after earning his bachelor's degree.

Gabriel
When discussing identity, Gabriel noted his Catholic faith and familial bonds were and continue to be central to how he perceives himself. Gabriel was raised in Honduras yet shared deep connections with European cultural influences through his German heritage. Among this study's participants, Gabriel was the only one to pursue an undergraduate degree in the United States as a student athlete.

"All This Freedom"
"I didn't really know a lot about [Dayspring]. I knew they had a soccer team because I got a soccer scholarship there, but academic-wise, I didn't know anything." Walking around Dayspring University after arriving on campus, Gabriel reflected on his new environment. "I thought it was pretty cool, you know, like, all this freedom; you could do whatever you want with all your time and it's definitely different I think than like high school." That first day, Gabriel chose to attend a welcome party hosted by Iota Delta Beta (IDB), one of the few fraternities on campus, in part because of his interest in joining a fraternity.

Late in the evening, campus security arrived at the party prompting most attendees to retreat behind residence hall doors or vanish into the wintery night. Confused but certain he had done nothing wrong, Gabriel stood in the hallway chatting with another international student. When asked for

his student identification, Gabriel provided it to security and thought nothing more of it.

The following day, Gabriel received a phone call and was told to report immediately to campus security. Once there, Gabriel was flatly told, "Okay, you're out," by the head of campus security, indicating Gabriel's expulsion from Dayspring. Though the officer was aware Gabriel had not technically broken any rules, he was considered, "guilty by association." As a private formerly religious institution situated in the midwestern United States, Dayspring maintained zero-tolerance policies on alcohol and mixed-sex gatherings in residence halls. Though there had been no hearing or official meeting, Gabriel was required to write a letter of appeal to the dean of admissions. Before classes began, Dayspring's dean of admissions accepted Gabriel's appeal provided Gabriel complete 20 hours of outdoor campus service in the dead of winter.

"An Actual Community"
After being granted an appeal, Gabriel reached out to members of IDB again. "It can get lonely sometimes at college, especially if you're not from the local area." It was not long before he joined IDB, establishing connections on campus. "I had a solid group of friends. I had friends that were from the area; they showed me around." Living on campus fostered and sustained deep connections between Gabriel and Dayspring's student community. "It's an actual community… basically living in a small town apart from everyone." While the individual members of IDB were an important part of Gabriel's cocurricular experience of Dayspring, he stated the fraternity experience, "underperformed my expectations." Although the fraternity experience was underwhelming, Gabriel remained friends with many members of IDB throughout his undergraduate studies.

Growing up, Gabriel loved playing soccer and played on teams continually throughout his youth. Playing soccer at Dayspring, a sense of "dirty competition" and lack of communication within the team discouraged Gabriel. He found the head coach disrespectful, undermining students' efforts toward teambuilding. After his first semester, Gabriel left the soccer team to focus on his studies leaving behind more than a decade of consecutive team play.

In classes, he felt his instructors lacked real-world experience in their fields. "[I]f you take a class from someone who- an engineer who builds bridges, but he's never built a bridge before…. You have to have that kind of experience behind it, you know… books don't teach you everything; experience does." Outside the classroom, Gabriel became disillusioned with how he viewed Dayspring's operations. "My first university [Dayspring], they weren't really- I think they were more of a profit driven university." Although his experience at Dayspring, "was a lot of fun," Gabriel transferred midway through his studies to IIIU, a university with a more prestigious academic reputation.

"The Opportunity I Had"
Before finalizing enrollment at IIIU, Gabriel met with his soon-to-be academic advisor Ladonna. "My advisor was a lot of help there. She gave me a lot of good advice on which classes to take… She was very, very helpful with everything, basically, even places to go in the city." Throughout his two years at IIIU, Gabriel continued to seek Ladonna's support. Rather than aiming for expedience in the advising process, Gabriel indicated, "[Ladonna] was genuinely interested in the wellbeing of each of her assigned students."

Living off campus in a rented apartment, Gabriel felt disconnected from the IIIU community. He stated, "the people that went there were more… more focused on themselves or more selfish and they didn't really care much about the university, but they just focused on themselves." Further, he found his perspectives clashed with the domestic students at IIIU. "They were focused on finding out if you had money, or if you did not." While Gabriel was raised in relative affluence, he dismissed wealth as being a prerequisite for social value. "At the end of the day, it doesn't really matter. If you have money, or if you don't have money, you're still this- you're a college kid, you know." Since Dayspring was only a few towns over, Gabriel continued engaging socially with his friends there on the weekends. Concurrently, he began developing close relationships at IIIU with other Honduran international students. "I had friends that were from my country, so I didn't feel so homesick."

About his experiences in the United States, Gabriel wrote, "Had it not been for the opportunity I had to study abroad, I believe that my world view, level of cultural knowledge and maturity would not be where it is at today." Although he was glad for his time in the United States, he elected not to stay following graduation.

