

*Challenges and Success Among International Students:  
What Makes International Students Resilient?*

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**Abstract**

International students face an array of challenges while attending higher education institutions. Among these challenges are the resettlement process of making a home in a new country, developing new relationships (e.g., friends, close relationships), and attending college courses in a country and culture different from their own. Using the grounded theory method, we interviewed international students about these challenges in addition to how they were impacted by the onset and persisting COVID-19 pandemic. We also interviewed a few faculty and staff members about their experience working with international students. Our findings suggested that international students faced a number of challenges in general, including language barriers, discriminations, difficulties making friends, etc. However, they also shared some good aspects in studying and living in the U.S. For example, many international students appreciated that professors in the U.S. were approachable, and many of them liked the university systems in the U.S. In addition, international students were affected negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic in different aspects, including impacts on their personal and academic lives, emotional impact, financial impact, etc. However, they also received support from the university during the pandemic. Further resilience among these international students is because of a substantial amount of support from their home network (i.e., friends and family from their home country), their new friends, and especially their higher education institution. Recommendations to higher educational institutions are provided.

Keywords: International Students, American Universities, COVID-19, Grounded Theory Approach

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## **Introduction**

The United States has high-quality higher education, which attracts numerous international students to come to study each year. In the academic year of 2019-2020, there were around 1.1 million international students enrolled in U.S. institutions (U.S. News, 2020). The number dropped below 1 million in 2020-2021 (NAFSA, 2022). In the 2021-2022 academic year, there were 948,519 international students (Statista, 2023). International students come from different countries, with China, India, and South Korea being the three leading countries that sent students to study in the U.S. In the school year of 2019-2020, 34.6% of international students in the U.S. were from China, 18% were from India, and 4.6% were from South Korea (U.S. News, 2020).

### ***The Benefit of Having International Students***

International students bring valuable resources to the universities and communities in which they study. Having international students come to study in the U.S. contribute to the diversity of the campus and the community. They bring their own cultural background to the U.S. and learn about American culture while American students and faculty can also learn about different cultures outside the U.S. from international students.

International students also benefit the economy of the communities in which they study. International students were often been viewed as “cash cows” in U.S. higher education institutions. Higher education institutions often seek opportunities to recruit more international students, as they provide a source of cash flow (Choudaha, 2017). During the 2021-2022 academic year, international students contributed \$33.8 billion to the U.S. economy, which was more than \$5.5 billion from the year before. International students also supported 335,423 jobs in the U.S. economy during 2021-2022 (NAFSA, 2022). The students themselves help prop up the financial stability of higher education institutions. For all that American universities and higher education can claim about the benefits to international students – exposure to the American way of life, and high-quality universities – these students contribute much to the universities and communities in which they study.

### ***Challenges That International Students Face***

For many international students, coming to study in the U.S. can be a challenging life experience. For example, language barriers are one issue that many international students have experienced. Over 53% of international students experienced language barriers when studying in the U.S. (Chen & Yang, 2014). Although some international students have studied English for many years in their home countries, because the language environment is different in the U.S. compared to their home countries, international students face language challenges such as accents, pronunciation, and the use of academic English (Wu et al., 2015). Language barriers affect international students’ academic life. In Leong’s (2015) study, a student commented that they needed to put extra time into homework assignments because they needed to use a translation dictionary. Language barriers also affect international students’ personal lives. In Wu et al., (2015), a student reported that they had difficulties making phone calls to the cable company to set up the internet. In sum, language barriers have affected international students negatively in their academic and personal lives.

International students also have experienced academic difficulties due to learning styles. Many international students experienced difficulties with student-centered learning and group

work (Chen & Yang, 2014). International students also experienced difficulties interacting with professors. For example, American education values independent learning and self-directedness, but international students who came from China may not be used to independent learning and may over-rely on their professors or advisors relative to American students (Yan & Berliner, 2009).

International students also experienced isolation and loneliness when studying in the U.S., and it is more of a problem for international students who do not have relatives or someone they knew in the local area. Some international students have difficulties making friends with American students (Wu et al., 2015). Because many international students' first language is not English, they may have a harder time making friends with Americans due to language barriers. In addition, experiencing culture shock may also make it hard for international students to be connected with others who have different cultural backgrounds (Ng et al., 2018). Further, a study related to the utilization of university counseling services found that international students did not always have someone to rely on when experiencing difficulties and were not shown empathy by others (Yi et al., 2003).

