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International Women Graduate Students: Transition to Public Research Universities in the Midwest

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by

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International Women Graduate Students:

Transition to Public Research Universities in the Midwest

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Abstract: This phenomenological qualitative study explored the experiences of international women graduate students (IWGSs) in transitioning to public research universities in the Midwest. The study utilized Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) to gain insights into the perceptions of six participants during their college transition process. Based on the analysis of data collected through in-depth phenomenological interviews with each participant, three themes emerged that described the challenges faced by the participants during their transition. These themes were: solitary voyage, a dilemma of self-reliance and reliance, and a vicious cycle of limited time and financial constraints. Through the three themes, the study addressed these research questions: How do international women graduate students describe their transition experiences at public research institutions in the Midwest? What student support services do these students believe they need from the university, other networks, and beyond to have a successful transition? Implications for practice and recommendations for student affairs professionals and future research were also provided to better support IWGSs at institutions of higher education in the United States.

Keywords: international graduate students, women, college transition, Midwest

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Gởi ba má và em gái thân yêu

Thật khó để diễn tả hết tình yêu thương của con đến mỗi thành viên trong gia đình, những trụ cột tinh thần và sức mạnh cho con. Con cám ơn ba má luôn tin tưởng vào mọi quyết định của con và luôn ủng hộ con trên chặng đường này. Chị Hai cám ơn em rất nhiều, hỗ trợ chị Hai hết mình và chia sẻ cả những lúc em trải qua khó khăn. Con đã làm được rồi cả nhà. Chị Hai đã làm được rồi em gái thân yêu của chị Hai. Và cám ơn hai bé mèo cưng rất nhiều đã hỗ trợ tinh thần cho chị Hai từ nhà và cho ba mẹ và em gái khi con xa nhà. Con yêu cả nhà và hai bé mèo rất nhiều.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Appendices

Chapter 1: Introduction

Transitioning to college can be a challenging journey for international women students, and even more stressful, particularly for those in graduate programs in the United States (Hyden & Coryell, 2023). This transition is an on-going process throughout a graduate program (Haley et al., 2011). Some studies have explored the challenges faced by international graduate students as well as international women students (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Hyden & Coryell, 2023; Lee & Rice, 2007). These challenges of these students include unfamiliar social norms (Hyden & Coryell, 2023), successful academic performance (Verdone & Murray, 2021), securing graduate assistantships (Githua, 2021), and well-preparedness for the professions (Choudaha et al., 2012). Despite a myriad of challenges, these are just a few examples.

International women graduate students (IWGSs) experience unique challenges as they navigate new student roles, adult responsibilities, multiple roles, and different cultures at the same time (Le et al., 2016; Myers-Walls et al., 2011). A study of the Big Ten Midwestern university campuses highlighted the complex challenges that this student population faces in balancing between their academic and personal lives (Silverman et al., 2010). Graduate students, in general, need to balance their student life (Le et al., 2016), adult life, and new parenting roles (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). IWGSs also bear their primary responsibilities of being international students (Le et al., 2016) and potentially first-generation college students (Kim et al., 2021).

In 2023, the United States saw the highest enrollment of international graduate students with over 467,000 students (IIE, 2023a). Among the four regions of the U.S. (South, Northeast, Midwest, and West), the Midwest region had impressive growth in international student enrollment in the calendar year of 2022 (SEVIS, 2022). The Midwest region was ranked fourth

with an increase of 5,714 students in 2021 (SEVIS, 2021), until in 2022 it rose to the second position with an increase of 26,926 students (SEVIS, 2022).

Even with the rise in international student enrollment across regions, U.S. universities have limited knowledge about their international enrollees (Ma & Garcia-Murillo, 2018). Given the importance of graduate students in the future of the student affairs professions (Bailey et al., 2022), U.S. universities lack specific offices, teams, or graduate student support services for this student group (Williams, 2019). Despite universities serving graduate students, the reports indicated that a significant portion of U.S. institutions, especially 46%, have not yet provided explicit support services to meet the unique needs of graduate students through student-affairs-led graduate support programs (NASPA, 2014; Williams, 2019). Although student affairs professionals were aware of the importance of providing graduate support services, these services have not been effectively incorporated into practice nationwide (Williams, 2019). The growth of international graduate student enrollment and unprepared support services require more actions from institutions in the U.S., particularly in the Midwest.

Several studies have explored available programs, services, resources, and support for international students at universities (Martinez et al., 2021), international women students in graduate programs at public Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Githua, 2021), international graduate assistants (Herzog, 2012), and international graduate students (Verdone & Murry, 2021). However, few studies have focused on the transition experiences of IWGSs at public research universities in the Midwest. This study aimed to serve as a starting point for U.S. institutions in the Midwest to better host and assist this graduate student population, rather than only benefiting from their international status as a means of revenue (Ma & Garcia-Murillo, 2018).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the college transition experiences of IWGSs at public research universities in the Midwest in the U.S. This study also explored the expectations of six IWGSs during their transition into their universities in the Midwest. It addressed a gap in the literature by discovering IWGSs' expectations for student support services on U.S. campuses during the transition. Some research has addressed international students' transition experiences while little specifically has explored IWGSs' transition in correlation with unique experiences and complex situations. The study attempted to add this student group's voices to the literature so as to work toward a better understanding of and increased support for this student group and the international graduate student group as a whole.

Research Questions

The phenomenological qualitative study explored the transition experiences of IWGSs at public research universities located in the Midwest region. This study identified and described the experiences of these students during their college transition and their expectations of student support services at these students' universities in the Midwest. The study was guided by the following two questions: (1) How do international women graduate students describe their transition experiences at public research institutions in the Midwest? (2) What student support services do these students believe they need from the university, other networks, and beyond to have a successful transition?

This study contributed to a better understanding of the transition experiences, the efficacy of student development, and student support services tailored to the unique needs of IWGSs. This leads to the development of a more inclusive higher education environment for this student population.

Research Design

A phenomenological methodology and a constructivist paradigm were chosen for this study design to gain insights into the experiences of IWGSs at public research universities in the Midwest in the U.S. A phenomenological design fully captured various perspectives, concerns, hardships, challenges, and strategies that IWGSs encountered during the college transition. Given my personal experience as an IWGS in the Student Affairs program at a public research university in the Midwest, the population and purpose of this study were chosen to see how much of the experience and college transition impacted an individual's academic journey. Six cisgender women over 19 years old, coming from different countries of origin, who were currently attending various graduate programs at a public research university in the Midwest, participated in the study.

The interview protocol was utilized in this study to allow IWGSs in higher education an opportunity to reflect on their own transition process and ideas of how college transition differed among individuals. Each participant underwent an in-depth phenomenological interview, which lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Data collected was transcribed by the researcher and then analyzed to fully understand the responses of each participant. Themes and subthemes in the preliminary findings were identified and sent to the participants for review. Afterwards, the final findings were revised and connected to the literature and theoretical frameworks for the study.

Positionality

My journey to a Student Affairs master's program at a public research university in the Midwest has given me new privileges, unforgettable experiences, and research and professional opportunities. As an international first-generation student, a graduate assistant, a female researcher, and a long-distance mental and emotional caregiver for my family members back

home, I have gained new identities and roles with valuable experiences. The program and graduate assistantship positions have additionally broadened my horizons by exposing me to research and helping me develop competency areas.

During my time in graduate school, I have completely transformed my ways of thinking, living, expecting, and acting. Despite a myriad of challenges that come with being in a new environment, such as visa policies, microaggressions, limited stipends, job opportunities, racism, and student employee reductions, it is crucial for me to prioritize academic performance and be academically prepared for the world of academia and the student affairs profession. Through academic and non-academic activities, I have realized the important role of student affairs professionals and researchers in helping international students access student support services and address student concerns.

I consider myself fortunate to have my family that is supportive of my choices when it comes to my education, career, and personal life. Unfortunately, in Southeast Asia, traditional values and women's roles still hold sway in families. Women are likely expected to rely on men for decision-making and financial stability as the primary breadwinners in traditional families. Consequently, women are discouraged from pursuing their own goals and higher education. This can result in women being unable to participate fully in social activities. At a young age, I was exposed to the heart-wrenching stories of women from patriarchal societies who were fighting to overcome the societal norms and stereotypes of women.

My different educational positions at international workplaces back home fostered me the different values of Southeast Asian and Western cultures. As an advisor, listening to the stories of female high school students over the years made me realize the difficulties that they face across

generations. Their stories motivated me to help empower and guide them towards discovering their potential and finding their own paths in life. This has become my primary life goal.

This life goal encouraged me to take a step out of my comfort zone and embark on a journey to pursue a master's program. Initially, I had doubted my abilities to deal with imposter syndrome as an international student and an Asian woman student with a second language, shyness, and limited knowledge. Until my class assignments, research projects, and new professional roles in academia and professional organizations, I gained more exposure and confidence to push myself higher.

Economic hardships, long-distance family care, and personal challenges during this transition have developed a more mindful approach for me to interacting with others. Conversations with individuals I met and worked with brought me closer to research questions and desires related to student affairs and international women graduate students. Personally, college transition is a journey with endless and complicated cycles and strict policies that I have to follow as an international student, as well as numerous unexpected situations that I have had to cope with independently. Of course, my family, peers, advisors, professors, and colleagues have supported me in different (in)direct ways so that I could overcome challenges and celebrate my successes. Social networks, cultural engagement, and the environments around me enriched my perspectives. All the important actors made this study extremely meaningful and significant for my future work, personally, professionally, and academically. As an international woman graduate student and researcher, I believe that my study will increase knowledge, turn awareness into action, and find solutions for different institutional bodies at the institutional, college, and student levels as well as communities nationwide.

Definition of Terms

Crisis in the study refers to a personal incident such as a loss of family member or financial support.

Four regions of the United States are based on the groupings used by the U.S. Census regions in the SEVP reports (SEVIS, 2018, 2022). The regions may be identified differently outside the scope of this study.

Mentors are someone who provides support, advice, guidance, and knowledge to a person or student called mentees.

International students are students who have crossed a national or territorial border to study in a formal education program at a U.S. institution outside their country of origin (OECD, 2006). They can work on-campus subject to certain conditions and restrictions (EducationUSA, n.d.a; USCIS, 2024). On-campus jobs had to be related to international students' area of study and no more than 20 hours per week during academic year (ICE, 2023).

International Women Graduate Students (IWGSs) is the term used in this study for helping to promote diversity and inclusion for readers all countries. Although all participants in the study are cisgender women, the term offers potential recommendations and inspirations for future studies.

Female refers to sex assigned at birth while ***women*** refers to all individuals identifying as women, including cisgender individuals and transgender ones who were not born female (Sturgi et al., 2021).

Cisgender refers to individuals whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth as male or female (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Intersectionality is a concept acknowledging that social inequalities are not caused by singular, mutually exclusive factors such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age, but rather by the complex interactions of these factors with each other (Crenshaw, 1993). This concept is also considered as a tool that potentially addresses three important issues related to discomfortable situations (i.e., unjust actions and thoughts, or human rights in any activities) by: (1) identifying the different types of distinctions that form discrimination, (2) improving evaluations of pain, suffering, and injury caused by such these situations, and (3) helping individuals who suffer these situations in finding appropriate solutions (Collins, 2015).

Student support services is used in the study to include university resources, support, services, and programs available for their students at universities. U.S. universities offer various resources, programs, and academic and social support services for their student success and engagement (Martirosyan et al., 2019). The report of Martirosyan et al. (2019) emphasized university support services need to be "more-student-center service structure and delivery" for international students (p. 178). In this study context, the term *student support services* include resources, programs, and academic and social support services for student-centered services in the short term.

Transition is "any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles." (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 39).

Visa status for international students and their dependents

Visa status for international students is a condition that international students holding non-immigration visas (or F1 visas) are legally in the U.S. and attend an institution with a full load of course. Visa validity varies based on the reciprocity agreement between the U.S. and

other countries and can be from one year to several years (Department of State, n.d.-a). An international student's visa can be valid for one entry while others are valid for multi entries. These students have to re-apply for a new visa when they leave U.S. if their visa is expired (UCI International Center, n.d.; The Office of International Affairs, n.d.) so that they can come back to their U.S institution to continue their program. Visa renewal and the first-time visa application can be the same application process based on strict policies and procedures at other countries plus the mandatory SEVIS fee ($350) (ICE, 2021) and F1 visa application fee ($185) (Department of State, n.d.-b; Department of State, n.d.-c). Only IWGSs' F1 visa status and their dependents' visa status were mentioned in this study context while there would be more types of non-immigration visas for international students to legally study at U.S. institutions.

F2 visa status for international student's dependent(s) is for an international student's spouse or child under the age of 21 who is considered as their dependent(s). Their dependents cannot work, are not eligible for Social Security numbers, and are legally in the U.S. as long as the international student maintains actively their fulltime program (Study in the States, n.d.). It means that their dependents and the international student also have to re-apply their visas when they all leave the U.S. with expired visas. Their dependents pay visa application fees as well.

Women /(Gender) stereotype is "a generalized view or preconception about attributes, or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by women and men or the roles that are or should be performed by men and women. Gender stereotypes can be both positive and negative for example, "women are nurturing" or "women are weak"", and women are shyer than men (United Nations Human Rights, 2014, p.1).

Delimitation

Eligible international women participants, who were at least 19 years old and either currently enrolled or previously enrolled in any graduate programs in universities in the Midwest were the focus of the study. Their program levels were important since they had experience that would impact their transition into graduate schools. Therefore, the results of the study may not be generalizable to undergraduate students in the same region or other institutions of higher education in other regions in the U.S. All participants were cisgender women and so the results may not be similar to those of other international graduate students with different gender identities.

The geographic area also confined this study, as it was conducted at public research universities in the Midwest and did not include other private universities in the same region or other regions in the U.S. However, the participants came from different countries of origin with diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Limitations

The study conducted was of a qualitative nature, meaning that the experiences of the six participants could not be generalized to the overall population of IWGSs or international students. The participants described their experiences during a single in-depth phenomenological interview, and as a result, some of their experiences were only recalled as memories. A few follow-up questions were limited to asking and unpacking all participants' experiences that could be valuable data for findings. Therefore, the process of retrospection, while valuable, may be subject to limitations in terms of the data obtained, and the perspectives and portrayals of the participants' experiences may change over a period of time.

Another certain limitation was time restrictions and incentive constraints for recruitment and interviews. The study needed to be completed within a specific time frame to meet the requirements for graduation. The interviews could be conducted during winter break, when the participants and I had a flexible interview schedule with no classes and assistantships. As an international student with a limited financial budget, the timeline prevented the researcher from applying for additional funding sources for the incentives or compensations as the participants' contribution. This impacted the potential candidates' willingness to participate and engage in the study. Consequently, two potential candidates did not register for participation when they knew of the absence of incentives. Nonetheless, participant recruitment reached out to the minimum number as per the recruitment plan through snowballing via various recruitment channels. Time restrictions also impacted the more comprehensive literature and data analysis, which the researcher expected to unpack more complex perspectives related to intersecting identities and the complicated transition process of each participant. The study did not explore in depth the complex perspectives regarding intersecting identities which were much more complicated. Nonetheless, the study process was helpful in informing upcoming research projects.

Furthermore, the participant pool consisted of one master student and five doctoral students. As a result, the perceptions of the participants from the doctoral program and master's program may differ. The data for the five doctoral students may provide a glimpse into the experiences of international women students in doctoral programs rather than the experiences of international women students in a master's program. Similarly, four participants were studying in an educational field, one in a STEM field, and one in an arts and sciences field. Therefore, the data may provide another glimpse into the educational field rather than other fields, experiences in other fields may also differ.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have presented an introduction to the study, the need to better understand this population of students and their transitions, and an overview of the approach I will take. Chapter 2 will present an overview of the relevant literature related to IWGSs, which are a subgroup of international students, the importance of their assistantships, social networks in the U.S. environment, funding and financial dependence, complex multifaceted responsibilities, specialized student support services, and new technology for academic performance. Chapter 3 will provide methodology with the phenomenological qualitative method, participant recruitment process, data collection, and data analysis for this study. Next, Chapter 4 will describe the findings from the data collected, starting with a description of each participant and then followed by an exploration of the three main themes. Finally, Chapter 5 will discuss the findings connected with the previous literature, offer implications for practice, and provide recommendations for student affairs and future research.

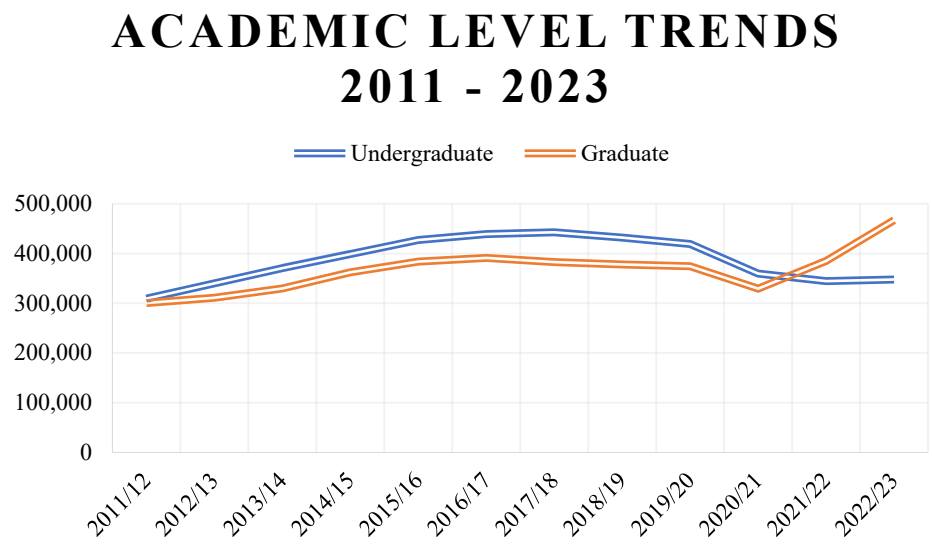
Chapter 2: Literature Review

International Graduate Students in the United States

Institutions of higher education in the United States have hosted a significant increasing in the presence of international graduate students. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2023a), the academic year 2022 – 2023 saw a total of 1,057,188 international students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions. Notably, this report underscored a shift over the past decade, highlighting a higher representation of international students at the graduate level compared to the undergraduate level (IIE, 2023a, 2023b). Figure 1 described the number of international students at both levels from 2011 to 2023 based on academic level trends (IIE, 2023b). Specifically, the number of international graduate students increased from 385,097 in the academic year 2021 – 2022 to 467,027 in the next academic year, as shown in Figure 1. For two consecutive academic years (2021 – 2023), these student enrollments were greater than those of international undergraduate students (IIE, 2023b).

Figure 1

The Number of International Students by Academic Level Trends (2011 – 2023)



Source: The number of international students in Figure 1 was collected from the Fast Facts 2023 – Open Doors Reports on International Educational Exchange (IIE, 2023b). https://opendoorsdata.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Open-Doors_2010-2022.pdf

While institutions in the Northeast, the South, or the West of the United States had been preferable for international students, institutions in the Midwest had become a desirable destination for them since 2022. It was indicated that among these four regions of the United States, the Midwest enrolled 11.5 percent more international students in the calendar year 2022 than in the calendar year 2021, and closely followed the Northeast, which observed the highest growth at 11.6 percent (SEVIS, 2022). A mixed method study about an institution in the Midwest demonstrated that international students from Asia chose to attend this university because of the institution's affordable living and studying costs and reputation as a large research university in this region (Ma & Garcia-Murillo, 2018).

Additionally, international students came from more than 227 countries and territories (SEVIS, 2022) around the world and brought unique cultures and backgrounds with them to U.S. schools. In the calendar year of 2022, SEVIS (2022) reported that over 959,000 international students (70.4 percent) enrolling in U.S. institutions at all academic levels were of Asian origin, making it the largest international student enrollment. The SEVIS report (2022) also indicated that the percentage of international women students in some Asian countries at all program levels in U.S. institutions was higher than the percentage of international men counterparts. For example, Vietnam and Japan had the highest percentage of international women students, with 54 percent and 52 percent, respectively, followed by China, South Korea, and Taiwan with 48 percent (SEVIS, 2022). However, no specific records of women graduate students from Asian countries were described in SEVIS reports from 2018 to 2022 (SEVIS, 2018, 2022). It showed

that U.S. higher education system still lack knowledge about IWGSs and university support for this student population (Ma & Garcia-Murillo, 2018).

According to the SEVIS reports from 2018 to 2022, the number of international graduate students, including IWGSs, had been increasing (SEVIS, 2018, 2022). Table 1 provided the summary statistics of the number of international women students at all program levels over the past five years, along with their percentages (SEVIS, 2018, 2022). This report grouped international women students in bachelor's and master's degree programs but did not provide disaggregated data for undergraduate and graduate levels (SEVIS, 2018, 2022).

In general, in the calendar year 2022, Table 1 showed 44.2 percent (422,861) of bachelor's and master's degree-seeking international students, 49.6 percent (35,433) of associate degree students, and 40.7 percent (80,320) of international doctoral students were women (SEVIS, 2022). The SEVIS reports for the past five years indicated that international women enrollees had been increasing, although there was a decrease in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (SEVIS, 2018, 2022). Significantly, the number of international women students in doctoral programs had been increasing from 69,455 in 2018 to 80,320 in 2022 (SEVIS, 2022). There was a slight decrease in international women doctoral enrollees in 2020, but it continued to increase one year later, despite the COVID-19 year in 2021. This trend suggests the need for student support services that cater to this student population.