Michael
Art, science, and a "fresh start" were at the core of Michael's goals when he came to the United States. Born and raised in Syria, Michael spent his youth studying the sciences hoping to become a doctor like his parent. He found comfort in music, and his recollections of playing piano throughout his studies speak to music's restorative potential.

"My Way Around"
Michael arrived at Birch University's orientation hoping to connect with others. "I was trying to tell my orientation leader faculty, 'You know, I still wake up and I look out the window...' I was trying to describe how it still feels surreal." The faculty leader interrupted Michael, saying, "'We're not interested in the things you do in the morning.' And making a little bit of a sexual innuendo joke there." Overall, Michael's orientation experience was isolating, "'Okay. Well, cool, then I won't talk about this….' So it didn't require much for me to decide to shut down and just put on a face and, like, fake it 'til you make it...." Though Michael sought community at Birch, "As when it comes to fitting in on campus, I don't… part of me wants to say I don't think I ever felt like I fit in as much as I found my way around fitting in."

"Get a Lamp?"
Despite some fear, Michael still tried to share part of his identity by hanging a poster on his suite's outward-facing front door. The poster promoted a campus "coming out" event an RA had asked Michael to speak at; Michael, "was really happy about it." Michael's roommate Thurston was affronted and requested a room transfer. After confronting Thurston, meeting with their RA, and meeting with the area coordinator, Michael took down the poster. Such experiences undermined Michael's desire to establish roots. "I'm going to move, so why would I get a lamp? So might as well just live out of a suitcase."

Around the same time, an advisor recommended attending Birch's activities fair. "I think everyone should step out of their comfort zone." Michael signed up for everything but felt most drawn to Birch's interfaith council. "Perhaps it was because I, you know, I was dealing with a lot of tension

with religion, religiosity, and spirituality myself." Participating in interfaith discussion groups helped Michael in several ways. "We like had some very open conversations, about what I believed and why, that… slowly made me more aware of who I am and become more able to articulate what I- what I believe in." This supported Michael's reflections on how the convergence of past and present impacted his social identities. "I was born and raised in Syria. My family is Muslim. And I'm gay."

Although the interfaith council provided enrichment, Michael still struggled to find the holistic support he desired. "In general, I had things I need to figure out, and it would've been nice to have something that could've helped, but I don't know what that would've looked like, you know, because it wasn't there." By the end of his first academic year, Michael was suffering the ill effects of transition related stress. "It was the end of the summer of my freshman year when a system broke down [and] really realized that I was- it was not as easy as I thought."

"The Idea"
"I was so obsessed with the idea of a fresh start. That was the whole goal, like starting as a freshman again even though I have two years of university... no, nothing from the past is coming with me." Midway through his second academic year, Michael volunteered for Birch's Pride Festival through the university's LGBTQ+ center. "It was, it was where we found a little bit of solace, you know, a little bit of encouragement." Though he never took on a leadership role at the LGBTQ+ center, Michael found himself drawn to the space and the people there. "The physical space, it was a building, it was a place where you went, it was the couch where you slept, it was the dining room where you ate, you know."

The more time he spent at the center, the more Michael began connecting with the center's staff, particularly the director, a postgraduate named Louis. "[Louis] understood what I was doing and also I think he understood the social... you know, tension that I might be experiencing." For Michael, the support he received through the LGBTQ+ center helped him succeed at Birch. "So it's an office and a person…. It was a lot of things that made it not just this person in this random office…. It had a, a physical feeling of being with people that was pretty helpful."

Michael faced another major hurdle in his final year of study: his final piano recital. Though an accomplished musician, and one who performed regularly in his residence hall, Michael was nervous. "[U]sually there's like a reception afterwards, like the parents or their family usually bring snacks or whatever and they set it out." Thoughts on his family and the community he had grown up with were complicated. "I think the hardest thing about being away from home is this sense of distance that is created not just in where we are physically but also in how we think and what we believe." Without his family around to help, Quirky Hall's faculty-in-residence, Dr. Shukran, stepped in to support Michael following his performance. "[S]he made these little napkins that have… the date, and I still have a stack of them that are just it's a- it's a very lovely memory… other than the nerves of like trying to play for 45 minutes." After four years at Birch reflecting, connecting with varied communities, and gaining perspective on the wider world, Michael eventually pursued his graduate studies in the United States.

Discussion

The deficit perspective, wherein international students are delivered programming and viewed in light of what they may lack over what they bring to an HEI context, persisted throughout the data as the default perspective of various HEI stakeholders (Anandavalli, 2021; Fass-Holmes, 2016; Jones, 2017; Lee, 2006; Page & Chahboun, 2019; Shaheen, 2019). Anne and Michael faced notable challenges during orientation, impacting their immediate perceptions of their universities and themselves. Anne's academic advisor, the counselors Avi addressed, Gabriel's coach, Michael's orientation leader, and others were all reported as presuming the support needed by international students. This led to perceived inequities and deficiencies in the support and services available to themselves and other international students (Burel et al., 2019; Madden-Dent et al., 2019).