International students are also often subject to experiencing prejudice and discrimination in the U.S. Some American students perceived international students as symbolic threats (e.g., the values and beliefs of international students regarding moral and religious issues are not compatible with the beliefs and values of American students) or realistic threats (e.g., international students are competing with American students for good grades) to them (Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010). Poyrazli & Lopez (2007) also found that international students experienced more discrimination than American students, and the discrimination also led to homesickness. Taken together, international students may be perceived as threats to American students and experienced more prejudice and discrimination than local students.

### ***International Students' Positive Experiences***

Although international students are facing numerous challenges studying and living in the United States, they also have gained positive experiences. The study abroad experience helps international students with their personal growth and self-discovery. Because international students have access to helpful educational resources from universities, it also helps enhance their intellectual development. Being far away from their families also helps international students to grow up and be independent (Chen & Yang, 2014). By studying in the United States, international students may also benefit from being in a multicultural, diverse environment. It helps international students to be open-minded and learn from different perspectives (Younes & Asay, 2003). Taken together, studying abroad provide international students with opportunities to grow and gain positive experiences.

### ***International Students' Experience During COVID-19***

International students have faced some unique challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic along with some positive experiences during the pandemic. On the positive side, many international students adapted to remote learning well, and even better than domestic students. International students also appreciated the support from their universities during the pandemic (Chirikov & Soria, 2020). Although some international students adjusted well to remote learning, some students also reported lacking motivation for remote learning, feeling disconnected to other students during remote learning, and experiencing difficulties to learn effectively online (Chirikov & Soria, 2020). Because some international students relocated

(e.g., moved back to their home country) during the pandemic, it became difficult for them to attend classes or meetings at their scheduled time due to time differences (Chirikov & Soria, 2020).

Other than difficulties in remote learning, international students were also concerned about their personal life related to healthcare, immigration, visa issues, and discrimination. (Chirikov & Soria, 2020). In addition, Gallagher and colleagues (2020) reported that international students in Queensland, Australia experienced financial hardship during the pandemic, which made them not able to afford basic needs, such as food and housing. Another study also found that international students in Canada experienced financial and emotional distress (Firang, 2020). Another study found that Chinese international students experienced a high level of anxiety, which was associated with discrimination and fear of COVID-19 (Ma & Miller, 2021).

In sum, international students experienced different kinds of difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic, including difficulties related to remote learning, healthcare, immigration issues, financial situation, etc. However, on the positive side, many international students adjusted to remote learning well.

## Current Study

The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of undergraduate and graduate international students' experience in the U.S., highlighting their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the current study, we not only interviewed undergraduate and graduate students but also interviewed faculty and staff who have international backgrounds to gain a greater understanding of international students' experience in the U.S. The current study uses a grounded theory approach for data collection and analyses because it allows us to build models based on qualitative data.

## Method

### *Participants*

Nineteen international students were recruited from a mid-size midwestern private university in the United States. Fifty-two percent identified as male, and 68% were undergraduates with an average age of 27.71 (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participant #	Country	Gender	Age	Undergraduate/Graduate Student	Time in the U.S.
1	Lebanon	Female	50	Graduate	6 years
2	China	Male	19	Undergraduate	2 years
3	Saudi Arabia	Male	30	Graduate	5 years
4	Germany	Male	27	Graduate	4 years
5	China	Female	22	Undergraduate	6 years
6	Israel	Male	23	Undergraduate	2 years
7	Ivory Coast	Female	19	Undergraduate	10 years
8	Israel	Female	32	Graduate	2 years
9	Peru	Male	33	Graduate	2 years
10	Germany	Female	30	Graduate	6 years

11	Spain	Male	23	Undergraduate	3 years
12	South Africa	Male	27	Graduate	8 years
13	Greece	Female	26	Graduate	2 years
14	Eritrea	Male	22	Undergraduate	7 months
15	India	Male	22	Graduate	5 months
16	Russia	Female	34	Graduate	5 years
17	China	Male	27	Graduate	3 years
18	Brazil	Female	25	Graduate	7 years
19	Ukraine	Female	26	Graduate	1.5 months

In addition, we interviewed an international postdoctoral research associate who graduated and currently working at the university, three international faculty members from China, Japan, and Italy, and one staff member from the Office of International Services at the university.

### ***Interview Protocol***

This study used semi-structured interviews. Interviewers asked four main categories of questions: (a) resettlement in the U.S. (e.g., “What has living in the U.S. been like?”); (b) relationship building (e.g., “How have people treated you here?”); (c) adjustment to American University System (e.g., “What do you like about studying in the U.S.?”); and (d) impact of COVID-19 on international students<sup>1</sup> (e.g., “How have you been affected by COVID-19?”).