Table 1

International Women Student in Academic Levels at U.S. Institutions (SEVIS Reports from 2018 – 2022)

	Calendar year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Count	Doctoral degree	69,455	73,301	70,418	76,394	80,320
	Bachelor's & master's degree	441,478	442,747	194,558	195,511	422,861
	Associate degree	55,909	52,017	42,608	34,886	35,433
%	Doctoral degree	39.0%	39.0%	39.0%	40.0%	40.7%
	Bachelor's & master's degree	43.0%	43.7%	44.0%	44.0%	44.2%
	Associate degree	48.0%	48.4%	50.0%	50.2%	49.6%

Note. Sourced and compiled from annual SEVIS reports from the calendar year 2018 to 2022 (2018 – 2022).

Assistantships for IWGSs

The Importance of Graduate Assistantships

Graduate assistantships are crucial for both graduate students and institutions in the U.S. These assistantships can be named Graduate Teaching Assistantships, Graduate Research Assistantships, or Graduate Assistantships (Haley et al., 2011). For international graduate students, taking different positions in graduate assistantships is a common way to gain professional experience, receive financial assistance, and help transition to their post-graduate journey (Haley et al., 2011). No matter what kinds of assistantship roles international graduate students take, these assistantships contribute to the development of these students' professional knowledge, skills, and values (Haley et al., 2011). Additionally, graduate assistants can provide

support to undergraduate students in areas such as orientation, academic advising and support, career assistance, student activities, and residential life, which can benefit the institutions and increase student retention (Patel, 2022).

University Support

It could be difficult for international graduate students to navigate and apply for assistantships at U.S. universities. Some graduate students may not have work experience after college because they continued their graduate program right after their undergraduate graduation. Graduate assistants may not receive the appropriate support they need from their universities or assistantship providers, including a clear understanding of graduate assistantship duties (Haley et al., 2011). Unfortunately, Haley et al. (2011) indicated that many graduate students in a student affairs program were adjusting to their new career environment while they were unfamiliar with the institution and lacked knowledge about the student populations they served.

Additionally, international graduate assistants often struggle with the discrepancy between their expectations and working experiences. Despite being expected to work professionally, they are not always treated as professionals (Haley et al., 2011). Conversely, their tasks and jobs are not approached from a student learning-centered perspective (Bailey et al., 2022) while they are viewed as students (Haley et al., 2011). By exploring best practices in the supervision of graduate students, Bailey et al. (2022) indicated that there was a lack of formal supervisory training for those who have supervised (international) graduate assistants. The lack of training and understanding of the international graduate student experience can lead to a lack of support in the graduate assistantship environment and cause stress in work, study, and personal lives for graduate assistants (Hayley et al., 2011). For example, graduate assistants who work in residence life tend to receive extensive training to prepare them for their roles, while

graduate students in other areas may receive little to no training (Haley et al., 2011). Some also are expected to perform their assigned tasks professionally on their first day at the new division (Haley et al., 2011).

Social Networks in A New Environment

Social networks in both the U.S. environment and back home led to a more successful cultural adjustment for international graduate students to their new spaces (Zhou, 2010). Communications with family members were significant for first-year international graduate students in maintaining their connections with their home culture, while peers and communities in the U.S. helped them to immerse themselves in the host culture (Zhou, 2010). However, Asian international students who experienced challenging college transitions may need more social networks and relationships in the U.S. to help them deal with their stressors of being away from their families and social networks back home (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Failure to provide more social integration opportunities could lead to feelings of depression, isolation, anxiety, or inadequacy (Hyden & Coryell, 2023). Moving to the new environment meant separating these students from critical events at home and family such as the death or illness of their extended families which was traditionally an issue for Asian collectivist cultures (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). The separation added another level of feelings of guilt as international graduate students were often responsible for taking care of their aging parents, and the time and financial cost preventing them from traveling back home for their family (Myers-Walls et al., 2011).

Additionally, studies found that Asian international students experienced more stress in adapting to new social environments than their European counterparts (Myers-Walls et al., 2011; Yang & Clum, 1994; Yeh & Inose, 2003) because of a greater difference in cultures between their home and host countries (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). It was believed that European

international students had similar cultural patterns and value systems of social connectedness and social support as the U.S. system (Myers-Walls et al., 2011).

Social networks for IWGSs could also include the social networks at graduate assistantship workplaces. International graduate students who received intensive new staff training or orientations upon arrival were more likely to identify and expand new support networks, develop a sense of belonging in their graduate assistantship roles and places (Haley et al., 2011), and improve necessary skills of research, teaching, and technology for different kinds of graduate assistantships in U.S. settings (Herzog, 2011). As a result, they were more likely to connect with a network of other colleagues in their assistantship workplaces and effectively ease their transition (Haley et al., 2011). For those who were graduate assistants in student affairs, socialization during graduate school was particularly important for their transition to college because it would help them understand student groups they would serve in institutions (Haley et al., 2011).

Peer relationships were essential for international graduate students' sense of belonging and an expansion of social connections in a new environment (Hyden & Coryell, 2023; Strange & Banning, 2015), such as an assistantship workplace and social interactions with domestic graduate students (Herzog, 2012). However, weak peer relationships could lead to a lack of connections with departments and universities, resulting in a weak sense of belonging (Haley et al., 2011; Herzog, 2011; Strange & Banning, 2015), frustration, isolation, and a challenging transition for international students (Herzog, 2011).

While international graduate students had to manage their adaptation to their new environment with their own challenges (Hyden & Coryell, 2023), their dependents also relied on them for social networking (Grimm et al., 2019). The non-student spouses of international

graduate students may become language dependents if IWGSs, their student spouses, had the greater English proficiency in this new environment (Grimm et al., 2019; Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Myers-Walls et al. (2011) shared that the gender role expectations of the student-spouses and their non-student spouses were changed and added during graduate school. One of the significant points was that non-student spouses left jobs back home, lost their social status, and performed new roles of parenting in a different culture with unfamiliar resources (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Parenting roles in a different culture with different expectations in a foreign language then brought a level of isolation to their non-student spouses (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). In addition, Grimm et al. (2019) shared that non-student spouses had fewer natural routes for finding social support because they did not engage in "ready-made groups", which were academic programs to assist their socialization with others (p. 1174). As a result, international graduate students had to care for their social and academic balance (Kim et al., 2021) and also had to worry about a lack of social connectivity of their dependents (Grimm et al., 2019; Myers-Walls et al., 2011).

Funding and Financial Dependence

Besides professional development and practical experience, international graduate students chose to take graduate assistantships to cover their living expenses and/or school tuition and fees for an academic year (Haley et al., 2011; Woolston, 2022). The compensation for assistantships varied depending on institutions and the specific assistantship role (Patel, 2022). While some graduate students received adequate financial support, many still experienced financial distresses due to the high cost-of-living inflation (Woolston, 2022). In fact, a report showed that 85 percent of graduate students worldwide struggled to make ends meet (Woolston, 2022). Although 35 percent of international graduate students received funds from a U.S. college

(IIE, 2023c), some felt disappointed with the level of financial support that they experienced from their university (Martinez et al., 2021). This was especially true for IWGSs, who reported there were few graduate assistantship opportunities available to them (Githua, 2021).

International students have certain restrictions on the specific number of hours that they can work and receive pay during an academic year. According to USCIS (2023), international students cannot work more than 20 hours per week or have an off-campus job. As a result, international graduate students often have to rely more heavily on funding sources provided by their colleges when they have no other financial resources. However, other international graduate students were hesitant to ask for additional support from the university because they felt they would be burdened with debt (Martinez et al., 2021).

Some IWGSs faced additional financial challenges when they relocated with their partners and children to their new academic environments (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). International graduate students may receive their health insurance covered by institutions but cannot afford health insurance for their partners due to the high cost (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Additionally, financial constraints may limit their accessibility to use childcare services outside the home (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Myers-Walls et al. (2011) noted that non-student partners may also experience financial burdens when IWGSs take over their breadwinner roles. As a result, IWGSs can experience multiple situations (Myers-Walls et al., 2011).

IWGSs involved in academic writing had to deal with additional costs when they needed more efficient, professional, and independent AI powered writing tools such as Grammarly, Zotero, and other AI writing tools (Zhao et al., 2023). The benefits of these AI tools could not be denied for researchers, especially international graduate students who wrote research papers (Mondal et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2023). For professional writing, the free cost AI tools with

basic functions may not suffice for professional academic writers (Zhao et al., 2023). As a result, graduate students expressed their concern for lower priced or free student versions of these AI writing support tools. (Zhao et al., 2023).

The Complex Multifaceted Responsibilities

IWGSs are aware of the new responsibilities that come with studying in this environment. They may have to deal with their own health issues, such as pregnancy and childbirth (Le et al., 2016), while also being responsible for other duties. These responsibilities could vary depending on their individual situations while others juggled multiple responsibilities at the same time. For those who were also first-generation students (Kim et al., 2021), graduate assistants (Haley et al., 2011; Herzog, 2012), breadwinners, mothers, or family caregivers (Myers-Walls et al., 2011), entering a U.S. college could be an overwhelming and stressful experience (Kim et al., 2021).

Various studies showed that IWGSs with their multiple roles may face unique challenges, which could create more stress, limit their participation in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities (Kim et al., 2021; Myers-Walls et al., 2011), or put them at risk of suicide (Silverman et al., 2010). Women, in particular, faced additional challenges beyond their traditional gender roles, such as being responsible for household tasks and childcare (Kim et al., 2021; Myers-Walls et al., 2011) when they had to carry multiple roles and responsibilities on their backs (Gonzalz, 2013; Myers-Walls et al., 2011). They carried the worlds on their backs, such as the world of being traditional women inherited from their culture back home (Kim et al., 2021) and the world of having new women identities from new cultures in their host countries (i.e., first generation, international graduate students, graduate assistants, and minoritized students) (Gonzalz, 2013; Kim et al., 2021; Le et al., 2016).

Furthermore, graduate assistants often have to juggle dual roles as both students and employees. They needed to show professional commitment and work in professional environments where they were expected to act as students but also have expectations placed on them as an employee in a graduate assistantship environment (Haley et al., 2011; Herzog, 2012). Female graduate teaching assistants tended to experience burnout or exhaustion more frequently than their male counterparts, especially if they were international teaching assistants in a social system that was unfamiliar to them (Berta et al., 2019) or if their workload was heavy in their positions (Bruner, 2019; Haley et al., 2011). Asian international graduate assistants felt that they were expected to work over 20 hours per week for their research assistantship, especially those who were in the STEM fields (Herzog, 2012).

The responsibility of being a breadwinner added an additional layer of complexity when IWGSs brought their dependents with them to a new environment. This could be especially challenging when their dependents had limited English proficiency (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). These students may need to secure financial resources for childcare and other caregiving needs, their participation in new outside activities, their dependents' health insurances, and the navigation of relevant resources for their dependents (Martinez et al., 2021; Myers-Walls et al., 2011). In addition, balancing the demands of parenting responsibilities with academic and professional work required access to childcare facilities (Le et al., 2016), family-friendly policies at universities, and a supportive community (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Myers-Walls et al. (2011) explained that IWGSs were unable to participate in activities outside the classroom because of their primary childcare responsibility. However, the responsibilities of child rearing required additional time allocation in their schedule, as they were unable to secure external childcare services due to financial constraints (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Their dependents' high-cost

health insurance and childcare services created financial pressure on graduate student mothers (Myers-Walls et al. 2011).

Specialized Student Support Services

Student support services for international undergraduates and graduates are not clearly separated for these students to navigate and access. Martirosyan et al. (2019) presented the most common six programs and services and their 30 activities provided by the top 20 universities with the highest number of international student enrollees (Martirosyan et al., 2019). If the resources were specialized for graduate levels or international students, only some cases were shown with separate links (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Services for international students or graduate students were shared or grouped with the same services as international undergraduates.

For example, four out of six programs and services offered to serve international students in general, such as English programs, academic support and student success, social and cultural events, and professional development programs (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Specifically, their programs' activities were collectively referred to by the common words namely global, world, and international, while one family program and its three activities specifically were directly geared towards international graduate students' family members (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Differently, writing center support was offered for graduate students without mention of its applicability to a specific student population (Martirosyan et al., 2019). The lack of specificity in program names could make it difficult for international graduate students to identify programs tailored to their unique needs and participation.

Conversely, international doctoral students found that university writing centers were not created for them (Zhang, 2016). These students also discovered that some student support services were not designed specifically for international graduate students, although they wanted

to access these services at universities. For instance, doctoral students needed advice for academic writing skills (Zhang, 2016), specific genre expertise, or research knowledge for their theses and dissertations in future academic professions and publications (Okuda & Anderson, 2018).

Some on-campus housing options were not available for students who were over 25 years old or graduate students (Martinez et al., 2021). Consequently, some international graduate students had to live off-campus when they did not develop enough of a credit history for housing lease applications upon their arrival to the U.S. (Martinez et al., 2021). Another challenge was transportation if international graduate students did not have a vehicle. Consequently, they spent more time walking and/or taking different buses from home to campus because buses were the only means of transportation they could rely on (Martinez et al., 2021). Other forms of transportation were not financially viable due to limited financial resources.

Some international graduate students knew about programs, services, and resources offered by their universities but seemed to be hesitant to access these services for myriad reasons. Others felt uncomfortable using them because of their cultures, gender roles, and self-esteem (Rodríguez et al., 2019). Asian international students tended to keep their difficulties and concerns to themselves and did not want to ask for help to avoid showing their weakness (Zhang, 2016) or refused to do so (Rodríguez et al., 2019).

On the other hand, Zhang (2016) shared that university services did not cater to the needs of international graduate students, particularly doctoral students. None of the ten international doctoral students in Zhang's study (2016) mentioned using services at the International Students and Scholars Office, Graduate Studies, or the Consulting Center for the doctoral level. Most student support services at the institutional level were designed to cater to all students, not just

IWGSs. Some studies indicated international graduate students needed Canvas training, writing skills to avoid plagiarism in their research paper (Githua, 2021), new staff (student employees) training and orientation (Herzog, 2012), and learning communities for family members' interactions between international and local women across multiple lines of differences (Grimm et al., 2019). In particular, these students required on-campus childcare and family programs or services (Hittepole, 2019), which were not always available or officially offered for IWGSs at universities. This was because these students needed to balance their academic and parenting roles without the extended family members' support that they had in their home country (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Those who were from countries with technology restrictions or were unfamiliar with technology learning environments may have more challenges (United States International Trade Commission, 2022). Especially, no orientation or training programs related to technology assistance and tools were available for international graduate students (Herzog, 2012).

New Technology for Academic Performance

When international students entered a new academic environment, they often had to learn how to use new technologies. Technology could actually be a helpful tool for international students to engage in collaborative learning practices (Ayoub, 2016; Habib et al., 2014). With the growth of the international student population, there had been some concern about how these individuals adapt to the technology-rich learning environment in the U.S. (Habib et al., 2014). This could be a shift from the more interactive and student-centered classrooms that many international students were used to (Habib et al., 2014). Learning in online courses for international graduate students put them in feelings of isolation due to a lack of interactions with instructors and classmates (Karkar-Esperat, 2018). Technology adoption was also considered a

potential cultural challenge (Habib et al., 2014) as well as learning style differences for international students (Kıroğlu & Kung, 2023). However, in Kıroğlu & Kung's study (2023), technology adoption was not found to be a challenge for those who were unfamiliar with U.S. higher education environments.

International students addressed their difficulties in using learning technology in U.S. universities (Githua, 2022; Habib et al., 2014) due to limited exposure to technology in their home countries (Dumaru et al., 2023). Factors such as the lack of digitalization at their native universities (Dumaru et al., 2023), the different levels of internet restrictions in some countries (United States International Trade Commission, 2022), technological infrastructure, and the limited adoption or integration of personal technology (Habib et al., 2014) may contribute to putting international students at disadvantages with technology in U.S. higher education environments. Specifically, the only digital resources some international students may be familiar with are their own university websites (Dumaru et al., 2023). Enrolling in courses, checking grades, and obtaining other necessary documents may require a manual process between the students and their universities (Dumaru et al., 2023).

Access to digital resources and computer services varies based on censorship policies and practices in countries (Habib et al., 2014; United States International Trade Commission, 2022). Censorship policies may involve blocking, filtering, or even shutting down internet access in specific markets or industries, such as universities or education (United States International Trade Commission, 2022). These restrictions could prevent individuals and businesses from accessing and searching for contents internationally (United States International Trade Commission, 2022). As a result, international students from these countries may have limited

access to digital academic resources for their local and international digital information when they are in their home country.

It is understandable that international students may face challenges when familiarizing themselves with technology tools for classrooms in the U.S. These students sometimes struggle to learn, use, and navigate Canvas (the course management system) due to their lack of technical familiarity (Ammigan et al., 2023; Dumaru et al., 2023). The IWGSs also showed their desire to learn technology and how to avoid plagiarism in research (Githua, 2021). Furthermore, international graduate students who took online classes faced difficulties with both technology familiarity and a higher level of technology competence (Karkar-Esperat, 2018), as they did not have experience using learning technology platforms at their home universities (Ammigan et al., 2023; Dumaru et al., 2023).

Theoretical Framework

The primary researcher for this study sought to understand how IWGSs described their transition experiences and what their expectations were related to student support services. Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) was used as the primary theoretical framework for this study.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Everyone has their own lens to view and experience a new environment. There are many sub-populations of international students; and international women students will navigate in different ways through their challenges in higher education institutions and graduate assistantship positions during their college transition. As discussed in the literature review, IWGSs may face significant challenges, so it was important to understand their transitions to college and graduate school. Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) was the primary theoretical

framework for this study and helped guide the researcher as I explored participants' experiences and how it described individual aspects of their transitions.

A transition refers to a change in someone's life path (O'Shea, 2014). Anderson et al. (2012) described a transition as "an event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 39). Schlossberg's transition theory categorizes three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events (Anderson et al., 2012). Anticipated transitions are expected and significant life events (i.e., graduation, marriage, having a child). Unanticipated transitions are unexpected and uncontrolled events (i.e., the death of a family member, staff reduction). Non-event transitions are promised events that were expected to happen but did not (i.e., not getting married, not being admitted to a program, not getting promoted).

The process of a transition is ongoing and has three phases of adaptation and ongoing evaluation as individuals move in, move through, and move out (Anderson et al., 2012). Each phase of the transition is closely interconnected, and how individuals navigate the three phases depends on a variety of factors, including their ability to cope with change (Anderson et al., 2012). During the "moving in" transition, individuals adapt to new roles, identify, and establish new identities in a relationship between their new environments and themselves, and gradually release old routines or habits. During the "moving through" phase, individuals continue to explore new surroundings and look for ways to change relationships and past habits. A time of confusion and emptiness can occur during this phase of the continuous transitional process. When individuals find ways to balance or change their lives, they are likely to feel more optimistic and spiritual (Anderson et al., 2012). Eventually, the transition comes to an end and is

integrated because the individuals “move out” of it and start exploring the new cycle of the transitional phase (Anderson et al., 2012).

Schlossberg’s transition theory described four factors that affect individuals’ reactions and ability to deal with transitions: situation, self, support, and strategies, or called the “4 S's” (Anderson et al., 2012 & Schlossberg, 2011). The situation looks at factors of a transition and how they could affect individuals as well as how important that transition is to individuals. Self refers to individuals’ characteristics, perspectives, and skills to deal with the transition. Support describes the resources and tools available for individuals, such as peers, mentors, advisors, and communities that affect an individual’s life. Strategies are the ways, actions, and techniques that individuals use to react to or overcome the changes that come with a transition (Anderson et al., 2012).

The Use of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory in Other Research

Schlossberg’s transition theory and the “4 S’s” have been applied to support research on the development of various student populations in higher education settings (Hyden & Coryell, 2023; Verdone & Murray, 2021; Zhang, 2016).

For example, Hyden and Coryell (2023) applied transition theory to gain insight into the college transition of eight international graduate student mentees participating in the peer mentor circle (PMC) program with six international graduate student mentors at a university in the Southwest United States. The moving in and moving through phases of the theory allowed the researchers to explore mentors’ perspectives and experiences to assist mentees with practical solutions for overcoming obstacles (Hyden & Coryell, 2023). The researchers suggested that the PMC program and the theory could be used to effectively support the life transition of freshmen or young professionals working remotely (Hyden & Coryell, 2023).

An interpretive phenomenological study conducted by Zhang (2016) employed the theory and the 4 S's to understand Chinese doctoral students' voices during their college transition at a U.S. university. The theory recognized that each individual responded differently to their transition process and highlighted the personal distinctions that were significant to the experience (Zhang, 2016). Thereby, Zhang (2016) indicated that this theory supported understanding adult development and the unique coping strategies that assisted individuals during their college transition experience.

Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) has also been used to understand and assist different student populations. Verdone and Murray (2021) conducted a study that applied this theory to analyze the stress levels and need satisfaction of 404 respondents as first-year female and male graduate students during their healthcare program transition. The researchers indicated the theory "can serve as a useful tool for faculty and leaders of professional institutions to promote the well-being of their first-year professional students in transition" (Verdone & Murray, 2021, p. 523).