Unlike the deficit perspective, perceiving international students as active agents means recognizing the skills, knowledge, and background of each international student as valuable to the community, the individual, and the institution (Jean-Francois, 2019; Jones, 2017; Page & Chahboun, 2019; Shaheen, 2019). Anne, Gabriel, and Michael found recognition and a sense of purpose through a variety of campus organizations and roles; only Avi found his deepest connections through an internationally focused group. Throughout this study, participants leveraged their strengths to navigate their institutional contexts. When their self-actualization was unimpeded, participants made decisions about their academic, professional, and residential circumstances that, while sometimes challenging, led to personal growth and intrapersonal reflection. This was exemplified in Anne's pursuing a residential leadership role, Avi supporting a major campus event, Gabriel changing universities, and Michael's participation in multiple campus organizations. By participating in campus organizations and support roles, international students in this study found community, institutional connectedness, deeper connections with their social identities, and a greater sense of purpose and direction (He & Hutson, 2018; Horne et al., 2018; Jean-Francois, 2019; Tsevi, 2018; Wu et al., 2015). Further, participants selected mentors, friends, and professional contacts who exhibited interaction patterns aligned with an agency perspective indicated through perceived equitable mutual support.

Data indicated participants experienced varying degrees of vulnerability as well as limited support and agency early in their undergraduate careers often impacting their social identities. For Anne, Gabriel, and Michael, early negative experiences with staff, students, and faculty negatively impacted how they perceived and shared their identities. Even Anne who had studied in the United States prior to her undergraduate studies faced challenges related to establishing community, navigating institutional policies, being apart from family, and more (Wu et al., 2015). Over time, acculturative stress was mitigated for all participants by engaging with campus-based activities and establishing interpersonal connections and friendships on campus (Horne et al., 2018; Jean-Francois, 2019; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Tsevi, 2018). Participants also reported more positive associations with many of their salient social identities through these relationships (Abes et al., 2007; Graham-Bailey et al., 2019).

Limitations

As a qualitative study focused on the unique reflections of a small sample, data and findings from this study have limited transferability. Further research needs to be conducted to determine the degree to which these data are representative or generalizable in relation to other international students or alumni. Data from this study do not reflect experiences of international students who did not complete their degree program in the United States. Research involving students who pursued yet did not complete a degree in the United States may be of particular interest.

Implications for Practice

Student activities and support professionals can have an outsized impact on international students' institutional connectedness, social identities, and academic and professional pursuits (Anandavalli, 2021; Martirosyan et al., 2019). To support international students, these professionals might start from a position of active listening to better understand international students' goals, abilities, social identities, and potential challenges (Anandavalli, 2021; Jones, 2017; Page & Chahboun, 2019; Shaheen, 2019). International students may require more personalized support as an alternative to centering logistical concerns and homogenized programming (Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2015; Jean-Francois, 2019; Tsevi, 2018). While this may be challenging, there are several ways this can be achieved.

When developing policies or programming exclusive to international students, student activities and support professionals should include international student voices and perspectives from the outset (Burel et al., 2019; Madden-Dent et al., 2019). Without input from international students, programming may be developed that international students perceive as ineffective, unnecessary, redundant, or actively demotivating (Di Maria, 2020; Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2015; Madden-Dent et al., 2019; Rosenzweig & Meade, 2017). By including international students, HEIs can offer more effective, targeted programming for individual international students while limiting unnecessary resource expenditures.

To expand campus connectedness, ISS professionals can operate as the nexus for international student support efforts. At regular intervals, international students are required to engage with ISS professionals, most notably during matriculation (U. S. Department of Homeland Security, n.d.). ISS and other professionals could coordinate, developing methods for gathering voluntarily shared information on individual international students prior to scheduled meetings allowing for more targeted support and information sharing (Burel et al., 2019; Madden-Dent et al., 2019). Rather than focusing primarily on logistics, ISS professionals could engage with international students to better understand the opportunities they might need or prefer and share personalized information about campus activities and advising (Burel et al., 2019; Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2015; Jean-Francois, 2019; Madden-Dent et al., 2019). With relevant information, ISS and other staff could position themselves to readily offer personalized targeted support and recommendations to each international student.

Trustworthiness
For this study, a voluntary member checking process supported the credibility of the findings, allowing for greater assurance. Data were authentic and derived from participants while establishing greater equity between the participants and researchers (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Liu, 2020; Motulsky, 2021; Stahl & King, 2020). Dependability was achieved in this study through thorough analyses of each autobiographical statement and transcript (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity were also supported through the researcher's notes present in the Impressionistic Record (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Conclusion

Within U.S. higher education, international students are an important source of diversity, cultural insight, and community growth. How HEI stakeholders discuss, support, and engage with international students actively reflects the values, culture, and goals of a given institution. Literature and data on international alumni are currently limited. However, by listening and amplifying their voices, researchers and practitioners can uncover opportunities for fostering community and connectedness for current and future international students.

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