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**COVID-19: How a Pandemic Exposed the Vulnerability of
International Students in the U.S.**

Darcy Eliot

University of Vermont, Class of 2021

College of Arts and Sciences

Global Studies Honors Thesis

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Abstract

International students face many challenges adjusting to a new academic and cultural environment in the United States. In March 2020, universities closed their campuses, moving courses online and emptying residence halls due to COVID-19. International students had to find somewhere to live, worried about how the switch to online learning would affect their visa status, and navigated international travel restrictions. In this research, I analyzed the precarious position of international students, looking at the state of international higher education and the lived experiences of international students in the wake of COVID-19. The Coronavirus has exacerbated the existing difficulties of being an international student, such as visa restrictions, experiences of neo-racism, and financial burden. Studying the international student experience in the context of a global public health crisis, we must examine how we can reduce the uncertainty they face and better support international students during their education in the U.S.

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Introduction

In March 2020, around two weeks after I arrived in Buenos Aires, Argentina for my study abroad program, global chaos descended. Day by day, students in my program were either strongly suggested to return to the U.S. or forced to come home by their university. As I watched my friends leave their study abroad programs in Europe, COVID-19 cases in Argentina were slowly starting to increase. On a Thursday afternoon, I received an email from UVM recommending I come home, that night I told my host family that I would stay as long as possible, and by Friday afternoon I had a ticket booked to fly back to the U.S. on Sunday evening. As I hurriedly planned my journey home, I worried about border closures, flight cancellations and the possibility of being stuck in Argentina, but I made it home safely and soon began quarantining with my family in Maryland.

In July 2020, along with the rest of the country, I heard the news that the Trump administration was going to deport or bar entry to international students taking a fully online course load in the fall semester. As petitions circulated on social media platforms, I reached out to friends from high school to see how they were feeling and if they needed any help. Due to my father's job with the World Bank, I spent my childhood living overseas. Since I attended international schools, many of my former classmates were now international students studying in the U.S. After my own experience leaving Argentina and reaching out to friends who were foreign students in the U.S., I began to think about what was happening to international students and how the pandemic was impacting their academic experience. Initially, I pondered how the international student experience during the Coronavirus might align with other types of migration and diasporas, a personal academic interest of mine. From these thoughts, I formulated one of my research questions, "when universities closed, where did international students go and

why?” As I began some initial research, I broadened my research parameters to additionally examine the state of international higher education. Thus, I expanded my research to include examining university admissions and international recruitment, as well as university support services specific to international students.

COVID-19 has disrupted everyone’s life in some way and has forced everyone to adapt and adjust to life during a pandemic. The spread of the Coronavirus has been predicated upon flaws in American support systems and brought to light the deep inequality and injustice embedded in American society. Through my research, I hope to add to the existing literature about the difficulties international students face in the U.S. and capture the particular challenges they have experienced in the midst of COVID-19 – transitioning to online learning, the closure of residence halls, and the announcement from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) that international students would not be able to enter or stay in the U.S. if their university was operating fully online in the fall. International students already face challenges in their education, yet they have had to face many additional obstacles since March 2020, which has caused significant stress. During such turbulent times, it is important to understand and process how the pandemic is shaping all of our lives

Through my research, I hope to have provided a space for foreign students to reflect and process their experiences. COVID-19 has been incredibly consuming and as society has adapted to a new context, time continues to pass at a fast speed, and it can feel like there is not much room to pause and reflect on how this experience has impacted us. After many of my interviews, I received feedback from participants that they were appreciative of my interest in international students and that they felt they were being seen and heard when they are frequently overlooked. I hope that in this thesis I am able to create space to share and honor these stories as well as to

critically examine the systems and structures that have shaped the international student experience.

My chosen research method was interviews and I interviewed three different populations to address the multiple scopes of my research. I interviewed international students, university admissions counselors who work in international admissions, and an international student advisor. In total, I conducted 19 interviews. In my interviews with foreign students, I sought to not only discuss their experience attending university in the U.S. during COVID-19, but I also wanted to hear about their decision-making process, how they found support, what it was like taking remote classes, and how they perceived their university's overall response to the pandemic. Creating my questions for international admissions counselors, I wanted to learn more about the recruitment process generally and how universities specifically recruit international students as opposed to domestic students. In addition, I asked questions about how counselors' interactions and exchanges with international students have changed throughout the pandemic. I finished each interview asking participants their thoughts on the future of recruitment and admissions as it relates to international students. Lastly, I initially intended to interview multiple staff members who work in the Office of International Education (OIE) at UVM; however, I was only able to interview one international student advisor. In this interview, I asked questions about how their job has changed since COVID-19 and what kind of resources UVM provided specifically to international students. I wanted to learn about what happened to the international student population at UVM during the onset of the pandemic, such as what proportion of students left the country and how the international student community has changed. I will further discuss my data collection strategies and process in my Methodology chapter.

To analyze my interview data, I transcribed then coded each interview. From my coding, I identified key themes in the data, categorizing them as challenges of being an international student pre-COVID and new or exacerbated challenges during COVID-19. Many of the difficulties that foreign students experience, whether they existed prior to the Coronavirus or have emerged in the pandemic context, can be attributed to the overarching topics of government restriction and visa policy, minority status on campus and in the country, and cost. These three themes appear throughout my thesis, both in the data I collected as well as in previous literature on international students.

Although I interviewed multiple population groups to gain different perspectives, my research focuses primarily on the student perspective because of the constraints of the scope of an undergraduate thesis. However, it is important to consider how other actors within the university impact the international student experience. Foreign students experience different barriers to accessing a university education in the U.S. than domestic students prior to their enrollment at a U.S. institution. International admissions counselors are closely familiar with the additional requirements for international students in the application process as well as interacting with them closely and frequently throughout their college search process, therefore I think the admissions perspective is important to study further. Staff who advise foreign students and work in international student services offices are important actors in the international student experience as they serve as a primary resource for advising and support. I was only able to interview one international student advisor; however, I think this is an important aspect of my research to be expanded upon further as I believe the staff working in these offices are an important reflection of how a university perceives and treats their international community. While my research begins to address these additional perspectives and insights, further research

is required to truly understand the larger questions surrounding how university administrations interact with foreign students and shape the international student community.

In my thesis, I will begin by further explaining and describing my data methods in my Methodology chapter. I will discuss why I chose interviews as my method, how I recruited participants, the interview process and how I wrote my questions, how I synthesized the data, the codes created for each interview group, and limitations. Next, in my Context chapter, I will explore the current state of international students in the U.S., briefly describing the history of international student mobility in the U.S., enrollment data trends, as well as important political context. Additionally, I will discuss recent data about the impact of the virus on universities and international education. Further, in my Literature Review chapter, I will explore the current juncture of higher education in a globalized context, discussing the internationalization of higher education, domestic higher education policy, the perceived value of international students, the international student experience, and research on the mental health of international students. In this chapter, I discuss prominent scholars and concepts in the field of international higher education, including the pivotal study of international student perceptions of discrimination by Lee and Rice (2007) and the concept of neo-racism. Then, in my Findings chapter I summarize the data sample as well as describe the major themes that emerged from the data, such as restricted movement, challenges and obstacles faced by international students, comfort and luck, and reflection on the emotional toll of COVID-19. Additionally, I explore significant themes from my interviews with admissions counselors – a new virtual reality, recruitment strategies, and the future of university admissions. Lastly, I described the main topics my interview with a UVM OIE staff member. In my Discussion chapter, I further examine the interview themes in the context of previous literature. In my analysis, I found that networks of support, empathy, and

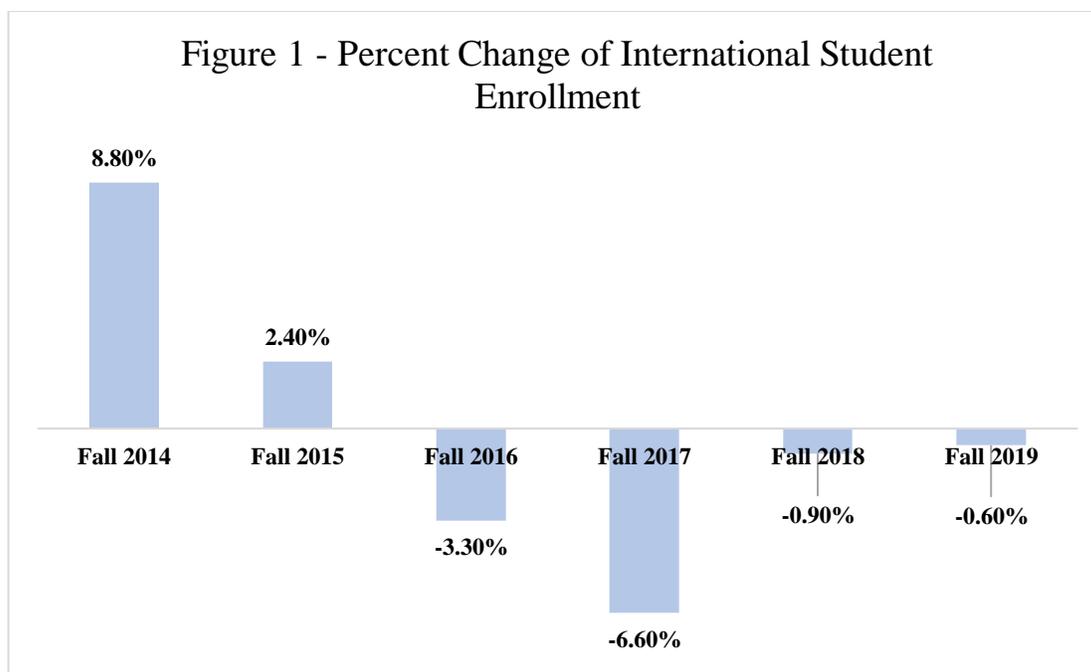
communication were critical to the survival and success of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, in my Conclusion chapter, I will discuss what we can learn from the data, on a global, national, and local scale. I will explore the limitations of my research as well as suggest ideas for further research on the topic.

Context

International Students in the U.S.

For a significant period of time, the U.S. has been one of the leading countries in international student enrollment in higher education. The number of international students has grown steadily and strongly since the 1950s, when there were around 26,000 foreign students in the 1949/50 school year (Israel and Batalova 2021). The number of international students in the U.S. peaked at around 1.1 million students in the 2018/19 school year; however, growth has slowed in the last decade and the 2019/20 academic year was the “first decline in years in the overall number of international students in the United States” (ibid). Changes in international student enrollment data in the U.S. reflect changes in global and local political economic landscapes as the data are particularly influenced by U.S. immigration policy, periods of economic growth or downturn, political relations, and historical events.

The history of international students has changed over time in terms of the composition of the international student population as well as the size of the population. Most international student data begins in the 1950s, with the first publication of the *Open Doors* report by the Institute of International Education (IIE) in 1954 and when strong foreign student enrollment growth began (Israel and Batalova 2021) (Ruiz 2014). Since the first *Open Doors* report, the U.S. has been the leading destination of international students worldwide and the foreign student population has grown steadily from 26,000 student in the 1949/50 school year to 1.1 million in the 2019/20 academic year. Yet, growth has slowed in the past decade and since the 2016/17 school year, the annual change in new international student enrollment has decreased, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Israel and Batalova 2021).



Adapted from Fischer, Karin. 2020. "Covid-19 Caused International Enrollments to Plummet This Fall. They Were Already Dropping." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 16, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/covid-19-caused-international-enrollments-to-plummet-this-fall-they-were-already-dropping#:~:text=They%20Were%20Already%20Dropping.,-By%20Karin%20Fischer&text=With%20flights%20limited%2C%20borders%20sealed,by%2043%20percent%20this%20fall.&text=According%20to%20the%20annual%20%E2%80%9COpen,in%20the%20fall%20of%202019.>

The country of origin of international students has also changed throughout history based on a multitude of factors, such as conditions in sending countries as well as immigration policy in the U.S. For example, in the 1949/50 academic year, the top sending countries were Canada, Taiwan, and India, followed by students from several countries in Europe and Latin America. Although some of the top sending countries at the time were countries in Asia, since the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and the subsequent removal of national-origin quotas in immigration policy, students from countries in Asia have composed a more significant share of international student enrollment (Israel and Batalova 2021). As a result of COVID-19, fall 2020 enrollment numbers plummeted; however, it is unclear what foreign student enrollment

will look like long-term. President of the IIE, Allan Goodman, stated that “after past pandemics, when travel became safe again, there were surges of students,” (Fishcher 2020a) and that he expects there will be similar trends at the end of this pandemic, but it is too early to tell.

An aspect of the international student experience that is important to note is neo-racism and the toll of a lack of integration into the broader community. In recent years, this issue has been marked by the political and social climate in the U.S. under the Trump presidency. International students experience microaggressions, xenophobia, and neo-racism, which I will explore theoretically in my Literature Review chapter. In Fischer’s article (2020b), a student that was interviewed shared they have noticed a change in how the rest of the world perceives America, noting that the country is viewed internationally as less welcoming. Throughout his time in the White House, President Trump “increased vetting of international students, stopped some at the border and revoked their visas, and threatened to ban all Chinese students” (ibid). The tone set by the president significantly impacts how international students are welcomed and accepted into their communities on a local scale.

Many scholars have noted the disproportionate tendency for international students of color from non-Western, non-European countries to experience neo-racism (Lee and Rice 2007). Race plays a role in how students perceive themselves in their university communities and how they interact with their domestic peers. In a study on how foreign-born students of color perceive race in a U.S. context, participants described racial and ethnic encounters that served as catalysts for examining their own race. The examples they shared ranged from classroom interactions with students and faculty, interactions with police, being called racial slurs, and comments about hairstyle and dress (Fries-Britt, George Mwangi, Peralta 2014). Being perceived as other within their local community, in addition to xenophobic rhetoric on a national political level, neo-

racism and integration in the community are not just theoretical concerns about international higher education, but also a significant aspect of the lived experience. During COVID-19, this has only been exacerbated with President Trump calling the virus the Chinese or Kung Fu virus and the accompanying rise in anti-Asian discrimination and racism.

COVID-19

In December 2019, authorities in Wuhan, China reported treating a cluster of dozens of cases of pneumonia from an unknown cause. Quickly, researchers identified the novel SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus disease, or COVID-19, and traced the virus' origins to a seafood and poultry market in Wuhan (Taylor 2021) (WHO 2020). The Coronavirus primarily spreads through “droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes” (WHO 2020) during close contact with other people, but it can also spread by airborne transmission (CDC 2020). Following confirmed cases of COVID-19 outside of China in Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the first confirmed case in the U.S. on January 20th, 2020, the World Health Organization (W.H.O.) declared “a public health emergency of international concern” (Taylor 2021). Soon, Coronavirus cases and deaths were being reported across the globe. As time progressed and the disease spread globally, various hotspots emerged. Italy was the first major outbreak outside of Asia and the first in Europe and Iran closely followed as a second focus point. On February 29th, 2020, the U.S. reported the country's first Coronavirus death. Progressively countries began implementing restrictions on travel and gatherings, leading into widespread lockdowns. Internationally, Coronavirus cases surpassed one million people in 171 countries with a death toll of at least 51,000 people by April 2nd, 2020 (ibid). As time has passed, hotspots and outbreaks have evolved and changed globally as countries manage emerging spikes

in case numbers. In September 2020, global deaths surpassed 1 million, 10 months after authorities first detected COVID-19 in China and in February the U.S. alone reached 500,000 Coronavirus deaths (ibid) (Huang 2021). Yet, many found hope as the first COVID vaccine, produced by Pfizer, was approved in the United Kingdom on December 2nd, 2020, and then approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on December 11th, 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound economic impacts; Japan and Germany entered recessions in May 2020, and in July 2020 a study estimated that more than five million Americans lost their health insurance as a result of job losses (Taylor 2021). Given how widespread the reports of COVID cases have been, it is arguable that almost everyone across the globe has experienced the devastating impacts of COVID-19.

Given the ease of transmission of the Coronavirus, as case numbers began to rise in the U.S. in March 2020, many universities closed their campuses and moved to online remote instruction. In response to the pandemic, universities have had to reconsider the ways they provide instruction and the impacts this has on all students. The IIE conducted three snapshot surveys and subsequent reports, completed by 234, 599, and 520 institutions respectively, as the pandemic unfolded. These surveys gathered data on the realities of the disruptions the Coronavirus created for higher education and students, the impact on student mobility, and the measures institutions are taking (IIE 2020a). As international students compose 5.5% of the student body at all U.S. institutions and there were over one million foreign students in the U.S. in the 2018/19 school year, they are a significant population that has experienced many disruptions to their education as a result of the pandemic (IIE 2020b). The reports of each survey were released in March, May, and July and therefore many of the participating institutions' plans changed between the surveys and the start of the fall 2020 semester; however, the reports provide

important insight into the decision-making process and the considerations of many higher education institutions as the pandemic unfolded and they planned for the 2020/21 school year.