### ***Procedure***

Participants were recruited via the psychology research SONA system and via emails using snowball sampling. The recruitment emails were sent to the Office of International Services and professors at the university. Data were collected from March 2020 to September 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all the interviews were conducted online via Zoom. The nature of the study was written in a recruitment statement and explained verbally before interviews started. The interviews were conducted by the first two authors. Interviews were audio-recorded using Otter.ai, an auto-transcription software, and lasted between 22 minutes to 50 minutes.

The interviews were analyzed using the grounded theory approach (Chun Tie et al., 2019). The interviews were coded in three phases. The first phase was open-coding, which involved line-by-line coding that put participants’ words into more concise phrases or sentences. For example, one participant said, “I didn't know how to make friends with Americans and even with other international students.” Using open-coding, we coded it as “difficulties making friends.” The second phase was axial-coding, which involved grouping segments into one category at a time for each section of the structured interview. For example, the line-by-line codes were put into a higher-level category called “making friends.” This category included participants reporting having difficulties making friends in the U.S. It also included participants discussing making friends easily in the U.S. The third phase of selective-coding involved integrating axial-coding categories to show how the codes related to each other. For

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<sup>1</sup> Interview questions regarding the impacts of COVID-19 were added to the structured interview because data collection started shortly after many cities in the United States and countries around the world enacted a form of lockdown.

example, the themes “language,” “cultural differences,” “discrimination,” “public transportation,” and “safety issues” can all belong to a core theme “integration/adaptation.”

## Results

### *International Students’ Experience Model*

Based on the themes that emerged during the interviews, we generated the International Students’ Experience Model (Figure 1). This model indicates that the experiences of international students from a Midwestern university in the United States can be categorized into integration/adaptation, relationships, and academic life.

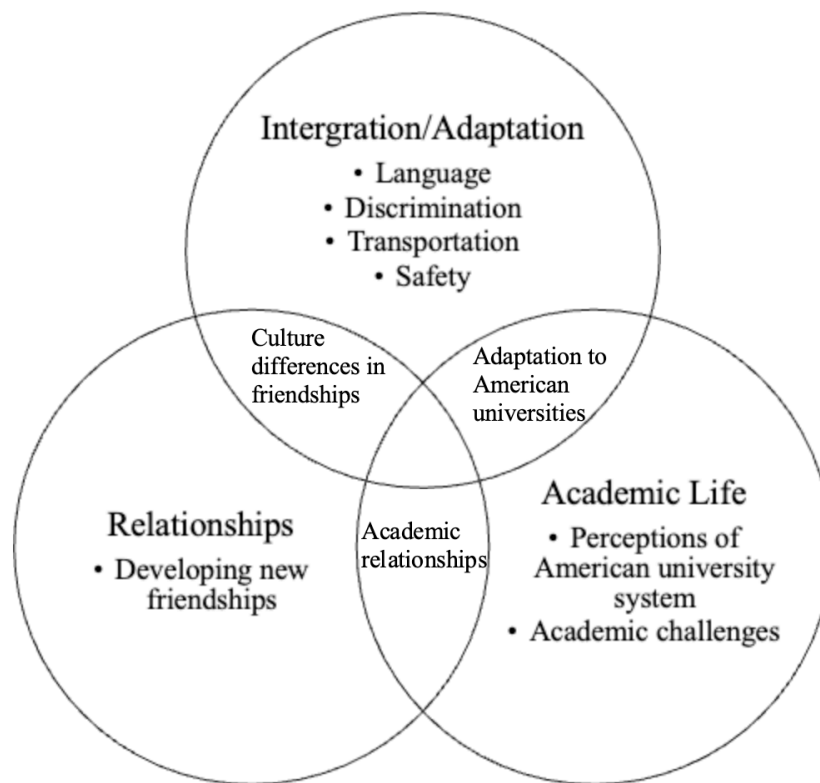


Figure 1. International students’ experience model.

For integration/adaptation, international students have experienced cultural differences between their home countries and the United States. They have also experienced language barriers when communicating with other people in the United States. Because all students in this study were living in a mid-sized Midwestern city in the United States, they also experienced difficulties with limited public transportation, and some students also experienced safety concerns. In addition, some students reported experiencing discrimination on or off campus.

For relationships, it was easy for some international students to make friends, but other international students experienced difficulties making friends in the United States due to cultural differences or having different understandings of the definition of friendships. Most students reported having positive relationships with their professors, and some also

mentioned that their professors were approachable, and the relationships with professors were less formal in the United States than in their home countries.