Given that Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) was developed around adult transitions and has been successfully applied in diverse student backgrounds and various higher education settings. Therefore, it is an appropriate choice to help understand the college transition experiences of IWGSs at their public research universities in the Midwest because it recognizes the unique experiences and strategies of individuals during their life transition.

Intersectionality

Although not used as a primary theoretical framework, the researcher did consider aspects of intersectionality to help gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences based on their different identities and meaning making processes. Using intersectionality allowed the

researcher to view the intersection and impact of multiple aspects of being IWGSs in the U.S. higher education environment. International students comprise different subgroups and bear intersecting identities (i.e., race, religion, nationality, or gender) that significantly affect their college transition (Yao, 2019).

Intersectionality describes the traffic at an intersection with the interconnected factors of social organizations (i.e., gender, race, sex, ethnicity, class, religion, disability, class, nationality, language, age, ability, education, culture, and other factors) (Crenshaw, 1993). Individuals who have several identities intersecting each other can experience privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1993). For example, intersectionality is likely to occur at an intersection where different streets, representing various aspects of interconnected factors, meet. An accident at the intersection affects various cars traveling in multiple directions (Crenshaw, 1993). Or an example of a woman of color experiencing discrimination in a dominant white workplace encounters it not only because of her gender but also her race (Crenshaw, 1989). In addition, it is essential to consider the significance of time and space. One must understand how individuals experience and interpret time and space based on their interaction and location (Hankivsky, 2014).

The Use of Intersectionality Theory in Other Research

Intersectionality theory has emerged as a valuable tool for gaining insight into the complex identities of marginalized groups. In some studies, such as those conducted by Githua (2022) and Pitcher (2015), intersectionality has been applied to explore the effects of social differences on individuals' identities and experiences.

A phenomenological study of Githua (2022) employed intersectionality to examine the intersectionality of gender and nationality and how they shaped the lived experiences of seven international female graduate students at a public HBCU in the U.S. The study highlighted that

this approach helped to understand the effects of social differences on women's identities and experiences as well as the challenges theses student faced when inclusion did not promote equal opportunities in higher education settings (Githua, 2022). Not only gender and national origin but also the role of mentoring in graduate schools were unpacked through the theory (Githua, 2022).

Likewise, Pitcher (2015) utilized intersectionality theory to discuss how societal level forces (i.e., racism, genderism, and heterosexism), shaped the experiences of six transgender college students. The study underscores the importance of intersectionality theory for student affairs practice, as it enables practitioners to conceptualize the ways in which larger social structures impact college students' experiences (Pitcher, 2015).

For the purposes of this study, intersectionality helped explore the various ways, time, and spaces in which intersecting identities shape the experiences, self-abilities, and strategies of IWGSs during their college transition. The approach benefits the researcher by helping to explain difficulties caused by IWGSs' previous and new roles in the new environment of graduate school life.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a thorough review of relevant literature to establish a comprehensive foundation of knowledge regarding the concerned phenomenon. Additionally, it introduced Schlossberg's transition theory and intersectionality as the two theoretical frameworks used to help understand the lived experiences of the participants. The study explored the multifaceted experiences of IWGSs and provided a more in-depth understanding of their unique transitional experiences in the U.S. higher education environment.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the college transition experiences of IWGSs at public research universities in the Midwest. It employed a qualitative phenomenological research design that valued individuals' stories and aimed to understand their experiences in diverse situations (Perl & Noldon, 2000). An inductive approach guided the researcher to dive into this complex situation and gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon (Mertens, 2015). This qualitative study was also conducted within a constructivist paradigm and utilized an interview protocol to collect rich data on the unique and diverse experiences and perspectives of six IWGSs. This comprehensive approach was significant in recognizing the unique nature of each individual's interactions with campus environments and their lives in graduate schools in the Midwest.

The study focused on the exploration of participants' personal meaning making processes and analyzed how past research related to participants' experiences. The findings and subsequent recommendations will benefit student affairs professionals, the participants themselves, and those who want to enhance their knowledge and take further action to ease the complex college transition of IWGSs. The study highlighted situations, self-agency, strategies, and support involved in the college transition of IWGSs at public research universities in the Midwest. The findings of the study share the participants' comprehensive thoughts, expectations, and support for successful transitions in the next generations through data collected during virtual interviews with open-ended questions. The study was guided by these two research questions: (1) How do IWGSs describe their transition experiences at public research institutions in the Midwest? (2)

What student support services do these students believe they need from the university, other networks, and beyond to have a successful transition?

Phenomenological Research and Design

Phenomenological qualitative research was my choice for this study based on the nature of the study, which was intended to understand and describe individual experiences of IWGSs from their points of view and how they made meaning of their realities (Mertens, 2015). Using a phenomenological approach allowed me to gain a deep understanding of participants' unique college transition experiences through virtual interviews, which provided primary data for the study. The main goal of phenomenological studies was to focus on the process of the researcher's interpretation and reflection and recognize the rich life experiences of each participant (Mertens, 2015). Phenomenological qualitative research "values individual voices and aims to understand individual cases" (Perl & Noldon, 2000, p. 38) with individuals' unique "beliefs, values, intentions, and meanings, as well as social, cultural, and physical contextual factors that affect causal relationships" (Mertens, 2015, p. 238). Therefore, the importance of phenomenological qualitative research lies in understanding how individuals experience something and how the study can contribute to better practice implications.

I chose to conduct this study through the lens of the constructivist paradigm because I wanted to "understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of" the participants in their new environment (Mertens, 2015, p. 65). The constructivist approach could explain the participants' experience in this study through the interviews between the researcher and the participants and data analysis (Mertens, 2015). According to the constructivist perspective, reality is not objective but rather socially constructed. Individuals derive meaning from their experiences, which are influenced by contextual factors in their environment

(Mertens, 2015). Within a phenomenological qualitative study, the constructivist approach places significant emphasis on the relationship that develops between the participants and me during the research process. This approach acknowledges the importance of context and the unique perspectives of each participant in shaping the research outcomes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The constructivist approach underscores that the study is not an independent product of the researcher's values and beliefs, as they inevitably influence the study outcomes (Merten, 2015). Employing the constructivist paradigm and the qualitative research allowed for "inclusion of participants' differences in beliefs, values, intentions, and meanings, as well as social, cultural, and physical contextual factors that affect causal relationships" (Mertens, 2025, p. 298). It satisfied my study purpose in exploring different perspectives and experiences of the participants.

As the qualitative study with the constructivist paradigm is a product developed by both the researcher's positionality and the values and backgrounds of its participants (Mertens, 2015), it is essential for me to include the participants' backgrounds in the following part and identify any potential unconscious biases during the data analysis process.

Participants and Setting

Participants

Six IWGSs at public research universities in the Midwest in the U.S. participated in this study. One participant was a master's student while the remaining five were doctoral students. Four were from student affairs programs, one was from the STEM field, and one from the arts and sciences field.

No incentives or compensation were offered to the participants in the study due to a lack of funding at the time of study approval and the limited budget. This posed a challenge in the

recruitment of participants as two potential candidates from a WhatsApp group declined to participate due to the absence of incentives or compensation. Fortunately, using these effective recruitment messages (Appendix A) in groups for calls of participants (Appendix B) yielded six participants.

These participants volunteered to be in the study and matched the following demographic: international women students, 19 years of age or older, and currently enrolled any graduate program at a public research university in the Midwest. Two out of six participants were friends or had previous relationships with me prior to the study. I appreciated their willingness and trust in their relationship with me. Through the strong connections, I did my best to tell their meaningful stories on behalf of their voices. Typically, selecting the participants as "information-rich" samples for my study was guided by phenomenological qualitative research with the constructivist paradigm (Mertens, 2015, p. 397). Based on specific criteria of recruitment about IWGSs, using this snowball sampling technique helped me find more potential participants in this study through these friends as "key informants" who referred to others (Mertens, 2015, p. 399). With the trust of the relationships, two individuals reached out to me after hearing about the study from study participants reflecting a snowball sampling process (Seidman, 2019). The participants responded to my recruitment message (Appendix A) for their participation in the study. Through sharing their experiences, the data collected was more credible and valid. This strengthened the overall efficacy of the study, allowing for more insights analysis and conclusions.

I collected basic demographic information for each participant through demographic questions and personal interviews. From the responses provided, I obtained relevant demographic information, which is summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2

The Demographic Information of Participants in The Study

Participant Pseudonym	**Mim**	**Wednesday**	**HP**	**Jamie**	**Sandie**	**Ella**
Race/ Ethnicity	South Asian	East Asian	Southeast Asian	East Asian	African	White / European
Pronouns	n/a	She/her	n/a	She/her	She/her	She/her
First generation	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Student level	Doctoral student	Doctoral student	Doctoral student	Doctoral student	Master's student	Doctoral student
Current major	STEM	Education	Education	Education	Education	Arts & sciences
Graduate assistantship	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Previous programs in the U.S.	n/a	No	Master	Bachelor's & Master's	No	College exchange program
Location of the previous programs in the U.S.	n/a	No	The South	Another state in the Midwest	No	Another city, same state, the Midwest
Years in the U.S.	2	0.5	2	7	0.5	6
Other family members in the same city	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Other family members in a different city	No	No	No	No	Yes	No

Note. n/a: the participants chose not to answer the question or did not provide any information in the demographic questions or the interviews.

Setting

All of the participants' institutions were nationally ranked Tier-1 public research universities located in the Midwest. These institutions are classified as Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) with high accreditation, enrollment of international students and a significant number of international graduate students. At the time of the study, these institutions had a total enrollment of approximately 26,000 to 31,000 students, out of which around 5,000 to 8,000 were graduate-level students. International students represented about six per cent to eight per cent of the student population, while international graduate students represented almost 22 per cent to 35 per cent of the total population of graduate-level students, including both degree-seeking and non-degree seeking graduate students. The cities where these institutions are located can be considered medium-sized, with a population up to 300,000.

Data Collection Methods

In phenomenological research these forms of data collection are most effective or appropriate because "the researcher is sensitized to the meanings that the participants bring to the situations" through questions in the virtual interview with each participant (Mertens, 2015, p. 450). The interviewing strategies of "establishing a relationship with the participants" helped me uncover the participants' lives and experiences and illuminate "hidden aspects of their lives" (Mertens, 2015, p. 453). Besides that, Schlossberg's transition theory primarily guided me form interview questions in an interview protocol (Appendix F) so that the participants could have opportunities to share their situations, self-abilities, supports, and strategies (the 4 S's) during college transitions (Anderson et al., 2012). As such, data collection and Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) are necessary and how they are related to phenomenological qualitative research with the constructivist paradigm in my study.

The primary method of data collection in this study was one interview with each of the participants. The main objective of "in-depth phenomenological" interviews was to allow me to explore the participants' transition experiences through their responses to an interview protocol with open-ended questions (Seidman, 2019, p. 14). As an international graduate student, I decided to conduct one interview that could be convenient for the participants' academic schedule and graduate assistantship tasks. In the process of one interview, I successfully covered three main areas of concentration by conducting in-depth phenomenological interviews. These areas included (1) *the focused life history*, (2) *the details of lived experiences*, and (3) *reflection on the meaning* of the participants' experiences (Seidman, 2019, pp. 14–24). I used open-ended questions in the interview protocol of this study (Appendix F) to gain insights into these areas which was an effective way to gather qualitative data in one interview.

Participants were notified via follow-up emails for their participation (Appendix D) to schedule an interview time, review a consent form for audio recording permission (Appendix E), and select their pseudonyms before the interview (Mertens, 2015). The interviews were conducted during the winter break in December 2023 and January 2024 because the researcher and the participants who volunteered to be in the study had no classes or graduate assistantship schedules during that time. Each of the interviews was conducted virtually via Zoom and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. The participants chose pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality while the audio of the interview was recorded (Mertens, 2015). They provided verbal agreement to participate in the interview and had a space to ask questions, address any concerns, and review the consent form again before the interview started. The interview was recorded after the participants provided their verbal consent for the audio recording and confirmed their readiness.

I employed the interview protocol (Appendix F) to guide the interview process. During the interview, if a participant's response was related to a different question, I demonstrated flexibility by rearranging the questions to ensure the participants shared their experiences coherently (Mertens, 2015). Occasionally, I modified the types of follow-up questions or skipped any questions that the participants had previously answered as I wanted to create a space for the participants to share their experiences as much as possible (Seidman, 2019). These follow-up questions were also posed based on Schlossberg's transition theory which allowed the participants shared their concurrent stressors, the changes of roles (situations), their feelings (self), connections at home and host countries (support), and flexibilities to cope with the situations (Anderson et al., 2012). The interviewing approach ensured seamless and natural interviews, resembling a conversation between two human beings. After the interview ended, Zoom automatically converted the interview into audio recordings, with a conversion time of approximately fifteen minutes per interview.

Data Analysis and Procedures

I transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews into text by using the transcription feature in Microsoft Word. The act of transcribing each audio recording to a Word document took three to five minutes with an additional 30 to 60 minutes for accurate checking of each transcript. The process of collecting and analyzing the data presented overlaps with each other (Seidman, 2019). Although the process of data analysis formally began after all the interviews were conducted and transcribed, I informally began reflecting on my thoughts during and after the interviews by highlighting crucial information (un)related to the literature review and writing down potential themes and subthemes in a notebook. Additionally, Schlossberg's transition

theory and my experiences at the graduate school also guided my ways of reflecting and posing the follow-up questions during each interview (Anderson et al., 2012).

The approach I adopted for qualitative data analysis involved the utilization of computer-based tools, including Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word (Mertens, 2015). This process helped me to extract the data in a more efficient, organized, and structured manner (Mertens, 2015). The formal data analysis process followed a set of strategies as a guide and step-by-step approach (Mertens, 2015, p. 511):

1. Phase 1 – Prepare the data for analysis
2. Phase 2 – Data exploration phase
3. Phase 3 – Data reduction phase

Prepare the Data for Analysis

In this phase, transcribing data by myself allowed me to interact with the data in "an intensive and intimate way" and connect it with my experiences (Mertens, 2015, p. 511). All audio recordings were converted and saved in my university account with the password-protected online server and filed with the participants' pseudonyms. Using the transcription feature in Microsoft Word was a quick and convenient process for transcription as it took me an hour in total for this process. The process of checking accuracy took around 30 to 60 minutes per transcript. The transcriptions were filed in my university account with the password-protected online server. I processed the transcription in a private residence with my personal computer and listened to the audio recording of the interviews while reviewing the transcript to confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions. Over 206 pages of transcript data were collected from six interviews. The transcripts were organized by the participants' pseudonyms.

This process allowed me to reflect on the audio recordings to better understand the participants' stories and responses to their college transition at public research universities in the Midwest. It was important for me to connect Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) during this phase so that I could validate it with the data (Mertens, 2015). Then this step allowed me to explore and synthesize the data in the next two phases of the data analysis process. As transcribing data was also interpreted and impacted by my experiences and knowledge, I met my advisor weekly for discussions related to the data analysis process and data gathering techniques (Mertens, 2015).

Data Exploration Phase

I analyzed all the interview data to gain insights into the participants' transition experiences and discussed with my advisor the most meaningful information related to the literature review and my experience. The research questions exploring IWGSs' transition experiences at public research institutions in the Midwest and the student support services they required from universities, networks, and beyond were often referred to during this phase.

The exploration phase guided me to read, connect, and write down my thoughts and "important quotes" (Mertens, 2015, p. 512). I highlighted repeated words, significant phrases, story lines, segments, and incidents about a participant's context and experiences during the college transition in graduate schools (Mertens, 2015). These highlighted key words and issues were selected and moved to a separate Excel file for deeper exploration and labeling into common codes. I identified, grouped, and highlighted similar and dissimilar important data or ideas in the Excel file by connecting with the research questions, guiding Schlossberg's transition theory as the primary theoretical framework (Anderson et al., 2012), and discussing with my advisor to finalize the common codes and preliminary findings (Mertens, 2015). Demographic

responses and data were added in the same Excel file so that I could connect the participants' responses to their background and experiences which was meaningful for their reactions and strategies to deal with the challenges during the college transitions.

In addition, I listened to the audio recordings ten times and reviewed the transcripts 43 times during this phase. Putting the data in this Excel file helped me filter, (un)group, and organize data easily to comprehend the similarities and differences of the participants' experiences. During this phase, I continued meeting weekly with my advisor to explore and help me narrow down potential themes and subthemes and avoid being overwhelmed by the amount of data. These meetings assisted me in working on the last phase, data reduction.

Data Reduction Phase

In the final phase of data analysis, I used the highlighted keywords and created codes to simplify the possible themes and subthemes (Seidman, 2019). These codes were keywords that were repeated once but had significant meaning in a single interview or were discussed many times in participants' responses. These codes were generated from the participants' words and sentences, which were gathered from the participants' *situations, self, strategies, and support* as the 4 S's (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011). Keywords related to the 4 S's focus on triggers, time, the degree of control (related to *situations*), self, and supportive networks (related to *support*) which the participants used to overcome challenges through their reactions and resolutions (related to *strategies*). I looked at the "whole story" with "a beginning, a middle, and an end" to understand the participants' stories in "a meaning-making process" of college transition (Seidman, 2019, p. 7) because the transition was a continuous process with feelings of hope and disappointment (Anderson et al., 2012).

Weekly meetings with my advisor remained the same at this phase when the preliminary findings were identified. After that, highlighted data with its timestamps and participant pseudonyms were moved into the Word document and put under the relevant theme and subtheme. Time stamps were a crucial aspect of transcribing audio recordings, as they indicated capturing the precise moment when each segment of speakers (a participant and the researcher) were recorded related to the timeline of the recording. The data time stamps that served as markers in the transcript allowed me to review the transcript quickly and easily, reflect on the context and sequences of events to which the participant responded during the interview, and decide whether to group, re-organize, separate, or remove data in the preliminary themes or subthemes (Mertens, 2015). I also received reviews from participants for trustworthiness and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mertens, 2015) and from my advisor for correction, clarification, and accuracy during the process. I also discussed with my advisor the researcher reflexivity as self-consciousness (Mertens, 2015) which will be shared at the end of this chapter.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, I focused on addressing the trustworthiness of the research and findings. During the process of unpacking the experiences of participants, I engaged components of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in this qualitative research to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings overall (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

The credibility of the findings increased when the researcher followed persistent observation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Before participating in the virtual interview, I emailed each participant the consent form and the objective of the study for their review. At the beginning of the interview, I dedicated a few minutes to checking in with the participants and gave them the

opportunity to address any concerns and questions before the start of the interview. The participants were also requested to use pseudonyms and turn off the camera during the audio recording to protect their confidentiality. Their pseudonyms were used in all documents of the study, including audio recordings, transcripts, and notes. The research process was described in detail, sharing the significant experiences of participants during the interviews. These rich and thick descriptions of participant's transition experiences further increased the study's credibility.

Confirmability

The techniques and strategies were to increase the trustworthiness of a study's findings using the major techniques of confirmability audit, audit trail, and reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A confirmability audit required the provision of any remaining records related to the investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher's audit trail included raw data; data reduction and analysis products; data reconstruction and synthesis products; process notes; personal and reflexive notes; and instrument development information (i.e., the interview protocol) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I stored the audio recordings of the interviews for the data analysis process on my password-protected university account with the online server which I could access. Additionally, I reviewed notes to organize the data and identified the preliminary findings for the writing process.

Transferability

Transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) refers to conveying as much information as feasible by presenting a detailed description of the population, international women students in graduate programs. I provided demographic information for each participant and a brief description of each participant for context in Chapter 4. I increased transferability by providing thoughtful and detailed descriptions of the data collection and data analysis process used in this

study. This also increased the dependability of the study as it was related to the evaluation of the accuracy of findings, data interpretations, discussions, and conclusions in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

Dependability is associated with the accurate interpretation of the experiences and perspectives shared by the participants during the interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All the activities (i.e., member checking and audit trail) were used to enhance the credibility and potential transferability of the findings and increase their trustworthiness. I shared the preliminary findings with the participants to obtain their comments, explanations, and adjustments to the data analysis. Additionally, I met weekly and discussed with my advisor who was an expert researcher for reading over and reviewing all parts of the study to improve its quality.

Researcher Reflexivity

As the primary researcher of a phenomenological qualitative study, I have had the opportunity to reflect on my experiences at U.S. campus space in connection with my host country. With the lenses of a researcher and an IWGS at a public research university in the Midwest, I have been able to share my empathy with the participants and understand the study from various perspectives. This study has proven to be invaluable for my research path, professional development, and as an ally to IWGSs whom U.S. higher education institutions serve and earn benefits from.

With over ten years of experience in educational organizations, I had previously been independent in all aspects of my work. Taking assistantships in different positions enabled me to understand the challenges that prospective international graduate students as well as new and

current international graduate students face. Then, interviewing participants for this study helped me recognize the barriers, invisible pressure, and hidden fears of IWGSs that the current higher education system creates and cannot reach out to. This leaves them profoundly affected in their student lives, hindering their abilities to enjoy studying and doing research, which requires patience, interest, commitment, and joy. I have great appreciation and respect for the participants who have overcome their situations, found strategies, and received valuable support during their journeys. It has become clear to me that many more IWGSs face various challenges and barriers, yet they remain resilient and continue to persevere.