In the spring 2020 semester, since 91% of institutions surveyed closed campus buildings and offices and 54% closed dormitories and student housing, many students were no longer able to stay on campus, yet travel restrictions impacted whether students could return to their home country (IIE 2020b). In response, only around 25% of institutions reported closing all campus facilities or dorms while many institutions left some housing available for students who had no alternative options (IIE 2020c). One school reported, “[We] kept dorms open only for international students or domestic students with special requests (e.g., insufficient support at home or at-risk family at home)” (IIE 2020b, 3). Still, 18,551 international students left the U.S. due to COVID-19 while 92% of students stayed in the country either on campus or elsewhere (IIE 2020b). As uncertainty rose, many universities reported providing additional services to international students and over “80% of colleges and universities provided increased communications to international students on health, safety and wellbeing, and offered guidance on compliance with visa status” (ibid, 7). In many ways, international students faced forced, yet simultaneously restricted movement and mobility and universities responded in various ways to continue to support these students.

Although it is unknown how exactly the Coronavirus pandemic will impact the future of international education in the U.S., it is clear that future enrollment and mobility will look different. While half of the schools reported lower application numbers for the 2020/21 school year, IIE suspects that the decrease in applicant numbers is among both domestic and international students “as the COVID-19 pandemic and economic and social realities may drive students to consider their academic options or gap years” (IIE 2020c, 11). Looking specifically at

foreign students, most institutions indicated that some of their international students would not be able to come to their campus “primarily due to delays in obtaining visas in time to travel, or continuing restrictions” (IIE 2020b, 10). At the time of the survey, 87% of universities reported plans to offer hybrid instruction for the fall 2020 semester and have pivoted to offering virtual enrollment options for international students who would not be able to make it to campus for the semester (IIE 2020c). However, 90% of institutions “expect that there will be difficulties associated with implementing virtual enrollment for international students” (ibid, 11). Although universities are providing other options for international students to continue their education, there are significant barriers and challenges for international undergraduate students in the wake of COVID-19, especially in comparison to domestic students.

Literature Review

Introduction

The international student demographic is a large population and plays an important role in American university culture, the economy, and U.S. immigration policy. Given the large demographic, the literature on foreign students is expansive. International students are defined as “students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin” (Kim, Oh, Mumbauer 2019, 180). There is significant literature on the role of international students at U.S. universities, the foreign student transition and experience, the mental health impacts of being an international student, and the impacts of higher education and immigration policy. This chapter seeks to understand the current juncture of higher education within the context of our globalized world and the literature on the international student demographic.

Internationalization of Higher Education

In recent decades, there has been a rapid internationalization of higher education globally as countries are competing for talented human capital in what scholars have called the great brain race. As globalization has led to international trade “intercultural and linguistic skills are more valued than ever. Student mobility has assumed a crucial role in the acquisition of these skills” (Suter and Jandl 2008, 404). Defined as “the process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the goals, primary functions and delivery of higher education at the institutional level (Knight 2012, 22), internationalization has transformed the higher education landscape through the mobilization of students and changes to programs on offer. These transformative processes have resulted in an integration of international, global, intercultural, and

comparative perspectives into curriculum and the teaching process, as well as increased partnership between higher education and policymaking as universities work closely with immigration, industry and the science and technology sectors in attracting and retaining foreign knowledge workers (ibid). The internationalization of higher education has significant impacts on the student experience, in particular shaping how internationally mobile students interact with host universities, host communities, and governments.

While this paper will focus on student mobility in terms of undergraduate international students, it is important to recognize the multiple categories of student mobility experiences. Student mobility includes full degree programs in a foreign country; short-term study abroad experiences; crossborder collaborative degree programs between multiple institutions and providers; research and fieldwork; internships and practical experiences; and study tours and workshops (Knight 2012). Internationalization has transformed various aspects of higher education, as is illustrated in the variety of student mobility experiences as internationalization extends beyond where students study, to research and other types of experiential learning. Not only is it possible to see examples of the internationalization of higher education through the multitude of student mobility experiences, but it is also evident through the development of twinning and franchise programs and double, joint, and combined degree programs (ibid). To list a few examples, New York University opened a portal campus in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates in 2010 and another in Shanghai, China in 2012 (NYU Abu Dhabi n.d.) (NYU Shanghai n.d.). In 2010 Columbia University inaugurated its Dual BA Program with Sciences Po, France (Columbia University n.d.). In 2011 Yale University and the National University of Singapore established Yale-NUS College, an autonomous liberal arts and sciences college within the National University of Singapore (Yale-NUS College n.d.). The internationalization of higher

education provides new means for global student mobility and is a direct byproduct of an increasingly interconnected world under globalization.

Implications of Domestic Higher Education Policy

The rise of neoliberalism is rooted in current higher education policy in the United States. Although neoliberalism originated from economists like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman earlier in the 20th century, it gained prominence in the 1980s as politicians like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan took the economic ideology and transformed it into political expression (Tight 2019) (Gaffikin and Perry 2009). Four primary principles of neoliberalism are “the self-interested individual... free market economics... a commitment to laissez-faire... [and] a commitment to free trade” (Tight 2019, 274). As such, neoliberal ideology emphasizes decreased state intervention and “focuses not on social welfare for the citizenry as a whole but on enabling individuals as economic actors” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004, 20) which results in the movement of resources from social welfare functions to production functions (ibid). With a focus on trust in the free market, competition, and individualism, neoliberal policies have resulted in decreased investment of public funds in higher education as we see a “downward spiral of state disinvestment and decreasing public support for universities” (Stephens 2013, 59). The rise of neoliberalism that has occurred concurrently with rapid globalization have significantly impacted the U.S. higher education landscape.

In addition, the United States has shifted towards a knowledge-based economy, in which “knowledge and people with knowledge are the key factors of development, the main drivers of growth, and the major determinants of competitiveness” (Gürüz 2011, 7). As such, these conditions have forced universities to “adopt market-oriented behaviors resulting in... ‘the

academic capitalist knowledge-learning regime” (Ford and Cate 2020, 1198). According to Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), academic capitalism theory analyzes the relations between higher education institutions and society, explaining the process of the integration of colleges and universities into the new neo-liberal economy. Under academic capitalism theory, faculty, students, administrators and academic professionals are groups of actors that use state resources to “create new circuits of knowledge that link higher education institutions to the new economy” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004, 1). But this theory goes beyond viewing the student as a consumer and rather sees higher education institutions as marketers. Universities compete and market their institutions to high-ability students who choose a school “they calculate [is] likely to bring a return on educational investment” (ibid, 1). As neoliberalism promotes privatization, commercialization, and deregulation, the academic capitalism regime has promoted the privatization of knowledge wherein “knowledge is construed as a private good, valued for creating streams of high-technology products that generate profit as they flow through global markets” (ibid, 29). Universities play an important role in the current knowledge economy as generators of knowledge through research and development as well as preparing and training the next generation of knowledge workers.

In an effort to remain competitive in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, governments are contending for talent. In the search for highly skilled migrants, competition for internationally mobile students who are willing and able to study overseas has increased (Sá and Sabzalieva 2018). As governments seek talented human capital, international students have attracted attention as the ideal highly skilled immigrant candidate. Foreign graduates are not only seen as a potential source of qualified labor, but as the shift to a knowledge economy has challenged traditionally industry-oriented regions, retaining

international students' post-graduation is seen as a path to “augment their skilled human capital base and to prevent demographic decline” (Suter and Jandl 2008, 403). As a result, foreign students and higher education have become important actors in policymaking to develop a strategy for attracting and retaining knowledge workers (Knight 2012, 28). Yet, these retention policies promote brain drain in other countries. The global flow of skilled labor is referred to as brain circulation, but this concept hides that “ultimately some countries are experiencing a net ‘brain loss,’ resulting in a smaller talent pool and potentially jeopardizing national economic and social development” (ibid, 28). The concept of brain drain is particularly significant as the main axis of student mobility and skilled labor migration is from the Asia-Pacific Rim to North America and western Europe (Gürüz 2011). While there are students who receive degrees and gain work experience abroad and then return to their home countries, brain drain has proven to be a significant challenge for many nations.

In recent years, the U.S. government has focused particularly on retaining international students pursuing science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) degrees (Sá and Sabzalieva 2018). About a third of international students major in STEM and are more likely to study STEM compared to domestic students (Demirici 2019). For international students who wish to stay in the U.S. to work after graduation, one of the most popular ways of obtaining a visa is through the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program. The OPT program extends student visas for 12 months and allows students to gain work experience in the U.S. without a work visa, providing a bridge for foreign students to access the labor market when it is otherwise difficult to obtain a H-1B visa. The H-1B visa is the most common temporary work visa for highly skilled immigrants, requires employer sponsorship, is time and cost intensive, and has restrictive quotas (ibid). Recently, the OPT program has been quite successful as “over the last

decade, 83% of international students of U.S. bachelor's- and advanced-level programs who initially stayed in the United States obtained OPT and used their students visas to continue staying... after their graduation” (ibid, 1368). Worried about foreign students accepting job offers in other countries and the resulting “loss of talent [that] might threaten U.S. leadership in STEM fields,” (Demirici 2019, 1368) in 2008 the government announced a 17-month extension for STEM students under the STEM OPT Extension. In 2016, a federal rule further expanded the STEM extension to 24 months, meaning STEM students can work in the U.S. for a total of three years after graduating (Sá and Sabzalieva 2018). The OPT extension for STEM students has been successful because it mitigates the typical uncertainty of obtaining a work visa that usually discourages the participation of international students in the U.S. labor market.

In the U.S., visa and immigration policy is closely tied to national security and economic concerns. Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, international students have not only faced an unwelcoming atmosphere due to contentious immigration discourse on a social level, but also on a federal level through increased surveillance through the Patriot Act (Hyun 2007). Since several of the terrorists who conducted the 9/11 attacks were in the U.S. on foreign student visas, it raised questions about the rights and privileges of international students in the U.S. and the right and extent of the U.S. government to monitor international students (Haddal 2008). During their education, foreign students interact with four federal agencies. First, they interview and apply for a visa with the Department of State (DOS). Once they arrive to the U.S., they are inspected by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and their arrival is reported to Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE). The student’s arrival is entered into the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), which is used to track students during their academic career. The information reported by a student’s academic institution is shared with DOS, CBP,

and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) (Haddal 2008). Through the implementation of tracking systems, international students are told from the moment that they arrive in the U.S. that they are being watched, surveilled, and reminded of the constant risk of having their visa revoked or being deported.

The U.S.'s reputation as home to many leading universities and the influence of American culture across the globe has allowed it to remain the country with the largest population of international students; yet, until recently, the government appeared unwilling to create measures to facilitate international student recruitment (Sá and Sabzalieva 2018). American policymakers have been criticized for “lacking a ‘strategic approach to capitalizing on the global pool of mobile students’” (ibid, 238) and the political gridlock of disagreement between Democratic and Republican lawmakers has made it difficult to pass any legislation that would ease the process of coming to the U.S. as an international student and remaining for work (ibid). In particular, under the Obama administration, due to the Republican control of the House of Representatives and Senate, there was inaction on any legislation that would relax the constraints on international students, with the increase in the STEM OPT Extension seen as a “compromise to previous stalled efforts at reform” (ibid, 239). Although there has been a call for a strategic and integrated approach to international student retention, some policymakers argue for the prioritization of developing a domestic talent pool in the STEM fields as opposed to relying on imported labor (ibid). Under the Trump administration, students have been wary about coming to the U.S. for higher education as President Trump has taken a nationalist approach to immigration that many have criticized as insular, xenophobic and racist (Tareen 2020). From initial travel bans, to recent considerations of ending the OPT program and newly announced limits for H1-B visas in the wake of the pandemic to address domestic job losses, there has been

significant uncertainty for international students who wonder if they will be able to stay in the United States for the duration of their program (ibid). Although domestic policy has attempted to encourage international students to attend university in the U.S. and stay after graduating to work, more recent xenophobic rhetoric and conflicting proposals from Democrats and Republicans leaves international students feeling hesitant and uncertain about their status and future in the United States.

Economic Value and Financial Impact of International Students

International students bring great value to American higher education institutions as they connect universities and domestic students with the rest of the world through their cultural experiences and knowledge. In recent years, many countries have embraced the great brain race in the competition for highly skilled migrants through the globally mobile student population. International students are seen as a “solution to national skills and funding shortfalls, while meeting the apparent imperative to act internationally and compete globally” (Sá and Sabzalieva 2018, 232). Universities also benefit from the tuition paid by international students who are often charged at full or much higher rates, allowing universities to “profit financially from student migration” and making international students a “major source of income” (Suter and Jandl 2008, 407). However, as Ford and Cate (2020) propose, although international students are a significant source of revenue for universities, many Americans fear that a large international student population takes away competitive university spots from domestic students and represents a loss of taxpayer money to non-residents. Yet, many universities and governments use the notable economic contributions of foreign students to counter this criticism. In the wake

of COVID-19, U.S. universities could stand to lose at least \$3 billion from a decline in foreign enrollment in the 2020-2021 academic year (Bothwell et al. 2020).

According to NAFSA: Association of International Educators, in 2019 education was the fifth largest services export in the U.S (Morgan and Penfeld 2019). As international student enrollment in recent years has steadily increased, so have their economic contributions and the consequential number of supporting jobs. During their time in the U.S., foreign students' tuition, living costs, and travel directly support local and regional economies (Suter and Jandl 2008). During the 2018-2019 academic year, just over 1 million international students contributed nearly \$41 billion to the U.S. economy and supported 458,290 jobs (NAFSA 2020a). In the state of Vermont, international students contributed \$80.6 million and supported 777 jobs, the majority of which are at the University of Vermont (NAFSA 2020b). In particular, the economic contributions of foreign students are particularly valuable to institutions themselves, who rely on this demographic to fill a funding gap. As state governments have decreased spending on higher education since the rise of neoliberalism and the 2008 recession, increasing international student enrollment is seen as a win-win situation for universities, who are "solving budget woes and adding to the value of the school's education at the same time" (Stephens 2013, 56). With government spending and support for state schools declining, out-of-state and international students are keeping universities afloat, paying full tuition and sometimes additional tuition fees (ibid). Since 2016, the U.S. has seen a decline in international student enrollment, which has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a 16% decrease in enrollment among 700 schools between the fall of 2019 and fall of 2020 (Cardoza 2020). With such a drastic drop in foreign enrollment, universities and the U.S. economy will both experience significant losses that will have a large impact on the future of higher education.

University Recruitment and the Perceived Value of International Students

For many U.S. universities, international students are an important demographic in the annual recruitment of incoming students. For many schools, foreign students are seen as an institutional asset, as markers of prestige, legitimacy and a means of economic stimulus (Ford and Cate 2020). In our current globally interconnected world and under an academic capitalist regime, higher education institutions are neoliberal actors that are “focused on securing their status position and generating economic growth” (ibid, 1195). Therefore, universities pursue goals of being seen as global, cosmopolitan, ethnically diverse and financially diverse to attract students, faculty, and streams of revenue (ibid). For many schools, international students “are subsidizing the education of in-state students while enriching the college experience for everyone” (Stephens 2013, 57). For both policymakers and university administrations, international students improve the quality of education offered through the cultural diversity that they bring and the subsequent need to attract and retain foreign students by providing “high-quality services that can compete with those of rival institutions” (Suter and Jandl 2008, 406).

Under the current academic capitalist regime, higher education institutions are forced to increasingly engage in market-oriented behaviors to recruit students, including “raising tuition, recruiting affluent students, patenting technology, copyrighting curricula, and commercializing university athletics” (Ford and Cate 2020, 1198). Not only are universities investing in marketing schemes, but popular destination countries are creating major marketing campaigns to attract the best students. Rather than seeking cultural and knowledge exchanges between countries through international student mobility, countries are competing to train and retain brain power (Knight 2012).