In terms of academic life, other than having positive relationships with their professors, international students discussed the cultural differences in university systems. Some students mentioned that the universities were more challenging, compared to their home countries' universities. For example, one student from China discussed that it was hard to graduate from an American university compared to graduating from a Chinese university. However, not everyone perceived universities in the U.S. to be hard. For example, one student from Israel discussed that high schools in Israel were harder than universities in the U.S. in some ways.

Other than experiencing language barriers which could be an academic challenge for international students, international students also experienced other academic challenges. One academic challenge is that some international students were not familiar with lab courses, as mentioned by a student from China. In addition, classes were also taught in American contexts, which may not be familiar to some international students. This could be more of a challenge for international students who were taking classes in humanity or social science.

### ***International Students' COVID-19 Experience Model***

International students' experience during COVID-19 could be different from their experience in the U.S. in general, also COVID-19 may have impacted international students in unique ways, compared to the impact on local students. Therefore, we generated the second model using the Grounded Theory approach, which is the International Students' COVID-19 Experience Model (Figure 2). International students have experienced negative impacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The negative impact includes emotional impact (e.g., feeling anxious), impact on personal life (e.g., flight tickets got canceled), impact on academic life (e.g., lack of access to the library on campus), impact on policies (e.g., student visa issues), financial impact (e.g., experiencing financial difficulties), and discrimination against Asian students. At the same time, students also have received extra support from the university. As students mentioned, the faculty and staff were being helpful, and the university also supported students by providing funding opportunities and sending out consistent email updates about the pandemic.

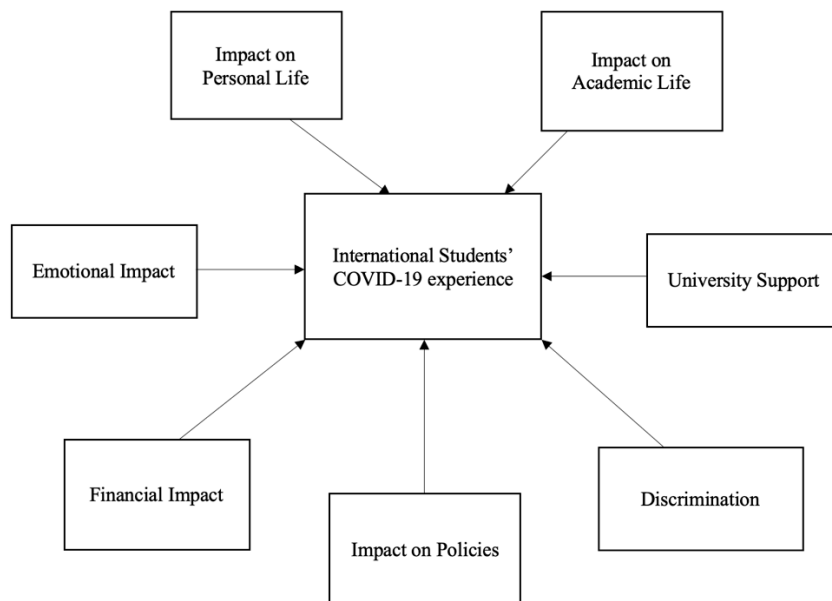


Figure 2. International students' COVID-19 experience model.

## Discussion and Conclusions

### *Limitations*

The study cannot be done without limitations. One limitation is that our university is a private Jesuit university located in the Midwest of the U.S. We assumed that many international students came from middle- or upper-middle class or their respective home government sponsored them, so their experience could be different from international students at large public university. In addition, participants' experience may also be different from international students who live on the East-coast and West-coast. Another limitation is that we used convenience sample and snowball sampling in the study, and participants self-selected to participate in the interviews. The self-selection could lead to some bias in this study.

### *Implications*

The current study has several practical implications. First, many students experienced language barriers when they first came to study in the U.S. It would be helpful if faculty and staff understand that international students may need extra help with their English – both written and spoken – and provide help as necessary. Second, many international students reported having difficulties making friends in the U.S. Universities could provide more networking opportunities for international students to make friends with other students who share similar cultural backgrounds and American students. Third, international students experienced lots of challenges during their time in the U.S. and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The university counseling centers could provide more help specifically targeting international students. It would be beneficial to have a counselor who has international experience, because they may be able to understand international students' experiences better.



In conclusion, using the Grounded Theory Approach, we interviewed international students, faculty, and staff who worked with international students to learn about their experience studying in the U.S. We developed two models based on the interview data, which were the *International Students' Experience Model* and the *International Students' COVID-19 Experience Model*. The current study helped us to gain a better understanding of international students' experience, which could help faculty and staff to understand and accommodate those students when working with them.

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