During my data analysis phase, conflicts arose within me, and I sought counsel from my advisor. As a researcher, my intention is to share various aspects of acknowledging and contributing to the development of a higher education environment. However, I was concerned that exposing the participants' difficulties in this study could hinder future IWGSs from accessing and pursuing a program at U.S. universities due to a lot of studies about the challenges faced by international graduate students. Nationally, funding sources have been cut due to institutions' budget shortages after Covid-19. International undergraduate recruitment brings the most significant source of revenue to universities and has a substantial positive impact on the U.S. economy every year, as seen in the Open Door and EducationUSA reports. Disappointingly, the literature showed that the contributions of international graduate students to research, supporting undergraduate students, and finding more funding sources have not been adequately recognized. This leaves less recognition of international graduate students' efforts, research interests, time, loss of native network, and independence as human beings in education.

On the other hand, the participants in the study trusted me and shared their stories with me although they had faced a myriad of obstacles during their graduate school. Their experiences

and stories had much more of a profound impact on me than I expected. I feel fortunate to have participants in this study. My appreciation was much more than the thousands of words that the study developed. I often find myself wondering how they are doing now and how their experiences would impact future improvements in the higher education system. In an effort to foster more inclusive and supportive environments for IWGSs, I have chosen to share the powerful stories of six participants who entrusted me to amplify their voices. With this study, I hope to contribute to the literature, inspire action towards increasing representation of IWGSs in higher education, a field that has traditionally lacked international women scholars or researchers.

Through this study, I have gained a more comprehensive understanding of participants who were different from me, particularly in terms of feminism and female gender roles. This study and process have been both challenging and rewarding for me, given my lack of prior experience conducting research, the need for research reflexivity, and the conflicts and anxiety that arose when writing about IWGSs. Nonetheless, I believe that the process and study have enabled me to continue with my research interest in the doctoral program and professional development, which will ultimately contribute to the development of higher education environments for IWGSs and international graduate students.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the study's methodology, data collection process, and data analysis techniques. I utilized a constructivist paradigm to address the research questions in this phenomenological qualitative study. This chapter delved into the participant recruitment process, interview conduct, and data analysis methods, which were utilized to generate the study's findings. Additionally, I acknowledged any potential biases that

may have impacted the research's validity and credibility. The following chapter will present the study's findings, which will include themes and subthemes as well as the participants' experiences generated from the participants' interviews.

Chapter 4: Findings

This qualitative study explored the experiences of IWGSs at public research universities in the Midwest during their college transition. The primary objective of the study was to gather diverse stories and life experiences. To achieve this, I kept the participant criteria open including current students or those who have completed a graduate program, international graduate students with various program and degree levels, parent students, and those who identify as IWGSs. Two research questions guided the study to explore the students' experiences in depth:

- How do international women graduate students describe their transition experiences at public research institutions in the Midwest?
- What student support services do these students believe they need from the university, other networks, and beyond to have a successful transition?

I collected data from six participants who are IWGSs studying at public research universities in the Midwest. The data analysis process revealed three themes related to their transition experiences, offering insight into the complex transition process of IWGSs and providing examples of how they navigate student support services. The study also highlighted how their support network impacted their experiences in different phases at public research universities in the Midwest.

Introduction to Participants

Six participants were interviewed for the study. All participants in this study were enrolled in a graduate program and were full-time students with a graduate assistantship at a public research university in the Midwest. They were also all over 19 years of age. Interviews were conducted via Zoom during winter break of 2024 when the participants and I had no school and graduate assistantship tasks or responsibilities. Five participants joined the Zoom interview

when they were in the U.S., and one participant participated via Zoom when she was back in her home country in East Asia. All participants were funded by their institutions or programs through their graduate assistantships and were allowed to work on-campus up to 20 hours per week, in accordance with U.S. policies regarding international student status. They all lived off-campus and managed their college expenses and living costs under their graduate assistantship stipends.

All participants stated they navigated the application process themselves, including selecting their school and program. Some of them got advice from their co-workers, friends, or current students for more information and clarification, but they all applied for the school independently with no support from any agents. Four out of six participants were enrolled in a doctoral program in the fields of education at a public research university in the Midwest, one was from the arts and sciences field, and one was from the STEM field in the same region. Nearly all the participants directly indicated that they had work experience in their home countries or had previously completed bachelor's and/or master's degree in the U.S. before continuing or returning to pursue their doctoral program at a public research university in the Midwest. Specifically, one participant completed both a bachelor's and a master's program in the U.S. Another one obtained a master's program in the southern region of the U.S. A third participant attended a college exchange program in the Midwest. Five participants earned their bachelor's degree back home, and four of these participants also received their master's degree in their home countries.

However, there were some disparities among participants. One participant had a dependent spouse and child under an F2 visa status, while other four participants had their direct support network (husband who was not a dependent of the participant's visa status) or indirect support network (a non-dependent spouse, siblings) in the U.S. One participant had no (in)direct

support network in the U.S. Additionally, four participants were from Asia, one from Africa, and one from Europe. Finally, three participants had been living in the U.S. for four to seven years, while the others had been living in the U.S. for a shorter time, ranging from half a year to two years.

Participant Profiles

To ensure their comfort while sharing their experiences and to protect their confidentiality, the study participants chose pseudonyms to be used in the study. Throughout the study, no specific institution and program names were noted. This study centered on the experiences of six individuals: Ella, HP, Jamie, Mim, Sandie, and Wednesday. The descriptions of these individuals were collected based on their responses to demographic questions (Appendix C) and the information they disclosed in interviews. These descriptions provide essential context to help readers better understand the stories and experiences shared by the participants during the data collection process. The primary themes and subthemes discovered in this study will be introduced later in this chapter.

Mim

She is a first-generation student from a South Asian country who is currently enrolled in a doctoral program in a STEM field at a public research university in the Midwest. Mim managed to complete the application process by herself. She relied on the provided information on the university's website, spoke with some friends or current students who had already come to the U.S., and consulted with a program coordinator. She applied for her graduate assistantship independently without any external help. When Mim began her graduate program two years ago, she found the first semester to be very stressful and hectic. She had to manage both graduate assistantship tasks and settling down without any family member in the U.S.

From what Mim shared, she believed that participating in social activities while in graduate school was crucial for international students to avoid stress. During her first semester, she was very active socializing, but lately, she had been busy with her graduate assistantship work and had attended fewer social events. Nonetheless, she still tried to attend social events wherever possible, and sometimes invited friends to join her. Mim was also quite independent and self-sufficient in navigating student support services, financial assistance, and other resources to ensure her academic success. She shared that being able to produce research and publications was important for career preparation in academia, particularly when competing with other researchers from other universities. Additionally, as a graduate student who has chosen to enter the academia world, Mim emphasized that graduating on time matters to her.

HP

HP identified herself as a first-generation student who faced unique challenges when she returned to study a doctoral program in education at a public research university in the Midwest. Before this program, she completed her master's degree in the southern region of the U.S. and worked as an education advisor in her home country in Southeast Asia for a few years. However, the transition to graduate school two years ago was quite difficult as she had to navigate a lot for her academic and two dependents' adaptation and transitions. During her first semester at the university, HP had to find options for her daughter's schooling. Her daughter and husband did not speak English at the time, and she did not have a car. No family activities were offered for her dependents, so she felt more pressure to look for activities to support her dependents' life adaptation and adjust herself for student life.

Talking about student support services for her student life, she experienced that the university provided resources with generic information and links, but they were initially unclear

about how to use them in what specific situations. She totally forgot to use them when she was in challenging situations. Specifically, a writing center, available resource, did not suffice for her due to the conflict between her pressure to manage a heavy graduate school schedule and the early submission of drafts for feedback. Conversely, her program did not offer any tutoring groups for research method skills, which made managing her academic workload even more challenging due to new difficult research courses.

Additionally, at one point HP had to travel back to her home country due to a family emergency but found that difficult to do due to financial constraints. As an international student, the second source of income outside her graduate assistantship stipend was impossible due to strict policies under her student visa. She experienced increasing financial pressure related to her school life, her dependents' living expenses, her savings for family emergencies, and the cost of travelling back home.

Wednesday

Wednesday has been studying in a doctoral program in education at a public research university in a peaceful atmosphere city in the Midwest for half a year. She previously worked as an admissions staff for five years in her country in East Asia. When she shared her experience, I could feel her happiness as she talked about her "love program and productive faculty member" in the university which she found and applied for by herself and supported by her partner, who is also under an F1 visa. According to Wednesday, her partner is the only one she feels comfortable being "open and honest" with and sharing her thoughts and uncertain feelings.

Wednesday expressed her mixed feelings about a weekly voluntary lunch meeting with faculty and the majority of domestic graduate students. She "cried" in her partner's car after the lunch meeting because she was uncomfortable with the constant and unfamiliar topics and the

situation of being a shy Asian woman during the lunch meeting. She wanted to break the stereotype of the shy Asian woman but did not know how to "not hurt" her feelings.

Sandie

She identified herself as a first-generation student pursuing a master's program in education at a public research university in the Midwest. Sandie comes from Southern Africa and has been in the U.S. for six months. Although she had visited other parts of the country to meet her family members and her sister who introduced this university to her, she found it challenging to adjust to life in a new country. During the initial months, she expressed her anxiety – "a fear for starter of" – about managing time to university for class and assistantship, submitting assignments through Canvas, and using a bus app for grocery shopping. These were all new experiences as she had never encountered them before at home. As an independent person financially and physically back home, she got stressed with these unfamiliar things with no prior notice or guidance from anyone.

Jamie

Jamie completed her undergraduate and master's degree programs in different states in the Midwest. She went back to her home country in East Asia and worked for five years before she, herself, applied for her Ph.D. program in education major at another public research university in a "safe" city in the Midwest. She was the only participant who experienced two previous programs in the U.S. and this current doctoral program in the Midwest. Although her bachelor's and master's programs were in another state in the Midwest, it was not easy for her to navigate a public transportation system. After two years in the program, she was not in student mode yet because transitioning from being an employee to this current mode took her time for adjustment.

Talking about activities for international students at her university, Jamie said that her university did not gear toward graduate students' participation due to the nature of graduate assistantship tasks. Although the activities were organized for international graduate students, they could not participate in these activities. About her five-year plan, Jamie expressed her concerns about securing her assistantship so that she could complete the doctoral program within five years. It was not easy for her without her savings that she earned back home.

Ella

Currently, Ella is in the last year of her doctoral program. Comparing with her positive experience during her college exchange program, she noticed that her experiences during a doctoral program were with feelings of "loneliness" and frustration while searching for resources related to international graduate students. Ella experienced a college exchange program in the Midwest of the U.S. After completing the program, she returned to her home country in Europe to pursue a master's degree. Later, she came back to the U.S to pursue a doctoral program in the arts and sciences field at a public research university in a different city, also located in the Midwest.

According to her response, it seems that her current university did not provide adequate assistance for international students. Despite her status as an international student, Ella did not feel her international identity mattered to the university because they did not recognize the unique needs and challenges faced by this student population. Furthermore, she did not know how to address a situation where she experienced discomfort due to disrespectful behavior of students while she was in a teaching role. She believed that graduate students, particularly those from international backgrounds, require more support to successfully transition into and out of campus life.

Introduction to Themes

The college transition for IWGSs can be considered a significant and anticipated life event as indicated by Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012). The participants in this study underwent this transition during their graduate program at public research universities in the Midwest. All participants' backgrounds and experiences varied, so their challenges and transition experiences also were different and complex during their journey at public research universities in the Midwest. It is noted that the transition is more challenging for international students as they relocate to a new environment away from their family (Chickering and Schlossberg, 2002).

The data analysis provided valuable insights into challenges associated with the college transition of the participants. I used Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) as a lens to help understand participants' lived experiences during their transition in graduate school. The study identified four themes and their subthemes, which are listed in Table 3.

Table 3

Themes and Subthemes

Themes and subthemes
Theme 1: Solitary voyage - Subtheme 1: Self-navigation to a new environment - Subtheme 2: Multifaceted responsibilities - Subtheme 3: Overlooked presence - Subtheme 4: Uncertain future of not being able to plan - Subtheme 5: A transition out of the graduate school
Theme 2: A dilemma of self-reliance and reliance - Subtheme 1: Independence there (in the home country) - Subtheme 2: Unknown here (in the new country) - Subtheme 3: Contrasting financial foundations
Theme 3: A vicious cycle of limited time and financial constraints - Subtheme 1: Time obligations and time for other resources - Subtheme 2: Invisible pressure

These participants experienced stress and pressure during their initial days in the educational system in the U.S., exacerbated by the fact that participants were previously unfamiliar with the system of their current graduate school. As a result, their mental health was adversely affected, although they were unaware of its impact during their transition or inadvertently ignored it to continue with their academic pursuits. The participants had an opportunity to select their preferred higher education program but were unable to prioritize their mental well-being. Due to the loss of their independence in an unknown environment, they had to rely on the support and resources available. The four themes and their subthemes discussed in this chapter, with supporting data, highlight the complex perspectives and aspects of these participants' stories and lived experiences that affect their reactions, solutions, and decisions for academic success. The chapter also includes the data that supports the findings.

Themes and Subthemes

Solitary Voyage

In this study, six participants saw their transition to graduate school in the U.S. as a journey they had to navigate independently or with limited support. Throughout this journey, they had to confront stressors such as navigating a new environment, changes in their roles, feelings of isolation, overlooked international student identities, uncertainty about the future, and transitioning out of graduate school. Although some participants received support from their social networks, the feeling of a solitary voyage persisted within them. They had to navigate the complex higher education system and environment alone, with no one to offer immediate assistance or guidance. It seemed the support they received from their universities was not enough. The journey remained solitary, requiring them to manage it every step of the way independently. The participants noted that their journey from their home countries to graduate

school as a challenging process marked by various obstacles, from the application process to the final year of their program and their entrance into the academic or non-academic job market. While the positive aspects of transition came from some resources available at the participants' university although these resources did not fully meet their specific needs.

Navigating resources from year to year made them feel fearful of managing time effectively and balancing tasks at the graduate school, especially for those in a two-year master's program. Suffering from the isolated feeling was repeated and lasted throughout the five-year journey for five doctoral students as participants in this study. In addition to their primary role as international graduate students, they also had multifaceted responsibilities that required multiple roles functions, adaptations, as well as presented challenges. Their international identities were either overlooked or appropriately recognized, which caused the participants to feel insecure in their current path and future plans. The following subthemes described here help to understand participants' feelings of isolation.

Self-Navigation to a New Environment

The participants saw their journey as a situation where they had to prepare on their own from the admissions application and navigate resources within their current university independently. The admissions application was crucial, as it was the first impression and experience for international students' new journey. Having support throughout the application process would have made the transition easier for the participants from the start as they matriculated into their graduate programs.

When asked who supported the participants with their school application, many participants replied with "on my own", "lonely", or "by myself" to describe their situation of applying independently and self-preparing. They spent a lot of their time researching relevant

information on various information channels, such as university websites and social media platforms. Mim experienced figuring out the application process by going through the website information. Some of them also received school information or got advice from their current network, such as their previous program coordinators, alumni, friends, siblings, partners, or colleagues. However, that information and support was limited from the institution itself. Mim added, “I talked to some friends who already came to the U.S. and a graduate coordinator. I used to follow social platforms where everyone is trying to go to the U.S.”

Similarly, Jamie applied using the same process for her current doctoral program as she did for her master’s program application in the Midwest of the U.S. Jamie shared, “I was kind of looking up on my own for my doctoral program. One thing was that I also did for my master’s program in the field in the Midwest.” It showed that Jamie’s past experiences and knowledge gained in the United States proved instrumental in preparing for her application and transition. She continued, “No one really did [support for me to apply to this university]. I was kind of looking up on my own. One thing [the similar way of searching for school choices] was that I also did to my master’s program in the field.”

Despite Ella and HP having previously studied in the U.S. prior to their doctoral programs, they still sought out support from individuals with differing perspectives. HP navigated the application process independently but did receive some guidance from her colleagues in regard to her doctoral program. As shared by HP during the interview, she obtained a master's degree from a university in the southern region of the U.S. and worked as an education advisor, providing her with relevant experience. Ella also received assistance from an individual prior to her visa application as a result of her participation in an exchange program in the U.S. Ellas said,

> My experience was completely different [from her college exchange program to this current doctoral program] which was a way harsher. I would know more than the person who was helping me when it came to immigration and getting a visa. I'm the type of person who does a lot of research about things, so it was a bit frustrating because I felt I was on my own. I was figuring everything out on my own.

Despite receiving assistance from a familiar source, a mentor of the college exchange program that Ella previously attended in the Midwest, she encountered challenges during the application process and had to conduct extensive research before submitting her materials. Similarly, four other respondents also received support from acquaintances but not from the institution or program itself. As doctoral program applicants, it felt like finding resources and information was their responsibility rather than having them provided by the universities.

The application period symbolized a fresh start for the participants, as they entered new academic institutions, locations, and experiences. This transition required self-navigation and self-advocacy, as they had to navigate the graduate school journey independently. Ella recalled initial experiences as she began her doctoral program. She shared,

> When I first came to the university, we didn't have any orientation for international graduate students. I have that feeling that I'm navigating the whole graduate school on my own. I just don't recall someone talking about an opportunity. I'm usually the one telling my friends. It's kind of sad to say, but I think no one telling me about the resource. I've always kind of found them on my own. I never really received any support if I hadn't created it. I was the person who advocated for it.

From what she shared; it is evident that adequate resources were not available to support her. She had to advocate for the resources that should have been readily available and accessible to all

students on campus. Likewise, Sandie, the only participant enrolling in a master's program, had to navigate the system alone and ask someone's help because she could not suffer with the struggle anymore. She noted,

> When I first started living here in my first month, I didn't understand the bus system. Nobody had taken time to explain it to me, so I actually used to walk to campus for study and for my graduate assistantship. Until I got so tired, I asked some friends what I needed to do to use the bus system.

While in graduate school, the experience of HP, Mim, and others further highlights their self-direction in seeking out resources. HP, as an international doctoral student, faced the challenge of juggling a busy schedule, including classes, assignments, graduate assistantship, and adult responsibilities for her two dependents who were non-English speakers. Her university did not provide any cultural activities or a network for students' families, so she had to look for these activities for her daughter and husband. She was stressed about finding additional activities and helping her dependents adapt to a new culture, which was crucial for their understanding of where they were living. The situation created stress while managing her graduate assistantship and settling into the new environment without any guidance. HP emphasized,

> I didn't have any chance to help my two dependents to be engaged in the new environment. I had to look for the opportunity by myself rather than my university help me to do that. They [the university] didn't create any kind of network activities so that I can bring my dependents there. Or they do any cultural events or something like that to help us to better adjust ourselves in the new environment. It's very helpful for us to know the culture of where we live. It created a lot of pressure on me like how to adjust myself and how to support my dependents in a new environment.

Finding a graduate assistantship was another challenge that required a self-driven approach. Mim shared her situation about having no help in finding a graduate assistantship which she had to do by herself. She had to find it and applied for it by herself. Moreover, she expressed the stress of managing her graduate assistantship while settling into life in a new place without any guidance. Mim expressed her situation,

> It was very hectic and busy because both work, settled down in the new place and the other research or teaching assistant activities, were very stressful. It was bad because initially I had to figure out everything. Where is everything, where I have to go.

It is likely that these participants who were either in their first year or final year of their program had to navigate their journeys independently. They were new to everything but still had to explore their environment independently and help their dependents adapt to the new environment.

Multifaceted Responsibilities

These responsibilities described the participants who led, were involved in, or participated partially or fully in various duties or abilities at the same time from their student life, graduate assistantship position, adult life, and other possible volunteering jobs during their graduate school. The primary role of international graduate students is to undertake studies in their programs of study in their role as a student. However, relocating to a new environment can change their roles or add new ones which were not present in their home countries. In their graduate schools, IWGSs may hold multiple roles at the same time including being researchers who conduct their studies in a second language, daughters who care for their family members back home, wives, mothers, and breadwinners who take care of their dependents in the U.S.

They may also be graduate assistants who teach, do research, and run programs at the university and serve as mentors who support newcomers in their program.

Through the interviews and demographic questions, the participants' roles have been summarized in Table 4. No matter how many roles they take on, participants who feel alone on their own journeys find it even more difficult to take on multiple roles.

Table 4

The Participants' Roles During Their Graduate School

Roles	**Mim**	**Wednesday**	**HP**	**Jamie**	**Sandie**	**Ella**
International graduate student	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Research	Dissertation	Dissertation	Dissertation	Dissertation	Dissertation	Academic Writing (1)
Graduate assistantship	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
First generation	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Long-distance caregivers (2)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Partner role (3)	n/a	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Caregivers for F2-visa dependent(s) (4)	No	No	Yes (2 dependents)	No	No	No
Student organization role	n/a	Yes	n/a	n/a	n/a	Yes
Mentoring role	n/a	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Notes.

n/a: means that no relevant information was found in the participants' demographic questions and interview.

(1): the participants did not conduct a research study or dissertation but did assignments in research formats.