Yet, many scholars argue that the ways in which universities value international students and how they are used as tools for recruitment has become problematic. As a Korean scholar in the U.S., Kim (2020) felt her input was valued as long as it benefited her white peers, and her background is “valued to increase the racial diversity in U.S. academia” (501). Similarly, in a study of how 160 large U.S. universities represent international students on their websites, Ford and Cate (2020) found that international students were marked with exceptional narratives, similar to other racial and ethnic minorities and students of color. The ways that international students and racial and ethnic minorities are showcased in a school’s visual marketing materials signals “an institution’s commitment to diversity... [and] may similarly be a recruitment tool, aimed at attracting domestic students, who are ‘cultural omnivores’” (Ford and Cate 2020, 1196). Portraying foreign students as exceptional and an indicator of diversity isolates them from domestic students, making the transition and integration into American universities more difficult. In addition, international students and students of color are constructed as “outsiders, commodities, victims, and change agents in ways that benefited the university,” (ibid, 1199) which can be misleading and harmful as universities blur demographics through representation and ambiguity. In their study, Ford and Cate (2020) found an “almost universal tendency to blur the demographics of international students through representation and use that ambiguity to the benefit of the institution” (1202). On their website, institutions redefined and reframed racial, geographic, and national boundaries to manage the presentation of the international student community on their campus (ibid). The often misleading presentation of international students on university websites reflects the belief of many institutions and the government that international students are pawns in a larger marketing scheme.

In much of the literature, scholars have noted the legacy of colonialism in the recruitment of foreign students. In the discussion of the cultural diversity that comes with the internationalization of higher education, Knight (2012) discusses the traditional role of education as a vehicle of acculturation and education being a historic form of colonization. Through the means of “curriculum content, language of instruction (particularly the increase in English) and the teaching-learning process,” acculturation through education can lead to “eroding national cultural identities and... cultural homogenization, most often in the form of westernization” (Knight 2012, 29). This is further examined through the global imaginary of Western supremacy. The concept of a global imaginary builds on the concept of the social imaginary, that “refer[s] to the organizing structure of societal understanding... a social imaginary is more like an (often) unacknowledged background than a theory or a political ideology” (Stein and de Andreotti 2016, 228). The global imaginary of Western supremacy draws upon the history of established racialized categories and classifications in Europe that were imposed globally through colonialism and slavery. The colonial myth of Western supremacy has been rearticulated and reproduced, particularly following World War II and during the Cold War, and with the rise of globalization. In these periods of transformation, the West maintained innocence by framing “Third World” poverty as “an internally produced problem” (ibid, 229) and globalization as inevitable and neutral. However, the idea that Western epistemology and ontology is “universal, and all others were deemed particular, inferior, and less developed along a linear path of human progress” (ibid, 228) has prevailed throughout history and is prevalent today in higher education.

Stein and de Andreotti (2016) suggest that the desire for Western institutions of higher education to recruit foreign students and the subsequent racism experienced when these students arrive are both rooted in this global imaginary of Western supremacy where, “the West is

understood to be at the top of a global hierarchy of humanity with the rest of the world trailing behind... [positioning] Western higher education as a desirable product in the global higher education market” (ibid, 226). The recruitment of foreign students perpetuates legacies of global colonialism as international students are “shaped by higher education policies that cast them as ‘cash’ (economic resources), charity, or competition” (Ford and Cate 2020, 1197). Additionally, the marking of foreign students as “contributors to institutional prestige” reinforces the global imaginary of Western supremacy as “the West is understood to acquire the non-Western other in ways that are simultaneously benevolent and profitable” (ibid, 1207). The legacy of global colonialism persists beyond recruitment and into the experience of foreign students as institutions and faculty “tend to adopt a neo-colonialist or ethnocentric attitude... assuming institutions have more to teach international students than learn from them and expecting students to do the bulk of work adjusting to their new environment” (Heng 2017, 834). Although universities strive for global prestige and diversity, foreign students are seen as commodities to help market the school, reflecting the legacy of colonialism in international higher education.

The International Student Experience

As foreign students move to the U.S. for university, it can be an exciting time of change and learning. Immersed in a new environment and culture, the international student experience is markedly different from that of domestic students as they adjust to living in a foreign country away from their family. Living in a foreign culture, international students view and experience their university and other surroundings through their own cultural lens (Dorsett 2017). Although the international student experience is incredibly unique, reflecting the heterogeneous nature of the community, many universities portray and categorize international students with other

students of color as racial and ethnic minorities (Ford and Cate 2020). The international student community is labelled and marketed similarly to domestic students of color, but the experiences of these two demographics are complex and intricate. Similarly, on many campuses there is an “‘us versus them’ dichotomy that categorizes all international students as the same – as if they are ‘other’ and ‘not like us’” (Dorsett 2017, 16), both labeling this demographic as outsiders but also as a one-dimensional community.

Further, the experiences of international students are “far from homogenous” (Heng 2017, 834). The pivotal study of international student perceptions of discrimination by Lee and Rice (2007) argued that the varied hardships experienced by foreign students in a range of contexts can be understood through the framework of neo-racism. Lee and Rice (2007) define neo-racism as “discrimination based on culture and national order...prejudice as a reemphasis of cultural discrimination flowing from the ideas of natural cultural boundaries and protection of a ‘way of life,’ concepts often used to promote restrictive immigration” (389). Neo-racism masks biological racism by discriminating based on the culture or national origin of the oppressed (Lee and Rice 2007). As a result of the discrimination they experience, international students “are barred from being full participants in the university experience” (Ford and Cate 2020, 1197). Glass (2018) adds that international students also experience discrimination based on political relationships between countries. Students from non-White, non-Western regions report more negative experiences than students from other places and are less satisfied with their educational experience (Glass 2018) (Heng 2017). In particular, students from China, South Korea and Saudi Arabia “are much less likely to report that they are part of a close and supportive community of colleagues and friends, and international students overall are less likely to report this than US students” (Glass 2018, 29). Many foreign students struggle with finding a sense of belonging and

developing meaningful connections as their experiences are shaped by legal, political and social restrictions, adding additional stress to the already challenging transition experience all students experience when attending university (ibid). Lastly, the political climate of the U.S. impacts the international student experience, especially following 9/11 when additional security measures, including the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, were implemented to “scrutinize international students and visiting scholars” (Kim, Oh, Mumbauer 2019, 180).

Experiences of neo-racism and a volatile political climate create diverse experiences within the international student community, yet they are all united by uncertainty.

International students in particular report challenges in the new academic environment they enter. While navigating a new sociocultural environment, academic and social challenges are intertwined (Heng 2017). As students face obstacles being in an unfamiliar environment with associated linguistic and cultural barriers, with the language barrier serving as a predictor of academic failure, they are expected to meet the same academic standards as domestic students (Kim, Oh, Mumbauer 2019) (Kim and Cronley 2020). Coming from different cultural education backgrounds, many students have to quickly learn about the U.S. classroom culture. Skills like classroom participation, critical thinking, individualism, and plagiarism are core elements of the U.S. educational system that many international students must learn quickly while simultaneously improving their English (Dorsett 2017). Although international students have met TOEFL standards for admission, the reality of having to write college-level essays in English presents different demands (Heng 2017). In her autoethnographic work Kim (2020) shares her experience receiving writing and grammar critiques in American environments where monolingualism is the standard and expected although her “bilingual writing” is the norm in our current globalized world. Furthermore, faculty and professors are not always aware of the

heavily cultured academic environment and as a result, some turn to deficit-thinking and stereotyping students as uncritical, passive, dependent and uninterested. This lack of awareness, perceived oblivion to the unique challenges facing international students, deficit-thinking, and cultural insensitivity “can unconsciously cause student grievance” (Heng 2017, 842). The academic expectations of international students paired with the lack of awareness of their background creates additional stress and obstacles to the already challenging experience of getting a U.S. education.

Although for many students, both domestic and foreign, leaving for college means living alone for the first time, this experience looks different for international students. Both domestic and foreign students “have to learn how to cope, survive, and make key decisions on their own without the input of parents or family on the scene,” (Dorsett 2017, 15) yet the families of international students are often in different time zones and are thousands of miles away. As a result, when international students first come to university in the U.S. “they often experience feelings of loneliness due to a real or perceived loss of social support” (Poyrazli and Devonish 2020, 4) and experience higher levels of homesickness than their domestic counterparts. Therefore, friendship formation plays a critical role in adjusting and coping in a higher education environment, with a correlation between lower levels of homesickness and friendships with domestic students (ibid). However, it is common that when there is a large population of foreign students from one country, the international student population becomes more insular because the students have a built-in support system and network from their country of origin and are less likely to interact with domestic students (Dorsett 2017). Through the systematic and social othering of international students, it can be difficult to form friendships with U.S. students and create a local support network beyond other international students from the same country.

With large numbers of international students coming to the U.S., there are calls from scholars and students for increased attention to this demographic. As more students have come to the U.S. to get a degree, universities have not responded with a corresponding increase in investment to support services, causing retention issues and unhappiness (Heng 2017). With calls for improving international student services and greater recognition for the unique challenges international students face, many universities would have to rethink how they value international students and how these students integrate into their community.

Mental Health of International Students

During their university experience, international students face many obstacles and there is significant literature about the impact of the international student experience on mental health. Experiences of neo-racism and processes of acculturation have a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of international students. For students, the experience of acculturation, “a dynamic, complex, and multidimensional process of adaptation,” can be a source of stress with negative impacts on their behavioral health (Kim and Cronley 2020, 208). The accumulation of stressors arising during the process of acculturation, or acculturative stress, puts international students at high risk of developing mental health problems (ibid). In a survey conducted amongst Chinese international students at Yale University, 45% of students reported symptoms of depression and 29% reported symptoms of anxiety, citing academic stress, social isolation, culture shock, and language difficulty as possible causes of their feelings (Han et al. 2013). Although Han et al. (2013) note that their results from a sample of Chinese students at Yale differs from similar studies at different universities, they conclude that “Chinese students at different universities in different areas of the United States may face varied but high prevalence

of mental health problems” (5). As cited in Kim and Cronley (2020), a study found that “22.6% of international students in the United States were clinically depressed; this rate is two times higher than the rate of depression among domestic undergraduate students” (208). Acculturative stress and the associated risk of mental health issues can lead to negative outcomes like “mental distress, social isolation, and poor academic performance” (Kim and Cronley 2020, 216). The challenges faced by international students have significant consequences on their mental health and wellbeing, with the potential to impact academics and social integration.

Yet, international students are less likely than their domestic peers to seek and use counseling services, making them “one of the most quiet, invisible, and underserved groups on American campuses” (Taliaferro, Muehlenkamp, Jeevanba 2020, 565). International students tend to rely more heavily on academic advisors than other university support services in comparison to domestic students; however, although they “are often aware of crisis situations, advisors are often unaware of more subtle manifestations of emotional problems that may reflect both cultural differences and the sensitivities of both expressing and detecting emotional problems” (Hyun et al. 2007, 110). In their study, Hyun et al. (2007), 33% of international graduate student respondents reported considering seeking counseling compared to 56% of domestic graduate students, suggesting multiple factors that may impact the likelihood of seeing mental health services among foreign students. The authors suggest that barriers to seeking counseling include lack of awareness of mental health needs, cultural stigma, and lower knowledge of available services. It is hypothesized that international students do not seek mental health services because they lack awareness of their needs for these services, instead seeking assistance for the physical manifestations of their mental problems, such as fatigue or difficult sleeping. In addition, students may not use counseling services because of the cultural stigma of

mental illness and emotional expression, and while “a high degree of stigma around mental health issues still exists in the United States, the degree of stigma may be lower here than in the international students’ home countries” (ibid, 110). In fact, Hyun et al.’s (2007) study saw that the use of counseling services varied among ethnic groups of international students, with Asian foreign students being significantly less likely than Black, Hispanic, and other ethnic groups. Lastly, international graduate students were less likely to know about campus mental health resources than domestic students, with 61% of foreign students reporting they were aware of counseling services available in comparison to 79% of domestic students. Although all students in the study received information about counseling services from the same sources – through the university health center website, other graduate students, and other venues, international students were significantly less likely to receive this information, suggesting that “important barriers exist with respect to the transmission of information to international students” (ibid, 115). U.S. universities are failing their international students by not ensuring the removal of barriers to access mental health services and information for foreign students when research shows that they are exposed to factors that put them at higher risk of developing mental health problems. Yet, higher rates of mental health issues are not the only challenge of being an international student that universities have yet to address, as I will examine further in my thesis.

Methodology

Introduction

Through my research, I hope to answer the question: how did COVID-19 and the resulting closure of university campuses affect international students? In order to study the international student experience, I chose to conduct interviews as they can capture a person's lived experience through the opportunity to describe their own experiences and perceptions in their own words and vernacular (Dunn 2010) (Valentine 1997). Additionally, interviews are "sensitive and people-oriented" (Valentine 1997, 111), and given that my research topic addresses experiences that may have been challenging or traumatizing for participants, conducting interviews allows me to account for potentially very difficult topics. In my research, I wanted the central focus to be the stories of international students and how they navigated encounters with restrictions, bureaucracy, and a public health crisis. In my methodology, I wanted to create a space where international students felt heard and comfortable to reflect on what may have been a challenging time for them. I chose interviews as opposed to other qualitative research methods because interviews are "about listening. It is about paying attention... It is about creating a comfortable environment for people to share. It is about being careful and systematic with the things people tell you" (Longhurst 2010, 103). In having the ability to prioritize fully listening to participants and their stories during interviews, I can give my full attention to participants and create a space of reflection and an opportunity for participants to process their experiences.

In her chapter, Valentine addresses critiques on the use of in-depth interviews and claims that interviewers bias respondents' answers and cannot be objective in their work. However, they counter this by explaining that in taking a humanist approach, scholars argue that there is no

objectivity in social science research, “all research work is explicitly or implicitly informed by the experiences, aims and interpretations of the researcher who designed... the interview schedule and that researchers should treat participants in their research as people, not objects to be exploited or examined for information” (Valentine 1997). Research, and qualitative research in particular, cannot be fully objective because it is conducted through the medium of the researcher, and therefore their identity and positionality will always somewhat shape their research and how they interact with participants.

Regarding my positionality as a researcher, given my identity as a Third Culture Kid, I somewhat identify with the international background of my student participants, yet I hold privilege in being an American citizen and thus do not experience the same barriers to higher education in the U.S. While I have been exposed to certain aspects of the international student experience in higher education in the U.S. through my own transition to living and learning in the U.S., I experience privilege as a result of my citizenship and the fact that my family now lives in the U.S. Additionally, I personally know several of the participants prior to conducting interviews. While these previously established relationships helped create a sense of trust with the participants, I found it important to maintain professionalism and to distinguish boundaries between the official interview and an appropriate time to catch up with participants after the interview, some of whom I had not spoken to in multiple years. By maintaining these boundaries and professionalism, I attempted to maintain my legitimacy as a researcher while still utilizing my personal relationship with participants to create a sense of trust.

In order to understand the impact of the Coronavirus on foreign students, I chose to interview undergraduate international students who were attending U.S. universities during the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. In the interviews with foreign students, I was primarily

interested in hearing their experiences and learning about their decision-making process as the reality of the pandemic unfolded quickly and with great uncertainty. To gain additional perspective, I wanted to interview university staff who work closely with international students, to learn about how universities have approached working with international students during COVID-19 and the trends they are seeing amongst their student population during this time. Lastly, I chose to interview university international admissions counselors to study how Coronavirus is shaping the future of international higher education by looking at the recruitment of international students. In total, I conducted 19 interviews. I interviewed 15 undergraduate international students, three admissions counselors, and one international student advisor. In this chapter, I will describe my participant selection process, the interview process, the transcription process, and the coding process.

Selection Process

After receiving IRB certification and exemption (see Appendix A), I began to contact potential participants. For all the people I contacted, I used scripts that were approved by the IRB. In communication with interviewees, I gave a brief description of my project, included my IRB-approved research information sheet, shared the approximate time commitment, and the topics and themes that would be addressed in the interview.

As my primary focus for data collection was interviews with undergraduate international students, my goal was to conduct 15-20 interviews with this demographic. I chose to focus on undergraduate students to narrow the scope of my research subjects and because I had the most connections to undergraduate students. Since I am particularly interested in what happened to international students in March 2020 when most university campuses closed, I interviewed both

current international students and recent graduates who were attending university at the time. Interviewing both current students and recent graduates gave me additional insight I did not foresee into how COVID-19 has significantly impacted the plans of recent graduates, particularly with their ability to participate in the OPT program.

I found the majority of my student participants through my personal networks. Since I lived overseas for 14 years and attended multiple international schools, many of my former classmates are now international students in the U.S. I primarily used social media platforms to contact potential participants. I initially posted a private post to my Facebook account calling for participants. The majority of the response to my post was from U.S. citizens who had lived overseas and were now in university at the U.S., so they were ineligible for my project but represent another demographic that would be interesting to study in the context of COVID-19. After receiving some response but not enough willing participants, I directly reached out to former classmates who I knew were in universities across the country. In addition, I received connections through other contacts, such as friends, family, the supervisor of the UVM Admissions International Student Ambassadors, and my thesis advisor Dr. Pablo Bose.

As I selected and contacted potential student interview participants, I aimed to have geographic diversity in terms of participants nationality and where they attend or attended university in my sample; however, I did not recruit participants specifically with this goal in mind. Since the international student population in the U.S. is not homogeneous, and international students with similar backgrounds and identities still have different experiences, I did not prioritize geographic diversity in my participants as I could not assume that two students from the same country would have the exact same experience (Heng 2017).

As mentioned earlier, I was interested in interviewing university staff who work with international students. I limited this demographic to staff at UVM because I would have fewer obstacles contacting them. Additionally, my intention was not to compare how staff at different universities worked with international students, but rather to see more broadly how COVID-19 has changed the ways international students interact with university staff. My plan was to interview multiple people who work in UVM's Office of International Education (OIE), including the Director, the Associate Director, and multiple International Student Advisors. I wanted to hear a variety of perspectives from the OIE to understand both the administrative and advising sides of the office. I had some difficulty finding participants from the OIE and was not able to interview as many people as I would have liked. After emailing the Director about my research, I was told that I would hear from one of their colleagues soon. After emailing the Associate Director, I was put in contact with one of the International Student Advisors and told that most of the staff would have similar perspectives. As a result, I was only able to interview one International Student Advisor.

The last group I interviewed were three international admissions counselors. I had originally intended to interview three counselors from three specific schools – one from a medium-sized, public research university; one from a large, private research university; and one from a small, liberal-arts college. However, I was not able to get in contact with anyone from the second two schools, the large, private research university or the small liberal-arts college, both by emailing them personally or through connections in the UVM Admissions Office. Since I work as a Student Admissions Representative at UVM, I have worked with many UVM admissions counselors, including staff who oversee international admissions. Using my contacts in the Admissions Office, I was able to interview two counselors at large, public research

universities, one in the Midwest and one in the Mountain West region, in addition to the counselor from a mid-sized public research university in New England.

Interview Process

I conducted interviews from December 2020 to January 2021. I conducted semi-structured interviews with all of my participants to allow the interviews to be content-focused and to provide flexibility to “deal with the issues or areas judged... to be relevant to the research question” (Dunn 2010, 110). The questions I asked international students addressed the closure of universities, impacts of remote learning on their studies, and support network. My questions for the international student advisor discussed topics such as the support given to international students and how advising has changed during the pandemic. In my interviews with international admissions counselors the topics of my questions were the recruitment of international students, the value of international students, and how the pandemic is changing the recruitment process. I printed out a question sheet for each interview and took some notes on it throughout the interview. Since I recorded each interview, I took occasional notes, allowing me to record non-verbal data or non-audible occurrences and take note of prominent themes throughout the interview, giving me the opportunity to be more present and concentrated in my interview (Dunn 2010). The semi-structured nature of my interviews allowed me to order the questions based on how the conversation flowed, skip over questions that the participant had already answered earlier, and to ask follow-up questions. At the start of every interview, I asked the participant for their consent to record the interview for transcription purposes and would ask for consent again once I started recording to have their verbal consent on record. Since I was conducting interviews during COVID-19 and many of my participants were in different locations across the

world, all of my interviews were conducted over the video platforms Microsoft Teams and Zoom.

For my interviews with foreign students, I asked questions about demographic information and then their experience being an international student during COVID-19. The demographic questions gathered data about their backgrounds, including their nationality, where they attend university, what year they are in, and where their family lives. Then, I asked participants about how they and their university reacted to the spread of the Coronavirus. I found that students who decided to stay in the U.S. and students who left the country had very different experiences, so I reorganized the order of my questions depending on where the participant went at the onset of the pandemic. In my interviews with students, I asked them about their decision-making process as universities closed, the transition to online remote instruction, and where they have found support throughout the pandemic.

The questions for my interviews with admissions counselors and the OIE staff, were similar in nature. I asked each interviewee about their position and how they interact with international students in their role. Then, I asked questions about how their interactions with foreign students have changed as a result of COVID-19. I also asked OIE staff about the support and resources UVM provided to international students during the pandemic and about UVM and the OIE's response at the onset of the Coronavirus. On the contrary, I asked admissions counselors about international student recruitment, how it has changed with COVID-19, and what they think the future of international student recruitment might look like. Please see Appendix B for the full list of my interview questions.

Transcription and Coding Process

After I completed my interviews, I directly transcribed them. Since I was working with a large volume of interviews, I transcribed them using the online transcription service Otter. After the interviews were automatically transcribed, I reviewed each transcription for errors and corrected them. The process of re-listening to each interview allowed me to review the interviews and the initial themes I noticed before I began coding.

I coded for both descriptive and analytic codes. I included descriptive codes to answer “‘who, what, where when, and how’ types of questions... [including] demographic categories, ... site categories, ... [and] scale identifiers” (Cope 2010, 283). Since my participants had various backgrounds and stories, I thought it was important to use descriptive codes to be able to build profiles for each participant that recognizes how their various identities influenced their experience during COVID-19. On the contrary, using analytic codes allowed me to organize and analyze the data based on themes I was interested in and “dig deeper into the processes and context of phrases or actions” (ibid). I coded each transcript using the highlighting tool and the colors used corresponded with the colors of each code in my codebook.

For each interview population I had different codes. In my interview with international students, the analytic themes I coded for were *movement, challenges and obstacles, academics, university action, comfort, and reflection*. For *movement*, I was interested in if students’ movement was restricted, limited, or determined or if they had freedom in where they went and how they got there. Movement seeks to answer my questions *where did students go, how did they get there, and if they left, what factors caused that decision?* I divided the code *challenges* into multiples sub-codes: *COVID related challenges, international student challenges, and government policy restrictions*. At times, it was difficult to discern the different kinds of

challenges students experienced. Some Coronavirus related changes were intrinsically tied to other challenges of being an international student. Additionally, sometimes it was difficult to discern whether data should be coded as *government policy restrictions* or *movement*, because for some students the policy restrictions meant their movement was restricted; however, it was typically fairly clear whether the data was more about movement or policy. The *academics* code highlights the impacts of COVID-19 on the academic experience and addresses the question, *how did the Coronavirus pandemic change how we conceive higher education and have these changes impacted international students differently than domestic students?* Using *university action*, I coded for the ways in which students felt supported or unsupported by their school. Additionally, this code addresses the question, “how did universities respond to COVID-19 and in what ways did their response differ between domestic and international students?” The code *comfort* highlights how many of the interviewees perceived their own experiences through relative comfort in comparison with other international students, noting that they felt lucky, privileged, or safe, as well as finding relational comfort through networks of support from family, friends, and their university. My last code is *reflection*, which I added later in my coding process as I found that most participants reflected on their experience, especially on the emotional toll of being a foreign student during the Coronavirus, and that these reflections did not fit under the subcodes *COVID related challenges* or *international student challenges* because they were contemplations on the intersection of the two types of challenges identified.

For my interviews with admissions counselors, I had different codes as the interview questions stemmed from other guiding research questions. My goal for these interviews was for them to be more informational in comparison to my focus on other participants’ lived experiences. Although the admissions counselors shared their personal experiences in

recruitment during COVID-19, my questions were directed at learning specifically about how universities recruit and interact with prospective international students. My codes for the interviews with admissions counselors were *virtual reality*, *recruitment*, *differences*, and *future*. As we have all been living and working in an increasingly virtual world during the pandemic, our new virtual reality is particularly important for international admissions counselors who typically spend part of the year travelling to different high schools across the world to recruit students. The code *virtual reality* looks at the ways that universities interact with and recruit international students have changed. *Recruitment* looks at the strategies universities use to recruit international students as well as the kinds of interactions admissions counselors have with prospective international applicants. The code *differences* highlighted the different challenges international students face as well as how the foreign student population differs from domestic students in the recruitment and application process. My last code is *future*, specifically the future of higher education and international student recruitment. We do not currently know what a post-pandemic world looks like yet, and so the future reality of higher education is slowly unfolding as university staff and students navigate COVID-19.

The last demographic I interviewed was a staff member from UVM's OIE. I did not create specific codes for this particular interview because there was only one participant in this demographic. However, I processed the data by reading through the interview and highlighting the major themes they mentioned. As I will further discuss in my findings chapter, the interviewee spoke primarily about the role of the OIE in the international student experience at UVM, immigration and visa policy implications for international students, and how the OIE responded to COVID-19.

Since I was working alone, there was no one on my research team to collaborate with on my codebook and to verify my coding. To ensure I was not missing important themes and to test the strength of my interpretations (Cope 2016), I did a theme check with two other students writing theses and using interviews as a method. We read a few of each other's codebooks and transcripts, then met and gave each other feedback. Receiving feedback from peers ensured that I was not coding with confirmation bias. My process of coding and organizing my data will help inform my analysis on the lived experiences and vulnerabilities of international students during a pandemic as well as other key perspectives on the issue.

Limitations

There were some limitations and challenges I faced when I conducted my interviews. A challenge that I encountered was conducting interviews online over Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Conducting calls on an online platform can be challenging for anyone given the need for a strong internet connection. While I did not run into many significant internet issues during my interviews, there were moments when someone needed to repeat themselves, either because the interviewee missed the question, or they needed to repeat part of their answer. Additionally, as I was transcribing there were times when the participant's audio cut out briefly and it was not noticeable on the call but was evident in the recording; however, these issues were infrequent. Yet, if the interviews had been conducted in person, there still would have been potential for audio issues or challenges depending on the location of the interview.

In my process of transcribing, coding, and writing, I struggled with deciding how to refer to my participants. Since I interviewed a large volume of participants and interviewed multiple different demographics, I did not want to call my participants by Participant A, Participant B,

etc. I also believed that simply referring to each participant by a letter is quite impersonal and because I am studying people's lived experiences, I wanted to honor each of their unique and individual stories. However, I was hesitant to use pseudonyms as names "imply particular ethnic, religious, class and age-based connotations, which will inevitably be transferred to any pseudonyms" (Clark 2006, 6). I did not want to erase a participant's background by using a pseudonym, but I also did not want to impose any cultural meanings of a pseudonym on the participants. To identify my participants, I decided to refer to them based on their demographic, whether they are a student, admissions counselor, or staff member, and the location of their university. Although this method of naming is not the most concise, at the time it was the decision I was most comfortable and satisfied with. Later, as I was reviewing an article I had read earlier in my research, I saw that the authors asked their interview participants, to choose their own pseudonym (Heng 2017). I wish I had thought of this earlier in my process so that as I conducted my interviews, I could have asked participants to choose their own pseudonym so that it would be easier to refer to them in my writing and I would not impose cultural and social connotations to my participants by choosing one myself.

Lastly, my interviews were very rich in data and I struggled with distilling everyone's stories and thoughts into one research paper. While I attempted to honor every student's experience and background, it is not possible to fully represent every participant's story within the frame of this kind of research. If I had more time, I would have liked to develop an additional final product that could fully explore and share each international students' unique story.

Findings

International Student Participants

Student Profiles

In this research, I seek to honor the stories and experiences that participants shared with me. The unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic was a time of stress, chaos, and uncertainty for many people around the world, and I wish to acknowledge and honor the backgrounds, stories, and lives of each of the international students I interviewed. Additionally, throughout the interview process I found that participants' backgrounds, nationalities, academic year, and where their family lived played a large role in their pandemic experience and their resulting decision-making process. Below I will share a profile of each student to provide further context to my later analysis, then discuss my international student sample and how it compares to the national international student population, then I will describe the most important themes and findings from the interview data.

Participant 1

My first participant is a student in their final year at a private research university in New England. They grew up moving often and during their childhood lived in Japan, Egypt, and China before returning to India, where they are from and where their family lives. At the time of the interview, this participant was at home with their family in India.

Participant 2

This participant is studying at a private Jesuit university in the West Pacific and is in their final year. They hold both Indian and New Zealand citizenship and their family lives in India, where they conducted the interview from.

Participant 3

The next participant is a recent graduate from a public research university in New England. At the time of the interview, they were living with their family in their country of origin, Thailand.

Participant 4

This participant is from Burkina Faso, where their family lives, and is a student in their third year at a private research university in the South Atlantic. At the time of the interview, they were calling from the city where they attend school.

Participant 5

My next participant is a student at a private liberal arts college in the South Atlantic. Born and raised Vietnam, they are in their third year and were calling from their family home in Vietnam for the interview.

Participant 6

This participant is in their final year at a private research university in the Middle Atlantic. Originally from South Korea, they also lived in Turkey and Taiwan during their childhood. At the time of the interview, they were with their family in South Korea.

Participant 7

Originally from China, this participant is in their third year at a public research university in New England. Their family lives in China; however, they were calling from the city where they attend university at the time of the interview.

Participant 8

The next participant is in their third year studying at a public research university in New England. They are from China, where their family lives, but were calling from the city where they attend school at the time of the interview.

Participant 9

In their final year studying at a private liberal arts college in the Midwest, this participant is originally from Mexico, where their family lives; however, the participant completed high school in the Netherlands. At the time of the interview, they were calling from the city where they attend university.

Participant 10

This participant is a recent graduate from a private research university in the South Atlantic. They hold citizenship to New Zealand and Singapore. As a child, the participant also lived in Hong Kong, Australia, England, and India. They have family in both Singapore and Kenya, and were calling from the U.S.

Participant 11

The next participant is a recent graduate at a public research university in New England. At the time of the interview, they were living with their family in their country of origin, China.

Participant 12

Originally from South Korea, this participant is in their final year studying at a private research university in the Middle Atlantic. Their family lives in South Korea, where they called from at the time of the interview, but they also lived in India for much of their childhood.

Participant 13

This participant is in their final year at a private research university in the Middle Atlantic. Originally from India, they also lived in the U.S., United Kingdom, Singapore, and Dubai. The participant called from their family home in India at the time of the interview.

Participant 14

The next participant is originally from the Philippines and is in their third year at a public research university in the West Pacific. Their parents live in Indonesia and the participant spent their childhood in the Philippines, Japan, Sri Lanka, and India. At the time of the interview, they called from the city where they attend school

Participant 15

Originally from Australia, this participant is in their final year studying at a private Catholic research university in the West Pacific. They spent about half of their childhood in Australia, and the other half in Hong Kong. The participant's family lives in Germany and Hong Kong and at the time of the interview they were calling from Hong Kong.

Sample

As I mentioned in my methodology chapter, geographic diversity was not a priority as I recruited student participants; however, at the end of my recruitment process, I had found participants that had a strong international and domestic spread in terms of nationality and university location. In total, participants held citizenship to 11 different countries and attend or studied at universities in 8 different states. Figure 2 illustrates where participants were from and the number of students from each country represented in the study. Additionally, Figure 2

includes the total number of students from each country studying in the U.S. and their rank of number of students according to data from the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) taken in September 2020. In order to recognize that the question *where are you from?* can be difficult for many people and does not always reflect someone's complex relationship with nationality, identity, and sense of belonging, in my interviews I asked two separate questions to address this topic. First, I asked participants *What is your nationality?* I followed this question by asking *Where did you grow up or where did you spend your childhood?* Figure 2 represents only a small aspect of the participant's identity, as many students held multiple citizenships and many participants did not spend their entire childhood in one country.

Figure 2 – Table of Nationalities Represented in Sample in Comparison to National Data

Country	Number of Participants	Number of Students Nationally	Rank Nationally
China	3	276,126	1
India	3	159,338	2
South Korea	2	43,792	3
New Zealand	2	1,464	61
Thailand	1	6,730	20
Burkina Faso	1	524	99
Vietnam	1	25,824	5
Mexico	1	12,533	12
Singapore	1	3,106	37
Philippines	1	4,221	30
Australia	1	3,780	33

Source: SEVIS. 2020. "September 2020 SEVIS Data Mapping Tool Data." Department of Homeland Security. Accessed 22 March 2021. <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/sevis-data-mapping-tool/january-2020-sevis-data-mapping-tool-data>

The sample is somewhat representative of recent international student demographic trends in the U.S. In my sample, there were multiple students from the top three countries of origin in the U.S., China, India, and South Korea. The countries represented were skewed towards Asian countries, with 80% of my participants being of Asian nationality. Since I primarily utilized my personal network to recruit participants, it is not surprising that more than

half of the countries represented in my sample are in Asia since I lived in the region for most of my life. However, this is also representative of national data as almost 74.93% of international students in the U.S. in September 2020 were from Asia (SEVIS 2020c).