(2): means the responsibilities which the participants care for their parents back home as a daughter or adult in a family by (in)direct ways. For example, have video calls with their family members for updating daily or uncertain issues back home. The responsibilities were related to financial support, long-distance mental care, or emotional assistance to their families there.

(3): the roles were wives or in a long-term relationship with someone for whom the participant has some responsibilities.

(4): the dependents were the children and/or spouse of a participant with F2 visas. The participant is a breadwinner as a financial earner in this situation.

When describing their international student role, “busy and hectic” were the words that all participants talked about their busyness. Whether they were in a master’s or doctoral program or how many years they were studying at their institution, Sandie, Mim and Jamie had the same thoughts about the duties of graduate students and graduate assistants that also made them difficult to engage in other types of activities at their universities. Sandie frankly said, “I actually never joined these [student] groups because I was too busy trying to make my graduate assistantship and my studies work. I didn't have time.” In the same situation, Jamie added, “I don’t usually have time to reach out to them [writing center] and get help. Ph.D. things have been a lot more hectic than I thought that they would.” Likely, Mim somehow participated in university activities in her first semester, but lately she was “busy with my graduate assistantship work so it’s little less”, but she “still go”, “invite friends to go with, but “mostly” she went by herself. It is obvious how their busy graduate student life resulted in their being put in an isolated working status. The demands of academic pursuits required them to prioritize their academic and

graduate assistantship responsibilities. This led to a sense of isolation for these responsibilities over social networks and activities.

Besides the role of being international graduate students, all the participants had their assistantship in their institutions, and each of them took a different assistantship role (i.e., a graduate assistant, teaching assistant, and research assistant). Ella shared her hidden challenges when taking a teaching role, where she did not know how to react to the situation of lack of respect from her students until she was asked in this interview. The students' disrespect left her feeling uncomfortable and concerned, wondering whether it was rooted in her positionality as a graduate student, female identity, and/or country of origin (European). Ella shared,

> I never reached out or anything. When I was teaching my own class the first time, I think some students were not being as respectful to me as I guess. I just didn't know how to react to that, so I tried to ignore it. I never really told that to anyone or brought that up to anyone. I could tell that the way they were writing emails or even talking to me, they were less respectful. I don't know if it was because I was a graduate student or a female student. Or if I was a [country of origin] student. I had met the whole experience very difficult. It's extremely uncomfortable.

She navigated the expectations of teaching, personal identity, and power dynamics. Although she was in the teaching position, she did not receive the respect and understanding from her students. This compounded her feelings of isolation. She shared it with no one or ignored it until someone asked and made her recall. There was an absence of supportive network and guidance for her on how to address and understand the root of the situation, whether it comes from her graduate student role, teaching role, a female identity, and nationality.

While Ella had difficulties in her teaching role, HP faced a challenge in her research role. Although these challenges were not related specifically to her gender identity, a lack of training and orientation, little support from research team members, and self-navigation added pressure and time consumption to adapt to the research team and new scope of work. HP said,

> Every graduate assistantship has its own challenge. For me, the first time I joined the team was very challenging because I was not familiar with what the time is working on. I had to spend one to three months to understand the whole scope of the work of the team. Then I know what my supervisor wants, and her working and communication styles are so that I can work with them more effectively. I had to learn by myself. My supervisor never offered any kind of training or orientation.

During the interviews, some participants revealed that they held additional roles such as mentors, student board members, or leaders of student organizations. However, they did not provide much detail about the challenges they faced in these roles. Talking more about her new role as a board member, Wednesday expressed her pride in stepping out of her comfort zone and taking on new challenges to support her community. By accepting this new role, she found herself committing more time to “informal meetings” with her peers, advocating for the needs and expectations of the student group members, building new relationships and communication channels, and managing her well-being to avoid burnout from her responsibilities as a graduate student and a graduate assistant. Wednesday talked about her new role: “I decided to join the student board and our program. So actually, I was elected as an academic and professional development Co-chair in my program. Yeah, I accepted lots of new challenges that I've never actually done back in my [country name].

Apart from her role as a student board member, Wednesday, like five other participants, also took on the responsibility of caring for her family back home. She communicated with them frequently by sending photos every other day or at least three times a week, which required careful time management. Regular communication and updates to their family back home required emotional support and time balance when there were emergencies or difficult circumstances back home. Mim, for example, was unable to visit her family due to geographical barriers and the high cost of airfare, which left her feeling guilty and isolated. Mim said, "sometimes I come back [my home country]. If I get more funding, I could travel. Ticket price is the only problem. Sometimes I heard [about her mother's health issue]. I felt bad because I was not there with her." The situation of Mim was about her responsibility as a daughter, geography barriers, and the high cost of tickets that prevented her from travel and physical presence during family crisis. As a result, they experienced feelings of regret, guilt, isolation, and detachment from their families back home. She had to continue her graduate school life and carrying the uncomfortable feeling of being unable to be there for her family during tough times.

Another example was Jamie's situation. Jamie had no dependents in the U.S. but struggled to maintain her responsibility as a daughter from afar. Her decision was to catch up with her family more to develop stronger family bonds and minimize physical gaps between them. Another support to Jamie's significant other in the U.S. required her attention, ability, time, and energy during uncertain time. Jamie expressed,

> I've been trying to be a responsible daughter but it's actually hard when I'm physically away. All I do is talk to them regularly and give them updates. I'm in a long-term relationship now and the significant other had the issue. There was a time super challenging for me.

Responsibilities to the family as a daughter or caregiver was another challenging layer that participants had to carry on their back in the new environment.

All study participants experienced changes in their roles and took on new responsibilities (i.e., first-generation status). Roles that none of them had experienced in their home countries could be international graduate students, a primary financial earner (if they brought their dependents), and long-distance caregivers to their family members back home. These roles were added when the participants pursued their academic journeys in the U.S. Sandie, Mim, and HP all identified as first-generation students. Mim showed her independent actions, thoughts and responsibilities and so did Sandie. It was more challenging for Sandie when she lost her primary emotional support when her parents passed away. She emotionally told, "back home I used to have family responsibilities when my mother was still alive. My father passed away. She [my mom] is really the only person that I would say I was responsible for in my country." Although Sandie did not have a responsibility as a daughter, it was obvious that Sandie, a first-generation student, could experience more challenges when she lost her support network.

Of the six participants, HP seemed to be the student who had the most roles in graduate school as shown in Table 4. HP, was a primary breadwinner or financial earner, had to take care of two dependents and navigated all resources for them in the U.S. HP described her challenges in finding cultural events for her dependents' sense of belonging and to make meaningful connections in this new environment,

> They [the university] didn't create any kind of network activity so that I can bring my dependents there. Or they do not do any cultural events or something like that to help us to better adjust ourselves in the new environment. We went to the public library and participated in some cultural events: Halloween or Thanksgiving. It's very helpful for us

> to know the culture of where we live. Otherwise, we didn't have any chance to go out and explore the city.

Apart from helping her dependents adapt to a social life, she had to manage her family's financial stability in the U.S. and her dependents initially relied on her for basic communication in English due to a language barrier when interacting with others.

Adding to Mim's challenges about geography, emergencies, and the high cost of airfare, HP faced the same situation. HP shared about her emergency,

> We try to minimize the spending so that we live within my stipend. One time when I had a family emergency that required me to travel back to my country immediately. That time it was very difficult for me because I didn't have enough money to buy the ticket.

Both Mim and HP faced emergencies, but they handled them differently. While HP needed to go home immediately, Mim was unable to do so and remained anxious. They both felt a sense of duty to take care of their family members while also balancing their academic performance, personal well-being, and other graduate student responsibilities. Additionally, HP opted to, similar to Wednesday and Jaime, to build a connection with her loved ones. She believed that calling her parents each day was the most effective way to keep them informed of her well-being and to instill a sense of responsibility in herself as a daughter. HP said, "I had to call them [my parents] every day, make sure that my parents were not worried about my safety and talk to them every day, like one of the child's responsibilities to my parents." Adapting to the new environment required HP to take on several roles, each with its own challenges in terms of time, effort, energy, resilience, and capacity. She had to tackle these obstacles on her own, which left her feeling alone.

The new environment added new roles and shifted the participants into unfamiliar ones they had never encountered before. The participants found themselves with a feeling of isolation and a lack of support associated with the navigation of the complexities of the multiple roles when adapting to their new environment. The greater the number of roles one has, the more complex the layers of challenges become.

Overlooked Presence

Navigating graduate school on their own can be extremely challenging for students who hold multiple roles. Unfortunately, being overlooked can exacerbate feelings of isolation within the university environment. In this study, participants shared their stories of how their expectations were unmet, their voices were unheard, and their sense of belonging disconnected from the beginning to the end of their journey.

It was hard to describe Wednesday's feeling when she saw someone else's gatherings for holidays and celebrations which sparked memories of having dumplings with her family. She may feel lost in a space where she had nowhere to belong to. What she knew about authentic holiday celebration was from a student group while it was not from university activities for all students. Wednesday shared,

> There aren't lots of international students in my program, so they are not really aware of that [a celebration a holiday in a Chinese group]. I remember one of the Chinese students in my cohort bring some moon cakes to celebrate the holiday. I felt it reminded me to have dumplings with my family on that holiday. It was heartwarming. So celebrating different holidays was kind of cultural gap or the thing that I've never expected.

Celebrating her own holiday to preserve her cultural heritage created a strong connection between her and her community in graduate school. This nurtured a sense of belonging and

prevented feelings of loneliness in the predominantly white institution in the U.S. Although she was able to find solace when she was away from home, her situation highlighted cultural identity, isolation, and a lack of recognition of communities in her international graduate student life by the university.

In another example, HP's experience was a little different from Wednesday's. HP demonstrated challenges in helping her and her dependents to explore U.S. culture for their adaptation. Her experience showed her willingness to participate in activities, develop her sense of belonging, and share the benefits with her dependents at the university. However, she had to look for signature activities and events (i.e., Halloween, Thanksgiving) for her dependents while it seemed these activities should have been organized by the university. The situation was not only about the lack of services for newcomers and their families but also the lack of local culture and social connections to assist newcomers in settling down. The university failed to recognize newcomers' families in the campus spaces, or "create any kind of network activity" for student families.

On the other hand, Ella and Wednesday came from different countries of origin but they both felt overlooked in typical ways. While it may be uncommon for white international students to feel overlooked in a predominantly white institution, the experience of Ella, a European student, was different. She highlighted when she first arrived, the university "didn't have any orientation for international graduate students". Later, there was a half day orientation with a panel of graduate students. There was "a traditional speech by everyone telling us we're the greatest". The speech was to motivate incoming students, but it looked like a generic message and not tailored to "what they thought or what they wanted" which was supposed to provide incoming international graduate students with resources and information. Ella emphasized

recognizing the presence of international students and providing thoughtful support required thoughtful communication and effort. She pointed out that the university did little to aid in transitioning into and out of campus life. Without adequate resources and support, she had to advocate for her needs while the resources should have been developed for students. Ella added,

> Students live international graduate student life when they are running into a system that we are not familiar with. It doesn't really exist for particularly graduate students to transition into campus life and transition out of graduate student life. International graduate students are highly overlooked by [a university department which supports international students]. I never really received any support if I hadn't created it. I was the person who advocated for it.

The story of Ella showed student support services were not specifically designed to meet the needs of international graduate students or international women students. The resources seemed to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach and surface-level recognition to students in student support services. Advocating the need for better resources resulted in increased pressure, a sense of isolation, and detachment from campus life for Ella. Furthermore, Ella's discomfort with students' disrespects also emphasized the lack of resources for international graduate students or women students. One more time, these student support services did not address the specific needs of these students at an institutional level.

Differently, Wednesday experienced a feeling of unwelcome and ignored at her weekly lunch meeting in her educational program. The primary objective of the lunch meeting was to provide a space for faculty members, domestic graduate students, and international graduate students to engage in meaningful conversations. However, the discussion centered on topics that were unfamiliar to Wednesday. She was stuck in unfamiliar topics which were more popular with

lots of domestic students than international students. Unfortunately, the situation was not recognized by topic contributors during the conversation or domestic graduate students in her educational program while it should have been. It seemed the conversation was not welcome a space for those who were unfamiliar with it. Her international identity presence was ignored. It explained why Wednesday indicated "be more sensitive or recognize international students" in the program with the majority of domestic students and emphasized "how international students have different experiences, and their perspectives, thinking, sites or experiences are not respected."

Navigating graduate school was challenging for the participants but feeling overlooked and marginalized increased feelings of isolation and disconnect from the campus spaces. As the university provided little support in terms of transitioning into and out of campus life, it led to higher pressure. Cultural, woman identity, and social norms were not recognized and addressed appropriately. The dynamics of the conversations and communications pushed them into a situation where the participants were uncomfortable, frustrated, isolated, and doubtful about their abilities.

Uncertain Future of Not Being Able to Plan

The successful completion of a graduate program requires meticulous planning for academic, financial, and career preparation. Planning for graduate school was a difficult process, especially when the participants faced different financial situations. All of them dealt with different situations, but they all had similar responses regarding their expenses, savings, emergency funds, family crisis, future plans, or additional financial support. Those suffering from an unsafe future kept their struggles hidden. Typically, "tight", "spending less", "minimize the spending", "not a lot of saving", "set budget", "not ready", or "not being able to plan for the

next phase of my life" were phrases that the participants described their unstable financial situations. Despite being adults who had prepared for their student and daily lives, participants found it increasingly challenging to save and plan for a secure future when they had to rely on university support or were bound by their international student status.

As noted earlier, Mim and HP shared their challenges traveling back home due to family crises. Mim had "very tight" stipend without "a lot of saving or anything" so she had to "try to spend less". With two dependents, HP also covered their insurance, which she "did not expect to spend a lot of money on". She shared how her international student status put her in a situation of dependence on university support and plan for a secure future because she could "not work over 20 hours per semester per week during semester". HP said, "the insurance for my dependents is an unexpected problem because I have to spend a lot of money on that cost." The unexpected expense added more financial pressure on her while she did have any saving or a second income. Work hour restrictions, limited stipend, and high dependent insurance costs were major obstacles for HP to manage her student life and dependents' life security. The limited stipend and high cost of dependents' insurance contributed to less independence in the event of emergencies or the ability to plan. As a result, HP experienced anxiety or reluctance during her school years which led to feelings of loneliness because she became the primary breadwinner and caretaker to manage financial pressure and navigate everything in the household for her dependents – non-English speakers. Both Mim and HP felt pressure to prioritize caregiving duties above their academic performance and career plan because of they were women. The interview data showed that they cared for savings, emergencies, and their family members back home.

In the same way, Ella was as frustrated as HP was. The anxiety for Ella was family planning when the relevant high costs were associated with starting a family such as medical

expenses for pregnancy and health insurance for a child. This added tension to Ella's life, as she was in her final year of a doctoral program and had more pressure for her future after graduation, which included transitioning out of graduate school, starting a family, and job security. Similarly, women and motherhood pressures also showed in Ella's situation. She described her situation as challenging, given the financial constraints she faced. Ella added,

> It's (the stipend is) not really feasible to cover food and rent or save for the future. That's the part that bothers me the most. When we're talking about people who are getting older, not being old, you might start thinking about what's next. So, I would say my stipend covers the essential but does not allow for planning. Starting a family, when you look at the cost of an additional health insurance for a kid and the medical cost of what to come with a pregnancy. Frustration and kind of hopelessness. We are stuck and there's not a lot that we can do to get out of that. That's the financial aspect and not being able to plan for the next phase of my life.

The theme revealed challenges that the participants faced in planning their academic, finance, and career preparedness. Some participants concealed their challenges and only shared them with their trusted people or until they were asked in the interview. Work hour restrictions, limited stipends, and the unexpected cost contributed to the inability to plan for a secure future. As women, they also had tensions for plans of starting motherhood and raising the child.

A Transition Out of Graduate School

The final destination of the graduate school journey is to graduate and secure a job. However, participants struggled finding resources and planning for the next phase in graduate school. When asked about their plans for finding a job after completing their program, most

participants expressed that they were not ready to begin their job search or were undecided between non-academia or academia paths.

Through Ella's view, the transition out of graduate student life was also important to her in the final year of a doctoral student. Ella pointed out "assumptions" about the structure of research world, which led doctoral students to be expected to pursue teaching positions in the arts and sciences field she was studying. She had different expectations of going into academia, and she found that career resources were not available for doctoral students or herself. The comprehensive support system did not "exist for particularly graduate students to transition into campus life and transition out of graduate student life" at her university. The situation made her feel worried about her career direction despite her best effort to gain practical experiences and opportunities. Ella shared,

> It [a name of career readiness program] doesn't really exist for particularly graduate students to transition into campus life and transition out of graduate student life. I don't want to go into academia. I think we're still kind of lacking training and support about to transition to non-academia work job because there are still a lot of assumption that we all want to be teachers like professors. I've tried to have some volunteer or have extra experience, so I feel confident with my resume. But then I don't know what the future holds. Not 100% sure.

Without a clear roadmap for post-graduation direction, Ella faced navigating her transition on her own. Similarly, Wednesday had a similar perspective about non-academic career paths, even though she was not yet in her final year of the program. She expressed,

> I just finished my first semester, so I don't think I'm ready for job search. Career readiness, I guess the focus in our program is to raise or develop, cultivate or make

> students to be ready as prospective faculty. I just want to discover any other opportunities there are. There is not only one way of career. For example, we can do institutional research or work in a practical setting as a director of student affairs or an administration job. I want to learn more about those jobs in academic or faculty careers.

Both Ella and Wednesday indicated that there would not be a single path after graduation. Wednesday explored a range of diverse career possibilities within and beyond academia. Once again, she recognized the traditional idea of the outcome of a doctoral program as "prospective faculty". Advancing in a specific study field of study was important for them and could be the reason they chose to pursue a doctoral program. While Ella and Wednesday needed available resources at the university, Sandie needed,

> I think I would need guidance on knowing my strengths and weaknesses. I just need some guidance with regards to what my options are, what I need to concentrate on with regards to the options that are available to me in terms of my studies. Perhaps someone who I can trust to give me the guidance that I need as I navigate this route what graduate was towards and then thereafter in the workforce.

Career opportunities, job searches, and interviews were challenging topics that participants faced. Participants, like other IWGSs, had to find resources to more clearly understand the job search process due to policies, important timelines, discrimination, financial burden, and mental health. These were particularly challenging for marginalized students in U.S. system. Another example of Mim and HP experience showed some gaps or dependences on the university support. Mim was talking about preparation of the academic job opportunities which she had planned,

> I'm not ready yet because I have to do a lot of research then I can think about it. I know [the university name] is very good university, but there are more great universities in the U.S. compared to that. If we can always prove ourselves with research and everything, it would be good for the academic job market. So we can give to academia or any place easily when we have to go for academic job.

She expressed the need of extensive research to strengthen her profile and competitiveness in the academic job market which was more challenging for women pursuing jobs in the STEM field. On the other hand, HP relied heavily on her advisor and program for job preparation. She noted the barrier of the university career service program which catering to undergraduate students. To her point, career preparedness leaned heavily on an advisor or department rather than involving the entire university. She also expressed the significant role of her advisor in supporting her entry into the non-academia or academia world. HP said,

> Career service program and all the services like interviews and internships at the university mainly support the undergraduate rather than graduate students. Doctoral students rely much on advisors and their own program in terms of preparing for the job market. I am trying to work with my advisor to make sure that I have an opportunity to get a job after graduation.

This subtheme highlighted the lack of comprehensive support systems for doctoral students and the absence of a clear roadmap for post-graduation direction. Marginalization, women's identity, and social dynamics created pressure on their career preparedness. University services seemed to be less available for international graduate counterparts and left them with a lonely journey to look for career resources.

A Dilemma of Self-reliance and Reliance

The majority of participants had prior work experience of a few years or had completed at least one college degree in their home countries (*there*). These past experiences contributed to the *self-reliance or independence* in their thoughts, decisions, and actions, which in turn influenced their strategies for success in graduate school. During the interviews, participants also shared how they bridged their personal knowledge with unknown environments *(here)* or unavailable resources. They needed *the reliance or dependence* on some assistance including financial foundations and the ability to do something to adapt to their new environment. This helped them to adjust to the new graduate school environment and achieve success in their studies. This theme addresses the first research question of how the participants as IWGSs described their transition experiences at their campuses.

Independence There (in The Home Country)

Based on the participants' demographic questions and interviews, all of them had some working experience, took adult responsibilities, and were independent in their thoughts, actions, and decisions in their host countries. They expressed a strong sense of self-agency in dealing with tough situations as independent adults because they were able to manage the difficulties back home. Or they had to be independent because no one in the home country helped them to do so. They brought values, experiences, and backgrounds to apply here to resolve issues and overcome possible challenges.

Talking about active independence in their home countries, Wednesday's journey to the graduate program was not about joining her partner's path. She was about looking for new spaces, opportunities, and future where her educational desire and career intersected. Wednesday said,

> I was working as an admission officer back then in [city name in an East Asian country] for five years. The biggest reason to study in the U.S. is because of my partner. He is also an international student, and we were basically in a long-distance relationship. That means I have to apply for this university. But I don't want to be like following him like I have to think about my own career too. Then I found the best professor that I want to work with here in this university and this program.