It was important to me that I recruited participants from multiple universities as one of my research questions was *how did universities respond to COVID-19 and how did they support international students at this time?* Figure 3 shows the different U.S. regions where participants attended university. While there were 8 different states represented, to maintain confidentiality I will be identifying university location by region as designated by the U.S. Census Bureau according to the most recent census data available from 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

Figure 3 – Participant University Location by Region in Sample

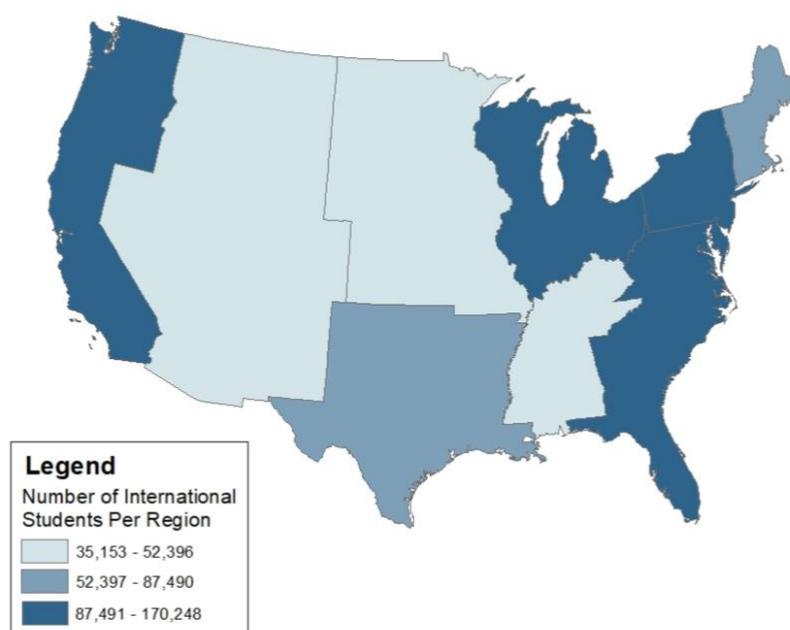
Region	Number of Interview Participants	Number of International Students	Rank Nationally
New England	5	87,490	5
Pacific	3	168,488	2
South Atlantic	3	143,044	3
Middle Atlantic	3	170,248	1
East North Central	1	122,852	4
West South Central	0	80,824	6
West North Central	0	52,396	7
Mountain	0	43,722	8
East South Central	0	35,153	9

Source: SEVIS. 2020. "September 2020 SEVIS Data Mapping Tool Data." Department of Homeland Security. Accessed 22 March 2021. <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/sevis-data-mapping-tool/january-2020-sevis-data-mapping-tool-data>

The locations of universities represented in the sample is fairly representative of national trends. The sample included participants attending university in all four regions of the U.S., Northeast, Midwest, West, and South. The three regions with the most foreign students are the Middle Atlantic (170,248 students), the Pacific (168,488 students) and the South Atlantic (143,044 students) (SEVIS 2020c) and in my sample participants attended university in the top five

regions for international students. Figure 3 shows the number of international students in each region using data from September 2020 and Figure 4 illustrates this data as a map.

Figure 4 – Map of Number of International Students per Region



Note: The Pacific region includes numbers from the states of Hawaii and Alaska

Source: SEVIS. 2020. "September 2020 SEVIS Data Mapping Tool Data." Department of Homeland Security. Accessed 22 March 2021. <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/sevis-data-mapping-tool/january-2020-sevis-data-mapping-tool-data>

Movement

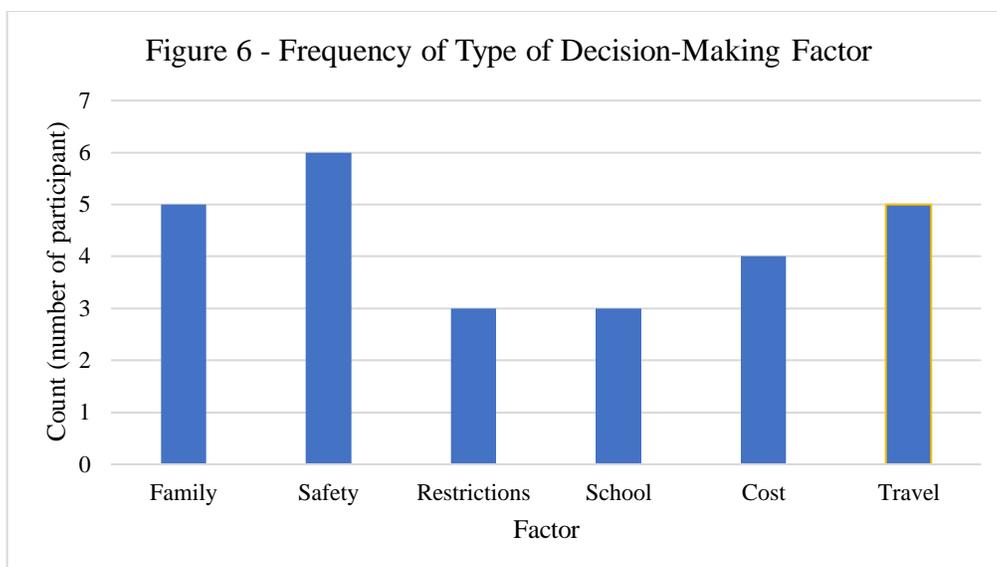
One of the first concepts I wanted to understand was movement, because the initial question that sparked my thesis topic was *what happened to international students when universities closed and where did they go?* The three subcodes for *movement* were *restricted movement*, *the travel process*, and *decision making*. The codes *travel process* and *decision making* are more descriptive codes where participants shared what their journey leaving their

university was like and the primary factors that caused them to stay or leave their school. The travel process for every student looked incredibly different; however, four students experienced difficulties getting flight tickets to return home. Three of the students who experienced issues with flights left later in the pandemic, in the months of April and May, whereas the participants who left the U.S. earlier in the pandemic in March experienced significantly fewer problems. The last participant who experienced flight issues was studying abroad at the time, which I will discuss later in this section. Figure 5 illustrates where students were living at the start of the pandemic and where they went when their universities closed.

Figure 5 – Movement of Interview Participants and Their Destination

Type of Housing	Movement	Destination
On campus	Left	India
On campus	Stayed then left in May	India
On campus	Stayed	School
Off campus	Stayed then left in April	Thailand
Off campus	Stayed then left in April	Korea
On campus	Left	Vietnam
On campus	Left	Elsewhere in the U.S.
Abroad	Left	Mexico
On campus	Stayed then left in April	China
Off campus	Stayed	School
Off campus	Stayed	School
Off campus	Stayed	School
On campus	Left	India
Off campus	Stayed	School
Off campus	Left	Hong Kong

There were six primary decision-making factors for students: family, safety, restrictions, school, cost, and travel. The factors that caused a student to either leave or stay were not consistent across the entire sample and did not correlate with where a student was from or their living situation at the time of the onset of the pandemic. Figure 6 illustrates the frequency each type of decision-making factor was mentioned by participants within the entire sample.



The most frequently mentioned factors were safety, family, and travel. As these are broad categories, the specific reasons students either left or stayed varied. For example, for some students who left, they perceived safety in terms of COVID-19 at their university in comparison to at home with their families. For some participants, they chose to leave so that they could be with family or because their family wanted them home, while other students stayed at their university so that they would not have the possibility of getting their family sick. However, all students who mentioned travel gave the same reason, discussing how they did not want to travel a long distance in the midst of a pandemic. For cost, it was primarily divided between students evaluating the cost of flights and the cost of living at their university, and the money wasted or saved by staying or leaving their school. Restrictions were not as large of a concern or issue for participants as only three students' choices were influenced by them. For two participants, they chose to stay in the U.S. because of restrictions set by the countries where their family lived, and one student was forced to return home because of the restrictions where they were studying abroad in 2020 and they were forced to evacuate. Lastly, three participants said the primary reason for their decisions was school. For two students, they wanted to be able to return to

campus to take their classes in person when their university reopened, while the other student did not want to disrupt their studies by returning home and learning in a different environment.

Coding for *restricted movement*, it was not as prominent of a theme as I had expected. Only seven of the interviewees discussed restricted or determined movement by outside forces. The participant who mentioned restricted movement the most was a participant from a private liberal arts college in the Midwest who had been studying abroad in Europe during the onset of the pandemic. Due to their particular circumstances, they experienced the most restrictions in the process of trying to go home to Mexico because during their journey home borders were closing and flights were being halted around the world. As briefly mentioned in my methodology chapter, the codes *restricted movement* and *government restrictions* overlap somewhat, therefore the specific code *restricted movement* might have appeared less frequently in the data as I may have attributed the data to the code *government restrictions*.

Challenges and obstacles

One of the most important codes was *challenges and obstacles* as it most directly relates to my primary research question *how did COVID-19 expose the vulnerabilities of international students?* because it highlights the specific challenges that international students face, either due to COVID-19, their identity, or government policy and restrictions either in the U.S. or at home. These three factors shaped my subcodes *COVID-19 related challenges*, *international student challenges*, and *government policy*.

As many of the participants mentioned, everyone has been impacted by the Coronavirus and had to deal with it in their own ways, including international students. Many of the students discussed the challenge of having to change the way they socialize and the heightened

uncertainty of COVID-19. A participant from a private liberal arts college in the Midwest said about the uncertainty, “you don’t know how to prepare in a situation like this because it was every time it was changing, it was never like, a predictable situation [sic].” Additionally, some students mentioned that their family’s source of income had been affected by COVID-19, which ended up playing a role in their decision to return home. For a student who graduated in May 2020 from a public research university in New England, the pandemic had a significant impact on their future. Originally, they had planned to attend graduate school in the U.S.; however, they changed their plans and returned home to China. Talking about their future plans, they said, “I feel everything happens so quickly. I even have no time to think too much to respond to those changes... I even still don’t know what I should do next... I may cannot go to Japan next year. If I cannot go there... I will waste half a year and did nothing [sic].” Similarly, other students discussed experiencing challenges trying to find a job during a pandemic and feeling like they have wasted time. The difficulties that international students faced pertaining to the Coronavirus were similar to what many people around the world have experienced during the pandemic; however, foreign students experience additional challenges due to their identity as international students.

The participants expressed many of the additional challenges they experience as international students during their higher education experience in the U.S. The various challenges of being an international student expressed in the interviews can be summarized in five categories: time zones, distance from family, feeling torn between their home country and the U.S., being a minority on campus and in the U.S., and racism. During COVID-19 higher education has transformed dramatically. An issue raised by many participants was the difficulty of taking classes based on a U.S. schedule while living outside of the country. While many

participants mentioned that professors accommodated them by recording lectures, adjusting participation expectations, and changing assessment formats or deadlines, the majority of students said that accommodating international students taking classes abroad was up to the discretion of the professor. For example, a student at a private Catholic research university in the Pacific West was told by a professor that they could not take their senior capstone course for their major if they were going to be remote because even if courses were online, the professor wanted to have some in person element. Although the majority of students had positive experiences with professors being accommodating to the time zone difference, it was still physically tolling for many students to attempt attending classes on U.S. time.

An issue that was raised by multiple students was the challenge of living far from family. Especially in the time of a pandemic, when health and safety are increasingly important, many participants expressed that it has been difficult being far from family. At the time of the interviews in winter 2020-2021, for the students who had stayed in the U.S. for the entirety of COVID-19, most of them had not seen their family in around a year. A participant who graduated in May 2020 from a private research university in the South Atlantic explained, “if something happened to my family now, it would take me 36 hours to get to them... it feels lonely not being able to see family.” A student from a public research university in New England commented that “domestic student, they have choice to go home on the weekend or a holiday. So they can spend time with family or parents. That’ll... you know, keep them sane... But for us international student, we don’t have that choice, you know? [sic]” Although this theme was primarily mentioned by participants who had stayed in the U.S., it is an important part of the international student experience and the students have stated that the challenge of being far from home has been elevated in the context of the Coronavirus.

Some participants expressed the challenge of navigating their sense of belonging and feeling torn between their home country and where they go to school in the U.S. For a student at a public research university in New England, they explained the difficulty of being from China and navigating the American political landscape, saying “being Chinese we sometimes like, I’m on my own, I don’t represent my government or anything.” For another student from a private research university in the Middle Atlantic who spent the fall 2020 semester remotely in Korea, they expressed wanting to return to the U.S. because it’s where they feel they belong and “international students, have such a hard time understanding our sense of belonging. And I think... going back to [redacted] would solve a lot of mental anxiety.” While international students spend around four years getting their undergraduate degree, they create a home and community for themselves in the U.S., and as some hope to stay after graduating for work, they can struggle feeling connected to two places at once.

For many participants, a principal challenge stemmed from being a minority on campus and in the U.S. Many interviewees expressed that they feel overlooked in conversations about higher education and especially in the context of the Coronavirus.

I wonder if people in general are aware of this situation... Because I feel like everyone talks about online classes... But nobody’s really talking about what’s going on within the international community... And this is just a whole different game... Plus if this wasn’t enough, there’s a lot of social tensions currently in the country. So I wonder if there’s some sort of awareness in everything that’s going on because for me and for my friends who are all internationals, this is all what our life has been for the past year... but some people can’t even like picture it or imagine, you know, what has been [sic].

For many of the students I interviewed, they felt like other people don’t see or understand the international student experience. Once I finished my interview questions, multiple participants expressed gratitude that I was researching this topic and interested in hearing their stories. One of the questions I asked was, *are there any specific experiences or interactions with your university*

that particularly capture the international student experience during this time? A participant from a private research university in New England shared a story of an email exchange with an administrator trying to get their belongings from their residence hall, saying:

I think it just captures the idea, like, that all of the support systems that we do have in place, are usually people with really good intentions and who want to help you as much as they can. But, as an international student, you're in a, obviously in a minority, and most people and most administrators, unless they're the Office of International Students aren't really aware of how things work... So it's just like, already, the pandemic makes everything uncertain. But it's even another extra degree of uncertainty if you're an international student, just because a lot of people don't know how that works and like the visa process, and the other hoops that you may have to jump through.

As this participant mentioned, many international students do not feel understood by their university community. Although I coded for challenges related to the Coronavirus and the challenges of being an international student separately, there are circumstances and occasions when the two intersect.

Many interviewees described their experiences with xenophobia and racism, both pre-COVID-19 and during the pandemic. Outside of the context of the Coronavirus, a participant from a private research university in the South Atlantic mentioned that they always feel like the other and that, particularly during the Trump administration, they were “constantly reminded that like, ‘Hey, you don’t belong here. You’re here because we allow you to be here. Don’t get too comfortable.’” Additionally, some of the participants from Asia shared racist experiences they have had since the onset of COVID-19. One student from Korea who studied at a private research university in the Middle Atlantic said that the first time they left the house during quarantine to fly home, a passerby made racist comments towards them. A student from a public research university in New England stated, “like, being Chinese in this country is not really, it’s not easy, you know? So, try to keep it low key [sic].” For many of the students I interviewed, they experienced or witnessed some form of racism and xenophobia during their time in the U.S.

The last subcode for *challenges and obstacles* was *government policy*. For international students, government policy and restrictions play an important role in their university experience. In the interviews, government policy restrictions were not only imposed by the U.S. government, but many students faced other restrictions or could not travel home. Many of the restrictions imposed by other governments were in the form of border closures, flight bans, and limits on the number and kinds of incoming travelers. However, much of the data coded for *government policy* were in relation to the proposed visa policy by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in July that would have barred foreign students from entering or staying in the country if they took a full online course load for the fall 2020 semester. The sudden announcement of the change to international student visa policy caused significant additional stress for international students. A participant from a private research university in the Middle Atlantic said, “just watching the news was just so anxiety inducing, because you didn’t know what was going to happen.” Yet, for many participants this change characterized the level of uncertainty they experienced throughout the Trump administration as they feared potential changes to visa rules and policies. All of my interviews were held after President Joe Biden was elected but prior to his inauguration, and multiple participants expressed relief over the change in administration and the hope it brought them for their future in the U.S.