Her country of origin may tie into the idea that women had to follow men's direction. In her situation, the stereotype was not correct because her steps were seen as a form of freedom, empowerment, and advancement in her rights and professional development opportunities. Investing in her intellectual growth increased her confidence and autonomy in her life. Another example was Sandie's situation. When asked about additional support from others for grocery shopping here, Sandie responded,

> All my life has always been **independent**. I don't bother my family or anybody asking for money. My independence, my **financial independence** is very important to me. I am who I am as an individual and has always been. I've always got into my car at home and driven wherever I wanted to go to do my shopping without having to ask anybody.

In the context of the new environment, Sandie could rely on public transportation for her daily activities because she had no car. This was a complete contrast to the freedom and independence she had back home. Both financially and practically, Sandie did not rely on others' support or assistance. And she preferred not to bother anyone even though they were her family members – the closest supportive network.

Ella had to be independent because no one in the home country supported her higher education. A lack of support in Ella's local network called for her self-reliance on her capabilities

rather than asking for support from her advisor back home. Not sharing and asking for help from her advisor showed the complexity of the dilemma of trust and dependence in Ella's situation. Ella shared,

> I don't think I told anyone in my country that I was applying for a graduate program in the U.S. because I wasn't expecting any help from them. Even if I had asked them, I don't think I would have received any help. When asking my professors there [her home country] to write me a recommendation letter for a Ph.D. program. I knew they wouldn't take it seriously. When I told my advisor in my master's program in my country about my Ph.D. acceptance, they were shocked. It was kind of rude. I did not receive any help from the people in my home country.

In this situation, Ella had to rely on her little knowledge, experience, and capacities to pursue her academic aspirations. The experience of independence back home meant something different from Ella to Sandie or Wednesday. From there, the levels of independence could vary in personal, financial, emotional, social, intellectual, and professional aspects.

Participants expressed a strong sense of self-agency in dealing with tough situations and expressed their values, experiences, and background to apply in their new environment. Active independence in the home countries was evident in the journey of participants who emphasized a higher level of their independence and financial independence. On the other hand, some participants had to be independent in their home countries during their application process due to lack of support from their home countries.

Unknown Here (in The New Country)

When entering their new environment, the participants left behind material possessions in their hometowns. What they could bring with them were the values, experiences, knowledge, and

privileges of which they earned from their whole life back home. The new environment became unfamiliar or unknown to them because they had to learn and adapt to so many new things. They become unknown or overlooked (aspects) by the new environment.

"Feared for starters" was how Sandie described her fear of the unknown (or uncertainties) about learning and exploring in the first month *here* (at a public research university in the Midwest). Earlier it was noted that, Sandie was "independent" financially and did not "bother her family or anybody" back home, but struggling to understand the bus system and learn a new environment showed her self-reliance was not enough for her to overcome the challenges. Her efforts to navigate the new system independently demonstrated her willingness to rely on herself to find solutions for her needs because the bus system, Canvas, and online grocery shopping were new to her. While her independent nature could empower her and foster her autonomy, it also had its limitations, in this situation where external support and help were necessary for her to adapt to an unfamiliar environment. Additionally, although she was mature, it did not mean that she could navigate everything by herself without support. In this context, learning everything from the beginning and a feeling of dependence were unfamiliar to her as well.

A shift from independence to dependence may be found in Sandie's journey while another shift from employee mode to student mode was described in Jamie's two-year journey. Jamie shared,

> I'm not really in student mode because I used to be an employee. A transition from being an employee to being a student life would take a bit more time to adjust to student life. With a lot of people around me, my transition from an employee to a student was a bit easier, but I'm still adjusting though.

She highlighted the adjustment from being an employee with routines, responsibilities, and an independent lifestyle to being a student with changes in time, efforts, environment, and power dynamics. Being a student meant she was treated as an international graduate student while being an employee could provide her with strong agency and control associated with her professional role. It was understood that employees have the ability to manage tasks, make decisions, and influence outcomes within their scope of work. As an international student, policies, code of conduct, academic protocols, and social norms would be required to maintain an international student status. A student mode limited self-reliance and required her to balance between professional independence and dependence in this new environment. As a student, she did not have as much power because she was viewed as subject to rules and not someone who could be a decision-maker.

Participants experienced a shift from independence to dependence in their new environment, especially within the context of societal expectations and pressures. This transition required them to balance between professional independence and dependence on their student role in their new environment, highlighting the complexities individuals face when adapting to different roles and expectations.

Contrasting Financial Foundations

A level of financial stability and independence influenced the self-reliance and reliance of the participants when they moved to the new environment. Self-reliance allowed them to have the freedom to make decisions, take actions, and have a safe plan for post-graduation. However, relying on financial support (stipend) made the participants feel dependent on their graduate assistantships while when they were back home, they felt more independent.

All of the participants had various types of graduate assistantships during their time in graduate school. They emphasized the significance of having these assistantships in terms of completing their program on time, receiving support for living expenses, tuition fees, and health insurance, and gaining valuable learning experiences at the university. As an independent woman, Sandie expressed the importance of an assistantship which could help her to be responsible for both a value of independence and self-reliance and a means of financial support. She was reluctant to be seen as a burden of bothering her family for financial issues. It means that she depended totally on her graduate assistantship stipend.

Ella and Jamie received different portions of financial assistance from their respective institutions' insurance policies. The amount of stipend they contributed depended on the percentage of insurance they did not cover. Ella emphasized that inadequate financial support could not cover her basic needs (food and rent) when her international student status allowed her to only work on campus for up to 20 hours per week. Inflation and inadequate financial support increased her stress and tension in the face of reliance, economic pressures, and systemic inequalities. Ella explained,

> With inflation and everything, the stipend from the assistantship wasn't enough anymore. It [the stipend] covered tuition. I still have to pay for the university fees. That is huge because I'm paying 20% of the insurance. How am I supposed to live while I'm paying that? Especially I cannot have extra jobs and get all the money. So, it's not really feasible to cover food and rent.

Furthermore, Jamie found the education field offered lower stipends compared to the STEM field. Due to time constraints, Jaime had to complete her academic goals in a strict timeframe, preventing financial strain. Setting a five-year timeframe to avoid additional financial stress

would put financial strain on herself during the five years of school for program completion. It was unrealistic expectations and financial disparities between STEM and educational fields, or socioeconomic disparities within academia. Jamie said,

> I'm glad that I've been able to secure the assistantship. I am in education so the amount of my assistantship would be a lot lower than STEM for sure. It covers my entire tuition and then I can take as many credits as I want. It covers 90% of the insurance and I will only pay 10% each month. Stipends don't really increase by year. I am bit a concerned as the rent goes up a bit. The entire journey will take five years. My funding will be able to cover the entire journey but can last for five years maximum. My hope is to get the program done within five years because of it.

What Jamie shared was an evident of how students with lower stipends could struggle with financial management when international graduate students with minoritized backgrounds may already suffer from the systemic barriers of U.S. higher education. Therefore, they had to live with the complex interplay between self-reliance and reliance from year to year of the program.

This theme concluded the transitions of the participants on the journey, in which their self-reliance was shifted to reliance, influencing their ways to manage tough situations and responsibilities. With their women's identity, societal pressure and expectations added complexity to their experiences. The level of financial support impacted their engagement in daily activities and post-graduation plans.

A Vicious Cycle of Limited Time and Finance Constraints

The participants expressed their concerns regarding their limited stipends and limited financial resources, which impacted their student and personal lives. The issues of time and finance were frequently mentioned in their responses. The participants emphasized the need to

increase their social life and make their academic work more manageable. They were drawn into the wheel of time, timelines, and deadlines of class and graduate assistantship. At times they tried to ignore these pressures, which gradually became invisible. Even if they started to recognize the (visible) pressure, they still did not have time for more activities due to their financial barriers. The demands of coursework and graduate assistantship, along with the financial constraints, prevented participants from engaging in their new environment although they wanted to.

Time Obligations and Time for Other Resources

Offering resources and student support services aims to support student development in the higher education environment, but time and financial constraints prevent students from enriching their physical, social, mental, and personal lives while in graduate school. Social activities benefit students by building their network, contributing to graduate assistantship tasks, academic achievement, and post-graduation prospects. Unfortunately, time and financial burdens can hinder their ability to engage in these activities fully. As a result, participants got stuck in a vicious cycle or dilemma wherein they had to consider the priority of academic responsibilities with their personal and social needs that were important for their well-being and academic success.

In this study, time for academic work and graduate assistantship responsibilities was more prioritized and important for all participants than time for other personal activities. Spending time for self-discovery and social interactions with communities was less important because the participants had to manage their academic and assistantship performance. This was particularly the case for Mim, Jamie, and Sandie, even though they recognized the importance of social activities focusing on personal wellness. They all were aware of the social and cultural activities offered at their universities. Unfortunately, they typically were unable to participate due

to their heavy schedules of studying and working, or due to conflicts with her classes and graduate assistantships. Mim participated less frequently in activities and events because she did not have time. Similarly, Sandie honestly said,

> At the university orientation, we were told about the various cultural groups. But to be honest with you, I actually never joined these groups because I was too busy trying to make my graduate assistantship and my studies work. I just didn't have time for them.

And Jamie added, “graduate students do have their own work hours where they are teaching. It’s not very flexible for us to join any of those social events that international student services offer”. The decreasing participation in these activities came from the nature of participants’ coursework and the high commitment of their graduate assistantship tasks. The demands of academic and teaching responsibilities consumed a significant portion of their time. Time inflexibility of the activities and the time limitations of the participants’ schedules prevented their participation in opening networks and building communities.

Additionally, five participants were doctoral students, so they also experienced services related to research and academic writing for the research papers. HP, Jamie, and Wednesday found themselves unable to effectively utilize two writing center services at their program and university due to their academic and professional responsibilities. HP thought the university writing service did “not work well” for her because they required the draft submissions in advance for feedback. Besides early draft submissions, Jamie had to “meet the mentor, the writing tutor, and then the writing coach” at her university. And, accessing the university writing service was “competitive” for Wednesday to make a reservation while she recognized the need for support because she “was not confident in academic writing” and she did “not want to make

basic grammar mistakes that faculty could have to correct." In these situations, time constraints were a barrier to them utilizing writing support while the services were created to assist them.

Practically, the writing services were available at the universities, but not as convenient or effective as the participants expected. Wednesday indicated using AI tools could bridge the gap in the writing center's ineffectiveness for her complex research and writing needs. It looked like the AI tool could address her concerns about time and resource accessibility. Wednesday said,

> The writing center was a synchronized meeting through Zoom. They just take a look and correct in the Zoom meeting. The basic grammar mistakes. In terms of formal academic writing, the writing center did not. I have to look it up more or ask ChatGPT again to correct my writing and select more appropriate word choice in my writing.

Ineffective "counseling in writing with staff" led Wednesday to choose the AI tool for writing assistance. In addition, leveraging Zotero (an open-source software for research and citation) and engaging library services helped Ella meet her needs. She did not use a writing center or assistance because articles in her mother tongue may not be available at her university. Ella talked about it,

> For writing, I don't know, or I don't think my [mother language] education where there's not all those resources in [a country name]. I don't have the thought of seeking those resources. I did use some library services for people to help me with some of my research or learn how to use Zotero.

Wednesday and Ella both talked about utilizing AI tools or additional open-source software to assist their research and writing. However, they did not share what free or paid versions they were using. Zotero's free version with its 300MB of file storage may not meet the maximum

needs of doctoral students who need to collect and store a huge number of resources for their dissertation. If Ella used the paid version of Zotero for her research assistance, time and cost-effective solutions may also be her concerns. At this time, a question was raised about the cost of additional tools that the doctoral students needed to pay for. Otherwise, manually managing the research resources and citations required time, organizing skills, and other relevant skills.

With an awareness of time limitations and daily task obligations, each participant had their own ways to use time effectively so that they could perform well in their studies and work and manage their schedule and necessary living activities. To buy groceries with her time and budget limitations, Sandie had to shift from taking buses (the first option), to taking a taxi to or from the supermarket (the second option), and to choosing online shopping (the third and current option). The reason she chose not to take buses was "very time-consuming and having to wait for the bus to come and take you to the supermarket and then bring you back." And beyond that, due to time and financial limitations, she had to try different ways. She continued,

> The only other alternatives were for me to either take an Uber to or from the supermarket, of which was an expense that I would have to incur as well. When I buy things online, I can actually set the budget without buying things if I'm physically in the supermarket, so I'm controlling my budget.

She was not familiar with online shopping in her country. Through the interview, online grocery shopping became more familiar to manage time and budget at the moment, so she may know the possible service and membership fees associated with online grocery shopping and stores in the U.S. Online grocery shoppers are the paid members and give tips to a shopper for free grocery delivery at some stores. Online shopping also costs some delivery fees. On the other hand, due to financial limitations, controlling the budget took her time. She shared, "when I buy something

that costs me a lot of money, I always take my time to before I make the decision and investment. So, it took me a bit of time. From Sandie's experience, time and financial constraints affected her decisions in her daily activities. It showed she had a great sense of time and budget management. However, using time effectively did not mean that she had free time. Instead, she tried to prioritize activities and eliminated activities that she did not need at that time. Sometimes she or other participants were even forced to consider eliminating personal activities altogether because they really did not have the time.

The subtheme highlighted how time and financial constraints hindered participants from fully engaging in social, personal, and academic activities, despite recognizing the importance of those activities. The high demands of coursework and graduate assistantship tasks left little time for social interactions or participation in university activities. Additionally, the participants found it challenging to utilize writing support services effectively due to time constraints and the competitive nature of accessing these services. Overall, time and financial limitations impacted the participants' ability to fully participate in various aspects of academic and personal life that required effective time and resource management strategies.

Invisible Pressure

With limited hours in the day, the participants found themselves stretched thin, sacrificing personal time and social relationships and considering possible resources to perform well in their programs and assistantships. Time and financial constraints were stressors, which the participants hardly recognized until people around them did or asked them. Invisible pressures were related to systemic inequalities and societal expectations seemed to exist during the women participants' school year.

Each participant had challenging and stressful experiences during their initial few months, some of which are ongoing as they adjusted to their new student life. Some participants were able to overcome these challenges by seeking help from someone else. Some stressors were visible and easy to recognize, while other participants kept their stress to themselves. And sometimes their pressure was invisible or not noticeable until it reached a tipping point. For example, Ella was in her final year of graduate school and recalled struggling with loneliness at the beginning of her graduate school experience. Shifting environments from her exchange program to her current large university impacted her emotions and social life. She said**,**

> Into that huge university, I didn't know anyone, and I was completely alone. The graduate program is harder to make friends. Everyone is working a lot, there is less of the social aspect. I was living in an empty apartment because I didn't have any and didn't know I had to order my furniture in advance. The living room was empty. I had had such a great time my first year [of college exchange program], but it was a different city, school, and program. It kind of changed everything. I had no social life or no dating life. I was just alone, like, really, really alone. I just go to class and not talk to anyone. I didn't want to be one person who was alone.

It was not an exception when Ella was also a graduate student dealing with the nature of the scope of a graduate student's coursework with less time and social engagement in her first semester. No time for social life and no time for settling in her home gradually increased her social isolation, which she did not recognize. Until the stressor reached its peak, Ella's struggles became apparent to her advisor. She "broke down in tears" when her advisor noticed her not-good-grade work and supported her to overcome the situation by introducing her to a mentor. She said that her advisor's support was a reason that she *"came back",* and stayed in her

program until now. During the interview, she did not mention knowing about or accessing support services for women. It was not related to women activities, but she then found a social coffee activity for conversations between domestic and international students organized by an office of student and community engagement. This activity gave her a chance to socialize and relieve some of the invisible pressure. Ella shared,

> A coffee talk that is organized for domestic and international students to meet and talk twice a week. I started going there because I wanted to talk to people and meet people. The type of conversation we had felt very weird. They were asking me really weird questions about my country. Did I have water in my country? But I was able to talk.

Ella's story showed that little time for socialization could cause invisible pressure, which students did not recognize.

As noted earlier, the disrespect of Ella's students caused her to feel uncomfortable and raised concerns about whether the students' actions rooted in her status as an international graduate student, her identity as a female, or her country of origin in Europe. Not addressing the uncertainty at that time did not mean that it was not important, it was because she, as an international women student, *"didn't know how to react to that."* This uncertainty reflected the invisible pressure she had never talked to anyone about until she was asked in the interview. It added an additional layer of stress, which she did not recognize and speak to the complexity of intersecting identities and systemic biases in the U.S. higher education system. She may feel pressure to prioritize her academic and professional duties and the hectic schedule over confronting disrespectful behavior.

Another story was Wednesday's situation in her weekly voluntary lunch meeting with faculty and lots of domestic graduate students in her educational program. She found herself

feeling uncomfortable during lunch meetings in which these conversation topics with these peers were unfamiliar to her, for example Spotify (a popular music app) or a show on Netflix. She described herself as a person who liked to participate in conversations, enjoy chats, and be confident in class discussions. However, Wednesday shared,

> Sometimes **I feel really bad** after having lunch. One time I just **cried** in our car when my partner picked me up and went back to our place together after that. I didn't want to join that [the lunch meeting], to be honest. I'm not sure what to do, but anyway I'll keep joining it and don't know how to not hurt my feelings.

Through her situation, a double bind of Asian cultural and women stereotypes which Wednesday did not want to be shaped was visible. She was aware of her discomfort and "did not want to be an outsider" of the meetings. However, invisible pressure was that her discomfort kept going when she did not know how to address it. Her ongoing uncertainty could create feelings of isolation and self-doubt (imposter syndrome) or more invisible pressures which was hardly recognized. External factors such as many domestic graduate peers, the native speakers' speech of language, and their knowledge in their context made it even more difficult for her to address her discomfort.

The participants experienced significant time constraints and financial pressures. Many of these stressors went unnoticed until they were pointed out by others. Women participants, in particular, faced additional invisible pressures related to societal expectations and systemic inequalities throughout their academic year. Limited time for socialization led to invisible pressures that some participants may not recognize. The final theme emphasized concerns about limited time and financial resources among participants, impacting their lives and their freedom to access resources, with time and finance being recurring issues. Despite recognizing the

importance of social activities, participants struggled to engage due to heavy academic and assistantship commitments. The pressure of balancing academic and personal life was often invisible, exacerbated by societal expectations and systemic inequalities that were shown particularly in participants.

Chapter Summary

The previous three chapters discussed how six participants described their experiences during college transition to their graduate schools and how they received support from their universities and other support networks around them. Chapter 5 will summarize the findings from these three themes and connect them to the context of the literature on IWGSs' college transition at public research universities in the Midwest. I will then provide implications for practice, recommendations for student affairs professionals and future research to serve student college development in higher education environment.

Chapter 5: Discussions

The objective of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the college transition experiences of IWGSs at public research universities in the Midwest. The study utilized a comprehensive phenomenological interview process to gather data regarding how six participants' experiences impacted their lives at various stages of college transition. The study addressed two primary research questions: (1) How do IWGSs describe their transition experiences at public research institutions in the Midwest? (2) What student support services do these students believe they need from the university, other networks, and beyond to have a successful transition?

This chapter presents an overview of the findings discussed in Chapter 4, in the context of the literature and theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2: Literature Review. The discussions are guided by the 4 S's of Schlossberg's transition theory to discover the participants' student and adult lives during college transitions (Anderson et al., 2012). They offer conclusions, summaries for findings and themes, as well as implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

The previous chapter described the findings of the study, which were based data collected from six participants who either currently attend or had previously attended public research universities in the Midwest. These individuals shared their personal experiences regarding their college transition into higher education institutions in the United States. As the primary researcher, I conducted one virtual individual interview with each participant to collect data and address the two research questions. I gained insight into their experiences, how they sought

support, how they perceived themselves, and how they coped with difficulties during the transition process.

In this chapter, I provide a summary of the themes that emerged from virtual interviews with each participant and demographic question analysis. I will then connect these themes with the existing literature on international graduate students and their college transition. Finally, implications for practice and recommendations for student affairs professionals and future research in the higher education field are presented.

Summary of Themes

Chapter 4 discussed three themes which emerged from the data analysis process. The three themes were (1) solitary voyage, (2) a dilemma of self-reliance and reliance, and (3) a vicious cycle of limited time and financial constraints. The first theme was divided into five subthemes: self-navigation to a new environment, multifaceted responsibilities, overlooked presence, uncertain future of not being able to plan, and a transition out of the graduate school. Next, the second theme had three subthemes: independence there, unknown here, and contrasting financial foundations. Finally, the third theme included two subthemes: time obligations and time for other resources, and invisible pressure. Some key takeaways from the findings are summarized here:

- IWGSs started their academic journey without the support of a study abroad agent to provide orientation and preparation for the new environment.
- The first few months or first semester in the U.S. were the most stressful time for IWGSs.
- Support matters to IWGSs regardless of their past study experience in the host country and work experience in home country.