Comfort

The code *comfort* was one that I did not expect to use and emerged during my iterative coding process. The code includes two subcodes, *luck and privilege* and *networks of support*. While I asked participants questions about where they found support throughout the pandemic, I was not expecting the theme of luck and relative privilege to arise from the data, and I coded for

it in all but two of my interviews with international students. Many participants processed their experiences and felt relative comfort in comparison to other international students' experiences. Many interviewees described themselves as lucky either in terms of their personal experience or in terms of their university's response to the Coronavirus.

“I was luckily in a position of privilege enough to be able to go home” [sic]

“I think some international students were impacted way more than I was, depending on where they were from”

“[redacted] kicked everyone out, okay. So I'm very appreciative of [redacted] for not kicking out international students”

“So I was lucky enough and fortunate enough to be able to stay on campus”

“I'm probably one of the luckier students. I feel like I'm very lucky that like, everything, the entire shebang happened when I was in my last year of like, college”

“I just feel lucky that I'm an international student in [redacted], because [redacted] doesn't have a lot of international students so they take care of us, like a lot”

“But I guess like, I'm lucky or I feel lucky that at least I have like, other friends and like, roommates that are there to like, also you know, like quarantine with me.”

“I feel like, super lucky to have like, another place to go to.”

For the majority of the students I interviewed, they expressed somewhat of a sense of comfort and safety through acknowledging the ways they felt privileged compared to stories they had heard about other students and schools.

Reflection

The final theme I will discuss from my interviews with international students is one of the subcodes of *reflection – emotional toll*. Although the emotional toll of being an international student during a pandemic is clear in some of my other codes, the theme is critical to answering my research questions and was frequently discussed in my interviews. Thirteen out of the fifteen

participants I interviewed specifically addressed the mental and emotional toll of being a foreign student during COVID-19 and overall, I coded for *emotional toll* over 100 times. The emotions felt by the interviewees included sadness, loneliness, anger, and frustration, and there was great variety in the source of these feelings. For some participants, taking classes internationally caused mental and physical exhaustion as they struggled to live between two time zones. Many students expressed frustration and anger seeing how the U.S. government and public responded to COVID-19, including misinformation and seeing Americans not take the virus seriously. Loneliness often stemmed from feeling a loss of social connection and support as a result of safety measures to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus. The visa policy announcement in July compounded the stress that many international students felt throughout the entire Trump administration as they worried about the precariousness of their visa status. Lastly, several participants from Asia expressed feeling fearful of potential racist encounters. Although the pandemic has taken an emotional toll on many, the specific emotions and fears that international students have experienced during this time reflect both the challenges of COVID-19 as well as the particular difficulties of being an international student.

Admissions Counselors

As discussed in my methodology chapter, I interviewed three international admissions counselors from three public research universities ranging in size. The first counselor I interviewed worked at a mid-size public research university in New England that has an international student population of 6%. Another counselor I interviewed worked at a large public research university in the Mountain West that has an international student population of 10%. The third counselor I interviewed worked at a large public research university in the Midwest

that has an international student population of around 11%. Throughout the rest of my paper, I will refer to the universities by their location as they are all public research institutions, and two out of the three schools are similar sizes. In this section, I will discuss the codes I created for this set of interviews and the resulting data.

Virtual Reality

The first code I used in the interviews with admissions counselors was *virtual reality*. This code was primarily descriptive, as the data explained how each admissions office pivoted to adjust to the pandemic. All three participants described how their offices moved from in person travel to virtual events, college fairs, webinars, presentations, and meetings. The admissions counselor from a university in the Midwest said that one aspect of their work that has not changed significantly since COVID-19 was email communication with students, which was already a significant means of communication with student's pre-pandemic. In my research, I was interested to see if COVID-19 has impacted the questions prospective international students have for admissions counselors and how it has potentially changed the college search process for future foreign students. All three admissions counselors I spoke to answered that some questions from prospective international students have not changed significantly, but that they are receiving many questions about what it is like to be a student in a pandemic. For a participant working at university in New England, they were surprised that they had not received many questions about COVID-19 case numbers and wished that more students asked about it because "we've done such a remarkable job here at [redacted] in keeping cases so low and being able to keep campus open. So usually, even when students don't ask about that, I still try to find a way to bring that into the conversation." For a counselor at a university in the Mountain West, they

have found that the primary change in questions from international students and their parents have been around safety – “safety has always been a concern for international student parents, especially, just because you know, their kiddos are going thousands of miles away. So they just had questions about like, general safety, but now it’s pandemic safety.” Additionally, the questions have a more serious, solemn, and heavier tone than pre-pandemic. COVID-19 has impacted many aspects of admissions work; however, whether it has impacted admissions positively or negatively varies.

Recruitment

An important code for these interviews was *recruitment* – understanding specific recruitment strategies and looking at how admissions counselors work with international students throughout the recruitment process. In my three interviews, each counselor said they do in person visits to schools and participate in university fairs throughout the year, but they all mentioned different additional strategies that they use.

Talking to a counselor from a university in the Midwest, they emphasized their email campaigns using purchased names from the College Board and ACT organizations. They described how these email campaigns increase awareness of the school and resources that they can offer. At this school, recruitment for international students looks very similar to domestic students as they attend college fairs and events at both domestic and international high schools, as well as targeting domestic students in email campaigns. Overall, they said that there is not a large difference in regard to the recruitment of international students versus domestic students at their school.

According to the admissions counselor I interviewed from a university in New England, their university prioritizes making connections with high schools, counselors, and students.

Taking a personalized approach, admissions at this school focuses on the relationship building through in-person travel.

And that's what's made everything with COVID so tricky, is that we haven't been able to work on that relationship building with like, the school for example, or the students really... What we like to do is we actually like to physically go to a school, sit down with a counselor... and just chat... Sometimes it's not even related to recruitment, but we just, you know, have a conversation around what's going on in each other's lives, what's going on in the country. It really helps us to get some really good perspective on what's actually happening on the ground in certain countries in terms of politics, and economics, and things like that, because that really impacts recruitment as well.

The participant stated that in their approach, they get to know both the schools and students on a strong individual basis through their recruiting process, noting the cultural significance of building personal relationships. Additionally, they discussed how working remotely has allowed their office to connect with more students and schools than previously possible because of obstacles such as visas; however, they explained that in increasing the number of schools they interact with, "it's really nice to be able to have that connection. But... [it's] really missing that relationship building piece... which I think is really, really important in this field, especially these days." In addition to discussing their philosophy, the participant explained how their university has recruited foreign students through different partnerships. In the past, the school had two English language pathway programs that attracted a significant proportion of their international student population; however, these programs ended recently prior to our interview.

The last counselor I interviewed, who worked at a university in the Mountain West, emphasized their data driven approach to recruitment. This school values mobility trend data provided by governments and pairs it with information about political and economic stability. In

addition, they mentioned their partnerships with the State Department through Education USA, a network of international student advising centers, and high schools. The counselor stressed their “360 approach” and explained the importance of analyzing multiple kinds of data saying, “something like political unrest can really hurt the economy of a country, even an entire region, and then topple recruitment efforts, or even any business efforts period out there. And so, we kind of have our eyes on several different things.” In addition to global trend data, their university also examines the history of their international applicants and students. Yet, the counselor discussed the importance of looking beyond data at the students themselves.

And in some of those like, trends, you know, might not always seem logical, or... they might not just be intuitive...there’s that big strategic data side, and then there’s also that interpersonal, like, you have to talk to people. And whenever, the moment that we disconnect from the students that we’re serving, we are no longer making the best decisions. Like we always have to, like students always have to be part of that decision and their voices, like hopefully, they’re a part of those decisions. Otherwise, you’re really missing some really great insight.

While the three counselors described different primary recruitment strategies that their school uses specifically for international prospective students, they each use multiple methods of outreach to connect and interact with both foreign and domestic students. Lastly, I asked each participant what their school looks for in international applicants, and each one stated that their international applicant profile is no different than their domestic applicant profile – a student who will be academically successful at their school.

Differences

In my research, I am interested in how international students’ experiences differ from domestic students’, including the application process. In my interviews with admissions counselors, each discussed the different barriers that international students face in not only

attending university in the U.S., but also in the application process. Each participant brought up the different hurdles that international students overcome in the application process unprompted in their answers as well as in response to specific questions I asked. From data coded as *differences*, I identified three principal hurdles for international students: cost, access to standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT, and immigration policy.

Two of the counselors identified cost as a significant challenge for international students. Since foreign students do not have access to federal financial aid like domestic students, funding their education is a significant difficulty for many students. A counselor from a school in New England mentioned how it is especially difficult for public universities to provide scholarships for international students because it is very expensive to fund the scholarships. They also noted how it is less costly to study in other countries, which makes it more competitive to recruit international students to the U.S. Another participant at a university in the Mountain West discussed how cost is a prominent topic in questions they hear from international students who ask about scholarships and whether they can work on campus. Not having the same access to financial aid as domestic students is one of the largest hurdles for international students receiving the same education.

Another challenge for international students, that many schools accommodate for, is access to required standardized tests like the SAT and the ACT. While many universities have become test optional due to COVID-19, two of the schools in the sample were already test optional for international students. According to two of the participants, for some international applicants testing centers are not easily accessible, thus requiring students to travel to take the test, as well as possibly paying for airfare and a hotel. However, one counselor from a school in the Mountain West highlighted the contradiction that although their school is test optional for

international applicants, if they want to be considered for scholarships they need to submit SAT or ACT scores. Cost plays a fundamental role in the additional challenge of accessing standardized tests for admission and scholarship consideration.

The last significant challenge I identified is immigration policy. In addition to the logistical challenges of immigration, such as getting a visa and the different forms and documents required, the polarized nature of the topic of immigration policy in the U.S. creates additional fear and uncertainty for international students throughout their education in the U.S. A counselor from a university in New England described that “there’s always this fear around, you know, students from certain countries and us banning students from certain countries... the fear of ‘can I even get a U.S. visa to come here?’” Another participant from a university in the Midwest explained how the Coronavirus has created uncertainty for all students, domestic and international, but highlighted “it’s uncertain, but imagine... not being part of our culture and not knowing what’s going on, not knowing if there are going to be policies at a government level, at a federal level, that are developed to help or not help them.” The challenges of understanding U.S. immigration policy and its polarization in our current political climate manifests as fear and uncertainty for many foreign students.

Future

The final code for my interviews with admissions staff is *future*, which derives from my interview question *what do you think the future of international student recruitment will look like?* While it is impossible to predict the future, I wanted to hear what each admission counselor thinks international recruitment will look like in the future given the changes they have already seen during the pandemic. Each participant shared different ideas and hopes for the future related

to the obstacles international students experience that they described earlier in the interview, some relating to challenges that existed for foreign students pre-COVID and others pertaining to challenges that have emerged during the virus. For example, the participant from a university in the Mountain West expressed hope that the transition from the Trump administration to the Biden administration will undo some of the previous policies regarding immigration and international relations that they described as damaging and reduce overall uncertainty and fear for international students. A counselor from a school in New England advocated for more creative funding opportunities for international students to address the cost barrier. The counselor I interviewed from a university in the Midwest shared the need for universities to become more flexible and adaptable, specifically in terms of policies and practices such as standardized test requirements for foreign and domestic students. Although it is difficult to understand how COVID-19 will shape university admissions and particularly international student recruitment, there are many issues with the system that existed previously and have only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

UVM OIE Staff

I interviewed a UVM Office of International Education (OIE) staff member who works on the International Student, Scholar, and Employee Services team. The OIE works with two populations, UVM students and faculty studying abroad, and international students, scholars, faculty and staff. The International Student, Scholar, and Employee Services team supports this demographic with immigration policy and procedures, programming, and advising (University of Vermont n.d.). In their role, the OIE staff member provides advising to all international students, including graduate students, undergraduate students, and exchange students, in addition to

working with international faculty and staff on immigration matters. In their interview, the OIE staff member spoke on the relationship between international students and the OIE, the significant impact of visa policy on the international student experience, and UVM and the OIE's response to the pandemic.

At UVM, the OIE is often the first point of contact for international students, and according to the participant, the office often serves as a gateway to other resources for students.

I mean, for any student, not just an international student, it can be hard to figure out kind of who at the university you need to talk to about what type of matter. So, you know, we're the first group of university employees that a lot of these students meet because we run an international student orientation at the beginning of every semester... And so we're the first ones they meet. And then that relationship, I think, carries on, we are kind of the go to.

While a lot of what the OIE staff member does in their role is direct international students to other resources on campus or in the community, another aspect of their work is programming and events for the international student community at UVM, which has been impacted significantly by the Coronavirus. In their advising work, the OIE has continued offering scheduled virtual appointments, online "walk-ins," and providing support through email communications. The programming side has been less successful in the transition to the virtual reality of this pandemic and the few social events offered had a small attendance. In addition, the OIE offers informational workshops on topics such as immigration status or getting a driver's license but the participant did not mention how COVID-19 has impacted these specific workshop events.

While the participant described that much of the work they do is connecting international students to other resources, the OIE itself is an important source of support and provides critical information to international students. The OIE staff member discussed how the OIE responded to the international student visa policy change proposal by the Trump administration in early July

2020. The participant explained how in those circumstances, “I think our response was to provide information and be present as advisors and kind of talk through what was a confusing situation. And communicate to the relevant partners on campus and elsewhere what was going on.” Additionally, they described how part of the work the OIE does is advocacy for international students.

We advocate for international students, if there is some change that is made or policy that is made that would adversely affect our population, or, and sometimes you have to point out times when it is necessary to adjust in order for international students to get what they need... when things like this happen, UVM has a Government Relations Office that we will kind of work with and they will be communicating with folks in the government, whether that’s Vermont’s congressional delegation or other agencies, so you know, we’re often in touch with them about, like, what is our advocacy strategy going to be on this.

The visa announcement in July was a particularly important moment for the OIE during the pandemic and the interviewee mentioned it multiple times throughout the interview.

The OIE staff member highlighted the challenge of visa restrictions for \ international students as immigration is “a big part of students’ lives here and affects what they do and what they can’t do.” With the added uncertainty and challenges of a pandemic, they said that it has become even more difficult to understand and keep track of all of the immigration rule changes; however, not all of these changes have been directly related to the pandemic, some of the proposed changes would still be important in a “normal” context. With changes to immigration policy and student access to applying and obtaining a visa, consistent and reliable communication became a priority for the OIE. In particular, the participant said, “this year has been just trying to make sense of these changes and figure out what is needed to communicate to students and when, because when something is proposed, we don’t always know if it’s actually going to go into effect. And so do we want students to know about it if it’s gonna [sic] worry them and cause alarm?” According to the interviewee, the OIE is the only area of the university

that does immigration advising and therefore the primary arm of the university communicating important legal immigration information to international students at UVM.

The last major theme the OIE staff member discussed was how UVM and the OIE responded to the Coronavirus. They described that the onset of COVID-19 “felt sort of like triage” as the OIE kept track of where students were and where they wanted to be, and assisted students trying to go home or trying to stay on campus. Overall, the participant emphasized how throughout the pandemic empathy and understanding have been central to their advising. They stated that this has been a difficult time in different ways for everyone, and “it’s always important to keep in mind in our work... that there is no one kind of experience... to not make any assumptions about what somebody might be going through.” In terms of communication from the university about the closure of the university, the interviewee asserted that international students received the same information, guidance, and resources as domestic students. The interview with the OIE staff member and the themes raised provides insight into the role of university offices providing international student services and advising and how this type of support system adjusted to the Coronavirus.

Discussion

Pre-COVID challenges

International students have always encountered obstacles during their education in the U.S. As foreigners and a minority on campus and in the country, international students are marked as other (Dorsett 2017; Ford and Cate 2020). Many scholars have discussed how international students are viewed as a homogenous population. Americans see international students as one monolithic group, creating an “us versus them” dichotomy that fails to recognize their individual and unique experiences as part of a diverse population (Dorsett 2017; Ford and Cate 2020; Heng 2017). This concept was reflected in the interviews I conducted. A participant from a private research university in the South Atlantic shared an experience where they spoke Mandarin while on the phone their mother in the grocery store and were yelled at by another customer who made racist comments about taking the virus back to China. Reflecting on the interaction, the participant said, “it made me really sad because I think that... a lot of international students don’t feel welcome in the States and that just kind of really drove it home... I think it comes from always kind of feeling like you’re the other.” During their time in the U.S., international students are labelled as different, creating an isolating experience as well as leading to experiences of neo-racism.