- IWGSs' stress levels increased when IWGSs experienced crises, such as the loss or sickness of their family members back home.
- IWGSs experience a higher level of stress due to a lack of information and support available to this student group as well as the complex roles they had to navigate.
- Several invisible pressures, such as disrespect towards IWGSs and a feeling of isolation in conversations about unfamiliar topics due to complex student and adult roles, were not adequately addressed.
- IWGSs described how they felt and managed the transition independently (i.e., *self*) without a lot of *support* or *strategies* to help them.
- Time and financial constraints affected IWGSs' access to resources and support for themselves and their dependents.
- Financial constraints created uncertainty for IWGSs because they could not plan for the future and potential emergency situations.
- University support matters to international women graduate students.

Connection to Literature

The literature review in Chapter 2 offered information and past research on the difficulties that international graduate students encounter during their transition to graduate school. As such, I expected to contribute to that line of inquiry, particularly in relation to the targeted student group or this phenomenon. Next, the research findings will be connected to the existing literature and Schlossberg's transition theory as the primary theoretical framework (Anderson et al., 2012) for an exploration of college transition experience of IWGSs at public research universities in the Midwest.

Solitary Voyage

The findings of this theme indicated that IWGSs experienced feelings of isolation, frustration, and depression while managing anticipated, unanticipated events, and non-events independently with little support from their universities. The absence of a study abroad consulting center during their application process, new staff training for graduate assistantship workplace, and resources and programs related to multiple identities, exacerbated their struggles. It looked like all participants received little support provided from their institutions. Ella and Wednesday had their partners in the U.S.; Jamie was in a long-term relationship; HP had two dependents with her in the U.S.; and no close relationships were mentioned from Sandie and Mim. The absence of a closed network would leave Sandie and Mim feeling lonely, as they may not have anyone to share their difficulties with during uncertain times.

The disrespect of Ella's students and the exclusive conversation Wednesday described in the lunch meeting emphasized two important issues: a lack of unique support systems specifically for IWGSs with complex identities and assumptions of three factors (countries, similarities in cultural patterns, and stress levels among these countries). According to some studies (Myers-Walls et al., 2011; Yang & Clum, 1994; Yeh & Inose, 2003), European students may have less stress adapting to a new environment than their Asian counterparts because the European educational environment is considered to have a similar culture as in the U.S. However, both Ella (from Europe) and Wednesday (from East Asia) struggled to address their situations regarding female stereotypes and countries of origin in the different situations they interacted with (Crenshaw, 1993; Hankivsky, 2014). The finding showed their complex identities were important for consideration when the participants did not mention any counselors or departments to support them in addressing the issues. A question was raised about the presence

of departments geared toward their specific situation, either the women's center, graduate studies, office of diversity and inclusion, multicultural center, student affairs, or international student office in their universities to which they expressed they received little to no support.

Furthermore, no new staff training for Ella's teaching assistantship role in an unfamiliar environment and Wednesday's difficulty integrating socially with domestic counterparts put them in a situation of a more challenging "moving through" transition, leading to a low sense of belonging and feelings of isolation (Haley et al., 2011; Herzog, 2011; Hyden & Coryell, 2023). As a result, Ella did not share her struggles with anyone until this study interview, while Wednesday only told them to her partner.

In the multifaceted responsibilities of the participants, these stressors such as being away from family and preventing social connections contributed to the feelings of isolation or guilt (Grimm et al., 2019; Myers-Walls et al., 2011) caused by new student roles or parenting roles. International women graduate assistants experienced burnout or exhaustion due to their workload (Berta et al., 2019; Bruner, 2019; Haley et al., 2011). Differently, in this study, all participants experienced social disconnections due to a variety of schedules and their heavy workload. They struggled to find time to participate in university events for all students or submit their papers for advice at writing centers.

Specifically, HP was in a more complicated situation as she had to balance caring for her academic performance with her dependents' social connections (Grimm et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2021; Myers-Walls et al., 2019), and her aging parents back home (Myers-Walls et al., 2011) as a caretaker. HP traveled back home for her family emergency, while Mim carried her feeling of guilt for not being able to travel home when a family member was sick. These feelings were influenced by Asian collectivist cultures and intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1993; Myers-

Walls et al., 2011). In Asian cultures, it is considered a cultural norm for children to take care of parents. Strong family bonds are valuable, and it is essential for family members to be present and for children to take on responsibilities in their loved ones' health situations (Myers-Walls et al, 2011). Moreover, mothers typically play a central and nurturing role in raising a child. However, in HP's situation, she faced numerous binds of her roles as graduate student and caregiver. Her family emergency, as well as Mim's, were the situation or trigger that caused interactions or conflicts in their intersecting identities of Asian cultures, women, and international graduate students were shown in the studies (Anderson et al., 2012; Collins, 2015; Crenshaw 1993; Hankivsky, 2014). Various stress levels came from these three roles of HP's and her anxiety about her family situation. These points connect with previous studies.

HP and Mim were from Asian countries, but their stress levels were differently. Not travelling back home for Mim may not simply be due to the high cost of flight ticket, but also to her visa status, the relevant visa process, and other formalities that she did not mention. Mim shared that she "felt bad because I [she] was not there with her [Mim's mother]" while Wednesday and Jamie chose to talk to their parents more often via phone. With such feelings, each participant had their own strategies to cope with their situation. Similar to previous studies, all participants, including those who did not have family emergencies, felt that communicating and staying connected with their families back home was necessary for maintaining close-knit relationships with family members and cultural community culture (Zhou, 2010).

Talking about transitioning out of graduate school, the "moving out" phase of graduate school seemed to overlap with the "moving in" phase of career opportunities while all participants were in different modes of career preparedness. A continuous process of transition (Anderson et al., 2012) and the overlapping of two cycles added stress to all participants'

navigation of limited resources (Hittepole, 2019; Zhang, 2016). Specifically, Sandie and the other five doctoral students were aware of their preparedness for post-graduation direction and had pressure to maximize career opportunities. The level of preparedness for post-graduation direction varied among participants and was influenced by factors such as marginalization, social dynamics, and gender identities.

The experiences of Mim, Wednesday, Ella, and Jamie showed assumptions or misconceptions universities had related to career paths for IWGSs due to their educational and social fields for employability inside and outside of academia. Mim demonstrated her research abilities in challenging academia, which was important for her due to unconscious biases and inequitable access between international women researchers and their male counterparts in the same field and universities. Under pressure to compete with other researchers in her STEM field at other universities come from "the complexities associated demographic differences such as race, sexual identity, and women's socioeconomic status, help shape women's experiences" and expectations in higher education about gender equity (UNESCO, 2021, p. 6).

Similar to my findings, Haley et al. (2011) indicated the connection between graduate assistantship and transition to students' post-graduation journey. They explained the important connection between post-graduation preparedness and the experiences that students could gain through their graduate assistantships. Mim's situation highlighted the lack of supporting activities for a marginalized group and future academic professions and publications (Okuda & Anderson, 2018). None of the appropriate resources targeted IWGSs' needs so these four participants (Mim, Ella, Wednesday, and Jamie) continued their job exploration and navigate the relevant career skills independently while HP relied on her advisor for job guidance and Sandi started to look for a career coach.

All participants in the study found themselves alone in their new environment from the application process to the final year of their program. They faced challenges in navigating the new environment, including new roles and responsibilities, leading to feelings of isolation and lack of support. The university provided little support in transitioning into campus life, leading to higher pressure. Cultural and women's identity issues were not approached appropriately. In addition, they struggled in planning their academic, financial, and career preparedness due to strict international student policies. The unclear roadmap for post-graduation and unprepared career direction led them to further exacerbated situation.

The Dilemma of Self-reliance and Reliance

The literature and research findings indicated that all participants had worked a few years before enrolling in their master's or doctoral programs. They had adult responsibilities and were confident in their financial independence, freedom of choice to plan, ability to manage their life in their home countries, and physical independence (as considered for an ability or freedom) (Crenshaw, 1993). Leaving their earnings and relationships behind, they started a new life in a new environment. However, it did not necessarily mean that they were experienced in the new environment, or if they had any experience, they might have struggled to cope with the challenges and situations in higher education in the U.S. The universities attended by all the participants were located in cities where they studied for the first time in the U.S. HP and Jamie's working experiences and studying experiences in the U.S. master's programs helped them ease through the application process, but they still struggled with their transition. Jamie still took time to switch her employee mode to student mode.

The unfamiliarity with a new technology-rich learning environment (Ayoub, 2016; Habib et al., 2014; Kıroğlu & Kung, 2023) led to feelings of isolation among international students

(Ammigan et al., 2023; Dumaru et al., 2023; Githua, 2021; Karkar-Esperat, 2018). Sandie described her struggles with navigating a bus app for going to class and shopping for groceries as well as using Canvas for her course work and assignments. Although she did not share about the type of her learning courses she was taking or her challenges in learning online, unfamiliarity with technology in this learning and living style difference could potentially be a challenge, leading to a feeling of isolation as well as limited interactions with instructors (Ammigan et al., 2023; Dumaru et al., 2023; Githua, 2021; Karkar-Esperat, 2018). In her case, a choice of purchasing groceries online showed her self-development in learning new technology for her daily life (Anderson et al., 2012). At that time, her strategies (Anderson et al., 2012) supported her in saving time and not being dependent on someone else. It was described as a sense of being physically isolated with limited accessibility. In addition, she shared, “Looking after my mom [back home] made me a very resilient individual and taught me to deal with a lot of adversity. That’s how I have been able to manage during the crisis.” Her previous experience gave her resilience, adversity management, and self-reliance to cope with challenges. She was successful in managing grocery shopping and going to school proactively (Anderson et al., 2012).

It was likely societal expectations and pressures added to an adult woman, like Sandie, who needed to prove her capability and ability to manage life, rooted in her background in her home country. Sandie emphasized her financial independence back home and, in this environment, showed her expectations and pressures on herself to prove her capability and ability. Her life, academic performance, assistantship management, and graduation shaped her expectations for student support services so that she could continue to prove her capability and ability. All the factors were developed from her cultures, previous responsibilities to her mother, and future social status as “intellectual and political actors” situated women of color in their

actions (Collins, 2015, p. 8; Crenshaw, 1993). However, the factors held her back for a while from asking for help when she needed to use the bus app system. It showed she believed in her independence to manage situations without seeking help, but then seeking support provided her with a better solution (Anderson et al., 2012).

In their predominantly white institutions, most of the IWGSs were unknown or well-recognized when support services were unavailable, or available but not easily accessible for their needs. Specifically, Wednesday's lunch meeting showed a situation of the dilemma of self-reliance and reliance as Asian woman identities and language intersected. Zhang (2016) found that Asian international students tended to keep their difficulties to themselves. She was aware of her situation of shyness and a lack of confidence, and the temporary solution was to talk to her partner (Anderson et al., 2012). The situation was not totally solved to help her be more confident in engaging conversation, but it still showed she was in the middle of the moving in and moving through phases where she found disappointment and was on the way to finding hope into the moving out phase (Anderson et al., 2012).

Her previous experience and country of origin shaped her mind about being a stereotype of Asian women reflected on her application process and the lunch when she shared, "I don't want to follow him [her partner who is also an international student at the same university], like I have to think about my own career, too." This connected to an Asian woman stereotype which normally followed man or a person of predominate power for instruction. It showed gender inequality in the traditional culture of some East Asian cultures between men and women. The gender inequality was more resonated when Wednesday engaged in this new environment with an interlocking system of oppression or predominance (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1993), such as most domestic graduate students at the lunch, a superiority in language and intellectuals, and

communication and daily life topics. At that same time, all intersecting factors as triggers in Wednesday's moving in phase (Anderson et al., 2012) made her moving-in phase in the transition process more complicated.

Financial stability and independence played a significant role in shaping the self-reliance and reliance of all six participants when transitioning to a new environment. While self-reliance provided participants with the freedom to make decisions and plan for their future, reliance on financial support, such as stipends, shifted them into a position of dependence, contrary to their independence back home. The level of financial support (Patel, 2022) influenced their decisions, actions, and engagement in daily activities, affecting their graduate assistantships, academic pursuits, and post-graduation plans. Each participant had different thoughts about finance support connected to the literature. Jamie shared the compensation disparities between assistantships in STEM and non-STEM fields connecting with literature (Patel, 2022) while Ella talked about the inflation of the cost of living relevant to this literature (Woolston, 2022). Mim and Sandie found themselves in a situation with limited financial sources but did not ask for any additional financial support. However, it is unclear why they did not ask for financial support. Perhaps, they hesitated to do so because of the fear of being burdened in debt (Martinez et al., 2021), avoiding showing weakness (Zhang, 2016), refusing to ask (Rodriguez et al., 2019), or attempting to be at a "more independent and advanced level" (Arafeh, 2017; Myers-Walls et al., 2011, p. 473).

In addition, Jamie was worried about her funding situation to cover her five years of the graduate program due to the fact that only 35 percent of international students received funds (IIE, 2023c). Finally, HP took on the breadwinner role in her family (Myers-Walls et al., 2011) while traditional roles of Asian women culture were household tasks and childcare (Gonzalz, 2013; Kim et al., 2021; Myers-Walls et al., 2011). HP's breadwinner role as a primary financial

earner was an indication of new women identities when she transitioned into graduate school (Kim et al., 2021; Myers-Walls et al., 2011). She was an independent or self-reliant mother who was responsible for her dependents but also a reliant student who set a minimum expenditure due to limited financial support. For all the participants, their temporary solution during graduate school was to minimize their expenditures or needs (Anderson et al., 2012).

A Vicious Cycle of Limited Time and Financial Constraints

Some literature indicated the heavy workload of graduate assistantship (Bruner, 2019; Haley et al., 2011) as well as multiple responsibilities faced by international students (Gonzalz, 2013; Kim et al., 2021; Le et al., 2016; Myers-Walls et al., 2011) who had limited time and finances (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Although they wanted to step out, it was hard for them when living costs and school tuition were covered for their graduate school (Haley et al., 2022; Woolton, 2022). They were limited by time to access necessary support services for them, limited time to engage additional activities for their personal and mental health, strict policies of international student visa status, and/or limited financial resources of their graduate assistantship stipend. There may be two ways to break out of their cycles. The first option is to pay all tuition and fees for their graduate school which are extremely expensive options including the living cost, especially considering the inflation rates in the U.S. (Woolton, 2022). The second option is to apply for more fellowships or scholarships, as Jamie mentioned in her interview. However, she chose not to apply because of the high competition and the limitations imposed by being an international student. At that time, neither option was sufficient for their situation, and they had to continue relying on themselves. This cycle and the dilemma of self-reliance and reliance were sadly continued during their graduate school when their role expectations with identity conflict existed (Kim et al., 2020).

The participants in this situation were experiencing invisible pressure due to a vicious cycle and a dilemma of self-reliance and reliance. Unexpected events and non-events kept adding more pressure over time. Examples of such events were the disrespectful behavior of Ella's students and the exclusive conversation during the lunch meeting that Wednesday experienced. These situations reflected typical aspects of women's identities back home (Kim et al., 2021) and new women identities in graduate school (Gonzalz, 2013; Kim et al., 2021; Le et al., 2016). In such intersecting places, too many roles, too many intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1993) together with triggers during transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Hankivsky, 2014) can create an explosion of negative feelings or feeling overwhelmed (Kim et al., 2021). The term intersectionality was added to the Oxford Dictionary in 2015 (Womankind Worldwide, n.d.) although it was discussed by Crenshaw back in 1989 and other studies (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1993; Hankivsky, 2014). It showed that the term and its complicated interactions may be unfamiliar to students from other countries. Due to their intersecting marginalized identities and the systemic inequities, they faced but did not realize, the complexity of participants' transitions was increased even further. This unknown pressure, based on marginalized identities and systemic inequities, can lead to emotional distress, mental health issues, and an increased risk of suicide (Silverman et al., 2010).

Implications for Practice

The study explored the experiences of six IWGS transitioning to public research universities in the Midwest. Their experiences are unique and different from each other based on their different identities, countries of origin, cultures, gender identities, races, and other complex identities. The following implications for practices were developed based on data analysis and Schlossberg's transition theory as the primary theoretical framework in this phenomenological

qualitative research (Anderson et al., 2012). The implications for practices were provided from conversations with IWGSs. It is noted for their potential applicability to the international graduate student population at large.

It is recommended that universities provide more effective services and maybe be more specialized for IWGSs. Three participants found that writing centers should provide writing advisors who have knowledge of specific research fields and genres, professional advising skills, and different backgrounds of international students. It is advised that writing centers should be aware of these students' heavy schedules so that they can provide more writing support staff. Arranging meetings with writing tutors and then writing coaches could take them too many times to arrange meetings and prepare their writing work for my multi time submissions and early submissions. It was not effective for their schedule. Additionally, career services should be designed for both undergraduate and graduate students. Skills for job opportunities should be provided for both academia and non-academia fields. It means that career coaches should prepare IWGSs with research skills, publication skills for those who want to be faculty, and professional skills for those who prefer to work as administrators. Career Centers should work with academic advisors to connect with their advisees for career opportunities and assistance.

Furthermore, IWGSs who are mothers and wives would need support for their dependents and parenting roles in this environment. Universities should organize signature events (i.e., Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas) and authentic cultural events of different countries for IWGSs and their families (i.e., Lunar New Year, Children Day, Holi Festival, Mid-Autumn (Chuseok, Tanabata). Student affairs professionals could work with IWGSs for authentic festivals and the convenience of their schedules. Providing gender-specific services for IWGSs is crucial, especially those that address childcare needs, offer talks on balancing graduate student

life and motherhood, and create resources for being a mother as IWGSs in the U.S. Collaborating with local communities and services can enable institutions to maximize existing resources near IWGSs' residence and study areas.

Next, it is recommended that universities should understand the complex transition experience of all international graduate students, especially IWGSs. These students' complex roles and lives lead to their complex needs. It does not simply provide financial sources and the list of resources but also explores the students' culture and needs and takes serious action and listens to the student population's needs. Moreover, institutions need to pay more attention to the unique needs of international graduate students throughout the matriculation process from admissions to graduation and the job search. They also must be more aware of the financial and policy implications for international graduate students and how that limits their access to support and resources and adds to their already complicated transitions.

And, finally, we cannot view international graduate students as being all the same based on their different identities, cultures, gender identities, races, and so on. Although some IWGSs come from the same country of origin, they are not the same because they have various backgrounds, previous experiences back home, knowledge, and other social positions that they have earned so far. It is important to think about their experiences using intersectionality as a guide to help understand their experiences based on their identities and systemic inequities and assumptions.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals

I have made an effort to describe participants' experiences in their own words to the best of their abilities. The data collected from the participants, data analysis, Schlossberg's transition theory, my experience and knowledge, and the Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards (the

Statement) were used to develop the following recommendations (ACPA, 1993; Anderson et al., 2012). Based on the purpose of the study, the Statement (ACPA, 1993) is a practical guide to improve inclusive student support services at all three levels: student, college, and institution as it outlines the expected behaviors of student affairs professionals in daily support activities. The significant roles and contribution of graduate students were emphasized for professional development, student improvement in higher education environment (ACPA, 1993; Patel, 2022).

Therefore, this study serves as a motivation for further research. It is important to note again that while some recommendations are specific to improving the transition for IWGSs, some can be applicable to the international population in general, and others can be used in appropriate campus spaces.

IWGSs

It is advisable that the study may be helpful for IWGSs to reflect and understand themselves more as every IWGS at institutions experiences their transitions differently. When IWGSs can recognize potential challenges and support networks which will help them overcome the challenges and situations with the lower level of stress. Every small signal of discomfort should be addressed to eliminate prolonged suffering. The longer the discomfort continues, the higher the levels of stress and feelings of isolation will be. The difficult level of graduate programs gradually increases over time, so the best way to help IWGSs is to understand themselves.

Talking with one or more trusted persons with the same background or having a mentor can help IWGSs connect with different solutions and ideas for an issue. IWGSs can take things step by step or break them into smaller steps to adjust more seamlessly. Putting too much pressure on learning too many new things can lead to burnout and exhaustion. Power naps, a

thirty-minute walk, a change in working view, or getting 6-8 hours of sleep can help freshen the mind when IWGSs do not have enough time for a social life.

To Student Affairs Professionals and Administrators

International students have to follow strict policies and regulations related to their F1 visa. Depending on their country of origin, they may face different challenges in the application process. Helping them is beneficial for everyone involved, including the institution.

No matter what positions student affairs professionals and administrators hold, a willingness to learn about new things, cultures, and people is necessary. IWGSs are willing to learn new things at the universities, cultures, and people at universities, and so must student affairs professionals be willing to do. Training and workshops about international students will be supportive for student affairs professionals and administrators. Starting small in learning about international students' culture in daily life and conducting training every semester will help to bridge the gap and create empathetic communities between people at an institution.

Administrators may need to restructure support systems and services to adapt to IWGSs and more diverse groups as they contribute their knowledge, research skills, and implications for practice to higher education system across the U.S. Getting involved with other partners, colleagues, and students in different colleges, programs, and departments at the universities and beyond can help strengthen support networks and resources. Together we can make the environment better and avoid burnout by putting too much pressure on one person or one department.

To reduce the financial burden on international students and minimize the gap in education accessibility, it is recommended to decrease insurance costs for international students

and their dependents and to increase stipends for graduate assistantships. Providing equal stipends for non-STEM and STEM graduate students is also important.