As discussed in my Literature Review, neo-racism is discrimination based on the culture or national origin of the oppressed (Lee and Rice 2007). While discussing their experience as an international student, prior to the Coronavirus, a participant from a private research university in the South Atlantic described the isolation they have felt coming from a different culture and the expectation to know and understand American culture:

And also, like, being shocked that we don’t know a lot of American traditions, or we don’t celebrate American traditions. Or, like, having to live in a country where you’re

seeing everyone celebrate their traditions, but like, when the time comes for you to celebrate yours, like, you're doing it by yourself. And it feels lonely, it feels very lonely.

This student's experience of navigating a new culture while simultaneously remaining connected to their own culture highlights just one site of potential for neo-racist interactions and experiences as international students celebrate their culture.

For many foreign students, experiences of neo-racism often reflect political discourse. America's polarized political climate regarding immigration as well as its foreign relations with other countries shape the international student experience (Glass 2018; Kim, Oh, Mumbauer 2019). A challenge that international students have faced long before the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 is the feeling of uncertainty regarding their visa status. Many of the participants described feelings of stress and anxiety regarding their visa status throughout the Trump administration. A participant at a private research university in the South Atlantic described the anxiety of being an international student under the Trump administration as, "These last four year, under, you know, the administration that's on its way out, you were always waiting for the other shoe to drop... there was always that fear that he would not give out more student visas, he would restrict more visas." For another participant from a private research university in the Middle Atlantic, they experienced racism and xenophobia at "the legal governmental level where Trump is putting out very targeted policies." Although many participants experienced heightened uncertainty during COVID-19, it is not new for international students to feel anxious about their visa status. Prior to the pandemic, international students experienced many challenges as they navigate living in a foreign country and navigating a foreign education system; however, many of these difficulties have been heightened during the pandemic.

New or Exacerbated Challenges During COVID-19

The Coronavirus has been challenging around the world, and especially in the U.S. it has highlighted many of the holes in our social systems and magnified many of the daily struggles and challenges people experienced prior to the pandemic. Similarly, many of the difficulties of being an international student were heightened by COVID-19. Through my interviews, I identified four issues that have been exacerbated by the Coronavirus, and two challenges that have arisen or transformed during the pandemic. The four issues exacerbated by the pandemic are student's sense of belonging, mental health, visa difficulties, and cost; the two challenges that have arisen and transformed are academics and post graduate planning.

The compounded experiences of being labelled as "other", neo-racism, and visa uncertainty complicate foreign student's sense of belonging, which many international students struggle with as they find their place at university (Glass 2018). As international students already grapple with sense of belonging, COVID-19 has intensified this feeling for the students who left the country and took classes abroad, as well as for the students who stayed in the U.S. and lost some of their support network as their friends left the country. For a participant at a private research university in the Middle Atlantic who was a senior embarking on the job recruitment process, they stated that "I do want to go back... because, you know, I'm a senior, so something about being back in New York... it just feels like, you know, when a team plays in their hometown... you want to go back because you feel like it's where you belong and especially as international students, we have such a hard time understanding our sense of belonging." For students who chose to leave the U.S. during the onset of the pandemic, they are continuing with their education from their family home, which has been difficult for some students after creating a life for themselves at their university and then returning home and continuing with their

classes. On the contrary, for students who stayed in the U.S., they also experienced a shift in their community as other international students left, as described by a participant from a public research university in New England:

You know, like, how tough it is to be in America at this point, because it used to be, I do know a lot of my Chinese friend, like international student, they like to gather together because they both... they're all far away from home. But at this point, most of them choose to go back home and just a really small part, small amount of international students still in United States at this point... some other of my Chinese friend, they do feel really lonely. And especially those really like to spend time with Chinese friends, they might have smaller group right now [sic]

COVID-19 has changed the landscape of higher education and impacted both the makeup of the international student population as well as the importance of your physical location during your academic experience.

The mental health of international students was an important area of research prior to the Coronavirus, and it is evident that COVID-19 has significantly challenged people's mental health. In multiple studies, international students have reported higher rates depression and anxiety than domestic students (Han et al. 2013; Kim and Cronley 2020). A participant from a private liberal arts college in the Midwest expressed needing additional mental health resources because of their experience travelling home during the pandemic.

Like mental health, I don't think we have no longer access to that... you have a right to access all of this health service, but now that we're online, I don't think that clinic is open. And I used to rely on their counseling and therapy services a lot. I really wish we had access to that still... I don't have access to mental therapists, which I think I have very much needed throughout this whole process [sic]

After navigating the stress of returning home as borders were closing, this student returned to the U.S. for the fall semester and after they arrived in the country, they were told that their university would no longer be offering housing for international students, leaving them homeless for a period of time. While they were able to find a place to live, being left without housing led to

flashbacks from their experience evacuating their study abroad program in March 2020, and “that sudden change got me like, thinking, I had to take like a couple of days to really take it all in.” This participant’s story highlights how in the context of COVID-19, mental health resources and care is as important as ever for international students who experienced significant disruptions and changes to their lives in a short period of time as they responded to the pandemic.

A significant barrier for international students both in their application process as well as throughout their academic experience is their student visa. The international student experience is heavily shaped by legal, political and social restrictions, including foreign policy and immigration (Glass 2018) In my interviews with international admissions counselors, all of the participants listed immigration as one of the primary barriers for international students to attend university in the U.S. Throughout the Coronavirus, it has become increasingly hard for international students to complete the visa application process due to embassy closures. The difficulty in getting a visa is impacting both admitted and returning students, as they are unable to get their initial visa or renew it. According to the OIE staff member I interviewed, some consulates and embassies are open but do not have many visa appointments or are backlogged with applications that the process has been very slow, and some consulates and embassies remain closed. A participant from a public research university in New England shared that their friend who returned to China during the onset of COVID-19 has been unable to return to the U.S. because they have not been able to renew their visa. Paired with the uncertainty foreign students felt with ICE’s initial summer announcement of the change in student visa policy, the volatility of immigration policy during the pandemic has exacerbated students’ anxiety regarding visa status.

The last difficulty of being an international is cost. The cost of attending university and living in the U.S. is a significant burden for many international students. According to an admissions counselor from a university in the Mountain West, the financial cost of attending university in the U.S. is the number one barrier they see in their interactions with prospective international applicants. In recent years, the U.S. has seen declining enrollment from international students (Fischer 2020). One of the factors in the declining interest in studying in the U.S. is the cost of higher education. An admissions counselor at a school in New England said that it has become more competitive to recruit international students because they are choosing to study elsewhere, like Canada because it is less expensive, or the Netherlands because of its proximity to students from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. COVID-19 has financially impacted many students across the U.S.; however, international students do not have the same access to financial assistance resources as domestic students. International students are restricted in terms of finding employment during their studies due to visa rules – “F-1 students may not work off-campus during the first academic year, but may accept on-campus employment subject to certain conditions and restrictions” (USCIS n.d.). After their first academic year, international students on a F-1 visa may have off-campus employment through three programs – Curricular Practical Training (CPT), Optional Practical Training (OPT) or STEM OPT Extension. However, all of these employment opportunities must be related to a student’s major and depending on what type of employment program they engage in and the length of time they are working, it can affect their ability to work in the U.S. after graduation. These limits on finding a job during their college career makes it more challenging for international students to hold employment while in school.

Employment restrictions in the context of COVID-19 and the financial difficulties that many people are facing is having an impact on foreign students. A participant from a public research university in New England discussed that they knew many Chinese international students that were afraid to get COVID tested because they were unsure of the cost of a test and whether it would be covered by insurance.

And they do not have, because they are not allowed to work off campus... for international students, they can only get money from their parents, they worry about to tell their parents. They like, worry about asking their parents to get some money, just because I want to go to the hospital to get the test if I get the COVID or not because the test fee they do not know how much cost [sic].

In addition, this participant shared that in their personal experience, their family runs a hotel and between February and June 2020, they received zero income. For another participant from a public research university in New England, one of the factors that led to their decision to return home during the pandemic was because of the burden of living expenses in the U.S. as their family's income was effected by the pandemic: "My family took a bit of a hit from COVID. So like, it's not ideal to have like... the Thai level of income, but... they have to support me in this age and stuff like that. So that's when I start thinking about going back to Thailand [sic]." The cost of attending university in the U.S. as well as the living expenses can be a significant financial burden for the families of international students as they do not have access to federal financial aid. In the context of the Coronavirus, which has been a financial burden for many, the cost barrier for international students is exacerbated.

A new difficulty for foreign students that has arisen with the pandemic is academics. While many scholars note the challenge of transitioning to a new academic environment (Dorsett 2017; Heng 2017; Kim and Cronley 2020), the emphasis of the literature is on the transition to the American academic environment. However, during the Coronavirus pandemic, the modality

of learning poses a significant challenge for international students who returned home and are taking classes remotely. Many students, domestic and foreign, are struggling with online learning; multiple participants stated finding it difficult to concentrate and feel motivated in their classes after moving to online instruction in March 2020. Yet, for international students there is an additional layer of difficulty when taking courses from their home countries in different time zones. After deciding to live on a schedule in Eastern Standard Time while they were at home in Korea, a participant from a private research university in the Middle Atlantic described feeling like a zombie and said it took a toll on their physical and mental health. Similarly, a student from a public research university in New England said, “some of my friends who is sophomore or junior right now, they are still taking the online course in China... they cannot focus on their study because they also have other things need to do in the daytime, but they do not have enough relax in the evening, so everything is a mess [sic].” While many participants shared stories of professors providing them with accommodations and were flexible with international students, the adjustment for foreign students who went home was intense and took a significant toll on their health.

The other challenge that emerged as a result of COVID-19 is increased uncertainty in making post-graduate plans. Three of the participants that I interviewed had graduated in May 2020 and the Coronavirus impacted each of their plans in various ways. A participant at a public research university in New England had looked for jobs to stay in the U.S. using OPT; however, since they were restricted to finding a job related to their field of study there were not many available jobs related to their major and they went home. According to a participant from a private research university in the South Atlantic, when international students at their university were faced with the possibility of having to return to their home countries if they could not find a

job within the OPT time frame, they would have had to return home, yet they would have faced travel restrictions in their home country. Lastly, for a student at a public research university in New England, they had planned to attend graduate school in the U.S. but chose to return to China in the spring of 2020 to apply to schools and to get a new visa. Once they returned to China, because the embassy was closed, they could not get a new student visa and decided to apply to graduate schools in Japan instead. The difficulty in finding a job or professional experience in the U.S. appears to not only be limited to recent graduates or those who graduated during the pandemic. A participant who was a current student at a public research university in the Pacific West commented that it has been especially difficult to find an internship during COVID-19 and noted the limitations of finding an internship in the U.S. as an international student given the time restrictions of the CPT program. However, only one participant who was an active student discussed the challenges of finding employment opportunities, so this is a point for consideration and would require additional research to identify it as a trend.

COVID-19 has presented many challenges for people across the world and international students are not the only population experiencing social, financial, and academic difficulties. Yet, the obstacles that international students faced prior to the pandemic add an additional layer to the challenges of COVID-19 and they experience common obstacles differently due to their identity and visa status.

The Future of International Recruitment

Due to the Coronavirus, the university admissions and recruitment landscape has already changed greatly. One particular area of the college admissions process that has transformed as a result of COVID-19 is the requirement of standardized tests. Prior to the pandemic, 1,070

schools in the U.S. were test-optional with one being test-blind, but for fall 2021 admissions deadlines, 1,686 schools became test optional, including 68 schools that were test-blind (Moody 2020). When asked about the future of foreign student recruitment, an admissions counselor from a university in the Midwest addressed the need for greater flexibility and adaptability in university admissions. In particular, they addressed the need for flexibility in policies and practices, highlighting the shift to being test optional for the 2021 calendar year, stating, “I think it’s forcing us to take a look at how we admit students, how we put students through this process, and seeing where we can be more flexible, or what we can change in the future, pandemic or no pandemic.” At the time of the interview, this participant speculated that a lot of universities that became test optional due to COVID-19 may continue to be test optional post-pandemic.

Throughout the course of the Coronavirus, life has changed and continues to change with new information shared frequently. In a report commissioned by ACT Inc., the organization that creates and administers the ACT exam, they found that more than “two-thirds of officials at colleges with Covid-driven test-optional policies said, ‘scores are too useful to abandon altogether’” (Hoover 2021). However, a sizable number of universities in the report are considering test optional or test-blind policies for the future. Additionally, these policies do not necessarily affect international students given that at some universities there are different standardized test requirements for foreign students. These changes impact the way universities evaluate students and reduces the barriers to higher education for both domestic and foreign students.

While changes to SAT and ACT requirements at universities will certainly increase access to higher education, immigration and cost remain significant obstacles for international students. Discussing their hopes and thoughts about the future of university recruitment, the

other two admissions counselors addressed the potential for change in these two areas. The counselor I interviewed from a university in New England emphasized the need for increased funding and scholarship opportunities for international students. In their discussion of cost, the participant's comments about how universities previously saw foreign students as cash cows to subsidize education for other students reflected the evolving discussion of the role and value of international students (Stephens 2013). And yet, while discourse surrounding scholarships, funding, and the cost of higher education in the U.S. is changing, as discussed earlier, COVID-19 has somewhat exacerbated the financial burden of attending university in the U.S. and needs to be further addressed in this new context.

Although competition for international students has increased in recent years as the U.S. becomes a less popular study destination and other countries have become more appealing for foreign students, COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the economy and many universities have lost significant amounts of money throughout the pandemic. Given their role as neoliberal actors and the need for tuition dollars, universities will have to increasingly market themselves to students. Yet, as discussed earlier, universities use international students to their advantage to market themselves while presenting misleading information about the international community (Ford and Cate 2020).

Throughout all of my interviews, the topic of visa policy and government restrictions was mentioned frequently. This quote from an admissions counselor from a university in the Mountain West speaks to the role of the federal government in the international student experience and the admissions process:

I'm hoping and wishing, that this administration, which so far, you know, on day one is already retracting and removing some of these, you know, policies from the last. I'm hopeful that we are more welcoming to international students... I just hope that the process is much smoother on the immigration end because we have absolutely done

everything we could to, you know, accommodate for the admissions end of it, but really governmentally, on the larger scale, hoping that it's easier for them to gain their access.

While universities can be accommodating, welcoming, and accepting of international students, there are larger forces at play – federal visa policy, foreign relations, and political rhetoric surrounding immigrants. Throughout my interviews with international students, it is clear that they experienced real fear, anxiety, and uncertainty over their status as students due to the xenophobic, anti-immigrant rhetoric that emanated from the Trump administration. Although immigration policy is incredibly polarized in the U.S. and a topic of contentious debate, it is clear that its volatility between different presidential administrations is a significant factor to the challenges international students face. It is not yet clear how exactly the Coronavirus has shaped university admissions, the international recruitment process, and the foreign student experience; however, it has posed many new and exacerbated difficulties for international students, but there is hope for positive change within university admissions as well as on a national political scale.

Support Networks

A critical aspect of my research was examining where international students found support throughout the pandemic. The students I interviewed found support through many different venues. For many participants, they found academic support from their professors, who assisted students who were taking classes from their home countries. Many participants described their professors adjusting attendance policies for them, recording their classes, and adjusting deadlines to accommodate for learning in a different time zone. Two important networks of support for students throughout the pandemic were friends and family. Almost all of the participants described communicating with their family and friends as a primary means of support as they navigated the Coronavirus. However, the two networks of support that emerged

from the interviews that I wish to highlight were networks of fellow international students and university international students service offices.

Although scholars have discussed the propensity for the international student community to be insular and the tendency for foreign students to create stronger bonds with each other than domestic students (Dorsett 2017; Heng 2017), in the context of COVID-19, for some students the international community was a critical support network. One of the participants at a private research university in the South Atlantic housed three other international students in a one-bedroom off-campus apartment for multiple weeks because they could not go home but were not allowed to stay in their residence halls. When their university closed, they closed all of the residence halls and the participant stated that many students were left stranded without housing because they were not able to return to their home countries due to travel restrictions, or because of the cost of travel. During this time, students utilized social media to connect international students with places to stay, primarily connecting with other students in the international community. For a student at a public research university in New England, they stayed in the U.S. until April, and during their time quarantining in the U.S. they experienced food insecurity.

We do not have access to the [redacted] cafeteria at the time... and most international student like me do not have a car, and so it's difficult for us to getting food. We can only order from like, Uber Eats, like that. It costs us a lot of money. And we, only thing we can do is to like, looking for other international students who have a car there and if they are willing to take us to the grocery store to get some food and other essential stuffs like paper towels or something.

The participant described how they utilized the Chinese international student network at their university to get access to food through the Chinese social media network WeChat. as well as through local Chinese American groups. In these more urgent and pressing circumstances, foreign students looked inward to the international community to find support from people sharing similar identities. A participant from a private research university in the Middle Atlantic

expressed the importance of shared identity and experiences in looking for support throughout the pandemic, stating,

mostly, I relied on my fellow international students... I didn't really feel like the international student advisor could really help me because they themselves weren't international students. You know, they didn't really go through anything that we currently are going through. So yes, they can empathize, but I think when it comes to emotional support you really want to hear from and relate to people who have gone through the same thing or are currently going through the same thing

Although scholars like Dorsett (2017) and Heng (2017) discuss the strong and occasionally insular international student community in a negative light, emphasizing the simultaneous “lack” of integration into the university campus, it is in times of crisis that identity-based community networks are critical for survival. Even though a university may have a strong international student community, that does not imply that foreign students are isolated from their domestic peers or that they are not fully integrated into the campus community.

Communication and Empathy

One of the questions I asked interview participants was *did you feel cared for by your university throughout this process?* Although students had varying answers based on their personal experience, many students named their university's international student services office or their international student advisor as a source of support, even if they felt negatively about their university's overall response to COVID-19 for foreign students. When a student from a private liberal arts college in the South Atlantic was traveling home, they were able to receive help from their international advisor in the middle of the night as they dealt with issues at an airport, and their advisor continued to maintain contact once they returned to their home country. As a student from a private research university in New England was preparing to return to the U.S. for the fall semester, their international advisors were quick to respond and assist with

immigration documents needed for travelling. In addition, many students shared stories of their international student services office regularly communicating with them throughout the pandemic, checking in with students personally, and providing resources such as town halls and support groups.

International student services were critical for supporting foreign students throughout the pandemic by providing advising, resources, and knowledge as they navigated changes on multiple scales. The OIE staff member I interviewed acknowledged the importance of their role in providing information and helping students navigate a confusing situation. While they acknowledged the challenge of deciding when to share information with students, particularly federal policy changes, to prevent misinformation while also not preemptively worrying students, clean and open lines of communication with university staff who specialize and work closely with international students largely contributed to the positive aspects of many participant's experiences.

Throughout all of my interviews, the importance of empathy was raised by multiple participants. This may seem like a simple conclusion, that we should show empathy for other people, but this research on a vulnerable population in the context of COVID-19 underscores the importance of empathy and how we show that towards others, especially minority populations. While the Coronavirus has presented many challenges for society as a whole, it is important to recognize how identity contributes to the uneven distribution of hardships that COVID-19 has brought on people's lives. The pandemic has exposed and heightened the vulnerability international students on a federal, university, and global scale. In the case of international students, their vulnerable position in the U.S. at multiple scales, federally, within the university, and globally, have been exposed and heightened as a result of the pandemic. It is vital in a crisis

that has disrupted everyone's lives to show empathy towards others and recognize that the pandemic has affected certain populations disproportionately.

Conclusion

It is widely acknowledged that international students face many challenges during their educational experience in the U.S.; scholars have noted the significant barriers that international students face when attending university in the U.S. and how it overall impacts the foreign student experience. Although the U.S. has historically been the leading country for international students, there has been a decline in enrollment since 2016. With increasing competition for a high-quality education at a lower cost and closer proximity to students, many other countries are seeing an increase in their international student population. As the U.S. grapples with its decreasing foreign student enrollment trends, it is forced to also reckon with the effects of COVID-19 on international higher education.

The Coronavirus pandemic has impacted every facet of society, but it has especially disrupted global flows of capital and significantly restricted global movement. During the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, universities around the U.S. closed their campuses, forcing many students, domestic and international, to return home. In my research study, I have examined the ways in which COVID-19 has exposed the vulnerabilities of international students in the U.S. and further analyzed the conditions of international higher education through university international admissions and international student support services. I collected interview data on the stories and experiences of 15 international students, 3 university admissions counselors, and 1 international student advisor at the UVM OIE. In my interviews with international students, I asked them to share their stories of what they did when their university closed as well as what it means to be an international student during a public health crisis such as COVID-19. Speaking with international admissions counselors, I learned about the recruitment process and how different universities interact with international applicants, as well

as the barriers for international applicants interested in studying in the U.S. Finally, in my interview with the UVM international student advisor, I learned about their approach and philosophy to advising foreign students, as well as the response and resources UVM provided to students during the pandemic.

Almost a year has passed since I began my thesis, and the pandemic continues to unfold and how it has impacted higher education is becoming clearer with new data; however, it is still uncertain just to what extent international higher education has changed in response to COVID-19. For universities and policy makers, enrollment numbers are a significant point of focus. In comparing data from SEVIS on active international students, it is clear that a significant number of students are choosing to remain overseas as they finish their education or choosing not to study in the U.S. at all. In January 2020, prior to the pandemic, there were 1,146,012 active international students (SEVIS 2020a). To compare, the data I used in my findings and analysis came from SEVIS September 2020 data, when there were 905,277 active international students (SEVIS 2020c). As the SEVIS data is updated and published quarterly, there is now data available from March 2021, when there were 866,502 active international students (SEVIS 2020b). As time the pandemic has progressed, the number of international students has decreased. My research studies an emerging topic, so it would be important to re-examine the data further into the future when life has returned to a more normal state. Yet, I wanted to focus on the onset of the pandemic and examine what happened to international students as the world stopped in its tracks.

In addition, if I had more time to continue with my research, I would like to explore in greater depth the administrative perspective. Although I was able to speak to some admissions counselors and one international student advisor, it is important to examine further other

administrative perspectives within international higher education. University admissions is historically inaccessible for many students, including international students. The admissions counselors I interviewed provided insight into the additional obstacles foreign students face in university admissions; however, I did not have the opportunity to fully study how crises such as pandemics impact such barriers. Similarly, my interview with an international student advisor provided initial information about university support services for foreign students, yet this is an area that should be studied further. The participant's responses reflected how the university treated international students during the pandemic and given how international students' university experiences have been significantly disrupted, it is important to consider how universities are supporting these students.

There was a lot to glean from my interviews as they were all incredibly data rich. However, the overall conclusion is that COVID-19 exacerbated existing challenges international students faced. The most significant theme in the research was the challenges of immigration and visa policy and how they restrict international students. While foreign students primarily experience restrictions in the U.S., in the context of COVID-19, many of them also experienced movement restrictions from their own governments. One of the most prominent codes in the data was *government policy*, which was mentioned 70 times in the interviews with international students. The theme of government restrictions was also prominent in the interviews with admissions counselors and my interview with an international student advisor in the OIE.

A finding that I found surprising was how students processed their experiences through comparison. The international student network is quite strong both at universities as well as within the larger international community, and many students described their experience as being difficult, but not as bad as other international students they had heard about. Similarly, even

among participants who were unhappy with how their university responded to COVID-19, they said it was still better in comparison to other schools. Many participants described themselves as lucky or privileged, even when they had been through a very challenging experience. This finding illustrates the strength of the international student network and how participants connected with other foreign students outside of their own university. It also shows the diversity of experiences within the international community, as each participant had a unique story to share that they felt was different from their peers

One of the most important findings from my research was the emotional toll imposed on participants' bodies and minds. It has never been easy to be an international student in the U.S., but as participants faced new challenges during the Coronavirus, it took a significant toll on them. Students were exhausted taking classes with a drastic time difference, they were angry and frustrated seeing Americans and the government not take the virus seriously, they felt lonely and isolated being far from family or feeling stuck in the U.S., and experienced fear and uncertainty over their visa status and potential racist encounters. These students have been through a lot, as we all have; however, as the literature shows, this population is already predisposed to suffering from mental health problems. As universities continue to support their students and respond to the evolving pandemic, it is vital that they provide mental health support for international students who have, in many cases, been through a traumatic experience.

Lastly, I want to emphasize one of the more positive results from my research, which was the importance of university communication, advising, and empathy. For many participants, they felt supported by their university through interactions with their international student services and support offices. Consistent and clear communication and resources such as town halls or spaces for processing and reflection offered by international student services made many

participants feel cared for, even if they did not take advantage of all that was offered. In addition, I want to highlight the stark contrast of how students felt about their professors in comparison to the university administration. In many of the interviews, students found support from their professors who accommodated their needs in the classroom. Many participants shared stories of interactions with their professors who would check in on their mental health and safety as they navigated whether to stay in the U.S. or leave. Throughout all of the data, it is clear that participants felt the most supported by their university when there was clear and consistent communication and when university faculty and staff demonstrated empathy towards their situation.

As with any research project, my thesis had limitations. As I mentioned in my introduction, if I had been working under a different time frame, I would have liked to present the stories of the international student interviewees in an additional format. I am not sure what this would have looked like, whether it would be a StoryMap, or a podcast or some other form, but I would have liked to fully recognize and honor each student I interviewed and the challenges they faced. In addition, I think it would be interesting to examine another population in this context, American citizens who live overseas but attend university in the U.S. In my initial outreach for interview participants on social media, some of the first people that responded were American citizens who had lived overseas for most of their life and whose families still lived abroad. Since my research scope was focused on international students, I could not include them. However, this is another population that is incredibly mobile and would provide an interesting perspective. I think studying American citizens who live overseas would also complement my study of international students as it could further illuminate the immigration and visa barriers international students faced during COVID-19.

COVID-19 has been a learning experience for everyone. As our world has adjusted to life in a pandemic, we have learned many lessons about how to support vulnerable populations. The Coronavirus has highlighted the ways that universities fail to support international students during times of crisis. The student participants who spoke positively about their university's response mentioned regular and clear communication from their university as well as specific communication and responses for international students. For participants who thought their university had a poor response to the pandemic highlighted the ways the university failed to accommodate for the specific needs of foreign students during a global pandemic when travel was limited and restricted. University administrations need to increase their awareness of the specific challenges international students face, such as visa obstacles, the cost of attendance, neo-racism, and sense of belonging. Although professors and faculty demonstrated empathy and support towards students, higher level administration needs to recognize that in times of crisis, international student require different support and accommodations than domestic students. Universities need to understand the different role that immigration, the federal government, personal finances, and mental health and wellbeing play into the international student experience. There is much to learn from the pandemic, but a clear lesson is the need for universities to pay closer attention to the needs of international student community.

In conclusion, I would like to share a quote from a participant that I included earlier and believe summarizes all of my findings succinctly:

And I think it just captures the idea, like, that all of the support systems that we do have in place, are usually people with really good intentions and who want to help you as much as they can. But, as an international student, you're in a, obviously in a minority, and most people and most administrators, unless they're the Office of International Students aren't really aware of how things work for international students. So it's just like, already, the pandemic makes everything uncertain. But it's even another extra degree of uncertainty if you're an international student, just because a lot of people don't

really know how that works and like the visa process, and the other hoops that you may have to jump through.

The Coronavirus has brought to light many issues in our social support systems and has had a significant impact on everyone's lives. Yet, for international students, COVID-19 has only exacerbated many of the issues they already faced prior to the pandemic. As we look forward and acknowledge the possibility of more global crises, such as pandemics, as a result of climate change, we must examine how we can better support international students during their education in the U.S. and reduce the uncertainty they face.

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Appendix A: IRB Exemption Certification



The
UNIVERSITY
of VERMONT

Committees on Human Subjects
Serving the University of Vermont
and the UVM Medical Center

RESEARCH PROTECTIONS OFFICE
213 Waterman Building
85 South Prospect Street
Burlington, Vermont 05405
(802) 656-5040
www.uvm.edu/irb/

Exemption Certification - Initial

To: Darcy Eliot
From: Sarah Wright, Research Review Analyst
Approved Date: December 11, 2020
Study#: CHRBS (Behavioral): STUDY00001301
Study Title: The Vulnerability of International Students: From
Visa Policy to the COVID-19 Pandemic
Sponsor: COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
Data Management and Security Plan ; Information
Sheet (12/9/20) ; Interview Questions ; Qualitative
Finalized Documents: Research Protocol Form (12/9/20) ; Recruitment
emails (12/9/20) ;

Note Regarding Conduct of Human Subjects Research During the COVID-19 Pandemic:

As the COVID numbers in Vermont continue to change, please refer to the institution's [Guidelines for Conducting Research During COVID-19 Pandemic](#) to determine what activities are allowed under the different Research Activities. To determine the current Research Activity Level, please check [here](#).

The study referenced above was reviewed by the Chair of the IRB (or an authorized designee) using the exempt procedures set forth under 45 CFR 46.104. While the project is exempt from IRB review, it is required that researchers follow all human subject protection regulations and notify the IRB of any problems that arise during the conduct of the project.

Exemption Category: (2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk)

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
(ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation

Consent/HIPAA/Waiver Determinations:

- Waiver of Documentation of Consent under 46.117(c)(1)

This determination applies only to the activities described in this IRB submission and will no longer apply should any changes be made. If changes are necessary, please submit a modification for consideration of a continued exemption.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Questions for International Students:

Demographic information:

- What is your name?
- Are you currently an international student at a U.S. university?
 - What university are you studying at?
 - What year are you in university?
- Where are you calling from today?
- What is your nationality?
- Where did you grow up/where did you spend your childhood?
- Where does your family currently live?

COVID-19 experience:

- In March when COVID-19 hit the U.S., did your university close or move to remote/online instruction?
 - When did this happen? (when was it announced, when did online classes start)
- Were you living in university housing at the time?
 - Were you forced to leave your campus housing?
 - Where did you go?
- If you were living in non-university housing, did you go somewhere else when COVID restrictions were implemented?
 - Where did you go?
- How did you decide where to go?
 - How did your home country factor into your decision? (level of healthcare, distance, cost of flights)
- How did it feel seeing how your home country handled the virus while living in the U.S. where things have been handled differently?
- What was the timeline of your departure?
- Did you have any difficulty getting to where you were going in terms of travel restrictions?
- How did you find the transition to online and remote instruction?
- Did the move to remote/online instruction impact your studies?
 - Did you experience issues with time zones?
 - Did you experience issues with internet connectivity?
- How do you think university faculty and staff responded to COVID-19?
- How did university faculty and staff respond to your particular situation?
- Did you feel cared for by your university throughout this process?
- Are there any specific experiences or interactions with your university that particularly capture the international student experience during this time?
- Who did you rely on for support during this process?
- The spread of COVID-19 in the U.S. led to an increase in xenophobic and racist incidents and statements. How did your identity as an international student impact your experiences with others during the pandemic?
- Do you think your university has done a sufficient job providing support specifically to international students during COVID-19?

- Looking back, is there anything you would have handled differently in relation to COVID-19?

If they are still current students at U.S. universities:

- Has your visa for the 2020-2021 school year been impacted by COVID-19?
- Is your university currently holding classes in person?
- Are you currently attending classes in person?

Questions for UVM Office of International Education Staff

Demographic information:

- What is your name?
- What is your position at UVM?
- Under normal circumstances, in what capacity do you interact with international students?

COVID-19 experience:

- Has your role been affected due to COVID-19?
 - How has your role changed since March?
- Through your role, how did you work with or support international students during COVID-19?
- What resources did UVM provide to international students in the early days of the pandemic in March?
- What resources did UVM provide for foreign students during the summer and into the fall semester?
- How often were you in contact with students?
 - Through what means were you in contact with students?
- Do you think UVM provided sufficient support for international students?
- Looking back, is there anything you would change about how UVM handled COVID-19 in relation to international students?
- What kind of responses or requests did you hear from students?
- What do you think was the primary challenge international students faced during this time?
- What proportion of international students at UVM or in Vermont stayed versus went home?
- How has the international student community changed this semester in comparison to before the pandemic?
- How are UVM and the OIE continuing to support international students throughout the semester?
- What percentage of international students chose the at-home option this semester?

Have there been issues with student visas as a result of the pandemic?

Questions for International Admissions Counselors:

Demographic information:

- What is your name?
- What is your position or title at (*specific university*)?
- What does your position entail/consist of?

- How long have you been working in this position?

Recruitment information:

- How does your university recruit international students?
- How does your university prioritize recruiting international students versus recruiting domestic students?
- What does your university look for when it recruits international students?
- What benefit do international students bring to your university?
- What do you think are the primary challenges or barriers for international students who want to attend university in the U.S.?
- How has your recruitment of international students changed with COVID-19?
- How have your interactions with prospective international students changed since COVID-19?
- What do you think the future of international student recruitment will look like?