To Communities

It can be difficult to make changes to policies and laws that affect international students. However, by working in collaboration with institutions, communities and organizations can expand more resources to support IWGSs. Particularly, the communities and organizations can provide activities for IWGSs, their families, and dependents to help them know about the local cultures and the available support services. They can leverage the existing resources in the city to help international students with their day-to-day lives. Training and workshops related to policy changes about international students to student affairs professionals and institutions should be provided to enhance their support for this student population. Furthermore, resources related to women should be made available to IWGSs in case they encounter any issues regarding their gender identity or their families.

Offer International Course in A Curriculum, Training, or Workshops

One participant, Wednesday, in the study recommended that an internationalization or globalization course should be mandatory for all programs and colleges and all students based on various perspectives and objectives of the program. Some topics could be considered, such as how IWGSs recognize racism or intersectionality, address situations, or reach out for support at universities; how to understand and communicate with IWGSs in the workplace and campus; and what silence means to IWGSs and domestic counterparts in the classroom and activities. The story of Ella and her students highlighted the need for an official course or training about cross-cultural classroom success and effective engagement with domestic students, minimizing background and gender conflicts for IWGSs as teaching assistants. By taking the course or

training, they would be better prepared to address incidents they may experience and seek support from others. At the same time, domestic students could also benefit from these courses by learning how to work and collaborate with international students, which would help bridge the gap between them.

An international course or training should be provided to supervisors or departments that teach or have international students as well as those that work with international students or have international graduate assistants. New staff training and orientation should be provided to graduate students so that they can familiarize themselves with their new working environments, create a sense of belonging, understand how to address gender issues, and increase student retention.

Depending on each country, international students will face different difficulties for moving into the U.S., student affairs professionals need to support them at the earliest phase of their application process. Helping them at the earliest phase will ease their challenges at the moving in phase of the transition.

Offer A Wide Range of Programs and Events

Universities should consider offering a variety of programs tailored specifically for international graduate students or IWGSs. To make it easier for these students to identify events and activities that cater to them, the university could think of making their name more visible. The university should tentatively list recurring events or a series of events on the calendar, newsletters, bulletin boards, digital signages, and other channels at the beginning of each semester to give students an idea of what to expect. If students miss an event during the semester, they should be able to arrange for their attendance next time, semester, or year. For one-time

events, the university should note it and send out the details for students to arrange their attendance at the event.

A university, college, or department should also designate one day or half a day per week where no classes are scheduled. This will allow students to participate in activities, take a day for student self-care (University of Pittsburgh, 2020), or attend any events within the department or the university without any schedule conflicts (Jordan, 2023). Wednesday afternoon would be an ideal time for this, as it falls in the middle of the week and can help students to refresh. Students, faculty, and graduate assistants' supervisors should be informed of this time slot to avoid any overlapping activities or scheduling conflicts. The purpose of the time slot is to encourage international graduate students to participate in extracurricular activities which they may not be able to do otherwise due to heavy study schedule at graduate school. If there are no departmental activities, then the timeslot could be used for self-care time. The availability of this slot will depend on each institution's operations and venue availability.

The university can create a QR code that collects anonymous feedback and ideas from IWGSs or international graduate students about which programs, services, event topics, or invited speakers they would like the university or colleges to organize for them. The QR code can be placed around the university or shared in weekly newsletters sent to students.

Writing Centers should have counselors who specialize in specific research fields and genres, as well as understand international backgrounds, to provide feedback to international students. It would be helpful if writing groups could be created weekly for everyone to have the routine writing schedule together on their individual projects and address writing skills or inquiries.

Career Centers should seek to understand the needs of international graduate students and offer support for both non-academia and academia opportunities. International career coaches from the Center or other departments should get involved in job preparation, options, and searching process for international populations in both non-academia and academia areas.

As a participant in the study, HP recommended that offering resources should include an explanation of the purpose of the resources, who they are catering for, and in which situations they should be used. It is not enough to just provide a list of resources without written or verbal instructions.

Research tools like Zotero or Grammarly have been used at universities for classes with free basic packages with limited storage. However, when it comes to research projects, thesis, and dissertations, the free version will not suffice for graduate students, especially doctoral students (Zhao et al., 2023). Institutions should consider offering the official research tools that institutions pay for and provide free of charge to graduate students or those conducting research projects. This would be similar to offering MS Suite to all students and employees at universities. It would help students proactively check their grammar and encourage them to conduct more research while also taking care of their financial burden of paying for additional tools for their coursework.

Provide One-Stop Student Support Service

Universities should create one-stop stations or departments to support IWGSs who have a myriad of marginalized identities. These stations should refer students to relevant resources and provide assistance in times of crisis. However, the responsibility of supporting international students with multiple identities should not solely rely on one office (Yao et al., 2018). It is essential that all departments, colleges, and the entire university take responsibility to support

these students. It is better to have a station or one portal for them to reach out to for their support or crisis. It is not ideal to direct international students with multiple identities to multiple departments such as the international student office, multicultural center, office of diversity and inclusion, women's center, and student affairs when an issue of international students can be intersecting and complicated.

One program coordinator or staff member can assist in identifying scholarship opportunities, fellowships, graduate assistantships, conferences, and other relevant updates across the university to share with students for their program. Jamie, one participant in the study found it beneficial to stay connected to these opportunities, and important deadlines when her peer or coordinator provided information and kept her updated for opportunities related to international students. Then, international students could maximize their professional development, publication, and job opportunities.

It is recommended for universities and departments to name or display the term related to international graduate students, adult students, or student families on their activities, services, programs, digital marketing channels, department names, or websites. The visibility will ensure better accessibility and information search for these students when IWGSs want to search for information independently due to their busy schedules. It is considered to separate services catering to undergraduates, graduates, or international students.

Skillful Manner and Higher Level of Sensitivity

Faculty, student affairs professionals, and domestic students should recognize the signal of silence in conversations, lunches, or study sessions because “when we speak, listen, and feel heard, we can also act” (Quaye et al., 2019, p.16). These approaches to international graduate students with a higher level of sensitivity “demonstrates care, provide opportunities for joint-

learning", and possible change through mutuality of "we speak and listen" (Quaye et al., 2019, p. 16). They should build trust with international students, have comfortable conversations, and lead conversations skillfully when the presence of domestic students is more than the presence of international students in interactive events. It is important to embrace international students for who they are, appreciate their uniqueness and individuality, and not force them to change or adapt to fit in. An adaptation may refer to changing someone to do something. Instead, focus on finding common ground and accommodating each other's needs and perspectives.

From the literature and findings, IWGSs come from diverse background and may unexpectedly suffer from unconscious bias or international women stereotypes (i.e., shy, imposter syndrome) related to their own countries in the past and the host environment. They may not be familiar with the new teaching-learning environments, the normal terms used in the U.S. context (i.e., Spotify), or the definitions of certain terms (i.e., racism, intersectionality, LTGBQI+). However, some students may know or familiarize themselves with these terms based on their previous experiences. Therefore, it is important to avoid making assumptions about the knowledge of international students, and to refrain from grouping them based on what they do or do not know. Starting with normal daily conversations can be easier to understand IWGS's perspectives and explore their intersecting identities. A thoughtful mind, great observation skills, and empathy from all participants, facilitators, and student affairs professionals are necessary in any events and conversations.

Mentorships

Peer-to-peer mentorship had proven to be effective for the participants in the study. It is suggested that the mentorship program makes it easier for students to communicate with each other, build relationships, and develop a sense of belonging in their graduate program. It can be

easier when students communicate with each other and create relationships and a sense of belonging to their program. It is also beneficial when mentors and mentees share the same background. When asking current students to take on a mentoring role, their existing responsibilities should be taken into account.

Recommendations for Future Research

There is still limited research on the experience of IWGSs at institutions in the Midwest or other regions in the United States. As very little of this phenomenon has been explored, there are endless opportunities for future research. Qualitative research could help discover subgroups of IWGSs, such as European students and African counterparts, to gain rich experiences in their college transition. Researchers would be exploring international students who are gender non-conforming or gender queer to gain insights into the intersecting identities and their challenges. Quantitative or mixed-method studies could be another option to access larger populations of IWGSs across the United States. Researchers should also consider using frameworks such as intersectionality to get a more complex understanding of different international student experiences based on individual and systemic issues that complicate their transitions.

During the literature review and data analysis, some interesting minor themes arose. Studies have explored college transition, so each theme of the literature review and findings in this study could be considered as a separate topic to delve into the phenomenon of this student group. Examining the experiences of more women and female identities, parent students, and students in student affairs and all programs would help us understand their college transitions. Next topic to explore could be the stress levels among these student groups or their countries of origin, due to their feelings of isolation, frustration, and depression when complex intersectionality will cause higher stress levels.

In addition, student affairs administrators at universities and professional associations should disaggregate data in terms of women graduate students from countries in reports, such as SEVP, OpenDoor statistics, and institutional levels. Collecting the disaggregated data of this specific gender group will help to provide insights for IWGSs with a myriad of marginalized identities, for future research and development in the higher education environment.

Conclusion

This study on the college transition of IWGSs at public research universities in the Midwest is crucial as it offers significant insights into the challenges IWGSs face and the support they need. The findings of the study indeed shed light on the multifaceted challenges that IWGSs may struggle with during their graduate student journey. These challenges deserve to receive thoughtful attention from institutions, broader communities, and society at large. The study's findings contribute to future conversations and amplify the voices of IWGSs who are often overlooked due to societal expectations and systemic inequities that the U.S. higher education system itself creates.

My dedication to sharing six participants' stories underscores a commitment to advancing knowledge and advocating positive changes for this student population in the U.S. higher education system. As the number of international graduate students or IWGSs are expected to increase significantly in the upcoming years, addressing the needs of this student population becomes increasingly vital. The past academic and work experience and maturity of IWGSs' does not eliminate the need for academic guidance and student support services from institutions. Providing student support services to IWGSs is the responsibility of the entire university, every single individual, and community. To conclude, **helping IWGSs not only benefits them, but also benefits the institutions as a whole.**

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Appendices

Appendix A – Recruitment Messages

Emails

Hello,

My name is Truc Nguyen, a graduate student in the master's program of Educational Administration in Student Affairs at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln. I am hoping to gain volunteers for my thesis project about understanding the transition experiences of international women graduate students at public research universities in the Midwest. I am looking for international women aged 19 years old or older who have been in any graduate programs at public research universities in the Midwest.

The project will include a 60 – 90 minute interview conducted via Zoom.

If you or someone you know is interested in sharing your experience, please fill out this form < https://unlcorexmuw.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2uckdDOfjg8Y7hY >.

Should you have any questions, please contact me, Truc Nguyen at tnguyen190@huskers.unl.edu or my advisor, Dr. Corey Rumann at crumann2@unl.edu .

Thank you!

Truc Nguyen

Facebook, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp Groups

Hello,

I am hoping to gain volunteers for my thesis project about understanding the transition experiences of international women graduate students at public research universities in the

Midwest. I am looking for international women aged 19 years old or older who have been in any graduate programs at public research universities in the Midwest.

The project will include a 60 – 90 minute interview conducted via Zoom.

If you or someone you know is interested in sharing your experience, please fill out this form < https://unlcorexmuw.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2uckdDOfjg8Y7hY >.

Should you have any questions, please contact me, Truc Nguyen at tnguyen190@huskers.unl.edu or my advisor, Dr. Corey Rumann at crumann2@unl.edu .

Thank you!

Truc Nguyen

Appendix B – Graduate Student Groups for Calls of Participants

(The groups are subject to change after the participant recruitment is enough for the study.)

- WhatsApp – UNL Grad Students Events
- WhatsApp – New UNL Grads 22-23
- WhatsApp – International Student Fellows
- WhatsApp – UNL Everything
- The researcher’s personal Facebook account and LinkedIn account

Appendix C – Qualtrics and Demographic Questions

***required**

1. First Name & Last name*
2. Pronouns if you wish to share
3. Email*
4. Phone number*
5. Preferred Method of Communication for Interview Reminders* [choose one]
    a. Email
    b. Phone number
6. Your country of origin*
7. Are you the first generation student?* [choose one] Yes/No
8. Family members living with you in the U.S. [excluded you]*
9. Are there any children (under 12 years old) living with you in the U.S.?* [choose one] Yes/No
10. Describe your racial/ethnic identity [check all that apply]*
    a. African or Black
    b. Arab or Middle Eastern
    c. Asian
    d. Hispanic or Latina/o/x/e
    e. Others: [insert text]
11. Name of your institution where you are studying/have earned during your master's and doctoral degree: [insert text]*
12. Department(s) of your graduate assistant positions [insert text]*

13. Total of years you have been working at the graduate assistantship position(s) if applicable [insert text]*
14. Years you have been in the United States* [insert text]
15. Year you graduated from the university if applicable*
16. Your availability for 01 (one) 60-90 minute interview via Zoom. [check all that apply]*
    a. Fridays, 3 – 6pm CST
    b. Saturdays, 3 – 6pm CST
    c. Sundays, 3 – 6pm CST

More time schedule will be added.

Appendix D – Follow-up Message for a Participation

Hello,

This is to confirm that you have volunteered to participate in a virtual interview via Zoom related to understand the transition experiences of international women graduate students at public research universities in the Midwest.

You have been registered to participate in <time and date from the Qualtrics and Demographic Questions in Appendix C>. The interview will take place online and you will be required to turn off your Zoom camera.

Please reply to this email and let me know if you will be able to participate.

The Zoom details are below: https://unl.zoom.us/j/8630184690

Before you participate in the virtual interview, the Consent form is for your review https://unlcorexmuw.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7VyNQWE2vFml2gm

I look forward to hearing from you.

Appendix E – Verbal Consent Form

Hello! I am Truc Nguyen and I am conducting a study for my thesis. If you are an international women graduate student and is at least 19 years of age, currently enrolled or previously enrolled in any master's or doctoral program at any public research university in the Midwest, you may participate in this research. The purpose of this research is to understand the transition experiences of international women graduate students who are simultaneously enrolled in any graduate programs at public research universities in the Midwest.

Participation in this study will require approximately a 60 – 90 minute interview via Zoom. You will be asked to share and describe your experience as international women graduate students. Participation will take place via Zoom only with an audio recording. You will require to turn off your camera for the interview.

The risks of this research are discomfort when recalling negative experiences.

You may benefit from participating in this research by reflecting on your experience with university resources, college transition, and support for graduate assistants and how they look based on your identities. Your voluntary participation will contribute a low volume of knowledge, meaningful stories, and strategies that will help international graduate students understand themselves, maximize university resources, and raise higher awareness among relevant university departments for their academic success in U.S. colleges. Society may benefit from exploring different aspects of international students' transition experiences in graduate programs at U.S. higher education institutions. The qualitative research will add your valuable experience to missing parts of the existing research topic and create opportunities for educational support staff to develop better student activities and services during college transition across the university.

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect the privacy and the confidentiality of your study data; however, in some circumstances, we cannot guarantee absolute privacy and/or confidentiality. A pseudonym will be used in place of your real name. Research records will be stored on the researcher's password-protected computer and password-protected OneDrive through UNL. Records will only be seen by the research team and/or those authorized to view, access, or use the records during and after the study is complete.

If you have questions about this project, you may contact Truc Nguyen at tnguyen190@huskers.unl.edu. You may also contact Dr. Corey Rumann, Truc Nguyen's advisor, at crumann2@unl.edu with questions.

If you have questions about your rights or complaints about the research, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (402)472-6965 or irb@unl.edu.

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can withdraw at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to be in this research study. By completing the research, you are giving your consent to participate.

Are you interested in participating?

Appendix F – Interview Protocol and Interview Questions

Interviewer: *Thank you for your time to meet me to learn your experiences during college transition at universities in the Midwest for this topic. The purpose of the study is to gain better understanding the transition experiences of international women graduate students at public research universities in the Midwest. Your experiences contribute a lot to international student development, budget balance, mentoring programs, and other activities of the universities. There will be an interview via Zoom, lasting 60–90 minutes per interview. For the best data collection and analysis, I will record an interview. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you can choose not to be involved in this research at any time during or after the research begins for any reason. You are required to turn off your camera. By saying yes, you decide to participate in the research and give me audio recording permission.*

(The questions are subject to change)

1. Tell me about:
    a. What brought you to your university? / What made you choose your university?
    b. Agents
        - Who supported you to apply to this university? (with or without agents)
        - If yes with agents: How did they support you to move to the university? What did they support you? Do you think all the support from the agents was enough and made you confident?
        - If no agents: How did you manage by yourself to move to the university without any support? Who helped you or did you ask for help? What did the person support you?

2. How do you describe your student life and daily life in the first three months moving to the university?
    a. How did you prepare for the changes? Who helped you to prepare for the changes?
    b. What did you need for the first three months of your student life?
3. Tell me more about your experiences with university resources or what resources are necessary for you. (For example: writing center, children services, career for graduate students, graduate assistantship support, orientation, etc…)
    a. Give me an example.
    b. What was your experience of finding resources (to arrange transportation, go grocery, etc.) for your daily activities? Can you give me some examples?
    c. How were the university resources effective and supportive for you, your family members, and your GA tasks?
4. Who did you talk to when looking for university resources and support, and challenges? Or tell me about the support networks and communities that you have had including inside and outside the U.S.
5. Tell me other support or resources that you might need outside of university services if applicable. Or share with me about the resources and support that you need, or think are important for your daily life, cultural activities, academic class, or graduate assistantships.
    a. Give me some reasons you need outside resources.
    b. How did you know about these resources?
    c. What networks helped you with these resources?
    d. What other support or resources do you need for your on-campus job?

e. How do you feel about the university resources support your life in the U.S.?

f. What additional resources and support should the university provide to international women students in graduate programs?

6. How would you describe connections between your cultural and social engagement and your school activities?

   a. Would you give me an example? How or who do you talk to for cultural and social engagement?

   b. What cultural and social activities are important for your student life, on-campus job, your dependents and your daily life?

   c. What advice would you share with someone who might learn more about your culture and graduate school and resources?

7. How would you describe your financial situation for your graduate school?

   a. What financial support have you received for your program? (scholarships / fellowships / government funding / …)

   b. What percentage of your tuition and fee have you paid? (100% / 75% - 99% / 50 – 74%)

   c. How confident do you feel about your financial support for your graduate school, life, and more?

8. What do you think about the importance of receiving a graduate assistantship?

   a. If you have a graduate assistantship:

      - how confident are you about stipends provided from a graduate assistantship for your graduate school, dependents, and others?

- do you think stipends can help you with living costs and your academic track? What makes you think that way?
- what additional financial support did you look for? What do you need support about your assistantship? (find assistantships, orientation for new position, …)
- what made you stay or change your assistantship positions?

b. If you do not have a graduate assistantship:

- how confident are you about stipends without a graduate assistantship?
- do you think your current financial situation can support your graduate school life?
- what additional financial support did you look for?

9. How do you describe your graduate assistantship experiences?
   a. For example: graduate assistantship orientation, support from your department, a relationship with supervisors, job crisis, or anything else.
   b. How did you balance your on-campus tasks and study?
   c. Who have you talked to for your job challenges in your graduate assistantship?
10. Tell me more about your responsibilities with your family members even they live with you here in the U.S. or in your host country.
    a. How do you describe your situation when you manage your graduate school?
    b. Have you overcome any unusual obstacles in your life? Examples might include economic hardships, personal or family problems.
11. You have studied in the program for a few years. How do you describe your current situation after a few semesters in graduate school? For example: differences from

semester to semester, from year to year, spring fall or winter, assistantship or internship when your situation is changed.

   a. How do you describe your readiness for the next step to academia or job search?

   b. What do you need to support your career inside or outside academia?

12. So far, what makes you feel safe right now and, in the future, to complete successfully in graduate program? For example: safe and healthy study environment, working environment, living conditions, or something else.

13. What else would you need more about the university resources and support or anything that you have not mentioned during the interview? That could help you to complete the program at your university.

Interviewer: *Thank you again for participating in this study. Should you have any questions or concerns about the topic, please do not hesitate to contact me.*

Appendix G – IRB Approved Letter

University of Nebraska Lincoln

Official Approval Letter for IRB project #23178 - New Project Form

November 22, 2023

Truc Nguyen
Department of Educational Administration
ALEX 1410 Q St UNL NE 685880417

Corey Rumann
Department of Educational Administration
TEAC 129 UNL NE 685880360

IRB Number: 20231123178EX
Project ID: 23178
Project Title: Unpack the Transition Experiences of International Women Graduate Students in at Public Research Universities in the Midwest

Dear Truc:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project for the Protection of Human Subjects. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects at 45 CFR 46 2018 Requirements and has been classified as exempt. Exempt categories are listed within HRPP Policy #4.001: Exempt Research available at: https://research.unl.edu/researchcompliance/policies-procedures/.

o Date of Final Exemption: 11/22/2023
o Certification of Exemption Valid-Until: 11/22/2028
o Review conducted using exempt category 2(ii) at 45 CFR 46.104
o Funding (Grant congruency, OSP Project/Form ID and Funding Sponsor Award Number, if applicable): N/A

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Final Approval: 11/22/2023

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:
* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
* Any protocol violation or protocol deviation
* An incarceration of a research participant in a protocol that was not approved to include prisoners
* Any knowledge of adverse audits or enforcement actions required by Sponsors
* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 402-472-6965.

Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman

Becky R. Freeman, CIP
for the IRB

Full Accreditation